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SMU West Dallas Youth Cultural Initiative

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SMU-West Dallas Youth Cultural Initiative
Big iDeas Proposal

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Abstract:

The SMU-West Dallas Youth Cultural Initiative began through our enrollment in Bernardo Diaz's Artist Residency directed studies course, Art as Social Practice. We are now hoping to continue our workshops and events with the West Dallas community at the Bataan and McMillan centers beyond the scope of this directed studies course, on the basis of the networks and relationships we have already initiated in the area. We intend to:

- Develop and implement culturally-driven curriculum for students participating in the afterschool programs of the West Dallas Community Centers.
- Pilot a program at SMU that allows students to engage in cultural production outside the classroom.

The Problem:

West Dallas, referred to locally as "La Bajada", is a low-income, largely Hispanic region of Dallas located West of the Trinity River. Growing commercial and development interests in the area prompted by the construction of the Calatrava Bridge have provoked questions on both sides of the Trinity over the possible cultural gains and losses associated with the area's inevitable gentrification. The West Dallas school district is also one of the most severely underserved school districts in the country.

The mounting commercial and cultural tensions located in this underserved community initially piqued our group's interest. We thus formed an independent study through the Meadows Division of Art in the Fall of 2011 to work with Bernardo Diaz, artist-in-residence at the Bataan and McMillan West Dallas Community Centers (WDCC). Through working with elementary and middle school students after school at these centers, we began to explore our own capacity to engage with this community as an interdisciplinary group of artists and young educators. Though our studies in the classrooms back on campus were scattered across various divisions, including visual art, theatre, computer science, music, and education, we each shared a sense of urgency for the need for greater emphasis on the arts in young peoples' education. And, as we increasingly spent time in West Dallas working with the centers and staging community arts and education events, we realized we are among a group of artists practicing in the La Bajada region. We began to recognize the disconnect between the cultural activity in West Dallas and our students' exposure to it. We thus see our roles in this community as cultural facilitators for WDCC students and community members.

Our work directly and uniquely addresses many problems that challenge La Bajada and the greater Dallas region. For example, while the community centers have resources and spaces already in place for afterschool academic and recreational activities, it is underserved with regards to cultural practice such as dance, theater, visual arts, and creative writing. With the deflation of arts programs in schools across the country, particularly in lower-income areas such as West Dallas, there's a dire need to develop

alternative models for creative engagement with students. This initiative offers such a model.

Our initiative likewise addresses the issue of enterprise and gentrification in Dallas. Rapidly developing commercial interests in West Dallas, which the Calatrava Bridge landmark both signifies and stimulates, overshadow and even threaten the cultural activity local to this region. There's a notion of "outsider" that didn't exist before in West Dallas, and it is imperative that the greater Dallas community address the developing cultural and socioeconomic tensions in this area. We believe an investment in arts events and education in West Dallas can address these tensions, because we've seen it happened: we've developed and implemented successful cultural programs in West Dallas that were attended by both locals and SMU community members. We think that continuing such events at these community centers can bridge communities in West Dallas and Greater Dallas better than any emblematic landmark.

Finally, we feel that our initiative addresses problems associated with the idea of "community outreach" as practiced in many socially-engaged programs active in Dallas. We are not an outreach program: though an awareness of our alterity to the West Dallas community as students coming from SMU is central to our understanding of our roles in the region, we are not located with administrative distance from West Dallas, a distance across which we would have to "reach-out". Instead, we're physically present in the West Dallas Community Centers for at least six hours every week. We already know all of our student's names, the names of their siblings and families, and who picks them up in the evenings. They've even come up with nicknames for us. We've conceptualized all of the programs and events we've implemented beginning last August directly on the basis of our on-site work at the centers, through interviews with staff and families, and through speaking with the kids. That said, before beginning this proposal, we asked our students to describe in their own words the problems they see in their community:

- "More drunk people in parks."
- "Community beautification."
- "Too many vehicles and not enough space."
- "Streets are messed up."
- "Ice cream trucks stopped coming."

Most of these things we can't fix. But our presence at these centers and the personal relationships we've built with these students are the basis for the community-centered dialogue that is beginning at these centers, and that perpetuates in the programming we have implanted and hope to continue to develop. Hence, we see our position with the WDCC as uniquely personal among other social-activism groups working in Dallas; as such, we think we offer an alternative model for community engagement. This in-the-field approach to community activism likewise relates to a problem we see in paradigms of arts education at the community level: we feel college students aren't given enough opportunities and impetus to engage in participatory modes of cultural production, learning, and service outside the classroom. Just a few months of working in La Bajada as an interdisciplinary, service-learning group has provoked and challenged each of us

immeasurably; the experience has allowed us to examine and reflect deeply on our roles as artists in contemporary society. We want to develop our work in this region as a reproducible model of cultural activism that is mutually-educational to both those serving and being served. We've begun drafting reports of our experiences and research, and as we continue working in this region, we intend to further document our methodologies, in order to create publishable and instructional materials on our specific approach.

Our Methodology:

We believe what sets our proposal apart is that we have been working in the centers already for a full semester; thus, by receiving Big iDeas funding, we will be able to significantly support and expand the work we have already been offering the centers. We would now like to go into detail about the work we have done with this community and our procedures for doing so, because it is from this point that we want to further our engagements in West Dallas.

To begin, below is the procedure we've developed for conceptualizing and implementing our work within this community:

1. Understand the community: Before we began teaching at the centers, we spent a lot of time in West Dallas. We visited local restaurants, met local business owners and WDCC staff, and became familiar faces within these communities. We recognize our "otherness", and thus recognize the importance of actively seeking an understanding this community to which we're outsiders.
2. Listen: Rather than assuming the needs of the community, we just ask. Only on the basis of our constant investigation, conversation, and questioning did we conceptualize our programs to specifically address the needs of our students and their community.
3. Identify resources and opportunity for engagement: Before drafting plans for a project with our students or a community event, we determine our available resources, and assess our ability to make an effective contribution to the community through our activity.
4. Conceptualize and implement project: For more information about the projects we've completed in the last few months, please visit our website at <http://www.berniediaz.com/socialpractice>.
5. Evaluate project: We never assume our success. We always evaluate our programs, big and small—from larger community events to individual lessons at the centers—and assess what we do right and where we can improve.

Next, we'll discuss three projects in particular to illustrate the results of this method of working.

We started the semester with a sculpture project to be exhibited at a show organized by John Marcucci of Haley-Henman Gallery in celebration of the new Calatrava Bridge. Given the theme of "connections", we opened discussion with the students to collaboratively generate visual and conceptual ideas related to this topic. They led our

working procedure entirely: we pushed them to be self-reliant in developing their own ideas, as well as to communicate their ideas to each other effectively. We used recycled cardboard and string from SMU facilities as the only materials for the sculptures. Despite their limited resources, the students made something they were very proud of and excited about. Their sculpture far exceeded other works in the gallery, in both creativity and evident passion, despite their scarce resources and young age.

Our activities eventually extended outside of the centers and into the surrounding neighborhoods. One of our major events, entitled “LaChilanGalería”, arose from our close relationship with the owners of a taquería, La Chilanga, where we ate dinner every evening after we worked at the centers. We then envisioned developing an art exhibit in the restaurant itself in response to the literal and cultural space of the taquería. We invited artists across divisions of visual art and theatre at Meadows to visit La Chilanga and create work that we would then display in the actual space. In doing so we brought business and awareness to the taquería and surrounding area of West Dallas. The event was successful with La Bajada locals and outsiders throughout the day and evening as visitors enjoyed the artworks and performance. We shared our project initiative with all who attended through conversation and brochures with texts in both English and Spanish. Customers of La Chilanga were even invited to take an art print home, sparking discussions about material and process while spreading the idea of accessible artwork. We also worked to demonstrate that the process of creating music is more democratic than our visitors may have thought, inviting guests to create sounds with boxes, cans, and sticks. The event drew attention to the West Dallas area for the SMU community, while sharing our initiative and ideas about the practice of art with the surrounding area. La Chilanga has kept the artwork and installations in the restaurant: the conversation hasn’t stopped.

Our culminating event for the semester, entitled “Little Voices”, condensed workshops we designed during our time with the students at the centers into activities intended to be shared with families. We focused on encouraging parents and children to think about their own community and ask questions about both its challenges and uniqueness as a direct response to the uncertain position the area of West Dallas now holds with the construction of the Calatrava Bridge. The event was centered around various workshop stations, and students and their parents worked together to finish tasks and brainstorm about the problems they find in their community, creating open dialogues that we encouraged be continued at home. Some of the questions included, “What colors do you see in your community?”, “Who is someone you admire in your community?”, and “What are some changes you’ve seen in your community?”. Our students generated questions of their own as well, such as, “Why do people kidnap other people?”, “Why do people steal things?”, and “Why do people sell drugs?”. For the event, we constructed the activities out of materials that SMU facilities intended to throw away until we intervened. This was really our only option; we were working with virtually no budget. Even despite our minimal funding, the event was immensely successful: over sixty people were at the event within the first ten minutes, and the majority of visitors stayed the entire two hours despite a small venue—all this using solely materials that were essentially trash.

We're asking for this grant because in order to continue achieving the goals we set for ourselves and for our students through our work in this community, we need to expand our capacity to implement and promote larger-scale cultural activities.

For example, a few weeks ago we had to face the realities of conducting this project with almost no funding: the children at Bataan on their own came up with the idea to start their own museum to exhibit the artwork they've completed through our work with them, entitling the exhibition space "Children of Art". We were so floored by their initiative, ambition, and confidence in their own significance as cultural agents in their community. Unfortunately, we had to explain to the children that we did not have the funds to be able to direct such a project. Receiving this grant would allow us to work at the scale of their visions.

Benefits of this initiative:

We expect to achieve the following goals through our continuing work at these centers:

1. Educational enrichment for the WDCC students: In particular, we hope to continue to encourage a greater understanding of the visual arts, cultural production, their impact on individual and community, as well as general improvements in the participant's academic scores in reading, writing, and mathematics.
2. Increased cultural and family-oriented activity in the La Bajada community: Adequate funding will allow us to expand the scope and success of the community projects we develop in residence at the centers.
3. Broadened educational opportunity for SMU students: By allowing more SMU students to serve WDCC through our initiatives, we're creating profound and impactful educational opportunities outside the classroom.
4. Benefit for SMU: Our endeavors will bring exposure to SMU as a significant player in cultural and educational activism in the greater Dallas area.
5. Finally, to write a soft manual for implementing this model of community-based cultural engagement for other regions and communities.

Timeline:

Our timeline follows our method of action as outlined above.

- 3-4 weeks: Research the needs of our students and our community through interviews with community members and afterschool programming with students.
- March 3rd: First event of the semester for the opening of the Calatrava Bridge.
- Mid-march and April: Continued work with WDCC after-school; two more events.
- May: Final event with students to conclude the year.
- Summer months: TBD; write a soft manual for implementing this student-driven model of cultural activism at other communities.

Budget:

With regard to our exact budget, we don't have the details necessary to predict a particular sum at the moment, as we work onsite in reaction to specific needs. Working within the community and incorporating issues brought up by students and other members prevents us from being able to outline a precise budget far in advance. We recognize that ambiguity is not preferred for Big Ideas applications; however, we hope to work with SMU in the coming weeks to determine a specifically outlined budget for the semester. That said, we can already determine our uses for these funds:

1. Supplies for after-school workshops with the students
2. Materials for putting together events, such as food for guests to encourage guests to attend and stay a while, and funds for flyers and other marketing endeavors to properly publicize events.

On March 3rd, we will be creating and planning an event with the centers for the opening of the Calatrava Bridge. Our need for funding for this project partly motivates our application for this grant.