With the support of the Lang Center, Istvan Cselotei ’18 and Paroma Nandwani ’18 conducted a feasibility study in summer 2015 called the Village Upliftment Program in Chilkigarh -- a small village located in the Paschim Mednipur district of West Bengal, one of India’s largest states -- with the goal organizing a system of support groups where women could come together, pool their resources, and create unique products to sell. Here, the team reflects upon connections among their coursework at Swarthmore College, their summer internship, and future as engaged citizens.

LC: How has your coursework at Swarthmore College informed your approach to this internship or your thinking about this issue?

Both of us have taken a number of economics and political science classes at Swarthmore [including Politics of South Asia, Introduction to Economics, International Politics, and Political Theory]. While all of these were good guides to the general nature of work we were carrying out, especially computing statistical data on the standard of living in the village, one class in particular, The Politics of South Asia, was particularly helpful. Being aware of some of the government [programs] and their effects on different parts of the country, we were able to delve deep into conversations regarding the same with the government officials, as well as ask villagers about their receipt of these services.

LC: Has this internship piqued your interest in new avenues of academic inquiry?

Absolutely! Party politics within the region that affects the public distribution system, and how to overcome the ill–effects of the same is a particular area of interest we are excited about exploring!

LC: How might this experience impact your future choices as students? As individuals? As citizens committed to social action?

As students, a lot of what we are currently studying in Swarthmore which is seemingly tedious and boring as text on a paper, came alive to us over this summer. The time that we took to write long papers to help us understand concepts bore fruit as we were able to
have engaging discussions on the same, and hopefully use them in our future work. This will make us more mindful in discounting any coursework as unimportant, laborious or boring and help us apply real-life context to black and white text.

As individuals, this experience has made us more observant of things we see around us every day, and naturally, more appreciative of the opportunities we have received by way of education. It is not until you step into a household where no one has even the slightest hint of the alphabet, of basic addition and subtraction or the joys of reading that you truly understand what a strength it is to have the power to know, learn and be aware.

As citizens committed to social action, we have been inspired to truly understand a situation before trying to find solutions. It is difficult to create policy without having a rounded view of the condition at hand, and this experience has taught us the importance of proper research before implementation of any fix.

My Path to Building Technical Capacity Across Africa, by David Opoku ‘12

After graduating from Swarthmore College in May 2012 and with funding from the Swarthmore Foundation, two Swarthmore students and I from ADOORE, a student-led literacy initiative I co-founded at Swarthmore, joined forces with two other students from Ashesi University
for a two-week library needs assessment in Manya Krobo Odumase in the Eastern Region of Ghana. The needs assessment trip gave as an opportunity to observe and talk to stakeholders in the community and at the end of the two week period, we realized that building a library at that time was not the best solution given other pressing challenges. Initially we were disappointed but we had just learned a valuable lesson on the need to validate solutions.

Last year, I joined the Meltwater Entrepreneurial School of Technology (MEST), a software development school and incubator based in Ghana as one of the Technology Teaching fellows. As a tech fellow my role is to design and teach software skills as well as mentor young entrepreneurs-in-training in building viable software businesses.

On many occasions, I find myself falling back on the skills I developed working on ADOORE. For many entrepreneurs, the ability to build a viable business solution around an existing problem increases the chances of customer adoption and success. As a mentor, I work with teams to identify these existing problems and walk through the process of validating any assumptions they make -- a skill developed through the Manya Krobo Library Needs Assessment. One other great thing the Lang Center gave me was exposure. Through my internship where I built a database of past grant opportunities and served on the Swarthmore Foundation grant committee, I gained a deeper understanding of the civic and social challenges that exist in diverse communities and insights into sources of success and failures of past solutions.

In April 2015, I also joined the School of Data, an organisation that works to promote data literacy for civil society organisations, journalists and individuals globally, as one of the seven 2015 fellows. My work involves organising trainings, developing educational resources and engaging with different stakeholders from the civil society and journalism sectors. As I have prepared for and carried out my work, I have drawn from my past experience working with civil organisations and individuals and building a non–for–profit or advocacy organisation such as ADOORE to engage with my audience and provide resources materials that apply to their context.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity through the Lang Center to get hands–on experience building an organisation and testing out different ideas. This contributed to my personal growth and has placed me in a position to continue my work of building entrepreneurial and technical capacity with diverse groups at home in Ghana and Africa.
In the spring of 2013 community members at Serenity House came together with six students and a professor from Swarthmore College. Serenity House is an outreach center of Arch Street United Methodist Church located in North Philadelphia. Since then, we have been working together on environmental and climate justice issues.

Our Accomplishments

In partnership with Serenity House, our team has supported the visions of local residents. We have organized garden work days, teach-ins about solar power, and energy efficiency workshops. With community residents, we installed a solar panel on the garage roof. We worked together with households on a nearby block to apply for and win a city-wide competition that will provide free energy efficiency makeovers for 22 long-standing homeowners. Most, recently, we have been awarded a RE-volv Solar Ambassador Fellowship to solarize the roof of Serenity House.

Our Idea

After learning about solar power, some local residents became excited about getting jobs in that industry. In response to the expressed need for employment and excitement about solar, our team has set two goals: to create green jobs in the neighborhood and make renewable energy accessible to local residents. We envision launching a worker-owned solar business in the neighborhood to achieve these aims.

Learn how you can contribute and get involved by contacting one of the student leaders: Lekey Leidecker (lleidec1) or Nora Kerrich (nkerric1).

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