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The Big Ideas @ Berkeley Panel/Mixer Encourages and Motivates Students to Think BIG

by Luis Flores

Berkeley—Big Ideas @ Berkeley was excited to host its second panel and mixer last Wednesday at Blum Hall. In addition to being introduced to contest rules, the large audience of prospective undergraduate and graduate applicants listened to the advice from past winners, asked questions, and mingled.

After a brief [introductory video](#), a panel made up of past Big Ideas winners: Alejandro Velez from Back to the Roots, Iris Shim from Crop to Cup, and Jacqueline Hoffman and Komal Ahmad from CAL Community Kitchen, shared their

experience developing their winning ideas. Ahmad, whose idea was to create a community-run kitchen that makes use of leftover goods from local restaurants to create healthy boxed meals, explained how her experience in Tanzania inspired her to alleviate hunger locally. “You see developing countries have these issues, but when you come back here, the most developed country in the world, you see it has the same issues... that’s a problem,” explained Ahmad. “Hunger isn’t a developing country issue, it is a developed country issue... there’s a really big supply out there and there is still a very big demand.”

The intention is that the mixer and panel, one of numerous new contest resources that include writing workshops and mentorships, will improve the quantity and quality of submitted proposals by providing support to applicants throughout the proposal process. “There are so many resources for you to learn from, definitely take advantage of them,” encouraged Velez, a 1st place winner in the 2009 Big Ideas contest. “This can go from nothing to a business that employs people and has national distribution.”

During a lively question and answer session, panelists explained the importance of developing a sustainable and feasible idea. While the grant from Big Ideas is intended to last a year, panelists encouraged that proposals highlight the possibility of expansion and external funding. “Your ultimate



2011 Big Ideas winner Iris Shim (r) listens as Alejandro Velez (l) talks to the audience about his 2009 winning project, Back to the Roots.

idea can be as big as you want, but you want to make sure that your next step is something that you think is pragmatic,” explained Shim, answering a question from a student who asked about the possibility of an idea being considered too big.

Panelists also stressed the importance of collaboration. “Look around you,” said Hoffman to the audience of perspective applicants. “The biggest thing is collaboration, thinking of what resources and friends share similar interests and constant communication with that person.” To encourage teamwork, the mixer that followed the panel discussion allowed interested students to meet potential collaborators while enjoying food provided by the Berkeley Student Food Collective, a 2009 Big Ideas winner. “The mixer was also a great idea as it allowed us to network with other people who were motivated enough to attend and share their ideas,” said Marwan Rammah, a 5th-year mechanical engineering major interested in the Energy Efficient Technologies contest.

As Shim explained, the contest encourages students to “take a leap and experience what it feels like to pursue a big idea.” Judging from their reactions to the event, many students left motivated to take that leap. Wenjie Chen, a Ph.D. student in mechanical engineering, left the mixer with enthusiasm. “We got some useful information, encouragement and have a better idea about the competition process,” said Chen. “We are more excited and more confident about how we will do in the competition now.” Rammah too was motivated by the presentation, specifically the introductory video. “The video was well put together in a way that motivates viewers enough to get up and immediately start working on their project,” explained Rammah.

In an effort to build on this motivation, Big Ideas @ Berkeley will be hosting a pre-proposal writing workshop on October 20 at 254 Satardja Dai Hall from 12-1pm.