EDUCATION UNLOCKED

Promoting Higher Education in the Albanian-American Community in Michigan
Final Reflection and Budget Report

(1) Provide us with a final reflection report as outlined in your proposal that also includes key leadership and team lessons learned, (2) Provide us with a detailed accounting of how the award was spent, and (3) Be willing to share your experience with the BLI community.

First and foremost, the executive team and the Albanian American Student Organization would like to thank the Barger Leadership Institute for providing the financial resources and support that allowed Education Unlocked to go from being a small idea to a successful and meaningful event. Below is a shortened version of our “Project Objectives” that were included in our initial application, and following this is an evaluation of our methods used to reach the project objectives and our success.

Project Objectives

1. Provide valuable information on higher education in America to Albanian-American students from ages 14 to 18. “Valuable” is actually quite subjective so we are working on a comprehensive presentation that incorporates vital information that the Albanian community should know and from which the members will benefit.
Specifically, we will create a video and presentation comprised of information about standardized tests, college options, how to apply for financial aid, how students can maximize their undergraduate experience, and more. We would like to focus on higher education in general, not specifically the University of Michigan. We will also hold a panel during which the members of our AASO group will answer questions and provide advice. We will share the experiences we have had and the challenges that we faced on the road to college. We hope to stand out from the typical “explaining education” workshops by giving the students first hand accounts of experiences that people from the same background and socioeconomic statuses have had. We believe this objective is doable because we have many viewpoints and members willing to engage with the students and put themselves at the students’ disposal.

2. **Widen and enrich the discussion of education within the Albanian community.** In order to do so, we are going to target various Albanian subgroups through advertising, and we will include nearly every Albanian on our campus so that the discourse that we are promoting can be inclusive, diverse, and far-reaching. The different backgrounds of our AASO group will be a very valuable asset because the different regional areas of Albania have unique dialects and our diverse language abilities will allow us to communicate with the parents who attend and do not speak English. Additionally, the panel will present our areas of study and offer our contact information to the students so that they will have a “go-to” mentor in the case that they think of questions after the panel. This is doable because once one student asks a question; the rest of the students will feel more comfortable in speaking up about their concerns. The success of this objective will be measured by how many questions are asked and how engaged the
parents become in the conversation.

3. **Share preparation materials for ACT, SAT, and AP exams.** The students and/or their families may not be able to afford prep materials, which can reach up to hundreds of dollars depending on the test and number of materials needed. Additionally, some students may not be motivated to buy these materials on their own, thinking that they do not necessarily need them, but may feel more inclined to use them if they are provided for them. We will offer students these resources at the end of our event.

4. **Inspire other college students or recent college grads in our community to take action and mentor young students.** Another objective is to provide an example for the Albanian students and encourage them by fostering a connected and helpful support group. By holding this event and serving as a resource to our community, we hope that the students we are mentoring will be inspired enough to take action and pay it forward to other people in the future.

**Realization of Objectives**

1. In order to create a presentation that included valuable information, we created a multifaceted program while holding our participants’ varying ages, socioeconomic statuses, and academic aspirations into consideration. We opened with a Keynote Address by Klementina Sula, our mentor, and also Erizon Aliaj, fellow Albanian and UM graduate. Our student panel that followed later in the program actually ended up being much different than we had planned and explained in our proposal. We realized that having a student panel consisting of only UofM students would not be the best route to take. We made an executive decision to only have one UofM AASO member on the panel, and the rest of the panel consisted of AASO student representatives from other
colleges in Michigan so that we could offer more diverse advice to the high school students. The student panel had one representative from UofM, Michigan State, Macomb Community College, Oakland University, Wayne State, Eastern, and UofM Dearborn. The rest of the University of Michigan AASO students were then the speakers in our last segment which was a comprehensive Prezi featuring information on high school involvement, standardized tests, college options, financial aid, the undergraduate experience, application timelines and so on.

2. This objective was somewhat open ended, but in order to widen and enrich the discussion within the community we took several measures to ensure that the grounds were fertile for questions, insight and comments. Klementina spoke extensively with the parents that attended the event, and we had this happening in a different room during our student panel. This environment was created intentionally so that the panelists and high school participants could speak more honestly and ask questions more freely. Finally, each student received a folder of information, including a contact sheet with the e-mail address, area of study, and phone number of every UofM AASO member, panelist, and Klementina. This sheet was created so that the participants could continue to ask questions and receive advice in a more personalized manner if desired, or perhaps establish a mentoring relationship with a college student. We believe that these methods were effective in accomplishing our objective-students did not feel restricted when asking questions and Klementina got an email the day of Education Unlocked from a participant looking for a mentor!

3. This objective is one that we believe we succeeded tremendously in realizing, and we have many people to thank for this. Our team asked for donations, contacted other
colleges and used the Barger grant money to put together practical and useful bundles for each participant. The bundles included:

a. ACT preparation book
b. Flash drive
c. UofM planner
d. T-shirt
e. LSA book bag
f. UofM Admissions information
g. Financial aid worksheets from several colleges
h. Pens/Magnets/Stickers from several colleges
i. Contact sheet
j. Hard copy of our presentation

Additionally, we were able to raffle off an iPad that was graciously donated to Education Unlocked by Dave Barger and two ACT/SAT courses from preparation agencies (1/2 scholarship from The Princeton review and full scholarship from Kaplan).

4. While we cannot truly evaluate if or how we inspired other college students or recent college grads in our community to take action, we got positive feedback from the executive boards of the other AASOs and the Balkan-American Community Center. The AASO members from other schools asked if we could do this event next year and if they could include more of their membership in the Education Unlocked program. The Balkan Center was also very receptive and said that they would love to let us host other educational and/or cultural events in the future.

**Evaluation Plan**
Distribute evaluation forms at the end of the event and ask students if they feel they’ve benefited from this information. Provide a space for them to offer us suggestions on how we can improve the event for future years. We will measure success by student attendance, active participation at the event, questions that are asked, and panelist attendance. The true measure of success will be in a couple of years when we see whether these students will be going to college and how they are doing. We are invested in the future of these students and the future of the Albanian-American community. The AASO group will hold a debriefing in which we will discuss our success, the engagement of the students, and discuss if and how the Albanian-American community has benefited from this event.

We did not distribute evaluation forms to students, but we are able to measure success by other factors. Below is a breakdown of these factors by which we measure the effectiveness of our program:

**Student Attendance:** The amount of students that attended the event actually surpassed our initial prediction. We were very concerned about attendance, and somewhat pessimistic that our first time doing the event would yield low attendance. However, we received over 50 RSVPs, not including the panelists, parents and our AASO group. Total, we had approximately 75 guests in attendance for Education Unlocked so we were pleased with the outcome. From a critical reflective stance, we could have improved our attendance by getting our commercial on air at an earlier date because this was a crucial way of capturing interest. Our commercial: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4PFW1o6eRg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4PFW1o6eRg)

**Active Participation:** Students asked questions, although getting the students to begin asking question was rough because no one wanted to come forward. When we saw this happening, we
had some of our AASO members in the audience ask questions out loud that they thought some of the kids would be wondering. These questions broke the ice a bit, and suddenly asking questions seemed less daunting. During lunch, the Education Unlocked executive team asked our membership to sit among the students, and engage with them. By doing this, we hoped to show that we were approachable and interested in the students not only for the duration of the program, but also on our own time. This proved to be quite effective, as many of the students who were reluctant to ask questions during the panel felt comfortable asking us in a one-on-one setting.

**Community Reaction:** The feedback from the Albanian-American community was phenomenal, encouraging and insightful. We received several phone calls from older Albanians asking if this event could include a full day program for people ages 18 and up, a program specifically for parents of school age children, and so on. Also, Albanian TV came to our event and broadcasted segments of our program that they filmed, as well as interviews with our executive team. This publicity was great because it highlighted our event to our community, and could help to encourage a greater turnout if this becomes an annual event. Several parents asked if we could do this every year. Finally, the feedback from the participants demonstrated to us that this event was beneficial and potentially life changing for some students who may have not believed that higher education was an option for them. Below is the email that Klementina received after our event:

*Mrs. Sula*

I am------ from earlier today; first off, I want to say your speech was fantastic and really motivating.

Just a little background from myself. I am 16 years old, I am an only child, I was born here in Michigan. My father ---- was born in Montenegro, he is 58 years old, and he came when he was around 20. He is the first in my family to attend college and received his masters and is now a teacher. My mother ----- is from -----, Albania. She married my dad when she was 17 and now she’s 37 years old and is a waitress. I am currently in 10th grade at ---------.

My parents always say that everything they do is for me and truly it is a blessing and I am privileged to be loved and have all these things that some people do not have, such as clothes, shelter and even food. A lot
of people know me because of my father he did a lot in the community and helped many people and is friends with many people, the expectations for me are at a roof top. I love my parents and everyone around me. All my life I had trouble fitting in with people like the “cool crowd” in elementary and middle school, personally, I am a very social person I do talk a lot and I was raised to have manners and be respectful. I love talking, as I got into high school I made plenty of friends and in a school of two thousand people, most of them know me, and sadly, some dis like me. I am an emotional, deep, sentimental person.

Last Year, I had a 3.4 GPA my freshmen year did pretty well, but then in the summer I started hanging out with older cousins, they misused me for money, a lot of things went down, I thought they were my friends throughout the whole summer, they were rich as well cause their dads were doctors, but they were older than me, then they stared bullying me and made me feel insecure. Then when school started 1st semester of my sophomore year unfortunately, I went through a phase, my grandparents left from America to move back home, I was very close to them, (my mom’s parents) I was sad, school wasn’t going good as far as grades, my friends left me they betrayed me, and was wondering and thinking all the time and I ended the semester pretty bad school wise. Second semester, which is now, I brought all my grades up. Reason is, I deleted all social networking, cut everyone out of my life except my parents and maybe two or three people, and its being going really great honestly, spending time with myself, and I’ve been with this Albanian girl for a while and it’s was going good, now, things are ending surely but slowly. She’s beautiful and changed me in a lot of ways, but if it does come to an end, I am just happy it happened, because it was amazing feeling talking to someone every day and being their other half, but things change I guess, and I realized these few months that the less people you mess with the less drama you have, and all my life I grew up with my grandparents and parents and being an only child I grew up by adults and am more mature I guess, and more wiser beyond my years. My GPA fell down to a 2.5 currently, and I am trying to bring it up. I want to maybe work for the United Nations one day or something with International relations or something like that. You said find a mentor, and I was really wondering, if maybe you could be my mentor? My role model in a way, I really liked what you said and what you are about and maybe if you could be my mentor and person to come to? I really would love to do internships anywhere in Europe like you did or something traveling, helping and being an assistant in an internship I think would be amazing, but yah, this is my story and was wondering if you could be my mentor. I really want to amount to something, make a difference and I understand that it is a dream, and chances are I won’t become anything because of the competition and because it is the real world, but I at least want to make an attempt. United Nations is a dream, or another dream for me is being on ABC or Good Morning America and being one of the reporters talking. It is all a dream, but I don’t want to be eighty years old and ask myself “What if...” I want to do it, or at least try. Thank you for hearing me out, and I was just wondering, I think someone like you could really change my life. Thank you.

If we were able to reach just one student in this way, we sincerely believe that our event was worth it, and we hope that the Barger Leadership Institute feels the same.

**Leadership and Team Lessons Learned**

Having an executive team for Education Unlocked was quite challenging as we began
preparations because there were countless tasks that needed to be completed, but delegating these to individuals within the team proved to be difficult. The five of us undergraduate students were either friends or acquaintances, and our ages ranged. Being fearful of stepping on each others’ toes or sounding “bossy” led to confusion, incomplete tasks, stress, and strained conversations. We quickly understood that in order for this event to be a success, responsibilities and roles had to be clearly designated within the executive team and then to AASO members as well. Leadership is not about having a title or power, but creating a loose flow chart of positions and responsibilities was actually beneficial and helped to overcome our initial struggles with coordination.

In a team setting, compromise is important. Leadership is about recognizing when others’ ideas may be better or more plausible than your own, and when holding your ground is necessary in negotiation. Our team met many times to brainstorm and make decisions in person so that all could voice their opinion, and comments were not misconstrued through text, email, and so on. Meeting in person also required compromising with our schedules, which is something that students often struggle with. We were all full time students, our mentor worked full time, over half of the team was employed at the University, and several of us belonged to other student organizations. Sacrificing personal time was sometimes necessary, and we learned to be more flexible because we were all working for the common goal, Education Unlocked.

Asking for help was surprisingly one of the biggest leadership lessons that our team learned through Education Unlocked. It was a humbling experience for all of us when we had to accept the fact that we individually were not capable of making Education Unlocked a success, and asking for help from one another and utilizing other resources was necessary. We had to adjust our attitudes about asking for help in order to work as a cohesive unit, rather than
individuals. While leadership may sometimes require being independent, a true leader should be able to recognize when and where assistance would be valuable.

**Accounting**

Below is the AASO finance account, the BLI deposit and Education Unlocked spending is highlighted in yellow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>Withdrawals and Deposits</th>
<th>Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8/24/12</td>
<td>Beginning Balance</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>75.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/24/12</td>
<td>Festifall 2012</td>
<td>-30</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/18/12</td>
<td>Welcome week assistance</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>195.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/3/12</td>
<td>Welcome Event, pizza</td>
<td>-50.88</td>
<td>144.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/28/13</td>
<td>DP Day 2013</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>119.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/3/14</td>
<td>BLI installment</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>1619.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/27/14</td>
<td>DP Day 2014</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>1594.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/27/14</td>
<td>Vistaprint EdUnlocked</td>
<td>-204.99</td>
<td>1389.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/9/14</td>
<td>ACT books EdUnlocked</td>
<td>-810</td>
<td>579.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/30/14</td>
<td>Icecream Social Reimbursements 1</td>
<td>-41.38</td>
<td>538.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/30/14</td>
<td>Icecream Social Reimbursements 2</td>
<td>-4.43</td>
<td>533.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/9/14</td>
<td>Refreshments EdUnlocked</td>
<td>-15.79</td>
<td>517.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/15/14</td>
<td>Flashdrives EdUnlocked</td>
<td>-136.2</td>
<td>381.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLI</th>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>$1,500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vistaprint</td>
<td>-204.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT books</td>
<td>-810</td>
<td>$1,295.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refreshments</td>
<td>-15.79</td>
<td>$469.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flashdrives</td>
<td>-136.2</td>
<td>$333.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLI</th>
<th>Expenses</th>
<th>$119.42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DP Day 2014</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>$94.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icecream 1</td>
<td>-41.38</td>
<td>$53.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icecream 2</td>
<td>-4.43</td>
<td>$48.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our Education Unlocked team worked diligently to find people and companies willing to donate items so that the majority of the grant money could be used for preparation materials. This was a unique experience in networking and communication, two key leadership skills that we
developed throughout our project. Below is a detailed account of our sponsors, donations and expenses.

1. Breakfast- Donated by Sava’s on State Street, Owner Sava was thanked accordingly
2. Lunch- Donated by Tre Monti Restaurant, Owner Zharko Palushaj was thanked accordingly
3. Drinks-$15.79, Kroger
4. Dessert- Donated by Piccirrelli’s Restaurant
5. LSA bags and UofM folders, flashdrives, t-shirts, information packets- Donated by LSA
6. Remainder of flash drives-$136.20
7. Agendas- Donated by Barnes and Noble of the Michigan Union
8. College information packets and pamphlets- donated by admissions offices of respective colleges
9. iPad- Donated by Dave Barger
10. Two prep courses- Donated by The Princeton Review (1/2 scholarship) and Kaplan (full scholarship)
11. ACT books- $810, one book per student
12. Vistaprint- $204.99, postcards were printed and distributed to high schools and junior highs after obtaining approval from the districts’ administration, churches, mosques, family
13. Venue- The Balkan Center allowed us to use their facilities at no cost because it was positive publicity for them, and we also promoted their ACT preparation courses that they offer
14. Commercial on AlbanianTV- Done free of charge due to nature of event
We did not anticipate having such amazing sponsors and supporters, and our frugality carried us through our project. Thus, we have $333.02 remaining from the installment. We have discussed this with our executive team, and we would like to use this remaining money to purchase additional college preparation materials to donate to the Balkan Center to distribute to students since they were so accommodating to AASO and our event. This would demonstrate our appreciation and also benefit students who may not have been able to attend the event. We will provide receipts and proof of this final purchase once it is made. We believe that this would be the best way to repay the Balkan Center in a manner that continues to coincide with our project objectives.

**Sharing our Experience**

Our executive team members that have not yet graduated, our mentor, and our AASO members would absolutely love to share our experience with the BLI community! We have event photos, advertisements, advice, testimonials, and more that we could share with interested students.