

# WDI IMPACT REPORT:

Building Bridges Through Virtual Collaboration



**WILLIAM DAVIDSON INSTITUTE**  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN





*University of Michigan student Jackie Spryshak teamed with a group of students from Egypt to form Team EcoMENA.*

# THE OPPORTUNITY

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Growing up, Jackie Spryshak said she didn't have opportunities to meet people from outside the United States. Spryshak, a sophomore business major at the University of Michigan, is from a small town in Michigan. So when she heard about the chance to meet and collaborate with her peers from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, she immediately applied. She admitted to some apprehension before the program began about language barriers and differences in culture and mannerisms. But after the first meeting with her Egyptian teammates, "I realized how similar we all really are."

Nearly 5,000 miles away in Tunisia, Mohamed Chahbi had a similar desire to connect with fellow students from outside his country. Doing so, he said, gives students "a sense of accepting the other and an eagerness to listen to, embrace diversity, collaborate and benefit from the diverse experiences that entails living within different cultures."

Spryshak and Chahbi exemplify students who want to connect with each other cross-culturally, but often lack the resources or ability to travel. Thanks to today's virtual technologies, students can now reach across the globe and connect in exciting, new ways.

The challenge for the **William Davidson Institute (WDI)** was how to leverage virtual learning tools to help students build the 21st century skills needed to thrive in the modern workplace and solve real-world problems.

Students in Egypt  
greet their U.S.  
teammates at U-M.



## OUR ROLE

To respond to this opportunity and deliver to students a real-world learning experience, WDI developed an innovative virtual exchange program, the **MENA-Michigan Initiative for Global Action Through Entrepreneurship** program—**M<sup>2</sup>GATE** for short. The program was supported by the Stevens Initiative, an international effort to build global competence and career readiness for young people in the United States and in the Middle East and North Africa while growing and enhancing the field of virtual exchange. The Initiative was created to honor the late Ambassador Chris Stevens, who dedicated his career to building bridges of dialogue and understanding between cultures. The Stevens Initiative is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and administered by the Aspen Institute. The Stevens Initiative is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation and the governments of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.

WDI designed the program to combine synchronous virtual connection with custom-developed online learning modules.

WDI recruited students from the three campuses of the **University of Michigan**, along with those at **Eastern Michigan University** and **Wayne State University**, to team up with their peers from **Egypt, Libya, Morocco** and **Tunisia**. WDI and its partner institutions developed a broad outreach campaign to attract undergraduate students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. The campaign included social media marketing, email notifications, flyers, open houses on campus and direct outreach to professors to enlist their support in spreading the word.

This successful campaign attracted over **1,300 student applicants**. A total of **402 students completed the eight-week program**—including **274 from the MENA region**. The students selected for the program were given their assignment: design business concepts that would tackle social problems such as healthcare, the environment or education.

Entrepreneurship was the program's focus because WDI believes it is an important driver of economic growth—critical for addressing unemployment in many countries—and an effective way to solve social issues. The program empowered students to identify pressing challenges in the MENA region and then develop a social enterprise solution to address them.

*“Connecting students across cultures to tackle social problems together has created so many positive outcomes—enhanced 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for participants, meaningful new relationships across countries, and many innovative social enterprise ideas that can now be parlayed into full-fledged ventures. It has been a joy to work on this project.”*

**—WDI Vice President  
for Education Amy  
Gillett (below)**





(Left) A student and a mentor in Libya connect virtually with teammates in the U.S.

(Right) Michigan-based students at U-M's Ross School of Business attend the launch event for the M<sup>2</sup>GATE program.

# GETTING STARTED

The first M<sup>2</sup>GATE cohort began in January 2018, with each team including students from one MENA country and students from Michigan. The kickoff event beamed participants from the four MENA countries into a Ross School of Business classroom where the Michigan students were seated. After introductions, the students worked on a team-building exercise in virtual breakout rooms before coming back together to report on what they learned. Program organizers then reviewed the eight-week schedule and outlined the support and resources available to them.

After the cohort launch, it was up to the students to schedule virtual meetings and decide their preferred video chat platform. Teams also discussed what social challenge in the MENA teammates' country they should pursue. Once that was decided, the teams presented their proposal in a short video. WDI staff, mentors and successful entrepreneurs from MENA and Michigan helped guide the students as they navigated through their projects.

The students then used the remaining weeks to develop a business model canvas for their proposed solution and to create a video pitching it. At the end of each cohort, a panel of judges selected the best pitch video. The winning team from each of the three cohorts—there were a total of 86 teams—was invited to the University of Michigan's Ann Arbor campus for a final pitch competition.

At the pitch competition, each team had seven minutes to present to a panel of four judges that included entrepreneurship professors from the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business and startup consultants. Team *EcoMENA*, comprised of five students from Egypt and two Michigan undergrads, was named the winner. Their project proposed working with the Zabbaleen, or "garbage people," in Cairo to help them turn the recycled materials they collect into jewelry and other products they can sell. This would reduce the amount of plastics and metal burned or dumped into landfills, and also help some of the Zabbaleen earn extra income.

The other two finalist teams were *The Alters*, a team from Morocco that proposed an after-school program to improve students soft skills, and *Kaizen*, a Tunisian team that wanted to encourage more recycling in the country by rewarding people who did.

EcoMENA member Naglaa Ibrahim Hussein Ali said the team faced challenges at times as it put together the proposal and pitch. But in the end the team "came up with the best pitch we can," and "we love each other."

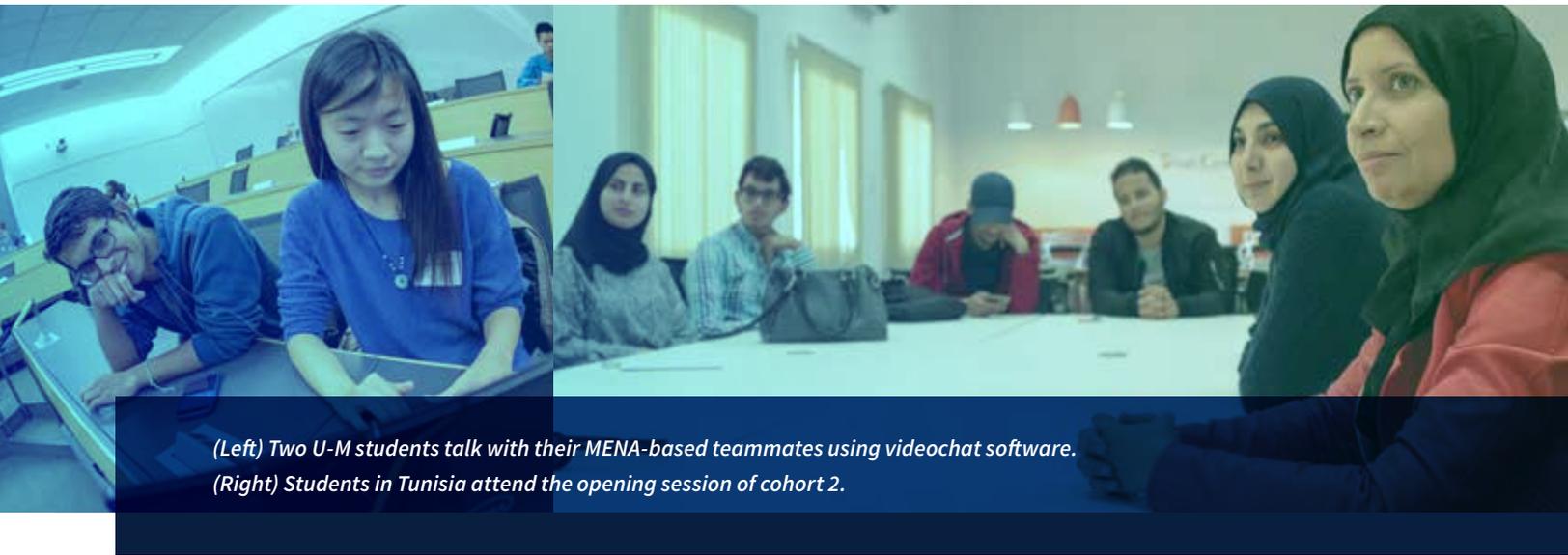
She said she never imagined the team would win and was very happy that they did. "I won't ever forget this experience," she said.

# OUR IMPACT

## OUR IMPACT

In surveys following each cohort, the students reported that their social entrepreneurship skills—the ability to define a problem, create a solution, develop a business model and take action—increased significantly after participating in the program. Similarly, the students said their global perspective and ability to work productively with people of differing cultural backgrounds also grew. And more than half of the respondents said they would use what they learned in the program to start a social enterprise in the future.

Participants also found the overall team experience to be extremely positive, and credited the teamwork with providing them with motivation, excitement for entrepreneurship, lifelong friends and connections, self-confidence and



*(Left) Two U-M students talk with their MENA-based teammates using videochat software.  
(Right) Students in Tunisia attend the opening session of cohort 2.*

empowerment. And the vast majority of participants reported that they felt strongly that diversity amongst team members enriched their work together.

Aseel Saad of Egypt said her recent acceptance into a leadership program in the United Kingdom “wouldn’t have happened without the M<sup>2</sup>GATE program.” She said M<sup>2</sup>GATE helped her discover talents she didn’t know she had, including video editing and leadership.

“M<sup>2</sup>GATE was a turning point,” Aseel said. “It let me understand my potential and discover my hidden skills.”

Saad also has launched a social enterprise, *TripleT*, that offers one-on-one, internet-based foreign language training that is flexible and affordable. The promotional site features two animated videos Saad produced using her M<sup>2</sup>GATE skills.

# OUR IMPACT

Rodolf Abanoub, also from Egypt, credited his involvement in the M<sup>2</sup>GATE program for being selected by Egypt's Academy of Scientific Research and Technology as one of five delegates to represent the country at a science camp in Indonesia.

The camp brought together talented, young scientists from 30 countries to share their ideas and projects. Rodolf said the M<sup>2</sup>GATE program prepared him for the rigorous selection interview and evaluation process.

“The skills of thinking critically from diverse perspectives that I gained from M<sup>2</sup>GATE helped me to be different from the other applicants from all over Egypt,” he said.

At the science camp, Abanoub was put on a team with students from China, Japan, Thailand and Indonesia for a competition. They worked on a project to recycle plastic and won the camp's top award.

The M<sup>2</sup>GATE program demonstrated that virtual exchange is a powerful tool to prepare today's students for the future. The program forged new friendships and networks that will lead to new businesses and greater cross-cultural understanding.

“This program has changed my life,” said Khoulood Baghourri of Tunisia.

Thanks to M<sup>2</sup>GATE, Khoulood said she has the confidence to start an enterprise project from scratch and is now more comfortable collaborating with people different from her.

The results from collaborating with others “is the best and most satisfying moment of it all,” she said. “I have now a second family of amazing friends I met thanks to this program, not to mention the added value that I have been provided with. The M<sup>2</sup>GATE program is a wonderful experience for any young social entrepreneur trying to make a positive impact in their country.”

*Team EcoMENA, comprised of students from Michigan and Egypt, won the final pitch competition. Their project proposed working with the Zabbaleen, or garbage collectors, in Cairo to help them turn the recycled materials they collect into jewelry and other products they can sell.*



# WDI'S IMPACT: BY THE NUMBERS



**402**

Program graduates



**53%**  
Female



**103**

Institutions represented



**73**

Social enterprises designed



**23**

International mentors engaged



**91%**

of participants reported strong satisfaction with the program



**51%**

of participants anticipate they will use what they learned to start a social enterprise in the future

This infographic shows the global reach and influence of WDI's **M<sup>2</sup>GATE program**. It spanned four countries in the **Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region**, and **five college campuses** in the U.S. The **402 program graduates** included **274 from the MENA countries**. The program was well balanced by gender, with 214 women and 188 men. The program participants, under the guidance of **23 mentors**, came from **103 institutions**. During the program's three cohorts, the student teams designed **73 social enterprises**. In survey responses, students credited the program with significantly **improving their cross-cultural understanding**, particularly when it came to their teammates' cultures in the U.S. and/or MENA countries.



# IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

*“The experience has been so much more than I could have ever asked for. I am immensely proud of the work that my team was able to accomplish”*

**—Mira Alana Kaufman, U-M student**

*“This program has changed my life in a way, I am now able to make a project from scratch, I am more open than ever to collaborate with people who are different than me and I have enjoyed it. This program has taught me that it’s okay to be different and that difference is what creates magic! The collaboration outcome is the best and most satisfying moment of it all. I have now a second family of amazing friends I met thanks to this program, not to mention the added value that I have been provided with. The M<sup>2</sup>GATE Program is a wonderful experience for any young social entrepreneur trying to make a positive impact in their country.”*

**—Khouloud Baghour, Tunisian student**

*“As someone who did not have the opportunity to study abroad, the virtual experience M<sup>2</sup>GATE provides allowed me to learn about and connect with like-minded peers from other cultures. I developed numerous communication and leadership skills that I know will benefit me throughout my future endeavors. Finally, I was able to act as a global citizen in the program and built a cultural awareness that helped me to understand different perspectives.”*

**—Zoe Finer, U-M student**

*“This program is on point, comprehensive and built in way that makes sure that you use what you’ve learned right away! I had fun learning about social entrepreneurship, design thinking, the business model canvas, leadership in this innovative way of learning “Virtual Exchange”. I am pleased that I was part of this program and I really hope we can change the world to a better place by solving our problems in an entrepreneurial way.”*

**—Esam AbdelHamid Shahlol, Libyan student**

*“Through virtual exchange, young people can gain global competencies and career readiness skills that prepare them to thrive as entrepreneurs. US and MENA students participating in WDI’s virtual exchange programming are now better prepared to be responsible and engaged global citizens who are able to develop solutions to both local and global challenges.”*

**—Mohamed Abdel-Kader, executive director of the Stevens Initiative**

(Right) Two U-M students greet their MENA-based teammates at the launch event for the M<sup>2</sup>GATE program.

(Below) A U-M student speaks with her MENA-based team during the launch event for the M<sup>2</sup>GATE program.



# IN THEIR OWN WORDS



*“It was a great experience to learn how to navigate through cultural differences and come together as a team to create a product. This program also gave me the platform to practice the business acumen learned from the classroom and apply it to something tangible. I was able to go through the entrepreneurial process, working on each aspect of the product, from the revenue streams to the customer base to the resources we would need to utilize. I now understand how to create a business, especially one with a social impact focus, something I hope to explore more in the future.”*

**—Isha Kenkare, U-M student**

*“I am passionate about working on social issues and peace-building, especially in the MENA region. M<sup>2</sup>GATE was one of the greatest opportunities I had ever seen. It is the perfect opportunity to make a difference, to join a varied network from the MENA region and the U.S., and to work in a multicultural environment to build a social entrepreneurship project and make an impact.”*

**—Chaima Jahouri, Moroccan student**

*“There were a lot of unknowns that made me a little worried if this program was right for me. But I was given great guidance by our leaders as to what the program was all about. The mentors made me excited to go forward working with my team. I also enjoyed meeting my team for the first time. We learned a lot about each other in such a short period and it really opened my eyes.”*

**—Brett Ritter, U-M student**



# TEAM PROJECTS

## TEAM PROJECTS:

- ➔ **Caerus** (Tunisia) designed *Ecopack*, backpacks made by rural artisans out of palm materials instead of petroleum-based material.
- ➔ **Pacesetters** (Libya) created a job-placement service for new graduates in Libya.
- ➔ **Sustainablers** (Egypt) developed “*El-link*”—an app between people looking to get rid of electronic waste and companies who can recycle it.
- ➔ **MedImpact** (Morocco) created “*HEAL*”—*Health Education Awareness Learning*, an online and in-person training service for educating citizens on emergency response procedures, such as CPR, in response to the shortage and slowness of ambulance service.
- ➔ **Femirights** (Egypt), designed an app to teach girls and women self-defense moves and how to deal with verbal harassment.



Two members of team Kaizen from Tunisia make their presentation during the pitch competition.

## CURRICULUM MODULES:

- ➔ Cross-cultural Team Building
- ➔ Leadership Development
- ➔ Communication Skills
- ➔ Design Thinking & Creative Inquiry
- ➔ Introduction to Entrepreneurship & Social Entrepreneurship
- ➔ Business Model Canvas

## 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY SKILLS:

- ➔ Global understanding
- ➔ Cross-cultural communication
- ➔ Leadership
- ➔ Digital literacy
- ➔ Entrepreneurial thinking
- ➔ Virtual collaboration
- ➔ Project management



WDI Vice President for Education Amy Gillett congratulates a member of The Alters team following the pitch competition.



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## ABOUT WDI

Established at the University of Michigan in 1992, the William Davidson Institute is an independent, non-profit research and educational organization guided by our founding principle that thriving businesses drive economic development and improve social welfare in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

WDI serves both profit-seeking and non-profit firms by conducting research and collaborating with local partners to develop business models that are profitable, and by transferring business insights to decision makers in LMICs.

Our consulting work focuses on developing, adapting and applying sound business principles in four interrelated sectors necessary for a thriving economy: professional education, energy, healthcare and finance, in addition to offering performance measurement and improvement services that span these sectors. Our training programs harness the latest innovations in education, providing world-class management training opportunities for the global leaders of today and tomorrow.

With a unique blend of field-based experience and academic rigor, WDI works to build stronger economies and healthier societies.

## EDUCATION SECTOR

Through our deep knowledge, expertise and networks, WDI's Education team tailors cutting-edge training programs to suit a variety of needs. We work with universities, corporations, governments, nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations to strengthen business acumen, develop robust management curricula and coach faculty, instructors and students in entrepreneurial thinking. Our close relationship with the University of Michigan enables us to harness the latest thinking in both education and business. Housed at WDI, our Global Virtual Learning Center builds upon the Institute's success as a provider of virtual learning.

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*The Stevens Initiative is also supported by the Bezos Family Foundation  
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