The main objectives of this summer were to develop a solid entrepreneurial skill set, to gain a better understanding of who I am outside a protected environment like Middlebury, and to explore diverse potential occupational trajectories. As a member of Ambassador Corps’ (AC) first cohort, my unusual assignment consisted of three modules:

1. Design, Partnering, Management, and Innovation (DPMI)
2. Field work in Cuba
3. MiddCORE

The biggest challenge lay in ensuring that these three components formed a coherent narrative that achieved the aforementioned goals. To ensure that each segment receives its proper amount of reflection, this report divides the reflection into four segments, one for each module with the fourth for some overall thoughts.

(1) DPMI

DPMI helped redefine my understanding of international development and provided me with the skills needed to enter the Non-for-Profit sector. Living in DC for the duration of the training was a highlight. The city struck the right balance between a vibrant environment, with robust transportation systems and constant thought-provoking entertainment, and a friendly space.

The training itself was skill-building intensive: From learning how to build problem trees, results frameworks, log frames, exit strategies, and scale-up proposals to mapping core competence, strategy canvas, and social networks, I am amazed at the amount we learnt in three weeks. Throughout DPMI, we had weekly projects wherein we applied all the skills and tools gained during the week. Although this provided a perfect opportunity to practice such tools, the hypothetical nature of the exercise detracted from the level of seriousness and commitment of some participants, thereby negatively influencing the learning process. In other words, I wish we consulted for ‘real’ NGOs or NPOs.

Having said that, I feel confident that I can now work in a NGO environment with a solid understanding of the jargon and an ability to design a project from
start to finish. Moreover, I have gained a nuanced understanding of partnerships and coalition building within the field of international development. Most importantly, DPMI taught me how to develop indicators to assess social impact.

Major takeaways included: a change in knowledge do not equal a change in behavior; only through high levels of trust are we able to achieve meaningful change in the development field; and development is not about empowering agents in a developing setting but about providing the environment for them to empower themselves.

If I were to start a social enterprise in a developing country, these skills would be invaluable not only because I could use them to develop the enterprise itself, but also to understand other organizations with whom I may partner to achieve some form of social impact. Once the partnership is established, developing metrics to monitor and evaluate our social projects should not be an issue.

(2) Fieldwork in Cuba Sponsored by Ambassador Corps

The fieldwork centered on identifying, locating, and interviewing aspiring (social) entrepreneurs in Cuba to understand the challenges and opportunities present on the island. This assignment challenged me in unprecedented ways. Overnight, I moved from being surrounded by friends to a state of complete isolation, as I knew no one in Havana. Starting with merely three contacts did not help my chances of getting to know people. Having never lived in a Spanish-speaking country nor cold-called before in my life, the assignment took any potential room for a comfort zone and threw it into the Caribbean.

When I really think about it, this was the first time I was completely structure-less. Canada, Syria, or Japan, all my previous travels have always been structured somehow. I have always stayed at a friend’s or was with family, or at least under the guidance of an educational institution. Never have I ventured to be so ... alone. Never have I lost the locus of control over my being so grandiosely. There were a hundred things that could go wrong and I could do nothing about any of them.

It took a couple of weeks for me to calm down after my initial 'spasmodic'
reaction. Living in North America for four years have rendered me a believer that I, and only I, am in control of my destiny. My time in Cuba reminded me that it is more complicated than that. Slowly, the city grew on me with its chaos and crowded buses that cost 5 cents. There is something oddly trancing about the feeling of solidarity aroused by melding into a desolate background with hundreds of people going about their lives. To a passer-by, I was just another Cuban. This visual reality eased my life, encouraging strangers on the streets to open up to me, albeit my foreignness.

With considerable difficulty, I managed to interview 17 entrepreneurs, establishing about 90 contacts on the island. It was humbling to discover how generous strangers can be with time. Such encounters allowed me to draw a more detailed image of Havana and life under a socialist regime. The stories I gathered interwove to form an intricate canvas that made no sense. The main lesson was that, regardless of the regime they live under, people are merely interested in making ends meet: they want food, health, and education for their children.

(3) MiddCORE

Initially, MiddCORE seemed rather daunting and overwhelming. The only three words that kept popping to my mind were: business, leadership, and networking. None of them particularly resonated with me. In the first week, our ‘strategic challenge’ was to help a one-billion company increase their market share amongst millennials. If anything the challenge confirmed my fears. Quickly, however, I came to realize that despite how people perceive it on campus, MiddCORE was more about innovation, collaboration, and mentoring. For the first time in my undergraduate experience, I began enjoying working in teams and came to the realization that no one regardless of their intelligence can do all the work. Moreover, I started developing confidence in my ability to find innovative solutions rather than perceiving myself as only capable of execute and critique them.

Perhaps my favorite component of MiddCORE was the opportunity to develop a project that solves an existing social issue. My initiative, Unleash Cuba, focused on the dire lack of credit in Cuba. Consequently, the non-for-
profit aims to improve Cuban standards of living through encouraging entrepreneurship by providing promising entrepreneurs with a grant, coupled with business management and hospitality training to start their own business. As it currently stands, I am considering piloting this initiative.

(4) Overall Summer
The final project at MiddCORE allowed me to bring together the skills and knowledge I gained throughout the summer into a coherent development project. I used the assessment and M&E skills gained in DPMI, the cold-calling experience from Cuba, and MiddCORE's human-centric approach. It was extremely empowering to go, in a mere two weeks, from identifying an issue to developing a coherent, validated idea with a robust financial plan. The yields of combing these three experiences was winning MiddCORE's innovation challenge. All the fast-paced, intensive three months paid-off. Moving forward, I hope other fellows will experience this trifecta and benefit from it, as much as I did.

For now, an uneasy tension is growing inside me that I have not had time to process yet: should my focus be learning for learning's sake or does it need a reason behind it, a carefully articulated rationale? I have always been a strong believer in following any burgeoning passions, regardless of whether they 'fit' a greater picture or not. After a multitude of experiences that are impact-driven and pragmatic in nature, all focused on acquiring skills and measurable accomplishments, I find myself lost.

A concrete example of this tension is my hesitation to carry out my thesis project. Initially, I wished to investigate the effects of bilingualism on economic decision-making as an unexplored field. Now, I am questioning whether this is 'too theoretical' and will not 'benefit' anyone in a meaningful way. Part of me now wants my senior work to be on micro-finance in Cuba, doing something that may directly benefit others.

This confusion, I find, is rather healthy. As my grandmother always said, "Out of confusion, we always grow." How I grow exactly, remains to be seen.