Penn undergrad startup aims to make finding grants easier

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Grant Fellow's John Lu, Nick Liu and Grace Truong

As most researchers know, applying for grant funding is a complex

process. But before the application process even starts, researchers must tackle a more fundamental task: finding a funding source that's a good match for a project. With numerous grants available locally, nationally and globally, some public and some private, it can be challenging to simply get a handle on what is out there.

It's this often-overlooked challenge of the grant application process that University of Pennsylvaniaundergraduates Grace Truong, John Lu and Nick Liu are tackling with the foundation of their company,Grant Fellow LLC. Grant Fellow's website is an online aggregator, search engine and task manager that will streamline and simplify the grant-writing process for universities and nonprofits alike.

Now, with their recent participation in an international competition for young tech entrepreneurs, Truong, Lu and Liu are poised to share their product with the world.

The Grant Fellow co-founders first met during Truong and Liu's freshman year and Lu's sophomore year through their participation in the PEER mentoring program. Hosted by Penn's Pan-Asian American Community House, PEER helps freshmen adjust to college life by pairing them with upperclass mentors.

In spite of their diverse backgrounds—Truong, a biology major from Irvine, Calif.; Wharton student Lu from Mississauga, Ontario; and engineering student Liu from Raleigh, N.C.—the three shared common interests. As high school students, all were engaged in research, and Truong and Lu were involved in community service related to autism. They became fast friends.

Eager to engage in community outreach at Penn, the three decided to create an after-school program for autistic children at Lea Elementary School in West Philadelphia. It was while initiating this program that

Truong, Lu and Liu were first confronted with challenge of obtaining grant funding.

"We were struggling to find ways to not only get materials for the program curriculum but also to compensate our special education-certified teacher," says Truong. "We ended up getting funding, but we had to apply for several grants from different places."

From this personal experience with funding obstacles and from additional conversations with research colleagues at Penn, the idea for Grant Fellow was born.

"We realized how much easier of a process this would have been if all the relevant grants were in one place," says Liu. "And we thought, if we have this problem, other people must be having it, too."

It takes a support system to turn a good idea into reality. For Truong, Liu and Lu, this support came in the form of acceptance to the Microsoft Imagine Fund last February.

The Fund is a pilot program that empowers young tech entrepreneurs to materialize their dreams. Grant Fellow was one of 11 teams from across the country to participate. Each team received $10,000 to begin developing a product. Twice weekly for three months, the teams met virtually to receive business and technology mentorship.

"Throughout the program I was really impressed by the collaborative spirit, everyone wanted to learn from one another, share skills and ideas," says Truong.

During the 10-week program, the team worked hard to transform their idea into a fully functional website.

"This was a big challenge for us because none of us had much experience with coding," says Truong. "Most of the other teams were master's students or have been working on tech products for a long time. We had to play catch-up."

Lu and Liu took on the bulk of the website coding, working for three months to teach themselves HTML and JavaScript. Truong taught herself to use Adobe Illustrator, and, with a 30-day free trial, created the slick digital artwork on the website's homepage.

And through participating in PennApps, the University's biannual, student-run hackathon, the team found a wealth of technical support in the broader community.

"We got to talk with a lot of Penn peers who are well versed in programming," says Liu. "We asked people what's the best way to set up the website, what are the best coding platforms to use, how to create the best user-interface experience. We received an amazing level of support from this community."

The team's cross-disciplinary skill set served them well beyond the technical aspects of website development. Liu, the group engineer, took the lead on product testing, making sure the various components of the website functioned smoothly. Lu put his business degree to work, serving as CEO and project manager throughout the development process.

"Our company is pretty horizontal, so everyone tries to help out with everything. It's a small team and we are all friends with each other, so it's really fun working with everyone," Lu says.

Truong's connections to the research world were also valuable. She spearheaded an effort to reach out to researchers and grant writers at

Penn and other universities and nonprofits across the country. Along with a network of volunteers, she made dozens of cold calls and conducted surveys to elicit input from potential users on major roadblocks in the grant-writing process and specific areas for improvement.

This user-centered design approach helped inform Grant Fellow in unexpected ways. For instance, the team discovered that many research departments outsource funding applications to dedicated grant-writing offices.

"Something we heard a lot from these offices is that they'd like to have more connection with the professors they are writing grants for. Through these conversations, we realized there was an unmet need to make the grant application process more accessible to professors and administrators alike," says Truong.

To address this need, the team created an "Application Manager" feature on Grant Fellow. This will allow an administrator to assign grants to specific researchers, visualize each application schedule, send email reminders and monitor the overall grant-application progress.

The team did a tremendous amount of work getting their project together during the three-month program. Their efforts are already paying off. Of the 11 teams, Grant Fellow was selected to represent the United States at the Microsoft Imagine World Cup Finals in Seattle last month.

"We had to submit a professional slide deck, project manual and 10-minute video of us presenting our product," Truong says. "And we had to do it all right in the middle of finals week. It was a pretty intense May."

The World Cup Finals brought together 34 tech startups, each from a different country. The three-day expo was an opportunity for some of the world's most talented young tech developers to showcase their products to the public through live presentations and an expo booth.

"It was an amazing week, and we were able to make friends from around the world," says Truong.

Although the Grant fellow team was not able to take home the Imagine Cup Champion title this year, for this team the most rewarding part of the experience is not the prizes.

"We really think Grant Fellow will make people's lives easier and enhance their chances of obtaining funding," says Truong. "And not just for university researchers; this is a tool that can be used by nonprofits as well. Currently the site is focused on materials science and medicine. But in the future we'd like to expand to many more disciplines."

Lu agrees.

"Hopefully, we will be able to impact not only the research community but simply anyone who needs financial support for their projects."

Grant Fellow is currently in beta and a live launch is anticipated within the next several months.

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