

Evan Chen Explores a Global Mission to Use Business Skills for Social Good

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Evan Chen is a junior at the Wharton School and past co-president of Penn International Business Volunteers, a non-profit, student-run organization that uses business skills to benefit those in need throughout the world. Run from the University of Pennsylvania campus in Philadelphia, PIBV sends students to serve as consultants to non-profits and NGOs in developing countries. Chen talked to Knowledge@Wharton High School about his volunteer work and how that relates to his career track.

An edited transcript of the conversation follows:

Knowledge@Wharton High School: How did you get involved in PIBV?

Evan Chen: I went to high school in the Philippines and I came to Penn freshman year. I was checking out different clubs where I could get involved with the non-profit sector. In high school, I was part of our debate team, and we talked a lot about the different issues that people faced. I found out about PIBV online through the website on campus.

KWHS: What is PIBV all about?

Chen: PIBV stands for Penn International Business Volunteers. Over the semester and the school year, we set up summer international consulting trips to non-profits and NGOs abroad. We find non-profits that are early-to-medium stage in their development and growth, where they would benefit from having students from different backgrounds coming in and doing a consulting project for them. Our consulting projects are usually business and marketing plans. This past summer I did a basic impact assessment study for the NGO that I was working with.

KWHS: Tell us a little bit more about that. Where did you travel to this summer?

Chen: This summer we went to Mexico and worked with a foundation called Fundación Ciudad de la Alegría, which means City of Joy Foundation in Spanish. They are a very interesting non-profit because their direct beneficiaries are other non-profits. They help these non-profits by giving them infrastructure, utilities and security so that they can focus on running their programs better. We were called to do an operational audit for them. Basically, that means looking at what they were doing well and what they could improve on. We did this through interviews with the staff and the beneficiary NGOs, and we also did some research online through articles in scholarly journals about best practices for non-profit management.

KWHS: Can you give other examples of how PIBV has used business to help NGOs in other countries?

Chen: Something that really caught my attention freshman year was a microfinance trip that PIBV did a few years ago, before I came to Penn. They ran surveys and helped the microfinance institution look at what kinds of products they could give out to the people they were helping. So, what kinds of loan packages would most help these women entrepreneurs, who would [in turn] use this money to start their own businesses?

KWHS: Why do you volunteer your time this way? What made you decide to do this?

Chen: I think the biggest [motivation] that leads me to volunteer is the fact that I feel like I've been given so much.

And it's not something that I necessarily deserve – it's a mixture of luck, hard work, where I was born and the different opportunities that I received. I feel like volunteering is the best way for me to give back, to use those opportunities and the skills I learn in class to give back to people in other places.

KWHS: What are the greatest lessons you've taken away from your travels with PIBV?

Chen: The greatest lesson I learned, personally, is that a lot of non-profits abroad still have that need for business skills. They can greatly improve on what they're doing. If you can help out by spending just a month in a non-profit abroad, or teaching them a little bit about what you learn in class, you can greatly help them improve their operations and make them better at helping other people, even if you're not there the whole time.

KWHS: Do you actually get to see, day-to-day, the people that you're helping [by working with these non-profits]?

Chen: While we were there on the ground in Mexico, we got to meet some of the beneficiaries, or some of the non-profits that City of Joy was helping. For other projects that we have, our trip members would personally talk to the beneficiaries and ask them, for example, whether or not the services that the NGO is providing were effective, and how they can improve on that.

Once we go back to school, it's a challenge keeping up with them. Recently I heard from my client through e-mail. She said that they were going through their yearly planning right now using the report that we made for them this past summer. I found it very encouraging to be giving them some value, even if we're just college students.

KWHS: You are an operations and marketing major, with a second concentration in social impact and responsibility. How do you see those skills coming together to shape your future? What would you like to do for your career?

Chen: The marketing and operations management concentration focuses on new product development and designing business products and services to sell. I was very interested in that because I like short-term projects, where I can see the result and I can see something grow. Connecting that with my interest in social impact and responsibility, I would want to see where business can help make markets more efficient and fairer. What areas of the market can we introduce certain products to that will actually help the people who are buying these products, not only the companies?

KWHS: Do you feel like your PIBV work is good training for that?

Chen: Yes, I think so. The PIBV work that I've had at Wharton definitely gave me a good experience abroad — and also a good experience in school — by linking my academic interests with extracurriculars. Also, [PIBV] gets professors at Penn to speak about certain issues in non-profit management and international development. Apart from PIBV, there are other clubs that I'm also involved in at Penn, which give me very concrete opportunities to use my business skills in the non-profit sector.

Related Links

- [Penn International Business Volunteers](#)
- [Fundación Ciudad de la Alegría](#)
- [Crain's New York Business: Philanthro-teens Delving into Nonprofit World](#)
- [KWHS: The Hunger Project: Beyond Cold, Hard Economics](#)
- [High School Study Abroad and Teen Travel](#)
- [AYUSA Global Youth Exchange](#)
- [People to People Ambassador Program](#)