Johnson Acara Challenge Finalists Merge Design and Business
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For the second year in a row, two Johnson student teams from the Creative Design for Affordability class were chosen to represent the school in the Acara Challenge finals in St. Paul, Minnesota in early February. The Acara Challenge, a program of the Acara Institute, engages students in multi-disciplinary, multi-country collaboration to develop sustainable solutions and business models to challenging global social issues with the intention of incubating and implementing the winning plans into successful sustainable social businesses.

Creative Design for Affordability is a pioneering full semester project-based course for graduate students that applies design thinking principles to a developing-world sustainability challenge. Design thinking is a user-centered approach to innovation that employs techniques such as observation, empathy, storytelling, ideation, prototyping, critiquing and iteration to better understand potential users and to drive creativity and innovation.

By using design thinking exercises students are encouraged to become more aware of their creativity and learn techniques that will prepare them to lead or facilitate creative teams in their future careers as business leaders. Cornell student teams were paired students from the Somaiya Institute of Management Studies and Research (SIMSR) in Mumbai, India to create viable business solutions that address an environmental or social challenge in an economically disadvantaged area in Maharashtra, India.

The business concept, UJJWAL, proposed by Cornell students Lani Shufelt (MBA '12), Michael Pu (MBA '12), Mohanram Gudipati (PhD, Molecular Biology & Genetics), Schuyler Blackman (MBA '12) and Tathiana Reis (MBA '12) together with four SIMSR teammates, addresses malnutrition in pregnant women in the slums of Mumbai. According to a United Nations report (2005-2009) the absolute level of infant and child mortality is about 48 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 2010 and 28% of the infants are born with a low birth weight. Most of these deaths are contributions from the urban slums. India stands at the 48th position in the UNICEF's ranking of under-five mortality rate (2009). The primary intention of their venture is to provide a wide
range of services for expectant women which will help them deliver a healthy baby and reduce infant mortality rate.

Easy Rasoi, a Hindi word for “Kitchen”, will offer comprehensive healthy meal solutions to young professionals by providing fresh cut vegetables along with recipes and ingredients. This idea of Johnson students Haley Farr (MBA ’12), Mark Skwarski (MBA ’12), Matthew Clifford (MBA ’12), Susan Buckwalter (MBA ’12), and Tom Galeazzi (MBA ’12) and four SIMSR students, proposes employing low-income vegetable vendors and “Base of the Pyramid” women and men in the business to deliver this service, thereby elevating the overall health and productivity across the community.

The winning teams will be invited to participate in Acara’s Summer Institute in India to further pursue their business concept. Last year one Johnson team was selected as a winner while the collaboration between Johnson and SIMSR earned them the Most Collaborative University Team award.

Johnson’s Center for Sustainable Global Enterprise received a Course and Program grant from National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance (NCIIA) in fall of 2010 to significantly enhance and institutionalize this new collaborative class that helps students conceptualize and develop new businesses that address global societal challenges.