

Business School Personal Statement

Growing up, the people I have most admired have never been necessarily the most successful in terms of certain traditional values alone, but the most impactful with respect to improving the world around them. As a young, soccer-obsessed kid, growing up in New Orleans, I was enamored with Arsène Wenger, coach of Arsenal Football Club, who revolutionized English football by introducing possession-based play, a more strict diet, and fitness regimens. While Wenger is one of the most successful coaches of all time in terms of numbers of trophies won, he is most known for his enormous impact on the game in general. Even more than that, as a young Congolese immigrant to the United States, watching Wenger's squads, which were loaded with talent from West Africa as well as the Caribbean, made me feel as though I could attain similar heights on the field. Search as I may, throughout my youth, I was loath to find many change-makers of this magnitude who looked like me in my home city of New Orleans.

While I have never put much thought into why this was the case, I've come to understand that what matters most to me in life is being impactful within my community and being a catalyst for change. The pattern for this is clear in my own life, as I have always felt most energized and focused when I have been able to change the course of a conversation or how my colleagues or fellows have been analyzing a problem in search of viable solutions. For example, Jared Diamond's "Guns Germs and Steel" is the book that brought me to do my master's degree in international development. In the classroom, I would often use lessons from that book, as well as from Dambisa Moyo's "Dead Aid," not only to provide a historical perspective to ongoing analysis, but also to make the case that aid may not be the proper or ideal tool for confronting certain policy issues. I can also find similar instances in my current work at the Vera Institute of Justice. For example, after a series of unproductive meetings, I was recently able to convince our public defender's office to increase the number of bond motions they file by showing them that they could meet their internal target by filing two to three more per day. This quick calculation using the database management software SQL helped make the difference between the success and failure of one of our initiatives.

I write all of this to say that the city of New Orleans, the city that I emigrated to as a young child and that made me who I am today, has reached a turning point. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the city has seen dynamic growth in the non-profit sector, but it is now starting to see similar business growth, though that growth has not been distributed evenly across all communities. I have come to realize that an injection of capital is needed to spark economic growth and diversify the New Orleans economy. While the world of petroleum products – the entire value chain – has played a disproportionate role in the New Orleans economy for many decades, this is becoming environmentally unsustainable. Data is now "the new oil" and has the capacity to impact all sectors of the economy. I have seen the power of big data in my current work in situations such as the one with the public defender's office outlined above; I hope to multiply its impact in my future work.

In order to provide this spark, I intend to, with the power of a Stanford education, establish a venture capital firm in New Orleans staffed primarily by minority investors who will be more keen and willing to invest in minority entrepreneurs and help change perceptions of what a person of color can become in New Orleans. While I didn't grow up well-off, I was lucky enough to have educated parents who were examples of what I could become. More children need that opportunity and this venture could make that a possibility. New Orleans is currently home to few large corporations. I firmly believe that within the city there is a minority entrepreneur capable of building a firm innovative and profitable enough to further rejuvenate its economy. Local black entrepreneurs such as Damon Burns have publicly noted that focus on minority entrepreneurship is "long overdue." I share that sentiment and look forward to having a long term impact through this work and building a brighter future for my city.

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