Spur Projects:

* A BOLD NEW APPROACH TO SUICIDE PREVENTION *
Introduction

This is one of a series of case studies produced by students enrolled in the Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University through its partnership with the International Youth Foundation (IYF). Students enrolled in a course exploring the role of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs were paired with young leaders of social ventures identified through the IYF’s YouthActionNet® program. The students were given the assignment of analyzing the venture’s assets, successful methodologies, and opportunities for investment to increase impact. Through this experiential learning process, the student consultants gained hands-on experience and exposure to the needs of social enterprises. The ventures, too, benefited from student insights into their strengths, areas for growth, and recommendations for enhancing their impact and sustainability. The Georgetown practicum is part of YouthActionNet's larger efforts to partner with institutions of higher learning around the globe to integrate social change into the academic experience and career interests of students.

International Youth Foundation

The International Youth Foundation (IYF) invests in the extraordinary potential of young people. Founded in 1990, IYF builds and maintains a worldwide community of businesses, governments, and civil society organizations committed to empowering youth to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. IYF programs are catalysts of change that help young people obtain a quality education, gain employability skills, make healthy choices, and improve their communities.

www.iyfnet.org

YouthActionNet®

Since 2001, YouthActionNet, a program of the International Youth Foundation, has provided founders of social ventures, ages 18 to 29, with the training, networking, coaching, funding, and advocacy opportunities they need to strengthen and scale their impact. These young social entrepreneurs have pioneered innovative solutions to critical local and global challenges, resulting in increased civic engagement, improved health, education reform, economic opportunity, environmental protection, and more inclusive societies. Our work is carried out through a network of 23 national and regional youth leadership institutes that collectively support over 1,350 young social entrepreneurs globally.

www.youthactionnet.org

Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University

The Global Human Development Program of Georgetown University is home to one of the world’s premier master’s degree programs in international development. An innovative, academically rigorous skills-based graduate program, the Master of Global Human Development degree prepares the next generation of development professionals to work with public sector agencies, private businesses, and non-profit organizations that advance development. Through coursework, extracurricular activity, and practical fieldwork experiences, our graduates develop the insights, skills, and experiences necessary to become leaders in development and make a difference in our global community.

https://ghd.georgetown.edu
INTRODUCTION

Meet Lee Crockford: Co-Founder and CEO

Lee is a very enthusiastic and personable leader, and possesses the perfect qualities to be Chief Executive for Spur Projects as they go through their first year as an officially registered charity. He was born and raised in Australia, and has an academic background in Music Composition. Upon completion of his university studies, he moved to London to work with an organization called Music Platform, which promotes youth social change through music education. This experience provided him with expertise in project development, which would prove essential for his current role as Chief Executive of Spur Projects. Lee then moved back to Australia to found an organization based on the Music Platform model but struggled to get it off the ground. He remained in Australia and in 2011 began assisting a friend who was organizing the first “Soften the Fck up” campaign, which would eventually evolve into Spur Projects. In addition to Spur Projects, Lee also manages another non-profit organization in Australia, where he consults with other organizations and businesses on ways to improve their impact.

Spur Projects is changing mental health awareness and suicide prevention in Australia.

The Problem

Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australian men between the ages of 14 to 44, and men account for 80% of all suicides nationwide. The alarmingly high suicide rate can be attributed in part to a culture of hyper-masculinity throughout Australia, particularly in rural regions of the country. In a hyper-masculine society, strength, looks, and a tough attitude are often viewed as the ideal standards that men should strive to achieve and are judged against. Men often feel forced to participate in certain rituals, activities, and behaviors seen as being “manly,” and are discouraged from openly expressing themselves or participating in activities that may make them appear weak or inferior to their counterparts. As a result, many young men are not aware of how to express themselves in a healthy manner, a phenomenon known in the behavioral studies field as ‘normative male alexithymia.’

Men living in a hyper-masculine culture are less likely to recognize or cope with difficult circumstances in a healthy manner. They may avoid sharing how they feel with family and friends or seeking professional help, as they are unaware of different methods of positive action that could potentially improve their condition. As a result, they may resort to substance abuse, erratic or even violent behavior, or other means of avoiding their mental health ailments. In extreme cases, this tension leads to suicidal behavior. In Australia, the primary approach to mental health ailments is clinical, aimed at assisting people that have already experienced mental health and have sought professional help. Many of the approaches to mental health outreach in the country are seen as potentially too clinical to resonate with the current generation of young males.
The Solution
Spur Projects consists of a variety of activities aimed at decreasing the rate of suicide among young Australian men. Their mission is to equip healthy young Australian men with the right tools, resources, and language to improve their mental condition during both normal and difficult times. According to their website, there are two things that must occur in order for someone to improve their mental health. The first is for them to actually be aware of their own feelings and emotions. The next step is to take positive action if there are changes that need to be made. This can be as simple as expressing how they feel or seeking professional assistance.

Each project utilizes a non-clinical approach to show young men how to properly recognize and cope with mental health ailments when they arise. This is based on Spur Projects’ conviction that experiencing periods of increased mental stress or anguish are an inevitable part of life. As a result, each of their projects aims to engage healthy young men long before they experience the symptoms associated with periods of depression. Then they know how to recognize a problem, and are aware of the positive actions they can take to improve their mental health. Each activity sponsored by Spur Projects aims to combat perceptions of masculinity that young men feel pressured to conform to. Men come to know the benefits of expressing their feelings. They no longer see their differences as a sign of vulnerability, but as attributes that make them unique.

“At Spur Projects, we’re passionate about making it easier for men to take positive action than to take their own lives. We believe that to tackle the rate of suicide among men in Australia, bold new approaches to suicide prevention are required.”

Source: Spur Projects Website

Operational Model
• Spur Projects is a registered non-profit organization based in Queensland, Australia. They operate as a collection of projects, which utilize non-clinical approaches to mental health awareness and suicide prevention.
• Spur began as a campaign aimed at suicide prevention called “Soften the Fck up,” in 2011.
• From 2013-2014, they received an Auspice Agreement from an Australian agency called Beyond Blue, which covered their insurance and legal affairs.
  o During this period, the original CEO stepped down and co-founder Lee Crockford became Chief Executive.
• After the Auspice agreement expired at the end of 2014, the staff had an internal debate over the future of the project, and ultimately decided to turn the project into a non-profit enterprise.
• The process of becoming a registered non-profit in Australia took nearly 10 months, but Spur Projects became an officially recognized charity in mid-2015.
• Numerous campaigns and projects have been launched through Spur Projects since the original project in 2011. Successful projects are continuously updated and scaled, and they are always thinking of new approaches to raising mental health awareness.
• The organization currently relies on donations and government assistance for financing, and hope to receive sponsorship for specific programs in the coming year
  o Spur raised roughly AUD$25,000 (US$20,000) in 2015, and is aiming for $150,000-$250,000 (US$100,000-200,000) by the end of 2016.

KEY ASSETS AND SUCCESSFUL METHODOLOGIES

Non-Clinical Approach to Suicide Prevention
While formal methods of assistance are important for those requiring direct support, the Spur Projects approach recognizes the need for more mental health programs aimed at the young male population as a whole. This is based on the notion that suicide rates will decrease if men are better educated about mental health, and are better equipped to recognize and acknowledge how they are feeling. Since certain clinical approaches and mental health resources may not resonate with the current generation of young Australians, Spur Projects designs each program to reflect the interests, concerns, and specific challenges men encounter in their daily lives. This generational approach encourages increased participation in each project, erasing some of the stigmas a young man might encounter when faced with having to reflect on his mental health. Keeping in mind the aversion many young men feel regarding open expression, many of Spur’s sponsored projects take a more covert approach to mental health advocacy, encouraging individuals to participate in fun social, activities and meet new people, with the underlying goal of getting them to be more open with their feelings.

Redefining Mental Health and Encouraging Healthy Expression
Spur Projects recognizes the importance of how society defines and describes mental health issues. While awareness of mental health has greatly increased in recent years, Australia is still a long way from making mental health conversations a societal norm. As a result, Spur’s projects address the power that particular words and phrases may carry when discussing masculinity and mental health as a whole. Clinical approaches to mental health use phrases that can potentially alienate the young men they are trying to assist, making them either scared to admit something is wrong, or feel that the approach is out of touch with their particular emotions. To address this, all Spur Projects’ campaigns
use terms and phrases when discussing mental health issues that aim to make discussing such difficult matters more accessible, such as referring to experiencing depression as going through “tough” or “challenging” times.

Spur also aims to change how young men view mental health as a whole. Mental health is oftentimes more difficult to address than physical health because unlike most physical ailments, it is difficult to determine a direct cause and effect of mental health issues. In much the same way as they would approach their physical health, young men should take positive action towards their mental health on a routine basis, and recognize when to seek assistance if something is wrong. Each program designed by Spur Projects promotes different ways of taking care of your emotional state in order to more effectively manage “tough times,” and to not be fearful of seeking more formal help if their mental health condition is more severe.

Each one of Spur’s projects aims to erase the stigmas associated with depression and anxiety. Oftentimes young men experiencing depression are well aware that something is wrong, but are afraid of the consequences of admitting there is a problem. They may be afraid of being seen as weak by their peers by showing any sign of vulnerability. Every venture of Spur Projects advocates for reassessing how young men view mental health issues, teaching them that there is nothing uncommon about feeling down or vulnerable from time to time, and to not be afraid to express themselves openly or seek help if they need assistance.

**Accessibility of Projects**

Spur Projects is distinguished by the democratic approach they take regarding project participation and outreach. Projects are free and usually open to anyone that would like to participate. Other organizations focused on mental health advocacy may require a program fee or enforce eligibility requirements on who is allowed to participate. Spur Projects also welcomes others around the world to create their own versions of their projects, and are proud that their projects have been engaged or replicated in USA, New Zealand, Canada, Germany, Uganda, Tunísia, Albania, Finland, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, India, Jordan, Italy, Poland, UK, Netherlands, and Brazil. The universal appeal of their projects highlights the potential for scalability. While their work focuses on the problem in Australia, other countries are also currently experiencing high suicide rates amongst the male youth population, as young men from all over the world struggle with how to properly express and cope with their feelings. Though programs will need to be adapted to suit the context of each targeted region, Spur’s projects are accessible enough to be scaled all around the world.

Over the years, Spur Projects has found that often the best way to reach out to men is through the important women in their lives. Studies have shown that unlike most Australian men, women tend to be more open to expressing their feelings, and are more likely to seek help if they are experiencing depression. As a result, oftentimes the people most interested in Spur’s work are women who want someone close to them to start expressing themselves and take more positive action toward their mental health. Spur Projects recognizes the importance of women in helping reach out to young men and greatly appreciates their willingness to help the young men they care about to better themselves. And while Spur Projects focuses on young Australian men, women are nonetheless more than welcome to participate in their projects.

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**In a recent [Australian] study, only 7% of men relate to the way media depicts masculinity.**  
Source: dovemencare.com.au
Each Activity Reflects Spur Projects’ Operational Model

Spur’s project designs consistently incorporate all the key elements of the organization’s operational model. Examples of these activities include:

Soften the Fck Up

“Soften the Fck Up” began as a video campaign aimed at combatting charged phrases men and women use to accuse others of being weak or vulnerable, such as to “man the F*** up” or “harden/toughen up.” Such charged phrases are used to insult and threaten someone into silence or to hide signs of vulnerability, in fear of further judgment or ridicule. The name of the campaign “Soften the Fck Up” is meant to flip the script on this type of rhetoric, and the culture that promotes hyper-masculine perceptions of strength and discourages open expression. The campaign dismisses the notion that having open and real conversations with companions is a sign of weakness. Rather, it portrays such expression as demonstrating bravery, and as a sign of a strong and positive relationship. It also reminds participants that strong support systems are built upon such open expression, as people are most likely to seek assistance from those they feel most comfortable expressing their feelings with. Soften the Fck up is made up of many components, including video campaigns and a story contest.

Fuck Up Nights

Spur Projects has hosted numerous “Fuck up Nights,” where participants meet at a local bar or other social venue and share past mistakes with strangers. This approach takes the weight off discussing moments that may be a source of shame or embarrassment, reminding participants that making mistakes and owning up to them are part of the human condition.

How is Australia Feeling? / How is the World Feeling?

In 2014, Spur Projects launched “How is Australia Feeling?” The campaign encouraged men and women across the country to track how they were feeling periodically on an online app. The responses of female participants were used to compare the differences between how men and women define and describe their feelings.

This approach to wellness tracking provided insights to how many young Australians perceive and react to stressful and adverse moments in their daily lives. The initial program was a great success, with over 4,000 participants across the country, and over 35,000 submissions. The data collected form the program recognized trends in the common causes of anxiety amongst young Australian men, how often they experience anxiety or stress, and what times of the day they are more likely to experience such feelings.

In 2016, Spur Projects is launching the worldwide version of the campaign, called “How is the World Feeling?” which will take place from October 10th-16th, 2016. Just like the Australian version, anyone who wishes to participate can download the free app. Upon downloading, they will receive notifications throughout the week to check in and note how they are feeling. The project provides participants with an effective method of self-reflection and support, as they will be able to witness a timeline of what emotions they feel on a daily basis and when they are most likely to experience them. Participants also have the opportunity to share their own testimonies or other publicly shared ones on their social media pages, expanding the reach of the project in the process. The app will even inform the participant if certain patterns of emotions keep recurring that may need addressing, and
will suggest localized tools and resources if the person would like to seek further assistance. The app will continue to be live after the weeklong campaign is completed, so participants can continue to use the app as a mood tracker if they find the exercise to be beneficial to their mental health. Throughout the campaign, Spur Projects will also formally document the lives of one person on each continent. The case studies will go further in-depth and explore the range of emotions that a person feels on a daily basis.

The goal is to have 7 million participants from all 7 continents, with over 70 million emotions captured through the duration of the campaign, making it the world’s largest mental health project. Spur’s method is in some ways a response to similar projects in Australia and worldwide, which while aiming to achieve similar goals, typically do not provide the democratic opportunity for participation. Spur’s approach, on the other hand, encourages anyone that has access to a smart device to participate. The data findings of the campaign will be open source, ensuring anyone that would like to use Spur’s findings for further research is able to do so.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVESTMENT**

*Develop Direct and Consistent Financing Methods and Goals*

Like all new charity organizations, the capacity of Spur Projects over the coming years will be dependent on their financial status. Spur Projects is in need of a formal fundraising and budget model to ensure financial stability. As of now, Spur Projects has relied on donations to fund their various programs. In 2015, they received roughly $25,000 in donations, which has been enough to cover their current program costs. However, as their operations continue to expand over the next year, they will need significantly higher income levels to ensure financial stability and increase operational capacity in the future.

Currently Spur Projects has no consistent source of income from the projects themselves, as each is designed to be free and accessible to anyone who wishes to participate. As this is an essential component of their approach, this will (and should) not change in the future because such expenses could potentially discourage participation. But a lack of program revenue means Spur Projects is entirely reliant on donations, which makes their potential capacity limited by how much they receive. Currently they can survive on modest funding as all staff members are working on a volunteer basis. However, in order to scale their projects and overall capacity, they will need to obtain a significantly higher amount of income in the coming years.

Achieving financial stability will take significant time, so it’s critical that Spur Projects develops clear financial needs and goals for future operations. For 2016, Spur Projects has a rough idea of how much fundraising they expect to raise, potential donors and partners, and where to look for further financial support. To their credit, Spur Projects is very much aware of this and are working toward
the goal of financial stability and more consistent sources of revenue. They hope to receive between $150,000-$250,000 in the coming year, which will be obtained through individual donations, government support, and potential sponsorships/partnerships for “How is the World Feeling?” Due to the project’s universal scope, they hopefully will be able to entice companies and organizations to provide financial support. They are even considering making the app a “white label,” which would allow a company to post their logo on the app in exchange for a certain level of financial support. While $150,000-$250,000 is modest when factoring in organizational costs, it is nonetheless a substantial increase from the previous year, and shows that Spur Projects is heading in the right direction financially.

In the coming months, Spur Projects staff should develop a concise financial plan based on their expected fundraising projections, which will provide them with a solid foundation of their immediate and long-term financial needs. They should develop clearer metrics of how much is needed annually to reach a level of financial stability where they can begin to hire full-time staff. They may need to reevaluate their projections following “How is the World Feeling?” in accordance with the final fundraising tally. Though it would be difficult to entirely determine, efforts could be made to plan if and how far they will scale each project, and the amount of funding it would take to facilitate such expansion. Though these calculations would be far from concrete and will depend on final fundraising tallies, it is never too early to get a sense of managing costs and budgeting for expansion, especially since they expect to be receiving a substantial increase in funding over the coming year. A final recommendation would be to develop evaluation tools to provide data evidence of project success for enticing future donors, which will be discussed further in the following section.

Establish Clear Theory of Change and Evaluation Metrics

Perhaps the biggest challenge Spur Projects has encountered is developing effective impact metrics for their different programs. In a fundraising culture where direct evidence and data are essential, Spur Projects focuses on an issue in which the causes and potential solutions are difficult to directly determine. The organization is dealing with the issue of suicide across an entire country, and the factors that lead someone to attempt suicide are various and broad in nature. Even if there is an extreme drop in the suicide rate in Australia in the coming years, it would be incredibly difficult to attribute any degree of such decline directly to Spur Projects. While they could track the impact their programs have on participants’ wellbeing, it will be difficult to measure a direct cause and effect between their programs and preventing a death by suicide, and it would likely take years before a noticeable drop in the suicide rate is evident. In addition, as Spur works with healthy young men, it would be impossible to determine if their projects prevented them from suicide later in their life, as one cannot measure in hindsight whether a particular person was more prone to suicide prior to participating in their projects. Finally, there is a solid chance that their programs could succeed in improving the mental health of the majority of the men who participate, but the suicide rate remains unchanged.

While the overall mission of Spur Projects is clear, there is a lack of cohesiveness regarding the specific objectives and outcomes for each project. The projects operate mostly separate from one another, and while some have clearly defined goals and objectives, others are more informal in their approach. This makes demonstrating success difficult, for while participants may respond positively to Spur’s respective projects, there is currently not a direct way to track or measure success. Since 2015, Spur has begun using a common metric for each project, which is the number of times men are able to either reflect on or share how they are feeling. While this is a metric which should absolutely
be collected, they will need to determine goals for what is the ideal amount of times men share and reflect on their feelings, and other metrics that could measure the effectiveness of their projects.

As success cannot be demonstrated through a decrease in the suicide rate itself, Spur Projects needs to develop other methods of defining success. In line with their financial goals, Spur Projects could develop clear project objectives and a more defined vision of the organization’s future. While it will not be easy, Spur Projects should develop a clear and universal theory of change that is based upon measurable and achievable project outcomes.

While each program has its own objectives, they must all operate under a clear and cohesive mission. Spur should develop a clear vision of how far they see their projects and their subsequent impact spreading, and from there how success can be measured at each level. Although there are variations in the scope of each project, there could be a clear sense of where Spur Projects sees both the individual projects and the organization as a whole heading in the coming years.

From there, Spur Projects should further develop key impact metrics and an evaluation program for their respective projects. They should determine what potential goals are achievable and measureable for each project, and then create indicators to track their results. Specifically, it’s recommended that Spur develops follow-up surveys for each project -- in particular “How is the World Feeling?” -- which ideally will highlight a positive response from participants. The survey will be sent to participants in the aftermath of the campaign, either by email or administered through the app itself if possible. Being able to demonstrate that participants enjoy the activities and find them beneficial to their mental health can be greatly advantageous from a fundraising standpoint, enticing donors with direct evidence that the project successfully engaged participants and provided them with the resources to improve their mental health.

These recommendations are easier said than done, especially when finances are tight. Despite these challenges, by further defining their mission, achievable goals, and how to measure the success of their programs, Spur Projects will be able to aim toward achieving goals in a more efficient manner.

**Create College Internship or Fellowship Opportunities**

The current employment model is arguably Spur Projects’ biggest limitation in regard to overall operational capacity. Spur Projects is reliant on a volunteer staff, which will be difficult to sustain over time. Relying on volunteers has obvious limitations. As staff members do not receive a salary for their work, they must rely on other employment to make ends meet. Having staff that has to prioritize their other work will ultimately limit their operational capacity. It makes delegating responsibilities more difficult, and likely puts too many responsibilities on staff members that have more available time outside of their other employment.

Lee and the other core staff of Spur Projects would like to eventually work full-time for the organization. Shifting to full-time positions will take a considerable amount of time, as they will need to wait until their finances are at a stable enough level for staff to feel comfortable leaving their current positions. For the time being, it is difficult to determine if and when Spur Projects will have enough financing to hire full-time staff, so in the meantime the team could consider recruiting college-age interns or fellows to assist with program and administrative tasks. One or multiple interns could alleviate some of the burden placed on the current staff. They can be provided a modest stipend and/or college credit for their work, or at the very least a position they can add to their
resumes. Interns will likely feel greater incentive to produce quality work and a desire to be part of the growth of the organization. Also, Spur Projects can reach out to specific programs to find interns that best suit the needs of the organization. For example, if they are in need of a social media intern they can reach out to communications programs, or accounting students for financial tasks.

### Spur Projects SWOT Analysis

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<th><strong>Weaknesses</strong></th>
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<td>Lack of full-time employees limits organizational capacity</td>
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<td>Breaking down stigmas of mental health</td>
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<td>Passionate workforce</td>
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<td>Government/Foundation grants and donations</td>
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<td>Participants respond favorably to future projects</td>
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<td>Use of project data for mental health research</td>
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### CONCLUSION

This was a very interesting time period to be researching Spur Projects, as they are in the midst of a period of deep transition and expansion. While there are many unknowns regarding future financing and the sustainability of each project, their mission, approach, and various projects speak for themselves. They have reached out to people in an engaging and encouraging way that recognizes the difficult nature of discussing mental health. The passion and work ethic of the core staff members, who as noted above are currently working on an entirely volunteer basis, is incredibly impressive. Their dedication to helping others is remarkable, and this energy will drive them toward future success. Lee is particularly impressive. He was an absolute pleasure to get to know throughout the process of drafting the case study, and appears to be the perfect person to be leading Spur Projects. There is no question that their various projects are both innovative and effective ways to engage Australian youth and provide them with the right tools and resources to improve their mental health, and they will achieve continued success as their projects expand throughout Australia and beyond in the coming years.
FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SPUR PROJECTS

- Spur Projects Website: http://spurprojects.org/
- Lee Crockford’s YouthActionNet Profile: http://www.youthactionnet.org/fellows/304/
- Spur Projects on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/spurprojects
- Spur Projects on Twitter: https://www.twitter.com/spurprojects
- How is the World Feeling Website: http://howistheworldfeeling.spurprojects.org/
- Lee Crockford’s Official Website: http://www.leecrockford.me/
- “How to Save a Life” – Lee Crockford TEDx Presentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtOoDNoojxo
- Video on “Soften the Fck up” Campaign: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-evWaD2mlM

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