Hi! My name is Prajanan Senthilkumar, and my final Action Plan involved a continuation of a current venture, using the modules I learned from the Brown Leadership Institute, called Project DREAMs. DREAMs was launched in 2011 for two purposes: To aid bright, impoverished students from rural schools in South India in the continuation of their schooling and to provide supplies and class materials for rural schools. Using the collected funds, we travel to our hometown in India and spend 4 weeks of our summer there, a large portion of time dedicated to allocating those funds to the targeted schools. We select the most promising students based on the consensus of the school and give them biannual stipends of ~1000 RS towards their education. We also help to fund basic infrastructure lacking in these regions in order to give bright kids better employment opportunities after high school and to enrich the community in the long term by helping schools provide quality education for their students.

Originally, our goals for 2015 were to continue the stream of supplies and funds to our group of students, fund plans to build gender-specific toilets at the Ottiambakkam Government School, and donate a portion of our funds to the Vasanthi Fund, a specialized program sponsored by Sahaya International for high school orphans in South India to go to university and technical school. The cost of all three combined goals was $5,500 dollars by the end of December, and since then we have raised almost $6,000 dollars, expanding our partnership fund with Sahaya International and our own school fund of supplies to our students. Since the start of this project we have partnered up with two schools in Tamil Nadu and are currently sponsoring a group of 50 students, as well as increasing the quality of schooling for these students. From being able to aid infrastructure plans for new buildings to being able to provide free hot lunches and clean uniforms, the success of DREAMs has exceeded our own expectations and has opened our eyes to how effective social change can be.
However, our own road to success was not a smooth course, involving many setbacks and revisions before getting to where we are today. Before my time in the Brown Leadership Institute, we faced many logistical problems, a major one including the problem of maintaining a steady flow of funds and achieving sustainability. So far the project has involved myself and my two brothers, each of us acquiring funds on our own basis through jobs, fundraisers, donations, service, et cetera. But we were concerned with how exactly to expand our project while reaching higher and higher donation goals for each coming year, as well as how to make the trips to India while becoming increasingly busy with our own personal and work lives. Other obstacles included how to maintain steady streams of funding through donations - as some periods were more fruitful than others – and how to figure out the funds needed for schooling each year as our group of kids grew older.

In short, the Brown Leadership Institute taught me a valuable lesson on the relationship between sustainability and success. While outside donations were a significant part to our success this year, it was ultimately out of our own grit and funding that the project has reached this successful milestone. By placing well-defined and manageable goals, being communicative of our own specific needs and schedules, and not trying to solve every problem at once or being too ambitious, we have been able to channel our energy to deliver long-term and effective change to the schools and group of students we sponsor, so much so that we have raised our fundraising goal from $5,500 to $7,500 dollars because of how fruitful our fundraising efforts have been thanks to the much needed direction. The Brown Leadership Institute has helped transform our previously unrefined and rough project to a well-defined and prosperous project guaranteed sustainability and success for years to come.

My own personal motivation and passion for continuing the project was how the project correlated with my own personal identity as a representative from two worlds: Northern Tamil Nadu and Long Island. Like many emigrated Indians growing up in the United States, I grew up confused to how I should define myself based on location and birth, especially with conflicting Indian and Western values. I felt a great distance
between my communities, contributing to a gap in my own identity. The project however helped to resolve these issues, acting as a linchpin to my community in the United States and my community in India. I have learned to accept the strengths of my dual heritage as an Indian and an American while valuing my roots and being grateful for where I came from. Much of this has come through my own experiences working in India and fundraising in the USA through DREAMs.

Much of the success of DREAMs can also be attributed to my own lessons with the Leadership Institute. The Leadership Institute specifically taught me the means by which to bring Socially Responsible Leadership to fruition. Learning the 7 C’s of Social Leadership in a comprehensive manner that involved looking both at DREAMs and myself objectively, I was able to define the efforts needed to become a socially responsible leader in every aspect in my life. Specific lessons have been instrumental to my Action Plan. My lesson on grit from the Brown Leadership course motivated me in fundraising for DREAMs, and my lesson on congruence helped me match my own values to increased resources for DREAMs through quality donors and funding. As the year comes to a close, I have achieved a great milestone with DREAMs and I am taking a set of lessons to serve me for the rest of my life as a leader.

My advice to future students from the Institute on creating successful Action Plans consists of three insights from my own efforts and from the Institute: Find something you are passionate about and make sure it motivates you, make sure that your plan is clearly defined and manageable, and never lose faith in yourself and your efforts. Failure will happen many times as you first start out, but to hold on to the idea that you are contributing something positive to someone’s life - directly or indirectly - is ultimately what will help propel you to success.

If you would like to know more about Project DREAMs, please feel free to contact me at prajanan.senthilkumar@gmail.com, or visit projectdreamseducation.org