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My Brother's Keeper Data Jam: Old World Values with New World Strategies and Tools



Nearly 20 teams worked through the day on crafting compelling ways to show data and creative solutions to chronic challenges. (Photo credit: U.S. Department of Education)

When President Obama launched the My Brother's Keeper Initiative, he called on Americans to make sure that every American — including our boys and young men of color — can reach their full potential. On August 2, over 150 people showed up early on a Saturday morning for a “Data Jam” hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with Georgetown University and the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation. The Jam took place at Georgetown Downtown in Washington, D.C.

The My Brother's Keeper Data Jam brought together a diverse group of high school students, teachers, data scientists, data visualization experts, developers and community and non-profit leaders. The aim was to find new and better ways to use data to highlight opportunities and create solutions that can improve life outcomes for all students, including boys and young men of color. It was a powerful day.

A group of young men started us off with compelling spoken word performances that reminded all in attendance of the incredible challenges they face and enormous potential they hold. While acknowledging the role they had to play in changing the narrative of their own lives, they made plain the real danger and risks they face each day and expressed frustration in having to overcome the negative stereotypes that are applied to them and their peers.

The attendees then broke into teams focused on the six universal goals outlined in the [My Brother's Keeper 90 Day Task Force Report](#)— entering school ready to learn; reading at grade level by third grade; graduating from high school ready for college and career; completing post-secondary education or training; successfully entering the workforce; and reducing violence and providing a second chance. The teams were designed to capitalize on the range of perspectives and expertise among the participants. The student and teacher team members almost uniformly commented that they had never before been engaged in developing or even asked about tools and resources that impact their daily lives.

Nearly 20 teams worked through the day on crafting compelling ways to show data and creative solutions to chronic challenges – ranging from strategies to reduce preschool suspensions and expulsions to websites that enable students to find career paths and the required education or training to access them. At the end of the day, seven teams were voted by other participants as having the most promising ideas, and those teams committed to moving these and other ideas forward.

We are excited about the ideas that emerged and anxiously await seeing these ideas in action. We are even more excited about the lessons learned from the day and how they will improve future Data Jams that I am sure other colleges and universities will be clamoring to host. But we are most excited by the demonstration of commitment and unbelievable energy of the individuals and teams that participated. With no cash prizes or press coverage, these people leaned in and showed a big part of what My Brother's Keeper is all about – people coming together to help our young people and the country. The Data Jam simply applied a little technology and innovation to that simple but profound concept and left many of us feeling inspired.

Yet, nothing was as inspiring to me as the time I had during lunch with the youth in attendance. They asked how I got where I am; how I avoided and dealt with the violence in my neighborhood; how best to survive and excel on campuses where they, for the first time, might come across few people with similar backgrounds and experiences; and many other questions about life as they know it and imagine it. They shared their stories of struggle and triumph as well as their plans for

the future and the impact they plan to have on the world. Their questions and their stories reminded me, as one young man said in the morning session, they are “overcoming every day.” So if we create ladders of opportunity, they are more than willing to climb. And, that, too, is a big part of what My Brother's Keeper is all about.

Jim Shelton is Deputy Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education and Executive Director of the My Brother's Keeper Task Force.

The My Brother's Keeper initiative is a collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach led by an interagency federal task force to build ladders of opportunity and unlock the full potential of our young people, including boys and young men of color. [Learn more about My Brother's Keeper.](#)

The Beeck Center for Social Impact & Innovation at Georgetown University exists to inspire and prepare students, faculty and global leaders with the necessary skills to generate and innovate solution-based social change both locally and internationally. It will promote collaborative spaces for fostering innovation and provide experiential opportunities to pragmatically impact the social sector. [Learn more about the Beeck Center.](#)

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