

**THE GRAY  
MATTER EXPERIENCE**

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# **2020 ANNUAL REPORT**

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# A LETTER FROM OUR FOUNDER

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This year has been one of the most challenging we've seen in our lifetimes. From the senseless killings of Black bodies, the loss of both freedom and loved ones due to COVID-19, the economic collapse that has impacted so many households, especially those within Black and Brown communities -- it's been difficult to find the joy and motivation to keep fighting. However, while some of these factors are new for us, at The Gray Matter Experience, we are all too familiar with the socioeconomic disparities and injustices we face as a community. It is our mission to provide resources, access and pathways for Black youth to unlock their self-determining power and strengthen their community ties. This year has shown us, more than ever, how vital and valuable our work is -- therefore we have no choice but to continue to show up and cement ourselves as the resource that our communities both need and deserve. This year forced us to be creative, to innovate. Forced us to look beyond our individual challenges and think about the collective. It forced us to find more effective and transformative ways to serve our communities. What resulted was a better understanding of the needs of the people we serve and a stronger commitment to do everything we can to continue creating pathways for them to succeed. We are more committed than ever to drive equity and access to our communities. We have a long road ahead, but we're encouraged by the success and impact we've had thus far and those of you that have committed to joining us along the journey. Despite its challenges, this year proved to be one of the most successful in our organization's history, and it wouldn't have happened without the support and advocacy of each of you. We thank you and look forward to working to build a more just society along with you in the new year and beyond.

Sincerely,

**BRITNEY ROBBINS**  
Founder & CEO





# OUR MISSION

The mission of The Gray Matter Experience is to unlock the self-determining power of Black youth and strengthen their ties to community through real-world experience in entrepreneurship.



# OUR VISION

We believe that empowering youth to learn about entrepreneurship at an early age has a great impact on their own self-worth and perception of success.

Gray Matter provides an environment and community where Black students can explore business and creative areas within an innovative space - fostering the development of entrepreneurial skills, mindsets, self-agency, and the transferability of these skills and mindsets into school, career, and life.



# OUR 2020 PROGRAMS

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We successfully completed seven programs and served 227 students in 2020.

7

PROGRAMS  
COMPLETED

55

VOLUNTEERS  
ENGAGED

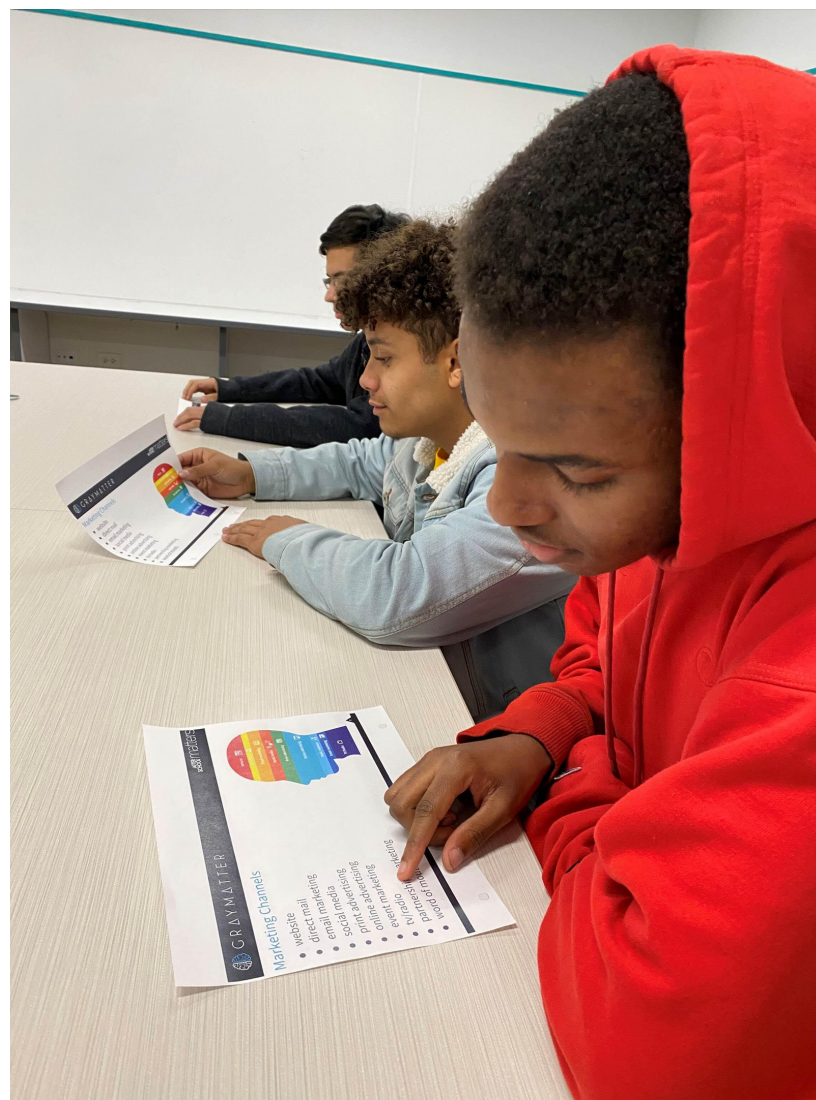
227

STUDENTS  
SERVED



# PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

We started the year working with [The Academy Group](#) and [After School Matters](#) through partnerships with Auxiliary Programs. Our Auxiliary Programs allow us to license our curriculum to youth-serving organizations to better train their youth to think entrepreneurially. After School Matters students participated in a 6-week entrepreneurship experience, and The Academy Group students completed a 10-week entrepreneurship program.







In March of 2020, we completed our 4th bootcamp, which was hosted at both Chicago Beyond and The Polsky Exchange. COVID-19 interrupted the program during week 2 and forced us to quickly migrate to a virtual setting, finishing the program early June. One student company emerged from the program, [Student Uprise](#), an organization providing resources and advice for college applications.

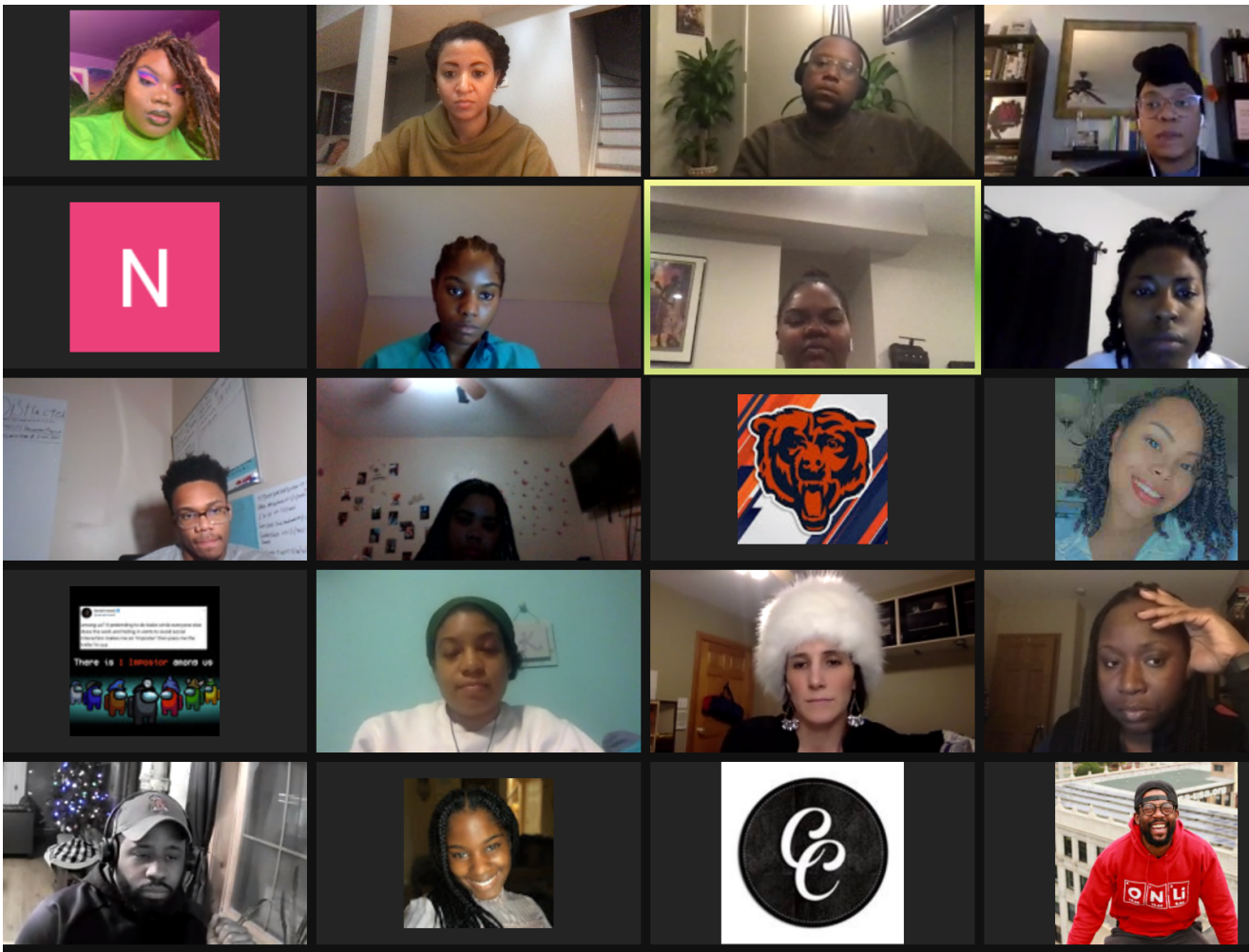


Over the summer, we launched our first ever Pitch Black Unplugged: Social Impact Idea Challenge, a social impact challenge for youth across the country that want to put their ideas for change into action. We had 16 student-run companies from across the country submit their ideas. Three teams progressed to the finals, with TLSA winning first place. TLSA is a digital rebirth of Black Wall Street. With an e-commerce website and mobile app conceptually in between Amazon and a budgeting app, their goal is to increase the volume and retention of capital in the Black community. The team won \$2500 to further their business idea.





In the fall of 2020, we launched a new direct-service program, IDEATE. IDEATE is the first of three programs designed to take students from idea to launch, and teaches the strategies and tactics of generating a strong & viable business idea. Since the program was hosted virtually, we were able to support students from across the country - including Texas, Maryland and Washington, D.C.



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This summer we partnered with [E.A.T.](#) (Equity and Transformation), a non profit whose mission is to build social and economic equity with Black Chicagoans engaged in the informal economy. We delivered a 3-day virtual Intro to Entrepreneurship program to their adult community members to better understand how to start and grow businesses.

In the fall of 2020, we also partnered with [Arrupe College](#) to deliver a 6-week virtual entrepreneurship course to freshman and sophomore students who were interested in starting their own businesses.

We are excited about the addition of these organizations to our expanding community of program partners, and will continue in our joint missions to deliver entrepreneurship curriculum to the communities that need it most.

# e.at.

**EQUITY AND TRANSFORMATION**



**ARRUPE COLLEGE**  
OF LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

# PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIALS



"Entrepreneurship is abundantly accessible to ANYONE. It is so important to build a community of ambitious and like-minded people in any of one's endeavors, so from this program, I have learned that there are people in your corner all over the nation that will push you forward!"

-Elise, IDEATE Alumni

"Thank you so much for giving my peers and I the opportunity to be a part of such an amazing organization. Thank you for planting these seeds inside of us. We will blossom in the near future and a huge part of our success will be because of the resources Gray Matter Experience provided for us. I am in the process of launching my own clothing store where I sell some of my favorite clothes, while in the process of creating this I find myself remembering everything from GrayMatter Experience has taught me and wow am I grateful."

-Samantha, Cohort 4 Alumni



"I really appreciate all that Gray Matter Experience has done for me, helping me to see, and learn, a lot more about what it means to be an entrepreneur. We've been given a lot of resources and knowledge for our future businesses, and I'm really thankful for all that I've been taught, thank you!"

-Karen, IDEATE Alumni





# OUR 2020 VOLUNTEERS

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Volunteers are essential to the work that we do. We appreciate the time they commit to coaching & mentoring our future entrepreneurs, and exposing them to new industries and ideas.

55

VOLUNTEERS  
ENGAGED

37

VOLUNTEER  
HOURS

25

INDUSTRIES  
REPRESENTED

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**Our programs** wouldn't be possible without the support and expertise of our 55 volunteers, 38 of those joining us for the first time this year. Volunteers work with our students in various ways:

- **Guest Speakers:** Entrepreneurs share their journey with students through a Q & A session facilitated by our students
- **Workshop Facilitators:** Using TGME curriculum to teach students new business concepts
- **Drop-in Mentors:** Helping students develop and refine their business ideas



# VOLUNTEER TESTIMONIALS



“The work you're doing now will send positive ripples through humanity long after you are gone.”  
- Bradley

“Great opportunity for our future entrepreneurs. Access is so important.”  
- Mironda



“It was absolutely phenomenal. Great way to spend my Saturday. I would love to attend in person once outside opens up again. Thanks again for all your effort and the opportunity.”  
- Ceata



# ORGANIZATION UPDATES



In March of 2020, we added our second full-time employee to the Gray Matter team. Jessica Childress-Robinson joined as our Operations Manager, working to develop internal structure, policy and procedures to our processes. Jessica has been an incredible addition to the team and has helped increase organizational capacity tremendously.

In the Fall of 2020 we hired two alumni interns to join us through early 2021. Jovoney Morton (Cohort 2) joined as our Design and Project Management Intern. She is a Junior at Howard University pursuing a Bachelor's in Marketing with a concentration in Entrepreneurship. She is a creative and passionate young professional seeking to make an impact in the same communities she was raised.



Ashlee Willis-Hopkins (Cohort 1) joined our team as the Program & Community Intern. Ashlee is a junior at Clark Atlanta University and is pursuing a Bachelor's in Fashion Merchandising along with a Psychology minor. They'll be with us until March 2021, and we are thrilled to have them on the team.

# THE 26 MOST INFLUENTIAL CHICAGOANS

This month, we honor the local luminaries leading the charge in our community. From arts and education advocates to innovators finding solutions to current challenges, these formidable forces drive change, pushing the city of Chicago forward for the greater good.

Our Founder, Britney Robbins, was named to CS Chicago Magazine's list of 26 Most Influential Chicagoans - coming in at #2 right behind Chance the Rapper. The list honors the local luminaries leading the charge in our community. From arts and education advocates to innovators finding solutions to today's current challenges, these formidable forces drive change, pushing the city of Chicago forward for the greater good.

Britney was also named as Streetwise's 20 Most Inspiring Chicagoans. This list honors an inspiring group of Chicagoans who are making the city a better place to live, work, and grow.

dens Family Foundation presents

## THE 20 MOST INSPIRING CHICAGOANS

ITA CLARK • BRYAN CRESSEY  
VID DIETZ • SETH EL-JAMAL  
OZI EZIKE • MATTHEW HOFFMAN  
OLLINGSWORTH • ELLA JENKINS  
IKA JOHNSON • KRISTI KATZ  
E LATIKER • ED MARSZEWSKI  
MCMORRIS • DR. IZABEL OLSON  
JIAN POSADA • CHRIS REDD  
I OBOI REED • BRITNEY ROBBINS  
TEVERBAUGH • LASAIA WADE

**STREETWISE**



Finally, Britney also received the Chicago Sky x People's Gas Community Assist Award, an award that highlights those making impactful differences in the Chicagoland area.

# OUR IMPACT

## 212

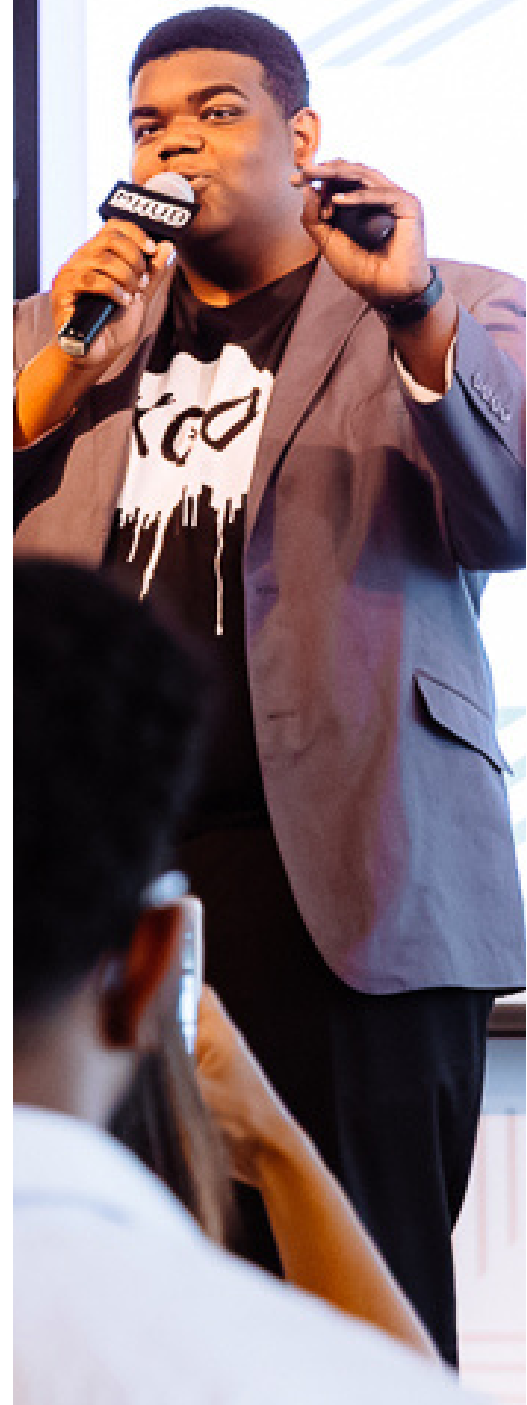
students were served

## 10

states represented including: Maryland, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina and Texas

## 86%

of participants say they feel they have access to the resources needed to start a business after participating in TGME





# OUR IMPACT

## 100%

of students say their attitudes towards entrepreneurship positively changed after participating in TGME programming

## 100%

of students say their participation in TGME resulted in the following:

- Desire to be more involved in my community
- An increased understanding about my community
- Understanding the value of my cultural identity as an asset
- Formed a meaningful connection with a mentor or speaker
- Formed meaningful friendships with other cohort members
- Better understanding of how to start a business
- Can complete a business plan on my own
- Increased self-awareness
- Increased confidence in myself



# OUR PARTNERS & SPONSORS

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None of our impact would be possible without the financial support and time commitment generously donated by our sponsors and partners.

250

INDIVIDUAL  
DONORS

21

SPONSORS

4

STRATEGIC  
PARTNERS

\$307,075

RAISED

# OUR PARTNERS

**This year** we were fortunate to work with many strategic partners to help us strengthen the organization's internal processes and structures.

A special thank you to:

**Chicago Beyond** - through our Founder's acceptance into their Collective Fellowship, we received Measurement and Evaluation consulting to better track our impact across each of our programs and partnerships.

**MHA Labs** - helped to enhance our curriculum, adding a cultural and social emotional framework to amplify and underscore the transferability of our content into school, work and life.

**Inspire Consulting** - worked to build an organizational growth strategy and agenda that will allow us to grow our team and scale our impact more easily.

**University of Chicago** - partnered with us to identify volunteer and alumni engagement strategies to better engage each group of stakeholders moving forward.



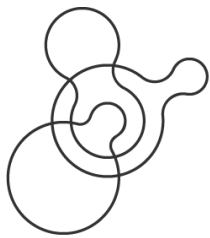
We are grateful to have had the opportunity to work with such talented groups and are excited to see the success we achieve as a result of these partnerships.



# OUR SPONSORS

Despite the challenges that loomed all around us, we were able to secure more funding than we have in our organization's history. In total, we raised \$307,075 this year with the addition of our newest funders:

Peak 6, Ferrara USA, I & G Foundation, Nova Collective, The Reinvention Lab and re:work Training. We are incredibly grateful for these new partnerships and are excited about creating more magic with each of them in 2021.



The  
Reinvention  
Lab

POWERED BY TFA



We would like to thank the following companies and foundations for their continued support...



**TRAFFIC SALES  
& PROFIT**

The John E. & Jeanne T.  
**HUGHES FOUNDATION**



THE CHICAGO COMMUNITY TRUST  
AND AFFILIATES

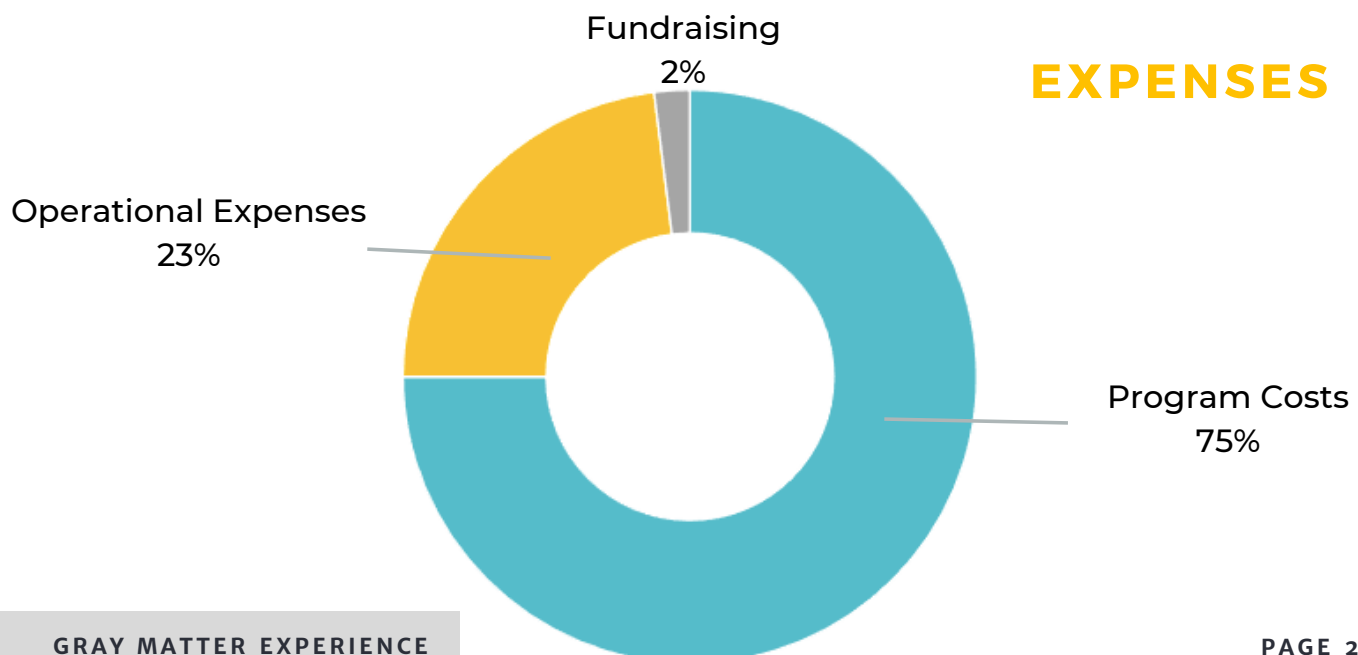
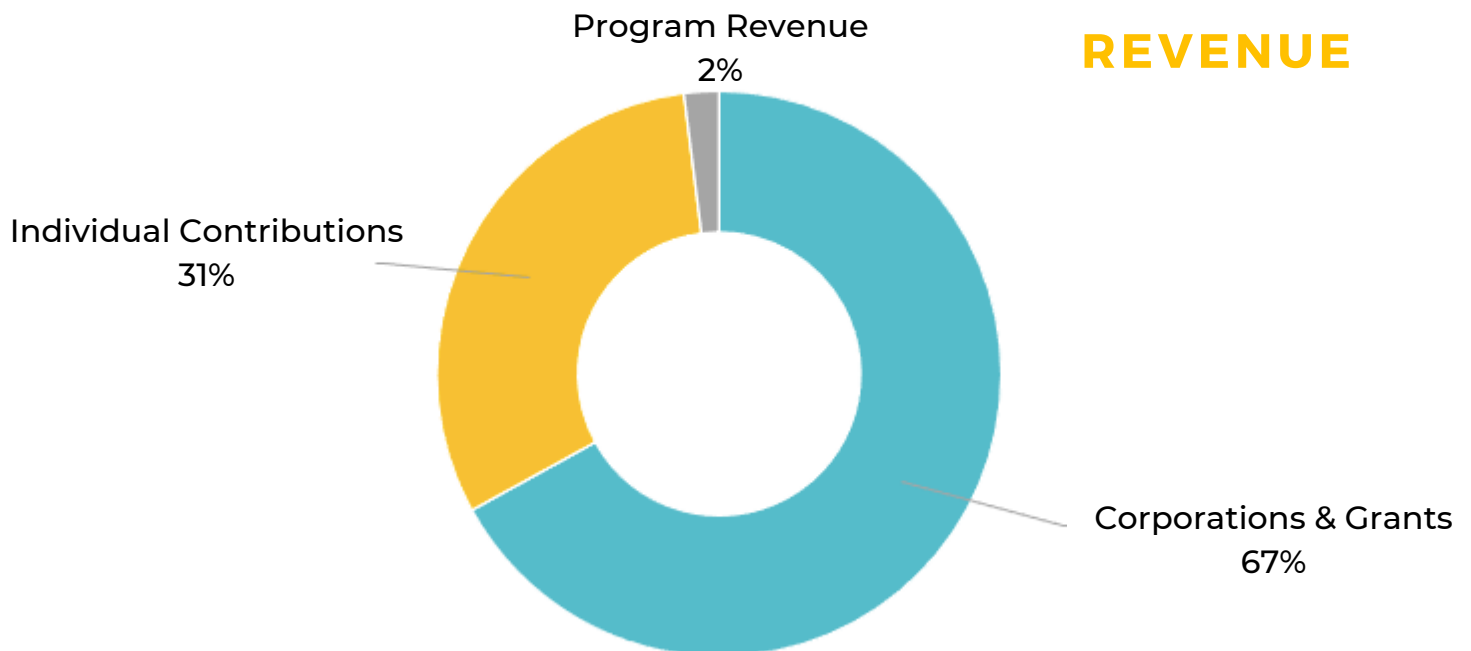


Joseph & Bessie  
**Feinberg Foundation**

# 2020 FINANCIALS

Fiscal year ending February 2020

We're committed to using every dollar efficiently to grow and scale our impact. Your support helps us to empower and inspire the next generation of Black founders. Here's how your contributions helped in 2020.



# OUR 2021 PLANS

We have much to accomplish in 2021. Some of those plans include:

Launching an Associate Board to grow the overall capacity and fundraising efforts within the organization. The Associate Board will kick off January 2021.

Growing the Team by hiring a Program Director and Manager by Spring 2021, and both a Marketing Manager and a Development Director by Summer 2021.

Launching New Programs: In Spring 2021 we'll debut our Hustle Hacks program, which is designed to help young adults with current businesses learn best practices to better structure and operate them.

Going Digital: Re-designing our curriculum to better suit the virtual environment. This includes digitizing and gamifying our content to increase engagement, collaboration and scalability.

Partnering with McDonald's Corporation and Flowers Communications Group to provide entrepreneurial development training to McDonald's crew members.

Partnering with re:work Training to provide access to business development jobs. re:work Training's mission is to reshape hiring trends and empower untapped talent by providing free career training to diverse, motivated individuals looking to jump start their careers.





**THE GRAY  
MATTER EXPERIENCE**

**THANK YOU TO ALL OF  
OUR DONORS,  
VOLUNTEERS, STUDENTS  
AND SUPPORTERS FOR  
HELPING US GET THIS  
FAR! WE LOOK FORWARD  
TO MAKING MORE  
IMPACT WITH YOU IN  
2021!**

**CONTACT US!**

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**LEARN MORE!**

[www.graymatterexperience.com](http://www.graymatterexperience.com)

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**DONATE**