

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration, the U of M library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of those who make up the university's rich history. For this installment in our series, Jeff Sorensen, co-founder of optiMize, and the Director for Social Innovation for the College of LSA, sat down with his boss Dean Andrew Martin. They discussed experiential learning and the future of undergraduate education at U of M. Jeff started the conversation by describing the groundbreaking organization he and some other students began when they were undergraduates.

Jeff Sorensen: optiMize is an organization that my co-founders and I started when we were undergraduate students here at Michigan. Kind of out of a frustration that we thought that students could really be doing a lot more with our time as undergraduate students. We were in this place where amazing people come together, have access to resources that are really rare to be able to have them all in one place like this and time to do really interesting things. Pair that with all the massive challenges out in the world, we thought it was really a shame that we were spending, what we thought, was still too much time just writing papers and taking tests and answering questions that people already knew the answers to.

Doing things that people were asking us to do, rather than really asking the students, "What would you like to change, if you could?" Maybe it's an issue that's so difficult that there's no clear answer, but could we start working to create our own projects that start to advance toward a better answer and start to illuminate possibilities for how the future could be.

I'm curious, from your perspective, you know, what's so exciting about it for you? I guess, both when you first heard about it, but also now having worked with us for three years.

Dean Martin: If you look at what optiMize is doing, optiMize is a type of experiential learning, rather than learning in a classroom or learning in a laboratory. What optiMize is all about is getting students out there to give it a go. I mean, it's a laboratory, in a sense.

Jeff Sorensen: The world is the laboratory.

Dean Martin: Exactly, the world is the laboratory, students can experiment. I like the rigorous way in which you lead students through this project development phase and then a down-select and those things get refined and, ultimately, we're able to support a fair number of these projects to actually launch and go out into the world.

Jeff Sorensen: \$200,000 in funding this year.

Dean Martin: Yeah, which is fabulous, it's absolutely fabulous. This is an opportunity for our students to get out there and try things. It's interesting, they're going to learn

how to be members of a team. They're going to learn how to drive innovation. They're going to learn how to fail. They're going to learn how to run up against a wall and figure out how to run around it. All of those things are incredibly important skills that our students are going to need in the rest of their lives. That's one reason I really like optiMize.

One of the other reasons why I really like what's going on in optiMize, and social innovation, more generally, is it takes a different approach to our society's biggest problems. You look across our society, we have lots of very significant problems. One thing we can think, as citizens, "Well, that's somebody else's problem to deal with." Well, of course, if that's the case, nothing's ever going to get any better.

I mean, another approach is to say, "Well, that's government's responsibility." And it can't be the case that government's responsible for all of the problems in the world. In fact, some of the problems were created by government. What's nice about social innovation is that it's really giving our students agency. We're empowering our students to look at the world, to try to find a problem. I mean, our students are not, at least, in the first instance, going to solve poverty, or the opioid crisis, today. They may do so in 20 or 30 years, to be able to look at the world, to find a problem, and then to work on it in a way outside of existing institutional structures. That's very empowering for our students, but I think, ultimately, it's also going to lead to better solutions.

Imagine a world in which everyone of us looks out at the world, tries to see a place where we're not serving others in a way that they should be served. Rather than saying, "Well, that's too bad." To be able to step out and actually do the work to help those individuals.

Jeff Sorensen: The phrase, that's our guiding phrase, is to ask yourself, "Why not me?" If you see a problem and you think someone needs to do something.

Dean Martin: Exactly. It's all about stepping up. It's about agency. It's about owning what's out there in the world and doing what we can to make the world a better place. I mean, if you think about what a model citizen looks like in a modern democracy. A model citizen in a model democracy is someone who's willing to step up, take responsibility, and work for the greater good. If we all did that, this would be a far better place.

Jeff Sorensen: One of the most surprising things about optiMize, when I talk to people around the country, is the fact that this started as a student club. Then the deans and the university said, "Let's make this a department and add a full-time staff component," to what is still a student lead organization and created this collaboration. I don't think that there's many other deans here, or around the country, not who would have, but who have, hired 20-somethings to create a new department and start creating out this new direction.

What is it about this idea of having young people on staff working in collaboration with the students? What is it that made you do that and that excites you about that?

Dean Martin: Well, we did it because the idea was so compelling. We also know a couple of things. One thing that we know is that it is very, very difficult to sustain a student lead organization over a long period of time. So we knew there was something great happening with optiMize and we were concerned that if we didn't institutionalize this, that it was likely not going to be able to be long-lasting and we thought that would be a missed opportunity for our students.

The other thing, frankly, is we also know that we're really lousy at communicating with students who are in their late teens and early 20s. So having you and some other young folks who work on our team, it's great to have these people around because it allows us to bounce ideas off of folks that are closer to the undergraduate experience. But you're getting a little bit long in the tooth, so you may not ... You're getting further away as the years go by.

Jeff Sorensen: It's true. I'm now 10 years off of the incoming freshmen, which is interesting.

Dean Martin: Yeah, that's crazy.

Jeff Sorensen: But they keep me young, because I learn their new technologies and everything.

Dean Martin: Right.

Jeff Sorensen: What do you see as the future of this? I think that the type of stuff we're talking about, right now, if this was 20 years ago, this would have been so far on the fringes that the dean of the college would not be having a conversation about this. Right?

Dean Martin: Right.

Jeff Sorensen: Now we are and that's very exciting. What does it look like moving forward, do you think?

Dean Martin: Where I'd like it to be moving forward is a world in which everyone of our undergraduate students would have, at least, one significant experiential learning opportunity while they're here. That sounds pretty simple, until you realize we serve 17,000 undergraduate students, so scale is our big challenge.

There's another systemic challenge. That has to do with access. I mean, there's lots of students who just don't have the time to be able to spend significant amounts of time outside of their coursework because of their family responsibilities, because of jobs, and those sorts of things. I think it's our responsibility, as an institution, to be able to provide the resources so everyone of our students can take advantage of these opportunities. I'd say that we're

doing a pretty good job at that today, at the University of Michigan, but we need to do better.

Jeff Sorensen: Well, I'm excited to be a part of it and really glad that you brought me in to this. I think that there's no better place to be doing the kind of work that optiMize is doing, then here at LSA, at Michigan. I really appreciate being able to work with you.

Dean Martin: Thanks Jeff. I mean, it's a real pleasure to have you on the team and I continue to be impressed every time I learn about what optiMize is up to next. I mean, you all are doing really great things and providing really transformative experiences for undergraduate students. I'm really grateful for that work.

Speaker 1: That was Andrew Martin, Dean of the College of LSA, and Jeff Sorensen, the college's Director for Social Innovation, talking about the future of undergraduate education at U of M. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, www.storycorps.org. For more from the series, visit arts.umich.edu/storycorps.