

Nomination of Josh Wright '98 for the Donaldson Fellowship

On a morning in 2008, I welcomed a long-term colleague who worked at a national grassroots non-profit organization dedicated to expanding the economic and political rights of low-income and immigrant workers. The meeting was organized to introduce me to a new colleague, Josh Wright, who had just joined the organization to serve as their Director of Social Enterprise. As Josh described his career journey from business school to a decade of corporate strategy consulting and leadership in the media and publishing sectors, I interrupted and said: "There is only one business school you could have attended with that resume: SOM!" Of course, I was right.

Every step of Josh's professional and civic career has embodied the mission of SOM to not only educate leaders for business and society, but also to build the knowledge base that equips these leaders to meet the evolving challenges and opportunities we face today. He currently serves as the Executive Director of ideas42, the nation's leading non-profit organization using applied behavioral science for social good. Over the decade of his leadership, he has expanded the organization from 12 to over one hundred employees, while increasing the annual budget from nearly \$1 million to more than \$16 million. But his greatest impact is how he has refined the organization's mission to reinvent the practices of institutions, product design and policy implementation to significantly enhance their impact on the causes and effects of poverty and inequality.

At the heart of ideas42's business model is a simple yet revolutionary strategy: that programs, systems, and policies should be designed to account for how humans truly behave, and not how we wish they did behave. One of the areas that has benefited the most from this insight is how we encourage people to save, as affirmed by Carlos Ramirez Fuentes, President, CONSAR Mexico: *"Our work with ideas42 has changed the way we approach voluntary savings in our pension system. By deploying more effective communications, innovative incentives, and timely reminders, we've seen a significant increase in voluntary savings—with enormous potential ahead."*

This behavioral science approach has proven equally valuable in the redesign of public sector services, as reflected in the experience of Matt Klein, the Executive Director of the New York City Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity: *"Cities interact with the public all day long, but not always in the ways that work best for people. The ideas42 New York Behavioral Design Team is helping us use evidence-based insights about people and iterative, rigorous design to create cost-effective solutions."*

Under Josh's leadership, ideas42 he has taken research and conceptual ideas created by academics and turned them into tools for change in the real world. An outstanding example is

Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir's work on the psychology of Scarcity, summarized in their book "Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much." Tina Rosenberg, a New York Times reporter, captures the magnitude of the influence: "*Scarcity*" is a new book that does something that I didn't think possible: it says something new about why people are poor — and what to do about it." I can personally testify to the power and influence of this book, having distributed it to over 1,200 participants at a summit my organization hosted and applying the principles to our work crafting national policies to address wealth inequality.

Specifically, this thinking has influenced the administration of benefits programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), Medicaid, and EITC (earned income tax credit) at the federal level and in state and local governments in California, Texas, Michigan, and New York City. Ideas42's white paper "[Work requirements don't work](#)" (written in partnership with the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities), strongly influenced the current federal administration to stop or reverse work requirements components to federal programs.

One of the newest initiatives is the [ideas42 venture studio](#) which combines behavioral science, machine learning, and business building to create sustainable models for improving economic opportunities and financial health for low and moderate-income Americans. The venture studio has already launched three businesses—one focused on reducing chronic absenteeism in K-12 education ([Everyday Labs](#)); another helping returning citizens make successful re-entries into their communities ([Vergil](#)) – and a third to support people to better manage and pay off credit card debt to increase their financial stability and credit scores ([Ask Nickels Credit Card Coach](#)).

It is no accident that ideas42 has attracted four SOM alumni to work at the organization and can boast that five ideas42 alumni who have matriculated to SOM over the past decade—an affirmation of how the mission of the organization—and the ways that Josh has executed that mission—aligns with values and rigor of the SOM education. Throughout his career, Josh has consistently used the skills, knowledge, and connections he gained in his time at SOM in service of economic and social justice—in the nonprofit, public and private sectors. As a member of the inaugural cohort of Donaldson Fellows, I take my responsibility for nominating Fellows seriously. I cannot imagine a better way to fulfill this responsibility than by nominating Josh.

Thank you for your consideration of my nomination.