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Coming to America: Cohort Students, Community Engagement, Linked Courses in Geography, Gerontology, and English Composition, and a New Sense of Place

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Coming to America: Cohort Students, Community Engagement, Linked Courses in Geography, Gerontology, and English Composition, and a New Sense of Place

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ABSTRACT

Our cohort was made up of sixteen University of Nebraska Omaha students that received the Honors Learning Community scholarship. We met together four days a week and studied Gerontology, Geography, and English Composition II in a linked class system. This allowed us to study the differences in elder care around the world due to cultural differences while writing proficient academic papers for all three classes. The skills and perspectives gained in these classes culminated in our Coming to America Project, wherein we recorded the story of a refugee elder who migrated to the United States.



Esteemed elders at the Celebration Party

Application of Knowledge

Our world regional geography course allowed us to gain cultural and geographic information about Afghanistan, our elder's homeland, which made his story more comprehensible. Also, our group's research into neighboring countries allowed us to gain a better understanding of the Southwest Asia region as a whole.

Our gerontology course enlightened us on the difficulties plaguing the aged population within the United States. Meeting our elder gave us the opportunity to empathize with the struggles he faces as a senior citizen in the United States and as an immigrant.

The Coming to America project concluded with our group constructing our elder's memories into a cohesive paper, which was possible because of the alignment between our courses and because we spent the semester perfecting our writing.



Team Southwest Asia with our elder and translator

Student Outcomes

Team Southwest Asia

- We improved our verbal and written communication skills, and organizational abilities.
- We expanded our world view and gained insights into the history of Afghanistan.
- We now understand the plight of the elderly in America and around the world.
- Our cohort improved our cooperation skills and learned how to rely on each other's strengths.

Reframing Learning Experiences

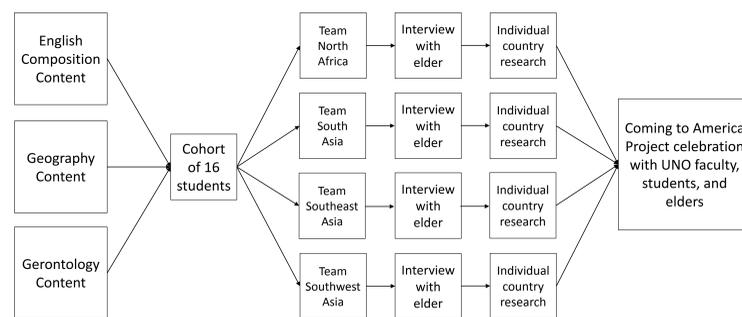
Although this project provided us with a few difficulties, it taught us how to communicate effectively and use our available resources to complete a project of a high academic level. Collaborating outside of school made planning a challenge, especially with the number of parties involved. Yet, this taught us how to compose clear and concise emails that made it easy for people to read through quickly without any confusion. Despite the language barrier and difficulties with planning, we were able to work around many different schedules in order to make our project work. We would not have considered a project of this scope if it was optional, but after completing the Coming to America project, we now know we can tackle any project of this complexity.

We consider ourselves particularly fortunate to have this assignment turned opportunity. Not only did we get to hear the Pashto language spoken by a native speaker, we were also exposed to three other languages (Karin, Nepali and Sudanese Arabic). The opportunity to hear elders speaking in their native tongues was appreciated by the entire cohort and the elders were happy to share their language with us.



Student presentations during the Celebration Party

Methodology



At the beginning of the Fall 2016 semester, our cohort was introduced to our semester-long project. This project involved the understanding, application, and analysis of content across English Composition, Geography, and Gerontology. Our cohort of sixteen students divided into four groups of four. Each group was assigned to an elder and a translator by Lutheran Family Services, a Nebraska-based organization dedicated to helping refugees, immigrants, asylees, and victims of international human trafficking. Organizing meetings with our elder involved coordinating seven different schedules and deciding which aspects of his story we wanted to focus on for our project.

Overall, our cohort researched four regions (North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Southwest Asia) and sixteen individual countries (Egypt, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) in addition to learning about the countries of our elders.

Linked Courses

The linked course program was comprised of Introduction to Gerontology, World Geography, and English Composition II.

Our cohort learned about the process of aging and the details behind caring for the elderly at both state and federal levels.

We learned about cultural differences between societies around the world, which equipped us with basic knowledge about the countries our elders are from and their neighboring countries.

We developed our writing abilities with our English course, which allowed us to compose thorough and academically proficient papers for all three courses.

Each Team Meets Their Elder

The first meeting with our elder occurred at Lutheran Family Services. After a brief introduction, the class split up into four teams and met their elder for the first time. Dr. Patton and our translator accompanied our team as we discussed the project and what we would be doing.

During this time, our elder provided us with a brief description of his life. Our second meeting took place at his favorite library. Between these two hour-long sessions, we were able to learn our elder's story and gather information to write out the story of his migration to the United States. Through this process, we created a book for his family to enjoy for generations to come. The book consisted of an artistic cover, his story, and a flash drive containing an audio file of our elder's story in Pashto and in English.

Celebration Party

At the end of our project, our elders, translators, Lutheran Family Services staff, and our professors gathered on campus for speeches, the presentation of the Coming to America books, and to celebrate the success of the project. Each team member presented their research about their assigned country. Afterwards, we ate dinner with our elders and translators.