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MSS Senior Project Report

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Middle to Middle: Middle Georgia Students Engaging in Middle Eastern Studies

Project Summary:

“Middle to Middle” will connect Middle Georgia high school students with the culture, politics, and history of the Middle Eastern region through a series of engaging, after school activities.

Target Community:

The target community for “Middle to Middle” is students in Bibb County high schools. Currently, the project is working with Westside High School and a confirmation email for presenting the project idea to their faculty is attached in the appendices. As an update, the project idea was presented to the faculty of Westside High School on December 4, 2017 and received an enthusiastic response and commitment from the principal to the program. In addition, the program was asked by Westside High School to assist the Social Studies department and students with the 2018 National History Day as a way to begin to build relationships. 2018’s NHD theme is Conflict and Compromise, which provided an opportunity to introduce some of the issues that the program addressed in the coming school year. “Middle to Middle” required collaboration between the project and the high school teachers in order to form an appropriate and engaging curriculum for high school students.

Project Relevance and Rationale:

Even though the Middle East is closely connected with the United States foreign policy, American youth know very little about the region. A study shows that 63 percent of young

Americans cannot identify Iraq or Saudi Arabia and that 75 percent cannot locate Iran or Israel (National Geographic, 2006). Considering how involved the United States is with the Middle East, it is imperative that the coming generation understand the region. The study found a connection between knowledge and level of schooling, as many high school students are not adequately taught about the Middle East. The Georgia Standards for World History includes 83 objectives, with more than 75 percent focusing on the Western world and only one objective focusing exclusively on a modern Middle Eastern issue (Georgia Department of Education, 2016). Bibb County has 11 schools that are labeled “chronically failing,” which in turn leads to an intense focus on Milestone Testing requirements (Chronically Failing Schools List, 2017). When a school is labeled as “chronically failing,” teachers begin to focus more on math and reading capabilities, and overlook other important educational topics such as the Middle Eastern region.

“Middle to Middle” provides a way for students to fill the educational gap and learn more about the Middle Eastern region through monthly meetings during the school year. History students will have the opportunity to engage in interactive learning modules that cover different topics dealing with the Middle East, and in the process, become more well-rounded individuals with exposure to world views they might not otherwise know about. The hope for this program is that it will restart each year, with modified modules focused on new topics.

Project Objectives:

1. Increased student knowledge and interest of the Middle Eastern region, which will be measured by a knowledge pre and post survey
2. Provide students with an educational, yet engaging, after school program, which will be measured by the level of student involvement and commitment

3. Increased understanding of the harmful nature of stereotypes, which will be measured by a pre and post survey

The main goal for “Middle to Middle” has been to increase students’ knowledge and interest of the Middle Eastern region. By the end of the program, students should know more about the Middle Eastern region than they did at the beginning of the program. The hope is that students will begin to question stereotypes and that the program will serve as a catalyst for an increased interest in the Middle East and desire for continuing education of the region

Project Analysis

Overall, I was pleased with the first semester implementation of Middle to Middle at Westside. As expected, attendance fluctuated, which did make survey evaluation difficult. Especially considering that who attended from month to month varied and I never had the same group of students. I eventually had to discard the survey method and instead focus more on informal feedback due to the fact that in order for a student to take a survey, they needed parental permission. The goals of the project were met in the sense that students were exposed to the Middle East North Africa region in a way that they had not been before. I consistently heard from students that they had no idea people their age in the MENA region listened to pop music or loved reality television as much as them. The program normalized the region in a way that media coverage does not and allowed for students to find global connection to the area.

Attendance proved to be one of the biggest barriers that I faced in regards to implementing this project successfully. The teachers that I worked with were extremely busy and some months they would forget to pass out flyers that I gave them and let their classes know when the meeting was taking place. When this happened, they would usually scramble the hallway searching for a few straggler students who were not yet going home and force them to

sit through the Middle to Middle meeting. Sometimes this was fruitful and those students came back the next week, but other times the students were disengaged and disruptive because they did not want to be there in the first place. There was not much that I could do about the attendance situation, so I simply had to make the best of what I was given. I prepared meetings for groups as small as two and as big as twenty, both of which were needed throughout the year.

If I could go back, I would make my goals better known to the Westside teachers I was working with. I am not sure if they fully understood the extent of what I was attempting to do, which led to some miscommunication of expectations and a fizzling out of the program by the second semester. While I know that the teachers were excited for the program, the turn-over in the history department made continuity difficult and will continue to make continuity difficult for the following year. I have learned throughout this process that flexibility is the most important characteristic of a community project and clear communication is needed in order to ensure success. My personality is not one that is forceful and I tended to stand by the wayside when my community partners told me that they would get back to me with information regarding dates and times for meetings. I definitely learned that teachers, being as overworked as they are, can easily forget about the extra program that they added to their plate, which means I needed to be politely persistent. While I eventually gained that trait, it took me months into the implementation to learn it. Another aspect in regards to flexibility is that many times I would prepare a meeting that was not reaching the students, so I needed to quickly transition to a more engaging topic on more than one occasion. Overall, this was a wonderful learning experience and I enjoyed making connections within the community as well as sharing my passion.

Dissemination Plan

I presented the concept of Middle to Middle, along with its progress, at the 2018 SoCon Undergraduate Research Forum in the fall semester. With the Westside community partner retiring at the end of the year, whoever might be interested in picking up my project will have to find a new teacher to establish relations with. They will not, however, have to start from scratch since the principal is aware of the presence of Middle to Middle on the school campus. My faculty advisor, Dr. Houry, will have all of my current materials, including powerpoints, handouts, and curriculum to pass along. Dr. Houry also has all of the completed surveys, but considering that the surveys did not yield the consistency or response rate desired, the measurements are not extremely accurate.

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