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Globalizing Curriculum and Introducing Diplomacy: Wright College's Participation in the Diplomacy Lab Program

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Introduction

Education is rightly seen as a core component of any solution to the global challenges we face—most notably the increase in violent extremism around the world, the disinformation spread through social media platforms, and the backsliding of democracy in many countries, including the U.S.¹ Schools, both k-12 and post-secondary institutions, are tasked with ensuring that students are prepared to be fully functioning global citizens: able to see the world from multiple perspectives, critically consider the information they read or see, and to understand fully democratic ideals in all their complexity (e.g., the rule of law, civil rights and civil liberties, and majority rule).

Wright College, a two-year institution that is one of the City Colleges of Chicago, is a Hispanic-serving institution of about 8,000 students. It has attempted to meet these goals and to globalize its curriculum through a variety of methods. In 2016, it applied for Diplomacy Lab, a public-private partnership that “enables the [U.S.] Department of State to ‘course-source’ research and innovation related to foreign policy by harnessing the efforts of students and faculty at universities across the country.”² Wright was accepted into the program, one of currently only 41 institutions nationally and the only community college, and since that time has worked on 20 separate projects. These projects have spanned the globe, giving students the chance to meet virtually with State Department personnel and discuss some of the pressing problems they face.

The Diplomacy Lab program’s mission is multi-pronged, but it has two primary goals detailed on the DOS website:

1. **ENGAGEMENT:** By establishing partnerships between the Department and U.S. colleges and universities, the Diplomacy Lab provides students with a mechanism to participate in the work of the Department while allowing policymakers to tap into an underutilized reservoir of intellectual capacity;
2. **EDUCATION:** Students participating in Diplomacy Lab under the guidance of faculty experts explore real-world challenges identified by the Department of State. The program gives the Department the opportunity to receive practical research related to their issues while also contributing to the Secretary’s public diplomacy goals.³

From Wright’s perspective, there are other benefits. The program has provided our students with demonstrable skills that have improved their chances of winning

¹ UNESCO, Global Citizenship Education (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/themes/gced>

² <https://diplomacylab.org/>

³ <https://www.state.gov/diplomacy-lab>

scholarships and gaining acceptance to the four-year colleges and universities of their choice. It has expanded the career aspirations of our students, especially for those who are the first in their families to go to college.

This also helps the DOS to further its goal (and legal requirements as part of the Foreign Service Act of 1980) of diversifying the foreign service and ensuring that its workforce reflects the makeup of the American public. According to a 2020 Congressional Research Service Report, only eight percent and seven percent, respectively, of its foreign service personnel were Black or Latino. The share was even lower for senior foreign service personnel, with just four percent coming from each of these groups.⁴ As a Hispanic-serving institution, Wright provides not only ethnic diversity but also broader diversities of age, experience, and economics. As a partner in Diplomacy Lab, Wright has introduced over 350 students to Diplomacy Lab projects since 2016, with several students choosing to do more than one as part of an independent study.

Additionally, our students have brought their own perspectives and research efforts to contribute to the overall foreign policy goals of the U.S. In this article, they will detail three projects. As you will see, they vary from broad in scope, both in topic and region, to those more narrowly focused, but each project enabled our students to dig deeply into a specific topic or region.

Making Smart Cities Meaningful to the Public: Southeast Asia

According to The Welding Institute (WTI) Global, smart cities are metropolitan areas that leverage technology and data to enhance the quality of life of their residents in the delivery of daily services, including healthcare and transportation.⁵ Smart cities vary by their purpose; for instance, Singapore—considered the most advanced smart city globally—focuses much of its efforts on using technology to inform contactless healthcare strategies with the use of the Internet of Things (IoT) and biomedical sensors to collect information.⁶ Other smart cities, such as in India, are more focused on environmental sustainability and use technology to optimize transportation services to reduce gas emissions from privately owned vehicles (Government of India).⁷ By utilizing advanced technologies, such as autonomous vehicles and digital wallets, smart cities can promote meaningful growth to the public—whether in terms of economic infrastructure or public services. In this project, we examined various forms of smart technology concerning the

⁴ Gill, Cory R. “Diversity in the U.S. Department of State Foreign Service: Background and Issues for Congress” (CRS Report No. IF11591), 2 July 2020.

⁵ “What Is a Smart City? – Definition and Examples.” *WTI*, The Welding Institute Ltd, www.twi-global.com/technical-knowledge/faqs/what-is-a-smart-city.

⁶ “5 Examples of Smart Cities from around the World - NEC New Zealand.” *NEC*, 14 Feb. 2022, www.nec.co.nz/market-leadership/publications-media/which-cities-are-smart-cities-5-examples-of-smart-cities-around-the-world/.

⁷ “The Smart City Challenge Stage 2 - Niua.” *SMARTNET: Solutions Exchange for Urban Transformation of India*, Government of India, 2016, smartnet.niua.org/sites/default/files/resources/Chandigarh_SCP.pdf.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN member states include: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁸ Considering the partnership between the U.S. and ASEAN, examples of our analysis included traffic congestion, traffic management and privacy, and pandemic responses. For the purpose of this paper, we will primarily focus on smart pandemic responses, which detail the recommended use of advanced technologies and data tracking to aid in controlling infection rates. Through successful efforts, as demonstrated through the depletion of cases, we will also discuss the learned consequences of smart policing and its comprehensive impacts.

Smart Cities in Southeast Asia and Pandemic Responses

Advanced technological infrastructure and influence are well-known attributes of China but were most noted when considering the containment of COVID-19 cases. The application of smart technologies, such as the uncrewed white rhino vehicles sent to transport medical supplies and deliver meals in hospitals (Charles Arthur and Ruan Shuhui),⁹ restricted contact and greatly benefitted public health concerns. This is only one of the many examples of the advanced technologies that China employed to combat the pandemic—actions perceived as successful by ASEAN countries.

Moreover, South Korea used similar technologies with data-tracking capabilities to produce what is considered ‘smart policing.’ The South Korean government mandated that each infected person download a GPS tracking app to notify authorities if they left their property.¹⁰ With jail sentences or steep fines at stake, this positively contributed to managing infections. Recent literature additionally supported these efforts and praised smart cities for their impact on prevention; “smart cities host a rich array of technological products that can assist in early detection of outbreaks; either through thermal cameras or Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, and early discussions could render efforts towards better management of similar situations in case of future potential outbreaks, and to improve the health fabric of cities generally” (Zaheer Allam and David Jones).¹¹ While this strategy has succeeded in its implementation, it nonetheless requires advanced economic development—something few ASEAN countries have. For this reason, we have found it appropriate to recommend less advanced data tracking systems to be incorporated

⁸ *ASEAN Member States*, Association of Southeast Asian Countries, asean.org/member-states/.

⁹ Arthur, Charles, and Ruan Shuhui. “In China, Robot Delivery Vehicles Deployed to Help with COVID-19 Emergency.” *UNIDO*, United Nations, 1 Apr. 2020, <https://www.unido.org/stories/china-robot-delivery-vehicles-deployed-help-covid-19-emergency>.

¹⁰ Buchwald, Elisabeth. “What We Can Learn from South Korea and Singapore's Efforts to Stop Coronavirus (besides Wearing Face Masks).”

MarketWatch, MarketWatch, 6 Apr. 2020,

<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/what-we-can-learn-from-south-korea-and-singapores-efforts-to-stop-coronavirus-in-addition-to-wearing-face-masks-2020-03-31>.

¹¹ Allam, Zaheer, and David S. Jones. “On the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak and the Smart City Network: Universal Data Sharing Standards Coupled with Artificial Intelligence (AI) to Benefit Urban Health Monitoring and Management.” *Healthcare*, vol. 8, no. 1, Feb. 2020, p. 46. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8010046>.

throughout ASEAN member states. Although it can be argued that this recommendation would not be as effective without similar technologies or capacities, we found that *any* type of tracking will nonetheless impact containment and ultimately impact contraction and infection rates.

In approaching technological efforts during the pandemic, it was necessary to relinquish Western ideologies of autonomy and liberty. For the case studies discussed above, one can argue that each measure violates the all-encompassing idea of human rights and could be argued against in an ethical or normative framework. This project admittedly shifted my perspective on what is fundamentally 'right' and 'wrong' in the international sphere, as what can be considered a violation in Western culture could be accepted in other parts of the world. For instance—within the context of the pandemic—American responses to masking or vaccine protocols and the discussion of civil liberties is a primary example of how strategic decision-making can be sensitive depending on the region at hand. This idea became more challenging to navigate in the unprecedented era of a global pandemic; however, in my analysis and recommendations, it was evident that I needed to proceed through an objective lens, no matter how difficult that was. The trends in infection rates, alongside the impacts of smart technology in a medical setting (e.g., robots, AI health monitors, etc.), recent literature, and data-tracking efforts, led to a clear conclusion that ASEAN countries should implement similar strategies.

Participating in this Diplomacy Lab project and having it be my first exposure to social science research significantly informed my understanding of the U.S. Department of State and its global and international responsibilities. Until this project, I believed that academic engagement in regional matters outside the U.S. was uncommon—especially regarding the application of strategic problem-solving or policy recommendations. Because of this initial research surrounding Southeast Asia and China's growing influence throughout the region, I have continuously involved myself in research within this realm. I feel as though I discovered an entirely new study of politics, one that feels tangible and meaningful with real-world impacts. My analysis of smart cities, as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic, has propelled me to research financial technology alongside Chinese influence on Southeast Asian smart cities with the Yale Policy Institute—a selective opportunity that I was accepted to because of the experience I gained through this Diplomacy Lab project. I feel most interested in continuing to focus on international politics now, as there is no necessary conception of 'right' or 'wrong' but instead strategic and rational thinking that advances issues most equitably.

Gender in the Great Power Competition

According to John Mearsheimer, the Great Power Competition (GPC) mandates that “the overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states. But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all great powers, although that is a welcome outcome. Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system” (Mearsheimer, 2).¹² This is a fundamental concept in international relations and game theory; absolute power is the absolute goal. By utilizing this definition of GPC alongside the foundations of Mearsheimer’s *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, we were tasked with determining the influence of gender—particularly that of women—on international affairs. In this project, we examined the number of women in power, cultural and societal perceptions of women, and the collective progress—or impacts of progressive legislation—made to increase the number of women in government. We examined the positionality of female representation in various countries, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, and analyzed the general conception of women in the GPC. For our purposes, we will discuss the gender influence regarding Iran’s GPC and the rationale behind proposed recommendations for the U.S. to influence them regionally.

Gender Influence in the Iranian Great Power Competition (GPC)

In understanding Iran’s global positionality through comparative analysis, it is evident that Iran is not considered a global superpower or regional hegemon. Because of their standing, Iran is susceptible to influence—most likely from powerful actors such as Russia or China. This becomes increasingly more likely when we consider that Iran’s gross domestic product (GDP) is centered around its geopolitical advantages. These geopolitical advantages center around Iran’s position between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, which allows for the opportunity of oil pipelines or the transportation of goods and services.¹³ Various investments, such as China’s \$1 trillion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or India’s and Russia’s International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), further demonstrate this, as Iran is leveraging their advantages to build economic infrastructure. As we understand Iran’s level of power, it is also essential for us to consider the political structure of Iran to begin to consider the role of women in government. The Iranian government’s political system poses a significant obstacle to change as the Supreme Religious Leader, who has ultimate power for life, is unaccountable to any person.¹⁴ This authority permeates every facet of

¹² Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton, 2014.

¹³ Faraji Rad, Abdol-Reza. “How Iran Should Translate Its Geopolitical Advantages into Economic Opportunities.” *Iranian Diplomacy*, Iranian Diplomacy, 3 Mar. 2017, irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/1967572/how-iran-should-translate-its-geopolitical-advantages-into-economic-opportunities.

¹⁴ Hoodfar, H., & Sadr, S. (2010). Islamic Politics and Women's Quest for Gender Equality in Iran. *Third World Quarterly*, 31(6), 885-903. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org.ccc.idm.oclc.org/stable/27896587>

Iran's political system, which has been found to complicate the advancement of women's rights and lead to the rejection of reformists.

Although President Hassan Rouhani supports gender equality and women's rights, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei considers reforms incompatible with Islamic Republic ideals. Khamenei strictly interprets a traditionalist approach to the role of women, particularly stating that "Western thinkers and those who pursue issues such as gender equality regret the corruption that it has brought about" (Golnaz Esfandiari).¹⁵ Under this interpretation, women are primarily caregivers and mothers and do not inherently hold the same value as men: "Women in Iran are denied equal rights before the law in divorce, child custody, inheritance, and other areas. A woman's testimony in court is considered to be half the value of a man's. Women need the permission of their father or husband to travel. And women are forced to cover their hair and body" (Esfandiari).¹⁶ This is not to say women's activism has not occurred throughout Iran's history, as the first women's social movement began in 1905 during the constitutional revolution.¹⁷ Despite efforts, political and social perceptions of women are intertwined, as women face significant discrimination—even within their families. The desire to promote substantial social and political change has prompted women's groups such as the Zaynab Society and the Islamic Women's Coalition to frame their demands in religious terms to find resonance with political officials.¹⁸ Our findings show that women have little to no impact on Iran's GPC or within their professional setting generally. This is mainly because of their subordinate role within this society and the unequal opportunities in academic or professional capacities. Again, with the perceptions of women and strict traditionalist interpretations on behalf of Iran's administration, women do not have the opportunity to impact or influence Iran's GPC in any facet of global positionality. Additionally, regarding strategies the U.S. could utilize to control Iran, financial and economic incentives appear ideal—as seen through the other investments they have received. As previously mentioned, the relationship between Iran and other regional hegemony, such as Russia or China, has been developed primarily because of financial incentives. With Iran leveraging their geopolitical advantages in combination with the amount of wealth offered to it via investments or infrastructure, a certain level of influence is gained over Iran's behavior. For this reason, it is fair to assume that entering a conversation with Iran that promises economic development and prosperity will influence their decision-making as a global actor, as already observed.

¹⁵ Esfandiari, Golnaz. "Iran's Supreme Leader Takes Fresh Shot at Gender Equality." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 25 Mar. 2017, www.rferl.org/a/iran-khamenei-takes-new-shot-at-feminism/28390611.html.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Alami, M., Vatanka, A., & Mohseni-Cheraghloou, A. (2020, November 19). The role of women in building Iran's future. Retrieved November 26, 2020, from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/role-women-building-irans-future>

¹⁸ Tajali, M. (2015). Islamic Women's Groups and the Quest for Political Representation in Turkey and Iran. *Middle East Journal*, 69(4), 563-581. Retrieved November 25, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org.ccc.idm.oclc.org/stable/43698288>

Considering women in politics, particularly in international politics, it was startling to consider how few women hold government seats. To understand how Iran compares to the rest of the world concerning female representation, I had to consider international agreements that promised to prioritize women in politics. My analysis included a quantitative approach to understand how the 1995 Beijing Declaration—adopted by the United Nations in 1995 to promote equal opportunity between men and women—affected the representation of women globally. I specifically looked at the periods before the 1995 Beijing Declaration, after 1995 until the 2017 Women, Peace, and Security Act—which promoted the incorporation of women in peace-keeping decisions—and 2017 and beyond. From the various agreements I analyzed, it was clear that they had little impact. This is where my frustration with international law began, particularly because of the weak enforcement mechanisms. Although I had my frustrations, I nonetheless enjoyed the strategic problem-solving aspects of international relations. I say this to mean that although weak mechanisms for enforcement and agreements *appear* to be in vain, policy recommendations must consider this obstacle and propose solutions accordingly.

Additionally, because of the startling statistics, I have found myself interested in increasing female representation in government in other regions—particularly Latin America. Through my current focus on international political economy and development economics, advancing women's rights and positionality is critical to progressing power and economic infrastructure. While I had a general understanding that women were underrepresented, until this project, I did not understand the comprehensive severity of the issue. With few women in power, this enforces outdated social and cultural 'norms,' which is something observed in Iran. Their perception that women are primarily meant to be mothers damages the advancement of women's rights and even a country's economic advancement entirely. This is not to say that women being mothers is detrimental in itself, but the social expectation or requirement that confines women to the extent that they cannot choose their occupation or path within this life *is* damaging. This project primarily motivated me to continue researching women's rights and incorporate this issue in my thesis research. Intuitively speaking, if we assume that 50% of a country's population is women and they are omitted from participating in government and, in turn, the economy, this can only halt economic prosperity and growth to its greatest capacity.

The Growing Impact of Social Media on Philippine Politics

In this project, students investigated social media's role in the 2022 Philippine presidential election: providing an overview of the country's social media landscape; examining how candidates used social media, paid trolls, and non-paid actors to spread their political messages; considering the possible areas where there was foreign interference in Philippine politics via social media; and finally analyzing ways the U.S. and U.N. could

combat the spread of misinformation. In efforts to understand the effect of social media on politics within the Philippines, the body of research concentrated on the mechanisms of misinformation and disinformation tactics and processes within said context.

The exploration of the misinformation and disinformation landscape in the Philippines was initiated through participating in the Diplomacy Lab. As social media grew in the scale of its reach and effects, prominent political actors in the Philippines utilized it as a tool to spread information closely relevant to the state and political opponents within the country. With few restrictions in place to monitor information from online sources, the propagation of false information occurred. Engagement in this work by students was conducted by studying and presenting fake news case studies individually and collectively. A holistic view of the misinformation tactics used by the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. campaign in the 2022 Philippine election was provided.

Rappler, a digital media company based in the Philippines, published a study on “networked propaganda,” covering behaviors on online platforms that enhance political messaging associated with the Marcos family. Sharktank, a Rappler database that monitored Philippine discourse channels within Facebook, tracked over 360 pages and 280 groups in support of the family. In July 2014, the creation of new pages increased following the mention of Bongbong Marcos running for president by the former first lady and his mother, Imelda Marcos.¹⁹ Rappler provided that “the number of followers of Facebook pages, groups, influencer accounts, and YouTube channels involved in this massive propaganda effort” reached millions. Its effect within politics was described as “strengthening, if not consolidating, political dominance” through the campaign tactic of revising history. Rappler reports that this strategy worked and was made evident when observing the close vice-presidential race in which, two years after the Marcos propaganda increased on social media, Bongbong Marcos almost won. From 1986 to 2009, no Marcos member attained national office.²⁰ In addition to this, Rappler reports that the Marcos family engaged in exaggerating achievements and maintaining the narrative of a “biased press.”²¹

As reported by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in work titled “Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections,” Bongbong Marcos and his family were “modernizing” misinformation campaigns by amplifying their messages and downplaying or denying historical events. According to this report, similar patterns of the creation of accounts persisted for President Duterte as fan pages were initiated near the

¹⁹ Bagayaua-Mendoza, Gemma. “Networked Propaganda: How the Marcoses Are Using Social Media to Reclaim Malacañang.” *Rappler*, 20 Nov. 2019, www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/245290-marcos-networked-propaganda-social-media/index.html.

²⁰ Bagayaua-Mendoza, Gemma. “Networked Propaganda: How the Marcoses Are Rewriting History.” *Rappler*, 21 Nov. 2019, www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/245402-networked-propaganda-marcoses-rewriting-history/index.html

²¹ Bagayaua-Mendoza, Gemma. “Networked Propaganda: False Narratives from the Marcos Arsenal.” *Rappler*, 22 Nov. 2019, www.rappler.com/features/newsbreak/investigative/245540-networked-propaganda-false-narratives-from-the-marcos-arsenal/index.html

start of the 2016 presidential elections, and most were created post-assumption of office. Duterte's campaign was the first to engage in the virality landscape of social media, identified by many as the first "social media election," and the 2022 elections predicted at the time to repeat similar campaign strategies. Nic Gabunada, Duterte's social media manager, employed numerous internet trolls to spread his message throughout Philippine digital media. Online trolls played a role in the 2016 election and were identified as being "endemic to Philippine cyberspace" as "companies, celebrities, and politicians alike" employed "trolls to smear opponents or create the appearance of a fervent fan base." Hired trolls impersonated "real people" through muted SIM cards and social media accounts to enhance and spread the reach of messages that provided misinformation while simultaneously diminishing the reach-based effect of oppositional messaging.

Studying several case studies, such as the two previously mentioned, students formed an observational basis of misinformation's political progression. The collaborative nature of this work allowed for varying concentrations surrounding the rise of misinformation in the digital age and recent campaign strategies. Through collaborative and individual work, students presented their points of engagement and closely relevant findings. My line of inquiry centered on the systemization of troll farms and its effects within the Philippine political landscape.

Social media is highly integrated into the culture of the Filipino population. Controlling for internet access, 90 percent of the population uses social media, 81 percent of which includes the use of Facebook. For the purpose of this work, it is essential to include that 85 percent of the population were YouTube users, and 87 percent of respondents in a 2017 survey reported social media as a trusted source of information.²² Identified as the 'most social media-fueled election in Philippines history,' social media played a significant role in Philippine presidential elections before 2022. Facebook was the leading platform to mobilize voters and spread information and propaganda. Commonly known for making negative comments that spark arguments or directly offend individuals, online trolls play a role in the media landscape.²³ By using the internet to engage in public discourse surrounding the political climate, internet trolls spread rhetoric and negative messages, disregarding its claims' factual basis, or lack thereof. The effect and reach of internet trolls are demonstrated in the following finding: despite not having the most posts in the 2016 election, Duterte had the most shares on social media posts by himself and his staffers—compared to his political opponents.²⁴ The role of social media in the 2022

²² Quitzon, J. (2021, November 22). Social Media Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine Elections. Center for Strategic and International Studies . Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/social-media-misinformation-and-2022-philippine-elections>

²³ Sanfilippo, P. Yang, S. & Fichman, P. (2017). Managing online trolling: From deviant to social and political trolls. Proceedings of the 50th Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-50). Los Alamitos: IEEE Press.

²⁴ Sinpeng, A. (2016, May 12). *How Duterte won the election on Facebook*. New Mandala. Retrieved 2022, from <https://www.newmandala.org/how-duterte-won-the-election-on-facebook/>

Philippine Presidential election served as an interesting model for the contemporary political arena. It provided insight into the ideological effects of political rhetoric, misinformation, and disinformation on constituents and the general populous. The close examination of social media's role in this context also allowed for the analytical study of the use of social media by official political actors—most notably, presidential and vice presidential figures and candidates.

Examining social media's role in the politics of one country also allowed for the generalization of some of its effects on other countries, most notably the U.S. It helped to develop an understanding of the political and societal impacts of online misinformation and disinformation. More precisely, discovering how misinformation is often used as a political tool to advance a political agenda or aid in advancing certain issues was especially important in the attempt to find ways to limit misinformation's effects. In doing so, my political awareness of the threats misinformation poses to democracy was raised. Engaging in this work proactively reinforced the importance of engaging with media through a productive critical lens. Within academia, this project allowed me to develop new perspectives on approaching, identifying, and providing solutions to large-scale and increasingly complex problems. That is, one must approach prospective solutions by fundamentally understanding their core dynamics and unique nuances. It is important to acknowledge that no absolute solution may be provided at the conclusion of the respective work; however, findings in connection with suggested solutions may offer building principles to the increased understanding of the subject and problem—eventually providing effective mechanisms for mitigating its effects.

Discussion

Matriculating at a community college is often associated with failure; perceptions usually center around a student's lack of intelligence or wealth, as that could be the only possible explanation for receiving a low-quality education. However, that is not the case nor the experience we have had at our respective City Colleges of Chicago campuses. One example is Wright College's partnership in Diplomacy Lab, a rigorous, tangible, and unique program. To be engaged with the U.S. Department of State in often our first year of higher education has been absolutely transformative in the development of research skills, policy writing, and professional or academic ambitions. We have had to approach real-life global issues and submit deliverables that inform our or other governments' decision-making. With the responsibility and weight of our respective assignments, we continue to see the application of what we have learned in our current work and education.

In our participation in Diplomacy lab, we have been allowed to delve into the varying facets of social science research and explore its intersections with adjacent disciplines (e.g., law, policy, healthcare). We learned what it means to question everything, to understand the mechanisms of governments polar to ours, and to nourish our intellectual curiosity to arrive at solutions for issues of diplomacy we were not previously familiar with. While each of our projects required the development of different research skills (e.g., quantitative, qualitative), this nonetheless enhanced our analytical skillset to grasp the complex intersections of issues abroad, domestic U.S. relations, and patterns in our respective projects—such as the digital age within the political sphere. For instance, in the project “The Growing Impact of Social Media on Philippine Politics,” upon researching and analyzing the role of social media within Philippine politics, we observed the prominence of policy and law within misinformation efforts and effects, both as a means to sustain it and as a viable pathway to combat and diminish its impact. This project's progression nurtured an overall curiosity for law, policy, and identifying what a healthy political system can or should be. Furthermore, this opportunity provided the space to fuel an intellectual spark while simultaneously discovering underlying mechanisms of social media within the contemporary political arena—a continuously prominent line of inquiry in the present world. This experience allowed for a better understanding of the interconnectedness of political and social issues and the varying professional sectors—ultimately expanding the framework when thinking about topics, conflicts, and solutions discussed within politics, the media, academia, and the public.

Additionally, our participation in projects of varying subject matter and regions contributed to our well-roundedness and understanding of international actors at play. For the project “Gender in the Great Power Competition,” we engaged with realist political theory surrounding global behavior and applied it within the progressive context of gender equality. This topic became particularly interesting when considering countries of low influence—in this case, Iran. To fully understand this region's moving pieces, in-depth historical research was necessary, as well as exploring the various investment deals between Iran and other actors. This is where we began to question everything: why did a specific country react the way it did? If the converse were true and women were fairly represented, how would this fundamentally change the fabric of this country? The nature of this project fueled critical discussions among classmates, most notably between students and various U.S. diplomats at our final presentation. In this moment, the theoretical and the tangible intersected; what was studied was not in vain or solely another assignment but for a significant purpose, further instilling value within our work and demonstrating the impact we could have on the world, even at a community college.

The project “Making Smart Cities Meaningful to the Public” evoked a similar sentiment—primarily since this work was conducted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since so little information was available about smart technology and its application to battle the pandemic, much of the analysis—especially with ethical and normative considerations—had to be made to the best of our judgment. With ASEAN governments seeking support in any capacity possible, solely ‘filling in the gaps’ was not acceptable for us as researchers; instead, we critically engaged with the materials available to us and continued to question everything. Many of us had not interacted with technology, smart cities, or healthcare policy before this experience, so gaining exposure to these fields was challenging but rewarding. We witnessed our memorandums be accepted by ASEAN, with some of our submissions being a resource on their official website. Having developed and utilized these research skills to serve global populations made politics *real*, and it continues to be active in our day-to-day lives and academic advancements.

Conclusion

Through Wright College’s participation in the Diplomacy Lab program and introducing community college students to the field of social science and policy research, students become engaged and informed global citizens. By providing solutions to real-world challenges identified by the U.S. Department of State, Chicago City College students have gained and developed valuable skills that are translatable to their studies at their four-year institutions and careers. In the described projects and reflections that Diplomacy Lab students have participated in, it is evident that the information learned from their research significantly impacted their views surrounding foreign affairs and contributed to sustained research opportunities and interests.