

“Envisioning a Future Without Immigrant Detention”
Middlebury College
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“Envisioning a Future Without Immigrant Detention” was a project that sought to introduce Middlebury College to the humanitarian crisis that is created by immigrant detention centers in the United States. Through education and direct service, our goal was to create a cohort of students to come up with concrete steps towards eliminating detention altogether. In practice, the majority of the work of the cohort, which consisted of the two of us and four additional students, was working directly with immigrant advocacy non-profits on cases of asylum seekers in detention and other related case work. Though initially, the hope was to work with organizations in person, developments in the global pandemic meant that we decided to work with more organizations than we had initially planned, but remotely.

A lot of the inspiration for our project came from prior experiences and being exposed to horrible conditions in immigrant detention centers that appalled us. Before proposing the project, we had a plethora of experience working together and separately on immigration issues. Both of us have recent immigration and refugee history in our families, so in some ways, this issue is personal. Through a school trip, we worked with asylum seekers in San Antonio, Texas with RAICES. After participating in this trip, we both felt motivated to continue this work and received funding from Middlebury’s Center for Community Engagement to return for a week in August and volunteer in Karnes. We also led a remote trip focusing on immigration education and advocacy which allowed us to bring more students into the work. For our Davis project, we wanted to think bigger both in terms of learning and experts we could work with and speak to, as well as the organizations we would later volunteer with.

The enormity of immigrant detention centers in the United States has grown to such magnitude because they are largely for-profit institutions. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) contracts corporations like CoreCivic and GeoGroup to design and maintain detention centers, who are then financially incentivized to fill their prisons with people. Put simply, powerful corporations make more money by detaining more people. On top of this, we are in a political climate where many politicians espouse and mobilize xenophobic rhetoric that creates further anti-immigrant sentiment amongst many Americans. As immigration itself is a politically charged issue in the United States, the notion of complete abolition of detention centers becomes increasingly challenging.

We had previously worked with several immigrant advocacy organizations in the past but for this project, we essentially started from scratch in terms of who we might work with. We wanted to ensure that the partnerships were mutually beneficial and that the organization was small enough to allow us to form close relationships with staff but not too small that our presence could be a burden. We interviewed over a dozen organizations across the country and ultimately settled on two primary partners: RMIAN (Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network) and Las Americas Immigration Advocacy. In the end, we were almost completely remote in our work due to the Covid-19 situation in detention centers and the transition that these organizations had made to make remote volunteer work completely feasible.

Because we transitioned our project to fully remote, all members of our cohort worked from their respective locations during the summer. In order to maintain a sense of community, we engaged in weekly cohort meetings to debrief our respective assignments with the partner organizations. The remote platform proved to be beneficial for our speaker series; we were able to invite speakers that otherwise may not have been able to travel to our cohort, and the virtual platform made the talks accessible to the larger Middlebury community.

While the question of our project not working was never exactly a concern, we had planned for the end of the summer to include an in-person trip to El Paso, Texas. Ultimately, out of safety concerns with the Delta variant, we had to cancel the in-person trip component. This was certainly a major let down but followed 8 weeks of in-depth volunteer work and conversations that made the cancellation of this trip feel more minor than it otherwise would have been.

The challenges we encountered in communication—both in preparation and in the midst of the project—were largely pandemic related. COVID created a great deal of uncertainty in the nature of work for many immigrant advocacy organizations. We expanded our list of potential partner organizations in order to find organizations that had the capacity to collaborate with our cohort, and that found the onboarding of our cohort beneficial rather than burdensome. During the work itself, we found that working remotely with detained individuals was a bit more cumbersome than our in-person experiences working in immigrant advocacy. Given that all of our partner organizations were also working remotely, however, we received support from our supervisors to make the remote work a bit easier. Remote communication proved difficult at the end of our project when we were deliberating whether to cancel our cohort trip to El Paso due to the Delta variant. Because we were not all physically in one place, we found ourselves having to coordinate communication and decision making between our supervisors, cohort, and partner organizations.

To us, peace is intrinsically tied to human dignity and basic human rights. Detention and specifically immigrant detention is antithetical to human rights and thus antithetical to peace. Our project sought to challenge the existence of detention structures and reconsider ways that immigration is a natural phenomenon and that immigrants are just people rather than the criminalization that frequently takes place in the United States. While we would have hoped to bring our group to an in-person detention center visit, we conducted almost all of our volunteer work remotely and through Zoom and other technologies. While it was in some ways a hindrance, it did allow us to bring speakers from across the country that wouldn't have otherwise been able to speak with our group.

Since the two of us have worked in detention centers before, the work itself did not necessarily change how we thought about the work/ the world. However, since this was our first time working with a Colorado-based organization, our conception of immigration detention in the United States perhaps became a bit more complicated given the differences in the asylum-seekers we were working with. Because we had never done this work during COVID, we saw how the challenges of detention became all the more difficult during a pandemic. Access to legal aid and maintaining proper health precautions, such as social distancing, become all the more difficult in a prison context. Participating in a variety of tasks in the legal systems allowed ourselves as well as the members of our cohort to learn what kinds of work we enjoyed and found fulfilling versus

what we found draining. I think that both of us, as well as our cohort, came away from this project having a better sense of how we want to continue working in this area, both while at Middlebury and after we graduate.

After having canceled our trip to El Paso, we found ourselves with extra money than we anticipated. With the goal of connecting our work with our local Middlebury and larger Vermont community, we decided to host an end-of-semester food event catered by Viva El Sabor—a woman-run Mexican and Central American cooking collective. The mission of Viva El Sabor is to promote Mexican and Central American food and culture, while simultaneously seeking economic justice for its members. Our event, which was grab-and-go style for the health and comfort of our attendees, included a selection of empanadas, tacos, tamales, and vegetables. We invited students and professors interested in issues of immigrant and migrant justice, as well as faculty connected to Projects for Peace and the Center for Community Engagement. At the event, we gave out posters that explained the mission of the project, along with information about the organizations we worked with through our grant. This event was a huge success! We were able to have safe, in-person contact with individuals passionate about immigrant justice, and were able to connect interested students and faculty members with opportunities to get involved.



Olivia and Alex prior to guests arriving to pick up their food!