

Middlebury College - Alexandra Burns '21.5 and Olivia O'Brien, '21.5 - July 2021  
**Envisioning A Future Without Immigrant Detention through Advocacy and Education**

**Vision:** This project will explore the current crisis posed by immigrant detention centers to Mexican and Central American refugees and envision a future without detention<sup>1</sup>. The project will be two weeks long and consist of the combination of education and advocacy through direct service with refugees and asylum seekers in collaboration with RAICES in San Antonio, Texas<sup>2</sup>.

**Project Context:** Although the current immigration system has been in crisis in the decades since the 1942-1964 Bracero Program, the Trump administration contributed to its further collapse through its passage of xenophobic immigration policy and executive orders.<sup>3</sup> Restrictive immigration policy under Trump, such as the Muslim ban, limits on refugees, and increased border apprehensions, has resulted in the annual net immigration to be cut in half to around 600,000 per year. In 2018, the Justice Department began arresting anyone who entered the US without authorization, leading to the separation of thousands of Central American families crossing the US-Mexico border.<sup>4</sup>

The "Justice-Free Zones: U.S. Immigration Detention Under the Trump Administration" report released in 2020, highlights the escalation of detention and worsened conditions in immigrant detention since 2017. The report specifically investigated detention centers in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arizona, but researched immigration detention throughout the country. The report found that since 2017, 40 new detention centers, most of which are privately owned and for-profit, have opened; as of January 2020, 81% of people detained are detained in facilities owned and/or operated by private companies. The report also describes the poor conditions within detention centers. People held in detention are held in inhumane conditions with limited access to medical care. Since 2017, 39 people have died in the custody of ICE or immediately after their release.<sup>5</sup> Although the United States has just transitioned out of a Trump administration to a Biden administration, the immigration system and the immigration detention crises remain.

**Project Objectives:** The intent of the project is to engage a small cohort of Middlebury college students in a 2-week long conference on immigration detention. Detention, which denies people of their basic human rights, stands in direct opposition to peace. Although peace is impossible in a country where detention still exists, students will work toward a future without detention through increased education on the nature of immigrant detention, and by performing direct service with asylum seekers within a detention center. The entirety of the two-week project will take place in San Antonio, Texas, where the cohort will work in close collaboration with RAICES.<sup>6</sup> The first week will be a conference consisting of various lectures, conversations, and workshops relating to immigration and immigrant detention. The second week will consist of direct service work at Karnes County Residential Center, a detention center outside of San Antonio, preparing asylum-seekers for their credible fear interviews in collaboration with RAICES.<sup>7</sup> The cohort will also be volunteering with RAICES at the Greyhound Bus Station in San Antonio, supporting asylum-seekers recently released from detention.

The breakdown of the objectives is as follows: 1.) To educate a cohort of Middlebury College students on the history of immigration across the US southern border, the current immigration crisis, and immigrant detention in the United States 2.) To spark conversations and engage with professors, researchers, lawyers, and other experts involved in areas related to immigration work and advocacy 3.) To think creatively about

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alternatives to detention; imagine a future wherein detention is obsolete 4.) To engage in direct service work inside a detention center and bus station with RAICES.

**Our Preparation:** Alexandra Burns and Olivia O'Brien bring a plethora of experience working together and separately on immigration issues.<sup>8</sup> Both of them come from families with recent immigration and refugee history, so this issue is close to home. Their sophomore year at Middlebury, they were both participants on the MAlt trip<sup>9</sup> to work with asylum seekers in San Antonio, Texas with RAICES. On that trip, they learned about the history and current challenges faced by Central American refugees and were able to work firsthand in Karnes Detention Center helping prepare asylum seekers for their credible fear interviews. During the trip, Alexandra, who is passionate about radio journalism, brought her audio gear and created a 25 minute podcast, documenting the trip and chronicling the challenges to immigrants under the Trump administration.<sup>10</sup> After participating in this trip, they 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. This year, they applied, and were chosen to be MAlt trip leaders on a trip focusing on immigration education and advocacy, which is presently taking place during Middlebury's winter term, fully remotely.<sup>11</sup>

**Support Network**<sup>12</sup>: The objectives of this project are supported by a combination of support systems both at Middlebury College and the alumni network, as well as through several partner organizations with which Alexandra and Olivia have prior relationships. For the first week of this conference, the cohort will engage in conversations and workshops with professors, researchers, lawyers, and other experts in the field. **RAICES** and the **CAIR Coalition** are two organizations with which they have already made contact and established relationships. At RAICES, Geovanie Ordonez, the volunteer operations manager, staff attorney Maria Osornio, and legal assistant Julia Valero are a few of the individuals they hope to work with and include as guest speakers in the conference component of this project. At CAIR, legal assistant Katherine Story and volunteer coordinator Naomi Turner will serve as important contacts and advisors to consider how detention centers exist in locations other than at the southern border. They will collaborate with Professor Lina Maria Murillo, assistant professor in the department of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies and History at the University of Iowa, who they are working with in their MAlt Trip. At Middlebury, they hope to receive advising from sociology Professor Trinh Tran who studies immigration and has been integral in the 'Hostile Terrain 94' project.<sup>13</sup> They also hope to work with geography professor Guntram Herb who specializes in border research as well as Professor James Davis who works within the Privilege and Poverty academic cluster. Following the Projects for Peace interview, David Torres, Professor of the Practice in the Global Health department expressed interest in mentoring on this project. They will be engaging with alumni in relevant fields including their former MAlt trip leader, Hannah Krutiansky, who now serves as the Director of Youth Advocacy at the Brave House in New York City.

**Sustainability:** As MAlt Trip Leaders this year, Alexandra and Olivia are building experience as leaders on this subject by working with a group of ten Middlebury students. Many of the students chosen for the cohort are underclassmen with the hope that each year, participants of the trip will be inspired to lead their own trip in following years and sustain Middlebury students' involvement and connection to engaging with immigration issues, specifically with RAICES as a partner. Through the Projects for Peace, they hope to further connect Middlebury College students to work in advocacy related specifically to immigrant detention centers in the US.