

Title of Project: Building Intercultural Peace in Greenville

Country where the project took place: Greenville, South Carolina, US

Nominating University: Furman University

Designated Project Leader Name: Lia Gaw Ghie Paw

Associated project blog, website, or social media accounts: This project was featured in a newsletter at Furman University. Here is the article: <https://mailchi.mp/406b7aad1058/shi-institute-november-newsletter-13678049>

The “Building Intercultural Peace” project focused on addressing cultural interaction issues between Americans and International students at Furman University. For this project, we gathered around 35 students in total and met up every Thursday for 5 weeks to participate in peace-building, conflict solving, international negotiation, and potluck events. The goal of this project was to help students communicate effectively with someone from a different cultural background.

As an international student from Southeast Asia, I noticed that there were misconceptions or stereotypes regarding who I am as a person. I am aware that the place I came from has an impact on how I was viewed. Some American students felt intimidated to approach me, as they were not familiar with foreign students. When I was drafting a proposal for this project, I knew I wanted to create a safe space for both international and American students, where they can communicate and learn from each other. I decided to host five different events, which allowed the students to interact with one another in various circumstances.

I chose my host site at Furman University because there was a great diversity of international students from different countries and American students, who came from different states during the summer. Some students were on campus for summer research, internship, athletic training, or classes. The mix of different individuals in the Furman community was the perfect place to inspire intercultural peace.

My project partner, Interfaith Ministries (iFace), which is a non-profit organization, was my community partner and greatest support throughout the project. iFace shares the same beliefs and values of increasing mutual understanding among the cultures and backgrounds represented at the event, in particular for Americans to understand the situation of international students studying here in the US. I was able to plan weekly activities more efficiently with the guidance of iFace’s staff and members.

One of the adjustments I made to my original plans was cutting down the project to five weeks, instead of six. This was due to the busy summer schedules of students. There was also trouble with the initial recruitment, and not enough students signed up to participate by the time the first week of the program was slated to begin.

There were no fundraising efforts to contribute to the project, as it was more academic, and experience-based. The creativity behind each activity that was held every week was research-focused, rather than financial.

Although the project has ended, the important work of increasing understanding between international students and American students is continuing with iFace's bi-weekly gatherings. Some of the members from the summer cohort who participated in this project are continuing to meet with this group, and new incoming freshmen have already started attending.

The definition of peace differs in many ways. However, based on the context of this project, I define peace as living harmoniously by using diversity to its fullest potential. I believe that my project gave the students the perfect opportunity to connect with one another on a deeper level. This project is indeed a life-changing experience as it helps students realize how similar they are to one another, rather than focusing on their differences. Many students who participated in this project are grateful to have been given the chance to meet other students this summer, especially students whom they might not have connected with otherwise.

However, one of the challenges that underlines the targeted issues is creating a safe space for both international and American students at Furman in the long term. Usually, during the summer, students tend to explore their friendships with anyone on campus, due to a lack of people and activities. It is different during the academic year. When close friends with similar backgrounds return, there is no motivation to put the effort into new or challenging friendships. I understand that at the end of the day we tend to stick to our people. That also applies to the participating students in this project. But I also hope that every now and then, special relationships between American and international students will be born using this project's experience as the backbone. The project inspired me to purposefully build a meaningful relationship with anyone, as we all have unique stories that can be shared, despite the differences in cultures, upbringings, or values.

My personal statement for this project is, "Once you understood the art of communication, you understood how to be heard and how to be a voice for others". One valuable lesson I gained from this project is to listen to others, as I want others to listen to me. Communication goes both ways, and it is very important to respect each other. With good communication comes good interactions and good relationships. I want everyone to listen wholeheartedly, not from their own views, but to put oneself in other's shoes and listen from where the person is coming from. That way, you understand how to keep a good conversation flow. I hope this project inspired the participating students to go out in the world and make connections with diverse groups of people, as they appreciate others' stories and tell their own with great confidence.