Summary
We organized two educational summer programs: an elementary and a college student summer program in Idlib province, home to the largest number of internally displaced refugees in Syria. The purpose of this project was to inspire and empower students to catch up and level up their knowledge and skillset to overcome the challenges of living through conflict, displacement, and the harsh economic reality.

Project Description
● How did you decide what issue(s) you wanted to address and what approach(es) or strategies you chose to implement in your project?
We met with grassroots educational leaders and advocates on the ground inside Syria and outside of Syria (pioneers in virtual teaching) to determine the community’s needs. From these conversations, we assessed the greatest needs were in two general cohorts: young kids, many of whom were out of school for years, and college students, for whom limited resources in English language training and computer skills training was observed. We prioritized these topics primarily because these skills play a major role in expanding access to better employment opportunities for students.

● Why did you choose your host site? In what ways did local relationships support you or contribute to the project?
We chose the host site to be in the Idlib province of Northern Syria due to it being the area with the highest number of displaced individuals, and therefore in the greatest need for help with education. Displacement can serve as a major disruption in a student’s life, so we hoped our summer program would help students get back on track and level up their skills as well.

Local leaders in education humanitarian organization Midaad helped us with all of the duties on the ground, they organized renovations of the school building to make it habitable, and they organized the general staff needs as well. This made the elementary division run smoothly, since we wanted to give the local leaders the ability to make the decisions for their own communities to truly empower them and involve them in this effort.

● What changes or adjustments did you make to your original plans, and why?
This grant was given to our team back in 2020 for a project working with a different partner organization, the Karam Foundation, and in a different country, Turkey. However, as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, we were unable to travel due to university restrictions that year. In 2021, the Karam Foundation was no longer able to work with us due to constraints on their own projects, and thus our project was postponed until 2022 where we revamped the entire structure of the project, but keeping the goal and target population the same: instead of a two-week long professional development workshop for high school Syrian refugee students in Turkey, we opted to work directly with displaced Syrians inside Syria for a period of three months. This new model implemented virtual volunteer teaching but also a greater dependency on staff on the ground. This is what allowed us to run our project for a longer period of time. We also shifted our focus to include both professional development and English language learning, as this is a skill in high demand, but the supply of English-speaking teachers in Syria is low. This was identified early on with our new partner organization, Midad, a branch of Education Without Limits in northern Syria.

We faced added barriers even with our new plan. Originally, our anticipated project time frame was from mid June to late August. But due to a delay in the grant transfer process internal to the
University, our program start date was delayed to the third week of August. Despite this delay, we used that time period to better prepare lesson plans and homework assignments for the Intermediate-English classes. We also took time to onboard a team of volunteers with background information and resources we put together, including videos, podcasts, and articles contextualizing this project. This has had a positive impact on the program as volunteers and teachers are prepared in advance to engage with the students. Our program intends to last for eight weeks, thus will run into October.

- Did other fundraising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?
  Sole funding for this project came from the Davis Projects for Peace grant.

- Are there opportunities for continuing your work on this issue? If so, please describe.
  Yes! Our program received hundreds of applications for the college student program (over 400!) but unfortunately, our capacity was limited to just 80 students. So in the future, we hope to continue running this program for more students.

**Reflection**

- How do you define peace?
  I define peace as an unhindered internal sense of purpose and direction, as well as an environment that allows one to actualize his or her vision externally. To me, peace is a byproduct of the opportunity to fulfill your purpose. We designed our project not to presuppose knowledge of what it means to bring peace to people. Rather, it mobilized a community towards working together to foster an environment for self-actualization in themselves and the people around them, which we feel, leads to the natural inclination towards peace.

- In what ways might your project contribute to peace? What changes occurred? Short-term? Long-term?
  The benefits of increased education are limitless; and studies including those completed by Harvard and UNESCO demonstrate a high statistical correlation between education and peace. In this sense, the education of conflict-affected people does not only advance them economically and diminish societal unrest, but also raises a generation that can grow the societies they reside in towards peace.

  Short term, we provided the elementary students with new backpacks, school supplies, books, and other resources. A secondary benefit of the project is that it promoted economic stability for teachers and staff. Providing stipends to full-time teachers on the ground allowed them to truly dedicate their time to helping these kids put their best foot forward into their schooling careers. This is often overlooked, but most teachers in Idlib, we learned, aren’t actually paid for their work. This exemplifies the lack of investment in education in this area. The elementary students who enrolled in our summer school were behind for a multitude of personal and external reasons, but will now be more prepared for the school year and will excel alongside their peers.

  Additionally, in the English program for college students, we found that they became much more confident and skilled in speaking in the English language, which will help them in all of their diverging careers in the future, including medicine, journalism, engineering, programming, graphic designing, and more. They will be better able to communicate online and have expanded their job opportunities to be able to tap into the much wider and more lucrative scope of online and global employment options to better support their families economically. This skill of communication in such a global language as English provides the seeds for increased communication among people and promotes global peace.

- What did you learn about the dilemmas, challenges, or conflicts that underlie the targeted issues or utilized approaches/strategies?
The Syrian conflict has resulted in a population of children that have been put at an educational disadvantage, particularly those of low socioeconomic status and those who were forcibly displaced from their homes in other parts of the country. The destruction of schools and the lack of staff/teachers with limited resources have contributed to a gap in educational opportunities. Economic struggles also plague not only the schools, most of which aren’t able to heat their buildings during the biting winters, but also families, some of whom rely on their children to help provide for their family. In order to bridge these inequities among displaced Syrian youth, we learned there was a need for quality infrastructure and educational resources. This included maintaining internet and electrical connections, repairing the school building, and providing students with desks, chairs, books, and stationary. With a safe and stable environment, this promotes a holistic learning experience for the students and teaching experience for the staff.

Further, we now understand the problematic roots of a language not native to a country, English, being the one that is the most lucrative in terms of future employment outcomes. However, we cannot fix that underlying problem, so our strategy was to use full transparency with students: we believe that all languages and fields are valuable, and we simply are here to increase accessibility and help build their toolkit, while also promoting their values and culture out of respect for the community we entered.

Additionally, education in itself is not a straight journey. Each student is on their own path to learning and engaging with the material. Despite using a pretest to group students into classes fit for their level of English learning, we still engaged with a wide diversity of knowledge levels and skillsets. What one student may understand quickly may be another student’s gap. This is why it is important to provide an individualized approach to teaching students for the most effective outcomes. During our college English program, students were assigned homework each week ranging from personal statements to resume development. Each student had a grader who would provide specialized feedback on their writing and hosted office hours for students to receive one-on-one assistance.

- Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has the project changed, challenged, or inspired you?

This project reinforced the concept that while we may all experience drastically different environments around the world, many of us struggle with the same internal questions and challenges that typically just require access to resources to overcome. Conflict-affected people are in some ways more resourceful than we expect, and are not simply purposeless victims or people using up resources as they are painted out to be in the media.

This project has reshaped how I view education, and how close the rest of the world can be with the right connections. I have never felt so close to students on the other side of the world, and it inspires me to push the boundaries of education in the future.

**Personal Statement**

Going into this project, I was determined to make a positive difference in a place that truly needs it. Coming out of the project, the inspiration, knowledge, and relationships I gained fanned the sparks of my determination into something more: a clear vision of self-actualization. I believe that there is immense potential for humanitarian relief programs implementing a similar model to help aid educational crises that result from long-term conflict.

This project brought immense value to me, my teammates, and touched all 330 elementary and college students we reached in Syria. As volunteers, we learned a lot about the nuanced differences between education in the US and education abroad. More specifically, we saw the drastic toll that school systems face in a country plagued by war for eleven years. The lack of resources in Syrian schools was truly disheartening; it led me to the realization of how much we take our resources for granted, and how much our program meant to the community. We also learned more about the people. What is termed the
“lost generation” is not only a generation of students facing unimaginable barriers in their lives, but also a generation so like my own in interests, hobbies, and goals. In the elementary program, I saw myself in every one of the students who were seen protectively clinging on to backpacks filled with their new school supplies, holding onto more than just the items, but also a glimmer of joy and hope for their future academic careers. I also saw first-hand the drive the college students had for opportunities to advance themselves, inspiring us volunteers to build a quality curriculum weaving speaking practice with professional development exercises applicable to their diverse futures. Students were eager to participate in our English lessons because they never had an opportunity to practice and apply their English language skills like our program provided.

What stood out the most to me from student feedback was the extent to which our program motivated students to put in extra effort at home to prepare to speak with us in class and during our optional office hours, and consistently integrated our feedback week by week into their written assignments. The growth we saw in just eight weeks was astounding, and we are so incredibly grateful for the opportunity to aid these students and the community at large in their journeys towards fulfilling lives in peaceful societies. - Yusra Sannah