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COMMENTARY

Project- and Human-Centered Teaching and Learning: Diplomacy Lab and the Expanded Public Charge Rule for New Cabo Verdean Immigrants

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Abstract

This commentary introduces the U.S. State Department-sponsored Diplomacy Lab. This program provides interdisciplinary teams of students an opportunity to learn how to directly inform government policy development and implementation. In the project discussed here, a team of student researchers considered how the new public charge final rule could impact Cabo Verdean immigrants in the United States. The program demonstrates how project- and human-centered pedagogy through social science research advances student learning by providing students an opportunity to directly observe the complex effects of policy decisions on people's lives.

Keywords: *experiential learning; Cabo Verde; immigration; final public charge rule; Diplomacy Lab*

Introduction

How can instructors capitalize on applied research experiences with students to engage important public policy? Global community sciences such as anthropology use evidence to understand and affect social change. But what mechanisms exist for social scientists to promote evidence-based learning, policy analysis, and even social justice with tangible, direct, and transformative impacts? The Diplomacy Lab¹ is one such student-centric mechanism. Through this program, the U.S. State Department outsources research needs related to foreign policy to students and faculty at universities throughout the United States. Initiated in 2013, student teams guided by faculty mentors bid on and complete priority projects identified by units within the State Department. Projects

¹ <https://www.state.gov/diplomacy-lab/>; <http://diplomacylab.org/>

address a host of international issues and challenges through two primary pillars: (1) engagement—students and faculty are paired with government policymakers to address priorities; and (2) education—students and their faculty mentors explore real-world challenges through practical research. University bids are submitted as 200-word abstracts proposing project action plans and intended deliverables. Diplomacy Lab projects are one semester in length and contain an expected deliverable such as a final report, data set, presentation, case study, or strategy plan. Each faculty and student team is set up in a unique way. The project can be part of a class, research lab, independent study, or some combination. Projects begin in the semester following the bid award.

Kennesaw State University (KSU), the third-largest university in Georgia and one of the 50-largest public institutions in the nation, became one of thirty-five university partners with the State Department through the Diplomacy Lab in 2018. The project described here ran from January-May 2020 and focused on Cabo Verdean immigration. The applied research was supervised by an anthropology faculty member (Lundy) and supported by faculty from psychology (Garefino), geography, and conflict management. The project attracted a team of eight students and focused on experiential, project-centered learning through social science research.

In the fall of 2019, Lundy evaluated the Diplomacy Lab Project Menu and identified a project focused on immigration policy and the Cabo Verdean diaspora in the United States. Before attending graduate school in anthropology, Lundy had served as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Cabo Verde and conducted several research projects there on migration and community integration. He wrote and submitted a bid for the project and assembled a student team. Interested students were identified in several ways. A project description was circulated by email to Ph.D. students in International Conflict Management as a directed study opportunity. Internship coordinators for the Geography and Anthropology majors helped to recruit undergraduate students.

The KSU Department of Geography and Anthropology values and requires pedagogical high impact practices (HIPs) such as practicums, internships, research experiences, study abroad, and project-centered learning (Smith, Lundy, and Dahlmann 2017). The Anthropology major in particular “seeks a holistic approach to education focused on enhancing and transferring skills to all our students related to anthropological principles such as cultural relativism, universalism, cultural diversity, while also encouraging them to engage in traditional liberal arts learning related to critical thinking, research, and teamwork, and to specifically help them see the connections between the learning they receive and its value beyond the classroom” (Smith, Lundy, and Dahlmann 2017, 3-4; see also Kuh 2008). Diplomacy Lab research projects afford students opportunities to advance their research skills, participate in team settings, and connect their advancing skills with applied opportunities “beyond the classroom.”

About the Project

In a clear example of the relevance of applied research, and in anticipation of the August 14, 2019, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) final rule relating to the public charge ground of inadmissibility, applicable to immigration cases decided by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy in Praia, Cabo Verde, proposed a Diplomacy Lab research project titled, "Immigration and Government Aid: Evaluating Cabo Verdean immigrants' reliance on public assistance programs." The new public charge rule was scheduled to take effect on October 15, 2019; however, multiple federal courts issued injunctions. On January 27, 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court lifted the last remaining nationwide injunction, and DHS implemented the new public charge rule on February 24, 2020.

Essentially, "public charge" is a ground of inadmissibility, or reasons that a person could be denied a green card, visa, or admission into the United States. In deciding whether to grant an applicant a green card or a visa, an immigration officer must decide whether that person is likely to become reliant on certain government benefits in the future. Factors that must be taken into account when considering whether an immigrant may become a public charge were officially defined in 1996. The updated final rule considers an immigrant a public charge if he or she receives public benefits for more than 12 months in the aggregate in any 36-month period, such that the receipt of two benefits in one month counts as two months. No single factor makes an applicant inadmissible based on the public charge ground. An applicant's likelihood of becoming a public charge at any time in the future is a prospective determination based on the totality of the applicant's circumstances and factors that are relevant to the case.

In the original project proposal, the Embassy stated, "To accurately make these life-changing decisions, the Embassy's consular officers are seeking information regarding Cabo Verdean first generation immigrants' actual use of public assistance programs." Our vertically-integrated research team agreed to provide "contextual understanding of public charge factors for Cabo Verdean immigrants, including policy effects" and to "propose sustainable offsets identified such as better resources, institutions, policies, and overall systems alignment."

Project Methods and Findings

Conducting social science research with political implications required students to learn how ethics get factored into research design, data collection and analysis, and reporting to protect human subjects. It also enhanced students' understandings of power-laden relations between the individuals and society. Because of the potentially vulnerable position in society of our study participants, our research design provided for anonymity in survey responses, neutral question design, opt-in question responses, and follow-up interviews through self-identification. Our informed consent process indicated that participation was voluntary and that participants could skip any questions or

withdraw at any time. While this likely decreased our overall response rates considerably, we were willing to sacrifice data to ensure confidentiality. To help overcome the dearth of survey data, we triangulated it with follow-up interviews, census data, and secondary sources. We also limited our project deliverables for the Diplomacy Lab and embassy to a final presentation and report, ensuring all collected raw data remained with the PI. We made no value judgements based on the data as to whether or not the findings would decrease or increase the likelihood of being granted a visa based on the final public charge rule, especially since these decisions were solely in the hands of the consulate. What we did do was ensure that all findings around each area of investigation were comprehensively treated. This included giving public assistance use data, survey responses, and community alternatives to indicate the complexity of factors surrounding each area.

Following a conversation with the Consular Section of the U.S. Embassy in Praia, the capital of Cabo Verde in West Africa, our team developed an overarching research question: What happens to new Cabo Verdean immigrants to the United States once they emigrate? We began the project with a background literature review on Cabo Verdean immigration to the United States and research design. We then refined research questions, pulled government assistance data, and applied for Institutional Review Board approval to collect primary data with human subjects. Students then proposed sub-questions around specific assistance needs such as housing, education, communication, health, food, community resources, and employment using a human security theoretical framework as the project's explanatory umbrella. Human security considers multidimensional perspectives including underlying root causes and structural barriers that degrade livelihoods (Sen 2001; UNDP 1994). Students then began making contacts and conducting preliminary community assessments, online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and social media analysis (Figure 1). The end of the semester was spent in data analysis, writing-up the final report, and presenting findings through an embassy debrief.

The project's findings contribute to understanding the broader effects of receptivity and integrative risks associated with engaging public safety nets for new Cabo Verdean immigrants to the United States due to revisions to the public charge rule. The team helped identify experiential and structural factors that shape immigrant experiences, including reliance on public assistance programs. Their research findings outlined where Cabo Verdeans live in the United States (Figure 1) and the ways these communities help new immigrants transition to a new way of life. Support from local school districts and social networks, including social media groups, were found to be especially valuable. Language was the most commonly cited barrier to community integration. Despite lower than average English proficiency rates when compared to all immigrants to the United States, however, Cabo Verdean immigrants acculturate well into their host communities based on the online survey results. One reason for this successful acculturation despite language barriers could be historical; Cabo Verde, as the first Creole society in the world,

emphasizes cultural and lifestyle fusions that may help ease overall integration efforts (Pardue 2013). This example demonstrates how the research contributed to better contextual understandings of public assistance needs for new Cabo Verdean immigrants. Changes to public assistance program access will affect immigrant livelihoods and well-being for both the immigrants and their broader receiving communities and social networks. The team identified sustainable assistance offsets such as social networks, social capital, and culture and history that help mitigate new immigration policy disruptions and promote overall systems alignment throughout the U.S.-Cabo Verde diasporic communities. The results of this research are intended as a first step in a broader research agenda.

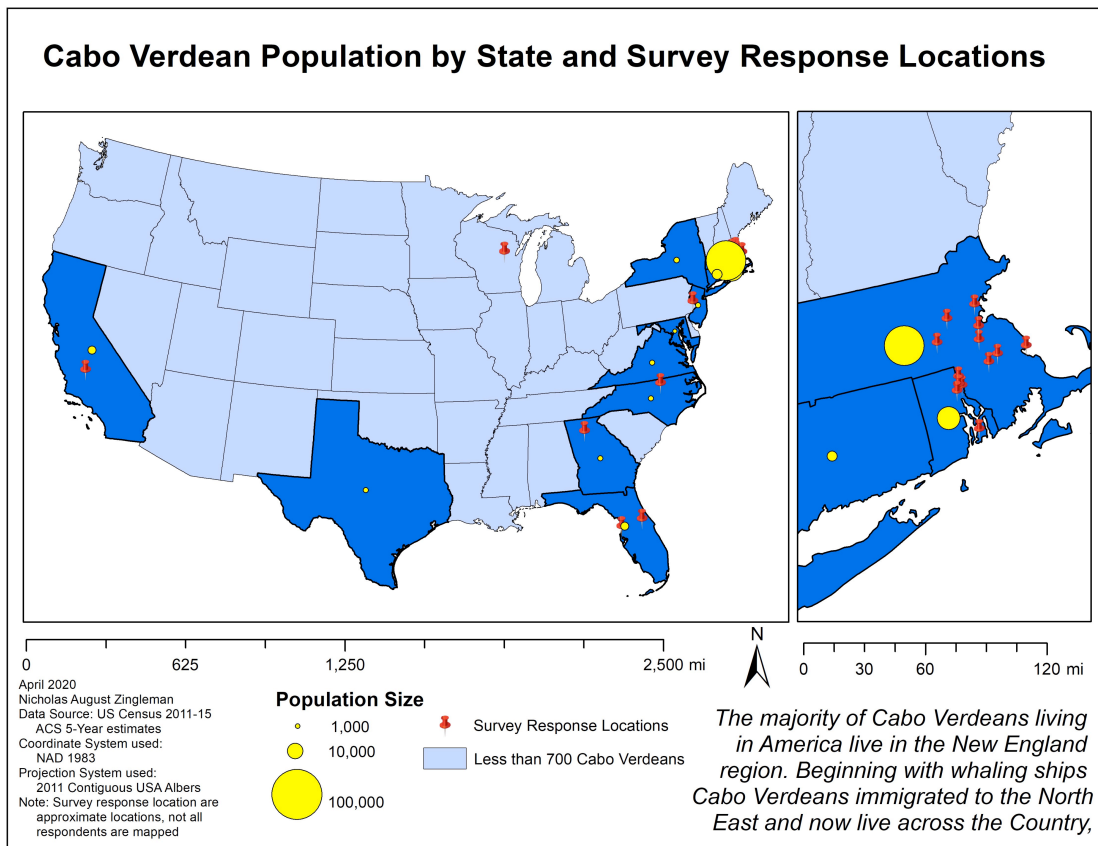


Figure 1. Cabo Verdean Population by State and Survey Response Locations

Discussion

The Diplomacy Lab project’s pedagogical significance follows the program’s two primary pillars, education and engagement. Education occurred through the emphasis on social science research and project-centered learning (Kuh 2008; Smith, Lundy, Dahlmann 2017) resulting in evidence used to inform connections between human security and immigration policy reforms and government assistance. Engagement came

from incorporating standards from the non-profit organization Welcoming America (Rodriquez, McDaniel, and Ahebee 2018) into our online survey. This organization believes that “inclusive communities becom[e] more prosperous by making everyone feel like they belong” (Welcoming America 2016). This approach allowed us to identify and measure community resources. Furthermore, we incorporated measurements of best practices around receptivity (McDaniel 2013), acculturation (Berry 2010), and community integration (Lundy and Darkwah 2018) when assessing community needs as well as resources that have significant potential to offset government assistance. For example, we asked people not only if they had enough to eat, but where their food came from. That is how we learned about locally-owned Cabo Verdean grocery stores and community gardens. Students engaged with the Cabo Verdean community on multiple and meaningful fronts including through phone interviews, chats and online forums, and through extensive reading and social media contacts.

The student team had several second- and third-generation immigrants among them that helped foster a sense of empathy toward the research subjects (Hollan and Throop 2008; Shemer 2019). The anthropology majors looked at Cabo Verdean immigration in a cultural context while the geography students related it to human geography. The students benefitted from seeing the issue from multiple perspectives. One student stated, “I gained valuable experience conducting research that will help solve a real-world issue. It was a really rewarding experience for our team to be able to present our hard work to the embassy officials. We were excited to share our findings, and they were excited to see what we learned.”

Success in college can be measured in numerous ways; for example, Paul Stoller (2011) sees success as producing “culturally aware and progressive citizens.” This “is achieved in anthropology classes, and other social sciences and humanities classes, when students critically engage with ideas and concepts and learn to apply them in real-world situations. ... But, the more significant impacts come when students step outside of the classroom and bring their skills to bear in new ways, such as working on original research projects” (Smith, Lundy, and Dahlmann 2017, 10-11). Students gained research skills that they didn’t have when they began the project and they came to understand policy analysis and its transformative possibilities when done in a humane and ethical manner that does not oversimplify complex issues of human relations.

Conclusion

The students working on this project learned that for people emigrating for a better life, the decision to leave home is never taken lightly. We found that migration is a central part of the global human experience (Lundy and Hayes 2020). Researchers such as Sirkeci (2009, 8) describe migration as a “conflict-space” where “environments of human insecurity” are replete with lack of employment, poor infrastructure, discrimination, human rights abuses, fear of persecution, and miscommunication. Based

on our findings, we anticipate that the new final public charge rule has the potential to exacerbate already fraught migration conflict spaces as Cabo Verdean immigrants struggle to find their footing in a new environment. By better understanding the migration context and the potential implications of the new public charge rule for Cabo Verdean immigrants to the United States, our Diplomacy Lab presentation and report provided accurate information to the Consular office making visa decisions, opened lines of communication within the diaspora, and established a feedback mechanism between policymakers, policy implementers, and those that are directly affected by these policies within an ever changing terrain. This information serves as one small step in better understanding the implications of new migration policy with the aim of helping “focus resources, incubate institutions, and promote practices among the many stakeholders to enhance the integration efforts of foreign guests toward a more cohesive society” (Lundy and Hayes 2020, 211).

Our research shows just how complex and challenging these decisions can be. What better way to support our emerging scholars than to participate in such valued applied and experiential research? Developing the tools necessary to understand the political nature of research is yet one more skill students gained from this work (Okongwu and Mencher 2000).

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Correction

This document is a revised version. It was updated the day after publication at the request of a quoted source.

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