Caroline Gao: Project Report

Project Inspiration

“Where are you really from?”

For years, those five words haunted me. Despite boasting freckles gifted by the American sun and a tongue sculpted by the sharp edges of English, my Asian face has perpetually marked me as foreign in my predominantly White hometown of Albany, Oregon. From strangers at Costco bowing and jabbering to me in travesties of Mandarin, to classmates calling me Fu Manchu, having my cultural identity ridiculed often left me wanting to scrub the Chineseness from my skin. I could never belong here, I thought, in this town too small to contain my expansive identity and global ambitions.

As I matured, though, and especially after meeting diverse youth through virtual exchange programs during the pandemic, I realized that most questions from my non-Asian peers came from a place of ignorance, not malice. This was especially true during elementary school, when many kids simply never had the opportunity to be exposed to or learn about cultures like mine. Soon, I began wondering: what if I was the one to provide that opportunity for Albany’s youth? And thus the seed of inspiration took root for The World in Us, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit cultivating cultural awareness and global citizenship through youth-for-youth education.

Besides my personal experiences facing cultural ignorance, my passion for democratizing access to authentic cultural education and engagement was also sparked by my recognition that intercultural collaboration is the foundation to addressing our ever-globalizing world’s most pressing issues. In our current polarized reality, our ability to create sustainable solutions to problems like climate change, poverty, and world hunger is dangerously hindered by our inability to work past our differences.

Project Plan

The World in Us (TWIU) is a nonprofit seeking to eliminate cultural ignorance from its roots and cultivate the next generation of global citizens through youth-for-youth education. Specifically, TWIU taps into the unparalleled power of authentic peer friendships and storytelling to shatter stereotypes and build cross-cultural empathy. We do so through three signature programs: an Intercultural Exchange Program for teens, Cultural Discovery Camps for children, and digital media initiatives.

As a student-led and -centered platform, we focus on experiential and collaborative learning; instead of learning about international cultures as distant, exotic entities through books or slideshows, our students immerse themselves in those cultures through profound conversations with members of the cultures themselves. Furthermore, to better integrate global with local impact and maximize the accessibility of cultural education, our programs are entirely free for all participants and take place both virtually and in-person.
Although our previous activities are articulated under Project Execution, our future goals include expanding the reach and refining the structure of our existing programs to serve over 1K youth by 2024, 2K by 2026, and 4K by 2028. For example, we’ve already integrated a new community-building focus into this summer’s Intercultural Exchange Program, which we’ll advertise to more potential students than ever thanks to a recent grant. This year, we’ll also launch a global chapters initiative providing resources and funding for youth to organize cultural education events in their hometowns. By starting at least 10 new chapters per year, we’ll steadily integrate our curriculum into more communities globally.

We are also focused on organizational restructuring for long-term sustainability. Upcoming action items for this include transitioning our team expansion system from a rolling general application to a role-based, seasonal recruitment cycle and revamping our onboarding process to foster a sense of friendship and autonomy. Such practices support the long-term retention and passage of institutional knowledge within TWIU.

**Project Execution**

As mentioned above, TWIU organizes three primary programs. Firstly, we run a five-week virtual Intercultural Exchange Program for teens from around the world to humanize and learn from one another’s cultural perspectives through weekly 1-on-1 friendship-building calls, language lessons, and service-oriented workshops integrating global issues and civic leadership. To recruit participants and language teachers, our team shares program information and application forms with groups like the U.S. Department of State Exchange Program Alumni Network, International Writing Program, and Teens for Fluency, in addition to TWIU’s own social media networks.

Our team also creates workshop curriculum, final project guidelines and submission processes, conversation guides, and a program webpage before conducting live classes and communication via Zoom and Slack during the Intercultural Exchange Program. Full execution details for our 2023 Community-Building Intercultural Exchange Program, which is structured similarly to the 2021 and 2022 programs, can be viewed in this [Program Implementation Plan](#).

Secondly, we organize both virtual and in-person Cultural Discovery Camps during which elementary schoolers learn about numerous global cultures across one or more weeks of fun, interactive curriculum. These camps are often run in collaboration with local schools and youth-serving institutions; previous partners include the Greater Albany Public Schools District, the Boys & Girls Club, and Oregon State University. Our curriculum on global cultures, which is created by youth team members with consultation from licensed educators, can be adapted easily to fit a variety of programming schedules. An example of the activities from a virtual, independently organized Cultural Discovery Camp can be found in this [Master Schedule](#) for our 2021 camp.
Thirdly, our media initiatives — including a blog, social media presence, and writing competition — empower youth around the world to both share their story and empathize with the stories of others. Our blog and Instagram page publish articles and infographics that accessibly share information about a variety of cultures with thousands of viewers. Our writing competition, which we are working to develop into an annual event, invites youth across the world to share narratives related to cultural connections. We are also developing a podcast that uplifts the voices and accomplishments of youth across diverse cultural backgrounds.

Demonstrated Impact

Since 2020, our programs have directly served over 650 participants across 26 countries, and our digital resources have reached over 10K individuals. Our team spans 20 members across all inhabited continents. We’ve garnered about $10K in grant funding from the U.S. State Department (Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund winner), International Writing Program, Global Ties, America’s Promise (Power of Youth Challenge winner), and Griptape (Learning Challenge winner). Below is a summary of TWIU’s quantitative impact on both the local and global community:

- Intercultural Exchange Program (2021-present): engaged ~250 participants aged 14-18 years old across the world in intercultural friendship-building, language learning (8 different languages offered), and service-oriented education about global issues
- Virtual Cultural Discovery Camp (2020-present): taught ~100 elementary schoolers across the world about global cultures through daily interactive curriculum and hands-on activities (crafts, cooking, sports, language practice, etc.)
- In-person Cultural Discovery Camps and related activities (2021-present): taught ~200 youth in Oregon about global cultures through the following activities:
  - Multiple 8-week courses on Chinese Culture and Global Cultures through Oregon State University’s Talented and Gifted Program
  - Day-long Cultural Celebration Event at the Albany Public Library
  - Cultural Discovery Camps hosted at the Albany Boys & Girls Club
  - Guest presentations on various global cultures to 5 local classrooms
- Writing Competition (2022-present): garnered 125 writing submissions related to cultural connections from middle and high schoolers around the world and awarded $300 in total prizes to 6 contest winners
- Digital Media (2020-present): reached an audience of over 10K through informational blog and social media posts and produced a podcast episode about Asian fetishization that won a New York Times contest (out of 1,500+ submissions)
As important as this numerical summary is, individual stories of impact and gratitude from our participants have often been even more powerful signifiers to me of the importance of TWIU’s work. For example, when providing feedback regarding the Intercultural Exchange Program, one Indian participant said she’d “formed a strong everlasting friendship” and talked for hours at a time with her Pakistani partner, an outcome she would’ve never anticipated given the two countries’ strained history.

We’re proud to have helped cultivate hundreds of friendships like these that humanize diverse perspectives and shatter stereotypes. By connecting each of our participants with viewpoints they might’ve never otherwise encountered, we bring the global youth community one step closer to appreciating the true scale, beauty, and power of its cultural diversity.

Reflection on Civic Virtue and Community

Leading TWIU has completely and positively transformed my understanding of Civic Virtue. As detailed in my Principles essay, Justice, Respect, and Responsibility are the founding values of TWIU; organizing educational programs centered around such virtues has added significant nuance and reverence to my relationship with those virtues.

However, Courage and Humility are the virtues I’ve learned the most about personally through TWIU. Especially when I first started developing TWIU, my parents often expressed skepticism over my efforts, uncertain whether the time I was devoting towards an organization that didn’t yet exist would be “worth it” compared to a more structured activity with clear-cut outcomes. When articles about TWIU ran in the local newspaper, some comments would not only attack me for promoting any sort of diversity or cultural inclusion, but also for being so outspoken about my beliefs when I was “just a kid.” Such criticism only further crystallized my commitment to TWIU’s work, because I firmly believe that protecting every individual’s right to live free from fear of cultural discrimination, ignorance, or malice is the just and fair thing to do.

Through it all, I’ve been constantly awed by the knowledge and contributions of the teachers, partner organizations, team members, and participants who make possible and comprise the heart of TWIU’s community. By collaborating with people across a broader diversity of backgrounds, sectors, and beliefs than I ever had before, I discovered just how much more I have left to learn about the world and my role within it. In this way, TWIU helped me realize that true Civic Virtue requires not only recognizing challenges in our community, but also having the courage to stand up to address them even when that stance may be controversial, to ask for help when we need it, and to put others before ourselves.

TWIU has also completely shifted my knowledge of and relationship with my community for the better. A milestone in that relationship shift took place when I was teaching lessons on Chinese
culture to the current class of my former fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Koontz. Witnessing the children smile with joyful wonder as they learned about the culture my fifth-grade peers once mocked was incredibly gratifying, but what lingered with me even longer was the kids’ strikingly empathetic, attentive responses when I explained why “Where are you really from?” was such a harmful question.

Moments of intercultural connection like these, whether they occur on an international scale or in my former fifth-grade classroom, reaffirm to me that inclusion is a choice every community can make. They reaffirm to me that I — even as just one person — have the power to stand up for that choice and turn my vision for a culturally empathetic future into a reality.

That exchange in Mr. Koontz’s classroom in particular helped me finally see that Albany wasn’t some incorrigibly backward, inward-facing town. In reality, kids from Albany — and anywhere else in the world, no matter how homogeneous — have the capacity to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. Furthermore, the process of founding TWIU opened my eyes to how kind and supportive the people who’d surrounded me my entire life truly were, from classmates who volunteered with our team to teachers who advised our curriculum.

For so long, I’d thought I could only belong somewhere big, diverse, and faraway. I thought I had to escape Albany. But TWIU revealed to me the beauty of this community, its people, and its ability to change. Ultimately, we belong in any place that we care about and invest ourselves into shaping for the better. So by virtue of all the hours, tears, and effort I’ve put into making Albany feel a little more like home for everyone, I now know I do belong in Albany.