

A. Description of project

It was recently reported that, since 2017, over 5400 children have been separated from their parents at the southern border of the United States (AP, Oct 2019).¹ Families targeted by the “zero tolerance” policy that led to these separations are overwhelmingly impoverished, nonwhite, and non-native English speakers. While immigration policy has been a subject of debate in the United States for decades, the harshness of the zero-tolerance policy has triggered a particularly heated debate over what sorts of ideals govern, or ought to govern, U.S. immigration policy.

U.S. policy, including toward immigrants, has historically been influenced by conflicting ideologies. One vision of the United States is of a country where pluralism is embraced, people are not to be discriminated against because of their identity, and all are treated humanely and fairly under the law. A competing vision invokes similar ideals, but applies them only to specific people based on particular identity characteristics. This second ideology sees “America” as a “nation,” made up of people of an imagined common heritage – specifically white, (Western) European, Christian identity.

In its first part, this project will examine and characterize these competing ideologies and will apply that analysis to current debates over immigration policy, with particular attention to the separation of families due to immigration status and to the fostering and adoption of children whose parents have been detained or deported. It will argue that ideologies about who belongs in the “American nation,” based on racial and religious identity characteristics that make up an imagined common heritage, continue, in important ways, both to influence and be influenced by rhetoric and policy around immigration. Academic thinkers, and the public, must understand and be able to hold critical and constructive dialogue about these ideologies, in order to have a fully informed and productive discussion of immigration issues.

In its second part, the project will take a normative stance guided by international human rights documents. It will argue that ideologies of an ethnically and religiously homogenous “nation” invariably lead to human rights abuses – even, at the extreme end, to genocide – and that ideals of non-discrimination, pluralism, and fair treatment for all people should govern immigration policies.

Activities, Process, or Methodology

This project is a work of political theory that will produce both a scholarly paper and a presentation aimed at an educated general public. I will engage primarily in text-based research, using scholarly books and articles, media and journalistic sources, and analyzing policy documents and political communications (stump speeches, etc.) for both content and rhetoric.

To better understand the interaction of the ideologies I have described above and to develop and refine my proposed argument, I will research scholarly books and articles that address these ideologies from multiple disciplinary perspectives. I will conduct historical research to understand how ideologies of “America” as an ethnic “nation,” specifically as a nation of white people, have influenced the governing structures of the United States and its legal and policy decisions, even as its founding documents espouse ideas of non-discrimination and the equality of all. I will apply tools of political theory and philosophy to analyze contemporary sources and to understand how they are influenced by the ideologies described above. These will include reports on public rhetoric around immigration (for instance, the words of politicians and pundits), media sources, and policy and legal documents, either

¹ Associated Press, “More than 5,400 children split at border, according to new count,” *NBC News*, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/more-5-400-children-split-border-according-new-count-n1071791>, accessed December 20, 2019.

available on the internet or obtained through library searches and consultations with subject librarians. Because my research work will last for several months, I will have the opportunity in real time to track significant current moments or changes in rhetoric about immigration and the idea of “America,” which will help me evaluate the most recent deployment of the ideologies I have described.

Project timeline

January 2020- May 2020 (Spring semester): I will spend this time doing preliminary research.

Preliminary research will entail narrowing down and expanding on initial research questions, taking notes and accumulating reliable sources (source based learning will include reading books, scholarly articles, and news articles as well as examining political rhetoric and commentary), and formatting an outline for a research paper to follow.

May 2020- August 2020 (Summer semester): The majority of my research will take place over the summer. I will read all the relevant sources and make detailed annotations. I will have concrete questions about the subject matter that I seek to answer. I will devote 15-20 each week to project research. I will begin drafting my research paper in June and make significant improvements and additions to it every two weeks to present to Dr. Alexander, beginning with drafting specific sections and formulating a broad outlines of the paper. I will have a finished first full draft by August 1st of 2020. At this point the majority of my research will be completed; new sources will only be added to substantiate the credibility of claims made in the paper or with significant new development in the subject matter.

August 2020 (Fall semester): I will continue redrafting and improving my research paper with the guidance of Dr. Alexander until I have a final draft. I will then work to create a presentation that can be paired with the paper and delivered to a general audience by September of 2020.

Student/Faculty Mentor Roles

The mentor for this project is Dr. Laura Alexander of the Department of Religious Studies. Dr. Alexander will support this project by providing parameters and suggestions to guide my initial research, giving feedback on the sources that I find over the first 2-3 months of work, and then meeting and working with me to narrow down the sources I have found and help me consider the major trends and themes in both scholarly and journalistic treatments of this topic, while also proposing new sources and avenues that will be important to consider. During the spring semester, we will meet biweekly to discuss the progress of my research. Over the summer, during which I will conduct the bulk of my research and begin outlining and drafting the project, Dr. Alexander will review my annotated bibliography, suggest further sources, and provide feedback on my proposed thesis and outline. We intend to meet either weekly or biweekly during the summer as well. In the fall, I will be writing a research paper based on my research and drafting in the summer; Dr. Alexander will review drafts of sections of the paper and then comment on the paper as a whole to enhance my final draft. She will also point me to resources and provide guidance and critique as I craft a talk for a general audience based on my research.

Methodologically, Dr. Alexander will assist me in determining how to make use of historical and journalistic sources for information and interpretation of the events I am studying, as well as ethical, religious, and philosophical resources for understanding political ideologies, evaluating them in light of my own developing political philosophy, and analyzing current issues in immigration and nationalism in light of the ideologies I have identified.

B. Budget and Justification

Amount requested: Student Stipend, \$2000

I am requesting a \$2000 dollar stipend. Receiving this stipend will enable me to dedicate the time needed to conduct the research and writing of this project and to meet consistently with my mentor. In particular, it will allow me to work fewer hours over the summer at my job and take time out of each week to focus solely on doing research for this project. I plan to work fifteen to twenty hours per week over the summer on this project, in addition to approximately 2-3 hours during the spring semester and 3-5 hours during the coming fall semester. I do not anticipate significant material costs for this project. The majority of my research should be able to be conducted locally as it entails mostly reading scholarly articles, books, new articles, etc.

C. Citations

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December 31, 2019

To the UNO Office of Research and Creative Activity:

I write this letter to affirm my support of Eli Wibel's application for a FUSE Grant and my willingness to serve as faculty mentor for this project. Eli's project has excellent potential to enhance his subject knowledge, methodological savvy, and research skills. It also promises to shed light on the political and ethical concerns at stake in the perception and treatment of immigrants in the United States, an issue that is much-discussed in public discourse but continues to need careful scholarly analysis.

Eli proposes to examine the impact of ideologies regarding what makes the United States a "nation" of people, and who counts as part of that "nation," on U.S. public rhetoric, policy, and action related to immigrants. He will focus on the current issue of asylum-seekers at the U.S. southern border. His goal is to contribute to scholarly and public understanding of debates around immigration policy, especially when the ideologies that influence some policies seem to contravene other American ideals.

As a scholar whose work undertakes the kind of ethical analysis of social policy that Eli proposes, I can confirm that Eli's objectives can be completed within the next several months. The issues he is discussing are certainly complex, but I will be able to assist him in breaking down the questions he is addressing into manageable arguments and in focusing his research on specific aspects of policy and ideology. This project fits with and will enhance my own scholarly work on ethics and political theory of borders, national sovereignty, human rights, and migration, but it does not duplicate my work.

The method of research proposed for this project is primarily text-based, drawing on media sources; statements from politicians, advocacy organizations, and law enforcement agencies; and scholarly books and articles. I have warned Eli that he will spend a lot of time in the library, and he is prepared to do so! I will remain in close contact with him over the course of his project to ensure that his research remains focused and that he can proceed in good time from analysis of sources to drafting and revising a paper. I will meet with Eli at least biweekly to review his research and, within the overall timeframe he has proposed for the project, will set specific goals during each meeting as his work progresses. In spring I will guide him in finding and analyzing sources; in the summer, he will begin his writing process and I will review his proposed thesis and outline, then critique drafts of his scholarly paper. In the fall he will refine and complete this paper.

Eli also proposes to produce a talk for a general audience that he will present at the Research and Creative Activities Fair. Having guided students in my department's Senior Seminar through similar work (crafting a public-facing presentation from a scholarly research paper) and having engaged in public scholarship and speaking myself, I will be able to work with Eli on this part of the project as well. He intends to engage in this portion of the project in Fall 2020, and I will continue to meet with him regularly to help him consider how to address different audiences and express complex ideas in accessible ways.

Eli was a student in my course "Religion and Human Rights" and has shown strong aptitude for this sort of work. He and I have had multiple conversations on topics of immigration, race, and nationalism, and he is extremely interested in making his own contribution in this area. He received excellent marks in my course and has shown the analytical and writing ability necessary for this project. Eli's other coursework has also helped prepare him, including writing-focused courses in education and courses related to Holocaust and genocide studies. He also has prior experience in producing spoken presentations that are comprehensible to a general audience. On the whole, as an undergraduate student he is well-prepared to take on this research project: to find and engage with multiple kinds of sources, produce a scholarly paper, and explain his research and findings to a wide audience.

Sincerely,

Laura Alexander, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies