Pathways to the Middle East and North Africa at Bridgewater State University: The First Federal Grant for BSU’s Global Programs

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Rejuvenation of the Program

Our endeavor, Pathways to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at BSU, marked a significant milestone as the first federal grant (2020-2022) for one of BSU’s global programs: CMES. This visionary project, sponsored by the Title VI Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Languages (UISFL), a division of the Department of Education, was designed to intertwine various activities underpinning the four crucial pillars of education essential for the internationalization of area studies at BSU: 1) Curriculum Enhancement, 2) Student Success, 3) Faculty Development, and 4) Community Outreach. Our region of focus covers 22 countries, nearly 400 million people, and the second largest religion of the world, Islam. This initiative has contributed to fortifying the connections between BSU and MENA through international integration and foreign language learning.

The intrinsic strategies of the project design are captured in Diagram 1. The Department of Education funding prepared a pathway to support curriculum development, student success, faculty development, and external outreach activities. The strategies to achieve the objectives of the MENA project have been successful and inspiring, as is illustrated in the following examples:

Objective 1. CURRICULUM ENHANCEMENT: The CMES was transformed into the MENA Studies Program, while new core courses were introduced to the MENA minor, including an introductory and capstone course, a study abroad course, and a course on modern Hebrew language.

Objective 2. STUDENT SUCCESS: This grant program resulted in the establishment of the MENA Studies Minor, attracting 13 students from diverse interdisciplinary areas. Travel to foreign countries was facilitated through student stipends.


Students visited Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain. The student-run Jewish-Muslim Association has promoted interfaith dialogue.

**Objective 3. FACULTY DEVELOPMENT:** Faculty opportunities included research stipends to publish on topics related to the MENA region, organizing and leading foreign field study tours, paper presentations at conferences, designing and delivering new MENA courses, and extending consulting services on topics related to MENA and Islam. Faculty involvement and participation in these activities increased their international knowledge and expertise, which benefitted students and the regional community.

**Objective 4. COMMUNITY OUTREACH:** Several initiatives were undertaken to enhance community awareness of MENA society and culture, particularly a workshop on women’s entrepreneurship in the Arab World, a summer institute for K-12 teachers, seminars, and panel discussions on campus during the semester. Talks and discussions during MENA awareness week each semester were the norm. BSU solidified partnerships with Universities in Jordan, Morocco, and Israel. For example, our team adopted the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) model with Al-Qasemi Academic College in Israel. Further collaborations with the University of Bahrain, the
University of Sharjah in the UAE, and Qatar Community College are being pursued.

Dissemination: Sustaining the Momentum

The International Conference on Education (ICE) is already well established and will continue providing a venue for educators, scientists, researchers, teachers, and professionals worldwide to connect and explore issues affecting US relations with the MENA region. Research papers presented at recent (ICE) meetings were peer-reviewed and published in a book, *The Role of Educators as Agents and Conveyors for Positive Change in Global Education*. One chapter, written by Dr. Rao, Dr. Al-Obaidi, and Dr. Wanchunzi Yu, is entirely devoted to the achievement of BSU’s first UISFL grant. It is noteworthy that the 2022 study abroad trip, involving 11 students, culminated in participating at the ICE conference in Fez, Morocco, while 5 students from the MENA Minor Program showcased their undergraduate research papers at the 2023 ICE conference in Jordan. The details of this conference were also publicized in the leading newspaper of the region, *The Jordan Times*.

The overall goal of the *Pathways to MENA* project is to bring about fundamental changes in the outlook of our students from local to global, a change in the research agenda and focus of faculty scholarship from domestic to international, and a change in the perception of our local community from regional to international in their appreciation of diversity, geography, people, cultures, and religions. The grant acted as a catalyst for positive change, encouraging deeper global understanding among students, faculty, and the community. In summary, the journey of the *Pathways to MENA* project contributed to the university’s overreaching goal of faculty–student scholarship, curriculum changes, and regional engagement. The legacy of the MENA program remains, with the promise of further expansion and development.

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