



Kevin Ahern, Ph.D., assistant professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, has long been a proponent of student activism. Recently, Ahern was engaged in “Crossing Borders: A Migration and Immigration Experience,” a student-led activity on campus that had a profound impact on the students who participated. The interactive role-playing simulation, sponsored by the Catholic Relief Services Global Campus Project and the CRS Ambassadors, was developed to help students gain insight into the issues that were being publicly debated in a way that moved beyond lectures or readings.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

by Rachel Clevenger

Manhattan College Immigration Simulation

Practicing What is Preached

In addition to his teaching obligations, Ahern remains active in several national and international networks, including as the international president of ICMICA-Pax Romana, a network of Catholic professionals and intellectuals in over fifty countries.

In a recent book, co-published with Christopher Derige Alano, Ahern spotlights on-campus faith communities. *God’s Quad: Small Faith Communities on Campus and Beyond* offers tools and best practices for young adults and college students to create and maintain faith-based communities.

Perfectly positioned at Manhattan College, which has multiple student-led groups focused on faith and spirituality, Ahern has opportunities to work with students who are passionate and driven to help others and connect with the wider world. Whether it is in the form of the CRS student ambassadors or the Muslim Student Association or the JustPeace members, the college’s inclusive community works to carry out the Lasallian tradition.

Empowering Student Activism

Ahern believes in empowering student activism and student mobilizing, as well as seeking ways faculty members can assist in that process. As a

faculty member on the National Advisory Board of the Catholic Relief Services, he’s focused on helping the international organization partner with colleges at two levels: student experience and faculty mentoring and research.

In developing partnerships with universities, the CRS is working to “tap into the network,” he explains, to be even more effective. As president of the International Catholic Student Organization before he earned his doctorate, he already had a well of experience to draw on, being an integral part of one of the oldest student-led movements in the world, and his scholarship naturally focused on faith-based student organizing.

Not only is he intrigued by faith-based student activism as a scholar, in that he wants to see the case studies that prove student mobilization is possible and powerful, but he also believes it’s important for faculty members to accompany students on these journeys.

The initial idea for Crossing Borders was from Cabrini University, and the details filtered through the network via the CRS partnership, another reason Ahern sees these partnerships as so valuable to universities.

The call to action encouraging students to try the simulation read, “Find out if YOU could cross a border for a better life? Would the U.S. accept YOU?”

Student and CRS member Alana Pons believes the offer of free pizza might have been what initially moved students through the doors. Before the simulation, Pons notes how amazed she was at the level of passion people shared on issues of immigration and migration when they had never been to a border.

She had spent time working at a shelter on the border of El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, receiving migrants from detention centers. She helped take people to the first showers they had enjoyed in days or weeks and offered them clean clothes. Moved by the families and children she saw each day, she recalls, “It was there that I saw the devastation of the policies I’d been learning about in class.”

While she already empathized with the plight of migrants, until she lived inside the moment, she did not realize how devastating it was. As she witnessed the children who were going to have lives that were being forever altered by this experience, she notes, “Now I realize that this needs to be a priority.”

With her involvement in CRS, she saw the simulation unfold and was impressed with the amount of care her fellow students invested in creating something that was both accurate and compelling. She recalls thinking, “Wow, they really got that perfectly.” Enticed by free pizza,



most students didn't understand how an interactive, role-playing event carried so much more emotional heft than a lecture series. "Going into it, I don't think people were ready for what they were going to experience," she notes.

A Migration & Immigration Experience

Lois Harr, the event host and Director of Campus Ministry and Social Action, hoped students would understand why people are coming to the United States and gain a better understanding of the process at the border. Before the simulation started, they offered participants a brief history of U.S. immigration policies and laws, in addition to reasons for the majority of the migrations to the country.

Each student was handed a card at the door with details about their "character," including background and families. However, these weren't works of fiction; each card was based on the actual story of an immigrant, and the stories were often emotional and difficult. The participants were also given little to no money to bring with them into the process.

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As the participants worked their way to the table marking the U.S. border, many were “robbed” before they reached it. The simulation offered an interrogation process similar to what many migrants encounter when first arriving at the border. They asked questions from a checklist to determine what fit the “ideal migrant”; any other details, including their entire back story, was usually irrelevant.

After the interrogation, participants were split up and placed in detention or instantly deported or sentenced to speak to a judge; most of those sentenced to speak to judges were deported or detained, and only a few made it into the country.

“At first it was sort of like a game,” Pons added, “and then they saw this wasn’t a joke.” From the very first table, students who were accustomed to being treated with compassion or at least civility were faced with representatives of a system that offered neither.

“They felt like their human dignity was lost,” she explains. “When they were treated with no dignity, they didn’t know how to react.” She watched as her peers’ smiles were eventually replaced by blank stares, the “same blank stares of actual migrants” that she had witnessed in her time at the border shelter.

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The Head, the Heart and the Hands

After the simulation, students had a chance to sit at a table with Ahern and a sociology professor to “unpack the experience,” where they could delve into the complex feelings and the faculty mentors could “provide them with deeper information and more resources.”

As a professor, he found it rewarding to watch as his own students could “experience the learning in a completely different way and see things open up because of that.” Their most significant emotional takeaway, he believes, was seeing that “the public discourse does not match the reality.” The goal was to ultimately “break through some of the misconceptions dominating the political discourse.”

The final stage in the simulation was an opportunity for students to take action, if they were so compelled—immediately answering the question, “What can we *do* to make things better?” They were given the chance to sign a letter to Congress that requested humanitarian aid for migrants and could also sign posters to show solidarity with migrants. The entire interactive experience draws on what Ahern calls, “the head, the heart, and the hands.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Rachel James Clevenger earned her M.Ed. degree from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham. Most recently, she taught Business Communications at Samford University.

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