

Alex Yom

Graduation Year: First Year

College: Arts & Letters

Major(s): Political Science

Minors(s): Asian Studies and Business Economics

Scholar Group Membership: Hesburgh-Yusko

Did you received other funding for this project?: No

Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding? No

More details on CUSE funding assistance?

Project Title: The Effects of Unfunded Mandates on National Infrastructure Projects

Project Location: Houston, TX

ND Faculty Mentor: Joseph Buttigieg

Project Type: Scholarly Immersion

Why did you undertake this project/experience? Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Career discernment and/or preparation

Did your funded experience help you:

[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]: Yes

[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]: A Little

[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]: Very Much

[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]: Very Much

[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:Very Much

Tell us about your experience.

My research question focused on the effects of unfunded mandates on national infrastructure projects, with a particular focus on Interstate 69. I-69 was a federally unfunded mandate that required the states of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan to construct a national highway that would be an important route of trade from Mexico to Canada. I met with various officials in the Houston area, where the largest portion of I-69 will be built, concerning the planning, construction, and the economic effects of the project. I first met with John Thompson, a former county judge along the I-69 route and the former chairman of Alliance for I-69 Texas, a nonprofit organization that brought different local leaders along the I-69 route together to lobby and facilitate the project's completion. I learned from Judge Thompson the importance of local leadership and consensus in constructing national projects. It is not Washington DC that is driving the project; instead it's a bottom up approach that starts at the local level. When local public support is high, the more likely the project is going to be completed. Because the State of Texas had to find a way to fund portions of their projects, the Alliance played a critical role in convincing elected officials to appropriate funds for the project. I also met with a professor at the Political Science Department of Rice University, Robert Stein. Stein mentioned how unfunded mandates have grown and changed, especially since the "Contract with America"

movement in 1994 of returning power back to state and local governments. Stein reinforced the notion that although the federal government has the authority to mandate projects to the states, without local support, there is going to be very little progress on the project. I met with a member from the Texas Department of Transportation's Houston District Office to discuss the I-69 project specifically and the different economic effects that such a large infrastructure project would have. I learned that originally TXDOT was not interested in appropriating funds to construct another interstate, but instead focus on upgrading existing infrastructure. It took immense local support and discussion for I-69 construction to begin. I finally met with a member of Houston Transtar, an organization that combined Harris County, the City of Houston, TXDOT, and METRO to work together on streamlining Houston's infrastructure, with focuses on smooth transportation and emergency response. I learned the benefits of different levels of government working together to create an efficient system and prevent overlapping spending. The biggest takeaway from my experience is that unfunded mandates do make national infrastructure projects difficult because there is no specifically appropriated funds for the project. However, although the federal government can make these mandates, it gives state and local governments considerable amount of freedom since they are funding much of the project. I learned that is local support that truly drives these national projects and make the mandates successful.

Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.

For me to have this experience to meet with experts on an issue that I am interested in, was a huge eye-opener on how much more I want to learn and investigate outside a traditional classroom setting. For me to be able to conduct a mini research project is pivotal in helping me spark future investigative efforts. I am more curious than ever to continue to reach out and ask questions and find unique ways to answer them. As a student-scholar, I am now more inclined to take the initiative to seek out problems and answer them myself. With the people that I worked with and got to meet with concerning my research project, they all said that they were so excited that a student was taking the initiative to seek answers to questions and stated that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge on the topic.

Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.

I have always been interested in public policy, so to be able to investigate the concept of federalism and the effects of unfunded mandates has allowed me to learn so much more about how the different levels of government function. As someone who wants to enter a career in public service in the future, the knowledge that I gained on this scholarly immersion project has been invaluable. In the more immediate future, as a Hesburgh-Yusko Scholar, I have to submit three project proposals for my summer experiences. To have the opportunity to go through the grant proposal project here at CUSE was a great learning experience more me to get more comfortable with the process and see how I can improve in the future. One of the summer experiences is research so I gained valuable knowledge on learning how to contact people that will help you with

research and being able to consolidate the different perspectives and information to draw connections and conclusions.

What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?

The biggest thing that I learned about the research as a whole is to have a clear goal in mind. It is very easy to find the vast amount of information as overwhelming and impossible to consolidate. That is where the process of narrowing your scope and finding a specific issue to investigate is so important. I started out with a vast question on the effects of unfunded mandates. It would be impossible to investigate fully all the effects of unfunded mandates, so I decided to narrow the focus to unfunded mandates on national infrastructure projects. Even then, it would still be too difficult to do that topic justice. So I focused on a specific project of Interstate 69 that was relevant and timely. By narrowing my scope on a larger topic, it not only made my research process more viable, but allowed myself to conduct higher quality research on a specific issue and add to the discourse on the topic. It's important to view research not as a way to solve every problem, but recognize that you are contributing to the general body of knowledge that together work to answer questions.

