

YES! (Youth Engagement for Somalis)
Program designed by Hannah McCain ('12) and Nima Mohamed ('15)
Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon

Somalis began migrating to Maine in the early 2000s, disillusioned with the cities they had been sent to upon arriving to the United States as refugees. They were attracted to the tranquility and low crime rates of Maine, and saw it as a good place to raise their children. Assimilating in Maine, however, is not a simple matter—for example, in 2002 a mayor in Maine addressed an open letter to the Somali community. The gist of the letter was: “Stop coming here.”

Maine is a state that is over 80% Christian, with only one percent of Mainers identifying with a religion other than Christianity (close to 20% are non-religious). Maine is also over 95% white. In 2000 there were only 800 Muslim residents in Maine, and only 0.5% of the population self-reported in the census as black. The influx of Somali refugees was highly noticeable against this homogenous background. Today 1.2% of Maine’s population is black, and it is no longer a rare sight to see a woman in *hijab* (Muslim modest dress) on the streets of a city like Portland.

Yet challenges remain. Somali youth in Maine today are faced with the difficult task of navigating the differences between their parents’ traditional culture, on one hand, and normative American culture in Maine, on the other. Both cultures can seem foreign, in their own ways, to a youth who is caught between them. Unfortunately, where there is misunderstanding, lack of trust, or ineffective assimilation and synthesis between minority and normative cultures, there is fertile ground for conflict and disunity.

Our Goals

The purpose of the Youth Engagement for Somalis (YES!) program is to provide Somali girls in Portland, ME, with the opportunity to cultivate a sense of belonging in a pan-ethnic Portland community while also, through academic and community engagement programming, offering a much-needed forum for discussion between the local Mainers and the Somali community. Many local Mainers and Somali girls are shy of each other and unsure of how to effectively communicate—YES! will change that by offering a safe and encouraging environment for engagement. This will foster pan-ethnic peace, unity, and understanding that is currently elusive due to a lack of adequate communication and interaction between Somali and local Maine communities.

A confident Somali girl with a strong sense of self will be an ambassador for peace and intercultural understanding in Maine, capable of bridging the cultural distance between Somali and local Maine communities. YES!’s primary goals are to overcome (1) generational divisions within the Somali community and (2) intercultural divisions between (and among) Somalis and local Mainers in citywide and statewide networks of community engagement.

Many girls we spoke with expressed frustration that their parents—especially mothers—were ambivalent towards assimilation and expected their daughters to conform to cultural standards at odds with normative American society. (A particularly pertinent example is the fact that Somali parents strongly oppose casual co-ed relationships among youth, which is why YES! is a single-sex program.) Unlike Somali boys, who are given relatively free rein by their parents to explore the normative culture(s) of Maine, Somali girls are subject to stricter rules of engagement. While this means that they are sheltered from drugs and gangs, it also means that Somali girls are inadvertently sheltered from constructive modes of engagement in the community.

Intercultural divisions can only be overcome once Somali girls have the freedom to fully engage outside the realms of school and family. That means generational divisions must be addressed before, or simultaneously alongside, intercultural divisions. Over the course a series of meetings with YES! project coordinators, Somali community members were able to offer advice and voice concerns. The structure and content of YES! reflects that dialogue, meaning that our endeavor has the trust and support of the wider Somali community.

Our Project

Programming for YES! will be focused on **engagement** and **dialogue** in an environment modeled loosely after summer camp. There will be two iterations of the program, each two weeks long: the first with incoming freshman (June 16-28), and the second with incoming sophomores (July 7-19), from high schools in Portland, ME. Each group will meet six days a week, Saturday through Thursday, starting at 9:30 AM. Sunday through

Thursday will follow a split-day programming model, with a field trip in the morning and the remainder of the day filled with a mixture of structured and unstructured programming. In order to succeed in high school—viewed in the United States as a necessary step towards success—Somali girls must cultivate strong academic skills, so the afternoon’s activities will be focused primarily on improving the girls’ literacy, building their confidence in writing and creative expression, and allowing them to engage in critical thinking exercises. The afternoon activities will be related to the morning’s field trip whenever possible. Depending on the length of the field trip, the day’s programming will end between 3:30 and 5 pm. Sample schedule:

Engagement portion

- 9:30a Meet at community center; informal but structured mini-activity to begin day.
- 9:45 Walk to African Culture Museum.
- 10:00 Snack in the square outside of the museum.
- 10:15 Guided tour of museum.
- 12:15p Walk back to community center.
- 12:30 Lunch.

Dialogue portion

- 1:15 Presentation: background of crisis in Somalia.
- 1:30 Discussion; relate Somali crises to other humanitarian issues globally and locally.
- 2:00 Poetry free-write. [This will be common; poetry reflections will act as follow-up to an artist’s presentation/poetry class we have designed to take the place of a field trip one day.]
- 2:30 Presentation: humanitarian aid in Somalia.
- 2:45 Discussion; explore how youth can get involved through organizations like Oxfam.

Dialogue with peers and role models (artists, religious leaders, outdoorswomen, fellow students, etc.) will assure that the intercultural communication aspect of the programming will be in-depth and rewarding. Likewise, the field trips will introduce Somali girls to the richness and diversity of Maine through activities: the girls will hike mountains, visit community gardens and museums, explore historical monuments, and tour local colleges. Each field trip is designed to be educational and inspiring. Both the field trips and the dialogue exercises will promote intercultural exchange in order to help the Somali program participants overcome cultural isolation and develop strong, meaningful ties that transcend the boundaries of the Somali community. The program organizers will make sure that the field trips and dialogues engage a wide array of local Mainers who will be able not only to teach but also learn from the Somali girls.

Each Thursday will be a community day and will follow a slightly different schedule. The first community day will be “Moms and Imams” with imam Muse Ali. Acting as presenter and mediator, Ali will help the girls and their mothers discuss sensitive topics like interfaith understanding, evolving gender roles, healthy coed relationships, shifting ideas of religion and traditionalism, and more. The second community day (and the last day of the program) will be a chance for the girls to reflect on and discuss their experiences with the wider community. It will be a celebration of the learning and growth of the past weeks, and the girls will be invited to present and share poetry, stories, and reflections with their families and community. The community days’ purpose is to foster intergenerational understanding as well as to illustrate to Somali parents the benefits that can be reaped from trusting their daughters and granting them expanded freedom.

Community Support and Sustainability

Our programming can only run for a limited amount of time this summer due to the timing of Ramadan, but by offering the program twice—once for incoming high school freshman and once for incoming sophomores—we hope to discern which age group the program is better suited for. We will make this judgment by way of observation, but also through feedback surveys administered to the girls and their families upon completion of the YES! program.

The Somali Culture and Development Association of Maine (MESOM) is our primary partner, and they are committed to helping us with outreach, participant recruitment, and logistics (securing transportation, meeting rooms, liability insurance, and so on). If the YES! program is successful, MESOM has agreed to search for funding to extend it to future summers, meaning that YES! has the possibility to help Somali girls grow and contribute to intercultural understanding in Maine for years to come.

Projects for Peace Proposal: YES! Budget (Hannah McCain and Nima Mohamed)

INCOME	DESCRIPTION	AMOUNT
	Amount requested from Projects for Peace	\$10,000.00
	Amount requested from Lewis & Clark	\$2,500.00
Total income		\$12,500.00

EXPENSES	DESCRIPTION	AMOUNT
Transportation	15-passenger van (1)	\$2,500.00
	1 minivan	\$0.00
	Fuel and tolls	\$2,106.00
Rental	1 community center room	\$1,360.00
Food & beverage	Lunch, snacks	\$1,374.00
	Groceries (for final community day celebrations)	\$120.00
Program materials	Notebooks, pens for girls	\$43.50
Office supplies	Photocopies	\$25.00
Stipends¹	2 assistant mentor-leaders	\$800.00
Indirect expenses²	Subcontract grant to MESOM	\$800.00
Activities expenses³	<i>Field trip:</i> Maine Audubon Society	\$0.00
	<i>Field trip:</i> Wolfe's Neck Farm	\$0.00
	<i>Field trip:</i> Portland Museum of Art	\$120.00
	<i>Field trip:</i> African Culture Museum (including private guided tour and year membership for each YES! participant)	\$570.00
	<i>Field trip:</i> Fort Williams and Portland Head Light	\$62.00
	<i>Field trip:</i> Victoria Mansion	\$390.00
	<i>Field trip:</i> Peaks Island	\$178.80
	<i>Field trip:</i> Guided tour of Portland Observatory, tour of Portland	\$278.00
	<i>Honorariums:</i> \$50 honorarium per lecturer (four guest lecturers per week)	\$800.00
Travel	Round-trip flight, PDX-PWM (Nima Mohamed)	\$450.00
Incidentals	n/a	\$500.00
Total expense		\$12,477.30
Remaining		\$22.70

¹ Two high-school or college-aged girls from Portland, ME, will be work as full-time assistant mentor leaders to help McCain and Mohamed direct the YES! program. The stipends (\$100 per week, per assistant) work as incentive and allow us to reach a wider range of possible candidates. Many people cannot afford to work full-time without any compensation.

² Subcontracting out the grant to MESOM means that YES! will be able to act under the auspices of their 501(c)(3) organization. We will get full coverage under MESOM's \$1,000,000 liability insurance, and we will be able to rent and purchase under MESOM's name, use their minivan, and use their office for organizational meetings. Hannah McCain and Nima Mohamed maintain complete creative control over the project and it remains independent from MESOM. \$800 is the fee we negotiated with MESOM for these services.

³ The prices include admission (or otherwise) for 30 girls (15 girls, 2 weeks) and 8 mentor-leaders (4 leaders, 2 weeks).

Appendix 1:

A statement from Hannah McCain

A senior at Lewis & Clark, Hannah has been passionate about the study of religion since her freshman year. Her major is Religious Studies, and her unofficial concentration has been Islam. She has pursued the study of this religion even outside the bounds of the Religious Studies major in relevant courses such as Culture & Power in the Middle East (Anthropology), The History of Islam in Europe (History), and Middle East Politics (IA). Hannah has continued to find herself amazed and inspired by the diversity of the religion as it has manifested itself around the world in contexts both historical and contemporary, and has been lucky enough to experience the lived religion firsthand in domestic as well as foreign contexts (she has visited Morocco for extended periods of time on multiple occasions).

Over the course of the past couple of years, Hannah has found herself steadily more intrigued by her new Muslim neighbors in her hometown of Portland, Maine—those neighbors being the Somali refugees who have been coming to Maine as secondary migrants since the early 2000s. However, it was not until a conversation this past summer with her aunt, an ESL teacher at Portland High School (Portland, ME), that Hannah began to realize the full extent of the hurdles facing the Somali community in homogenous Maine. As someone who is not only comfortable with intercultural exchange, but thrives on it (becoming an AES tutor has been one of the highlights of her time at LC!), Hannah immediately became interested in finding a way to reach out to the Somali community and help them adjust to life in Maine. To her, it is unfair that a community that has been in Maine for a decade is still ill at ease and misunderstood.

This Projects for Peace grant is an opportunity for Hannah to use her knowledge of Islam, her cultural sensitivity, her interpersonal skills, and her strong intercultural communication skills for the betterment of a community she deeply respects in the city that she loves.

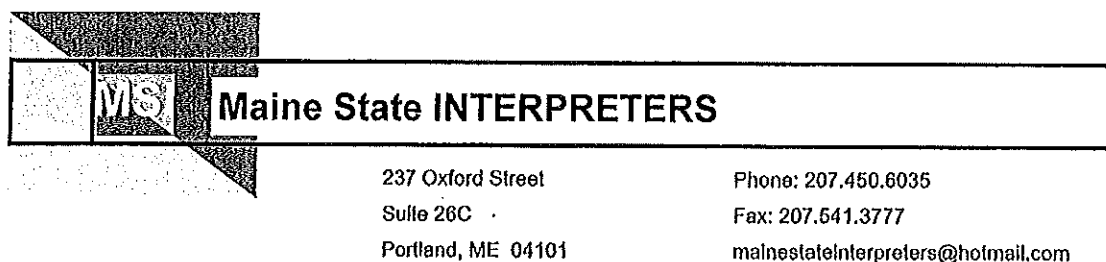
A statement from Nima Mohamed

As a first generation college student and Somali immigrant, Nima Mohamed has experienced firsthand just how difficult being part of two cultures and languages can be, especially as a youth trying to conform to both. Since middle school, she has been very involved in the Somali community, and has taken an active role in helping organize projects, events, and fundraisers, whether through the youth group she is a part of (the Somali Youth of Oregon), or as the president her high schools Youth Ambassadors Club. Because of her deep involvement with the Somali community, she has come to realize that many Somali Youth are also conflicted as they try to hold on to their culture, language and religion while simultaneously working to assimilate into their new environment.

Nima is very intrigued by the dynamics of different social structures and the pressures to conform placed on members of society. She has started taking classes in both Sociology and Communications and is considering a double major in the two disciplines. Although only a freshman, she already holds two leadership positions: Special Project Coordinator for her college's Office of Multicultural Affairs as well as President of the Black Student Union.

This Projects for Peace grant would offer Nima the opportunity to work with Somali girls who are facing the same struggle of intercultural division between them and their new community that Nima faced, as well as bridging the distance between their parents who may have a hard time understanding just how stressful assimilating into this new culture may be. This grant would also give her the chance to inspire her fellow Somalis with her experience in leadership, organizing, and mentoring.

Appendix 2: Letters of Support



January 13, 2012

Projects for Peace Review Board
Lewis & Clark College
0615 S.W. Palatine Hill Road
Portland, Oregon 97219

Re: Proposal by Ms. Hannah McCain

Dear Members of the Projects for Peace Review Board:

As a Somali business owner and Somali elder, I am pleased to offer support for Ms. McCain's wonderful proposal for a Projects for Peace grant.

Her project speaks perfectly to concerns shared throughout the Somali community. There is much conflict between our Somali youth and their parents. Ms. McCain's proposal offers a solution to support our girls participating in healthy, normal American activities in a way that Somali mothers can trust. This is a very good idea! I see how this can make life at home more pleasant and peaceful for Somali families.

I am confident that her program is one that will make a big difference in the Somali community. It is a generous gift for the Somali community in Portland, Maine that Ms. McCain and her Somali friend Miss Mohamed from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon give to us. This program is one that will continue so your efforts will have a long term impact.

Sincerely,

Osman Hersi, MD

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Osman Hersi', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Interpreting and Translating Services

Somali Culture & Development Association

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somaliculture2000@hotmail.com

January 13, 2012

Projects for Peace Review Board
Lewis & Clark College
0615 S.W. Palatine Hill Road
Portland, Oregon 97219

Re: Proposal by Ms. Hannah McCain

Dear Members of the Review Board:

The Somali Culture and Development Association is celebrating ten years serving the Somali Community in Portland, Maine this year. Ms. McCain and Miss Mohamed's program is one that fits with our mission and strategic plan. It is a great honor to offer support for your program for our Somali girls, and you have our word that we will help in any way we can.

This program addresses a real community need and priority. We will look forward to summer!

Sincerely,



Mohamud Barre, Executive Director
Somali Culture and Development Association of Maine

Serving Children, Youth and Families

Dd Swan, Nonprofit Consultant
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January 13, 2012

Projects for Peace Review Board
Lewis & Clark College
0615 S.W. Palatine Hill Road
Portland, Oregon 97219

Re: Proposal by Ms. Hannah McCain

To the Members of the Projects for Peace Review Board:

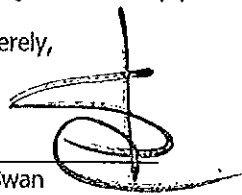
I have worked closely with The Somali Culture and Development Association for as a Nonprofit Coach and Mentor for the past three years. During that time, I have helped the organization build its competencies, capabilities and capacity through strategic planning, grant writing and grant management, and providing support in navigating the mainstream community. I have also had the opportunity to meet many Somali families at community meetings and celebrations and hear their concerns. Hannah's Projects for Peace proposal *Youth Engagement for Somalis (YES!)* addresses a critical community concern at just the right time. The program goals for engagement and academics are right on target, as is the proposed program model to introduce Somali girls to the richness and diversity of Maine coupled with academically-oriented activities and mentorship.

The project design portrays a remarkable understanding of the struggles Somali youth and their families experience as they navigate finding balance between the traditional culture and their new American culture. The program offers a solution for harmony that is viable and doable, and most important to me, a solution that is replicable with the ability to attract funding to continue and grow beyond a single year.

I offer full endorsement for the summer camp model for Somali girls ages 13-15 as well as my commitment to support Ms. McCain and Miss Mohamed with my skills as strengths. It is my pleasure to be a champion for this program.

Sincerely,

Dd Swan



Working with Organizations and Individuals to Build Competencies, Capabilities and Capacity