

DUKE UNIVERSITY: NOMINATED PROJECT

Beyond the Border: Reconciling Relations among College-Aged South Koreans and North Korean Refugees

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Executive Summary: Project “Beyond the Border” seeks to create meaningful and sustainable relationships between selected South Korean and North Korean refugee college students through an intensive one-week leadership, identity, and story-telling retreat through targeted university campuses, followed by a month of weekly service-learning projects. The goal is to reduce stigma against North Korean refugees and create safe spaces for authentic dialogue and understanding between South Korean and North Korean college students. Our final product, a joint effort by all participating members, will be a website and documentary film that will be used to expand the program into other universities and future time periods.

Problem Statement and Needs Assessment: Every month, hundreds of North Koreans make the treacherous and secretive journey through China or Southeast Asia to find freedom and opportunity in South Korea. However, even after arriving at the long awaited “Promised Land,” North Korean refugees still face a myriad of obstacles that hinder their successful integration into South Korean society. Due to their own inability to leave behind their traumatic pasts and enter the high-paced, capitalistic society as well as deeper systemic problems in the way South Koreans perceive culturally different others, North Koreans feel ostracized, displaced, and alienated from the people and things around them.

The government has tried several attempts, mostly financial, to “fix” their maladjustment problem. Despite these efforts, recent statistics show that of the 9,000 North Korean refugees in South Korea, approximately 55% are unemployed,¹ more than 50% of university students drop out,² and many suffer from chronic depression and alcoholism.³ Consequently, not only do North Koreans carry the stigma of being the political enemy, but they are also perceived as useless economic burdens on the South Korean tax system.

The continued stigmatization of North Korean refugees has harmful effects for both parties involved. Especially among young North Koreans, who rely on social acceptance as a measure of their success, there is a tendency to deny their North Korean identity completely to assimilate into the South Korean idea of “Koreanness.” Even socially conscious South Koreans treat North Korean refugees as victims stripped of their moral agency or cultural others who can only become Korean by imitating the South Korean worldview. As the number of refugees continues to grow exponentially, South Korea's ethnically and culturally homogeneous understanding of humanity needs to be questioned. If not, the socioeconomic and cultural divide between South Korean citizens and North Koreans refugees will deepen, severing the possibility of peaceful reconciliation.

Objective: Modeled after Duke University's successful multicultural retreat, Common Ground, “Beyond the Border” seeks to break through the harmful and debilitating walls of stigma, discrimination, and homogeneous understandings of self by creating a safe space of exchange, reconciliation, and relationships between South Korean and North Korean refugee college students. Coming face to face with the other and being forced to self-examine one's own prejudices during the one-week retreat will foster genuine learning through intense exploration of self and group identity. Through these interactions, we hope to build a micro-community of thoughtful, self-aware,

¹ Staff. “More than half of N.K. defectors unemployed: Measures needed to integrate them into S.K. society.” *The Hankyoreh Online*. October 5, 2006. <http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/162299.html>

² Chung, Ah-young. “NK Defector Students Face Educational Challenges.” *The Korea Times*. January 18, 2006.

³ Woo, Taek Jeon. “Issues and Problems of Adaptation of North Korean Defectors to South Korean Society: An In-depth Interview Study with 32 Defectors.” *Yonsei Medical Journal*. 41.3 (2000): 362-371.

and passionate student leaders who can then share their experiences with other student groups. Through four weekly service-learning activities with local organizations after the retreat, we hope to promote solidarity, community and reflection through non-hierarchical relationships among all participants involved. Finally, by undertaking a joint documentary and web project, both groups will have the opportunity to share their stories with each other, discover their own voice, and contribute equally to the accomplishment and distribution of their work during the five-week. Only through these narratives can individuals begin to understand others through the others' eyes.

Our project will benefit the university campus by raising retention rates of North Korean refugee college students, creating authentic and sustainable relationships among students of diverse backgrounds, and equipping students with a language with which they apply concepts of peace and understanding to future conflicts. Our project will serve as a model for other schools, organizations, and institutions to establish public alliances among heterogeneous populations.

Project Details: We will derive the framework and activities for the retreat and service-learning component of Beyond the Border from targeted pedagogical curriculum, such as Duke University's Hart Leadership Program, the Center for Race Relations, the Service-Learning Program, and the Center for Documentary Studies. As I and several members in our organization have been involved in these programs, we have the passion and tools to undertake this project with professionalism and organization.

Our project timeline consists of four parts. 1) We will advertise the leadership and identity retreat through flyers, listservs, and word of mouth at target universities, such as Yonsei and Sogang University, two of the main feeder schools for North Korean refugees. We will also receive recommendations from South Korean organizations that work with North Korean college students, such as Yeomyung School. 2) Each participant will be required to fill out an application and about 25 students will be chosen to go on a week-long intensive retreat at a campsite on the outskirts of Seoul. The first few days of the camp will be led by previously trained Duke students who will raise their own money to travel to South Korea. We will transfer all leadership roles to the South Korean and North Korean students involved through the creation of a self-curriculum. 3) The subsequent four weekly service-learning assignments will be planned in advance with South Korean nonprofit organizations. The team's overall development will be filmed by an experienced student film documentarian. Each participant will also be responsible for personally documenting his or her own experiences through an organized process of critical reflection and story-telling to the other. 4) The final product, an edited film and website, will be used to expand interest and raise support for Beyond the Border.

Feasibility and Preparation: With the help of NGOs that serve the North Korean refugee population, I have gathered the support of several university administrators. The Deans of Student Affairs at Sogang University and Yonsei University have given me the contact information for several student leaders on campus who are interested in participating in this innovative program. Due to the previously high dropout rates among North Korean refugees and the noted tension between North Korean and South Korean students, the administration is willing to provide institutional support through classroom and presentation space. Having worked closely with several young North Korean refugees in the past as a Robertson scholar and Service Opportunities for Leadership scholar, I anticipate the difficulties and frustrations we will face. My coursework during my senior year has helped me to unravel the complexities of the maladjustment problem and envision the possibilities of real change. After much debate and consideration, our organization proposed Beyond the Border as the first step towards unity.

Future goals: Vision for North Korea will continue to raise funds on American and Korean college campuses as well as through Korean-American communities to expand Beyond the Border into other universities. I dedicate myself to stay in South Korea for the next two years to see this project accomplished and I am confident that this seed money will be used to foster greater reconciliation between conflicting groups.