

I am very present in my academic life and community and I feel that my firsthand accounts of the Middle East from the experience in the Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Program could contribute new and thoughtful comments to classroom discussions. I could engage my classmates and colleagues on a personal level regarding material that is often times very condensed and theoretical. Furthermore, this direct interaction with the region will benefit my future hopes of higher education. In the same way I would like to engage my classmates, I want to have the ability to engage my students on a level that goes past just the pages of a book, to explain to them that the Middle East is a real place with real people and we cannot and should not limit our understandings in black and white terms.

In another context, my work with the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding has really opened my eyes to the value of cross-cultural engagements, dialogues, and conflict resolution. I hope to use the interfaith skills I learn through the trip to expand CERRU and its interfaith and cross-cultural initiatives to CUNY at large. The City University of New York is an incredible network of nearly half a million students dispersed among several New York City public colleges and universities. This has given me a very different college experience than most: not only do I have direct contact with New York City at large every day, I also interact with the diversity of the city on an incredibly personal level. There have been students in my classes from every race, creed, ethnic background, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity, you name it, CUNY has it. Despite this incredible diversity, CUNY, Queens College included, can often times be very segmented, with students coalescing around a shared identity rather than engaging with the countless human experiences around them. My work with CERRU has showed me how valuable cross-cultural engagement is to bridging that divide. Whether it be a shared lunch over a facilitated conversation about race and police in America today or a campus-wide social identity fashion show, CERRU has truly showed me how college can be a place to broaden your ideas of the world you live in, the people around, and how you situate yourself amongst that. To export these principles to the larger CUNY community will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the students, faculty, and administration of the City University.

On a more personal level, as a self-identifying Middle Eastern woman, I feel rather compelled to broaden people's cultural understanding of women in the Middle East. I am currently working on my political science thesis on the status of women in Afghanistan, but much of that is invested in policy recommendations and data analysis. I want to bring these flattened ideas of Arab femininity to life and showcase how the women of the Middle East have a whole breadth of experience and understanding of what it means to be a woman. I Am That Girl is one place that can be done, particularly as our presence on the Queens College campus inherently has us aware of faith and culture differences on campus. I hope to use my experiences on the trip to allow me to find strategies of how to be more conducive to these differences as we share our experiences as women.

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