

April Wallace
NEH Summer Institute Application
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“Making Holocaust and Genocide
Education Relevant Through Inquiry
and Classroom Application”

My name is April Wallace and I am writing to express my interest in the National Endowment for the Humanities program, “Making Holocaust and Genocide Education Relevant Through Inquiry and Classroom Application.” As a social studies educator teaching World Geography and Human Geography, my classroom and my students would directly and immediately benefit from such an invaluable experience. Throughout my nine years of teaching, I have increasingly spent more time covering genocide studies into my curriculum. However, this institute could provide impactful inquiry-based pedagogical support that would truly transform my own curriculum design both related to the Holocaust and to other tough topics. In a climate where the teaching of tough topics is so incredibly vital, this opportunity would help ensure that my students are receiving the highest quality instruction on the Holocaust and other human rights issues around the globe.

The 2022-2023 school year is my ninth year teaching. I have spent all nine years of my career at Luverne Public Schools. Luverne is a small, rural town in the southwest corner of Minnesota. We are situated about three and a half hours from Minneapolis and about thirty minutes from Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Luverne has an incredibly supportive community, administration, and teaching staff that support professional development in their teachers. I primarily teach 8th grade World Geography along with one High School Geography class, both with an emphasis on human geography. I teach four sections of 8th grade, where I average about one hundred students a year. I am also the only 8th grade World Geography teacher at Luverne, so I have a great opportunity to get to know every student and build long-lasting relationships throughout the year. This setting offers many benefits, as well as some challenges. First, I am able to create my own curriculum, so long as I incorporate the Minnesota Social Studies Standards. This freedom allows me to plan engaging and impactful lessons without restraints. But being the only 8th grade Geography teacher, I do not have a built in team to help plan and improve curriculum. By attending this summer’s institute, I believe that I will gain an incredible opportunity to work and learn with fellow Holocaust and genocide educators, along with incredible experts on the topic. I will have the chance to connect with a professional learning community that could directly support in improving my own teaching.

In my current 8th grade World Geography course, there are several spots where this institute would directly apply. As an overview, the Geography curriculum is separated into two parts. For the first half of the year, students cover thematic units including the study of population, culture, government, and conflict / human rights. This is followed by regional units

like Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania, and Latin America. Within these regional units we cover human environment interaction, history, culture, and discuss current issues.

In the 8th grade setting, this institute would specifically assist in my development of curriculum for my Conflict Unit, where we emphasize human rights. Currently, we study the Rwandan Genocide. This opportunity would also help my development of my Europe Unit. In the past, we have only spent a couple days on Europe's history, attempting to cover a large amount of information over a small period of time. For example, the curriculum plan that I inherited included just a couple days on Europe's history. Students were introduced to the Ancient Greeks, the Ancient Romans, the Middle Ages, and so on. However, this method only covers a small fraction of information and does not have a meaningful impact on my students. Starting this year, I have decided to improve the historical part of my Europe unit. This is the first year where students have started Europe's history with World War Two, specifically with an emphasis on the Holocaust and what made the Holocaust possible. I was able to access educator resources through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which was incredibly helpful. However, this is such an important topic and it is so critical that I teach it responsibly, so I would like better training and further support. Finally, the Asia Unit also has an additional emphasis on human rights with a discussion on the genocide against the Uyghur people. As of right now, this is not a complete lesson. My students are just briefly introduced to this issue, with only basic connections to our past studies and without a lot of inquiry involved. So ultimately, there are so many opportunities for this institute to make a real impact on the curriculum and to the pedagogical approach that is applied in my classroom.

In addition to 8th grade World Geography, I also teach one section of High School Human Geography each semester, reaching approximately fifty 11th and 12th grade students. These are students that I once saw as 8th graders, so it is another great opportunity to take advantage of long-standing relationships and to make connections into topics and issues that were once introduced and discussed in their 8th grade year. This course is divided into five thematic units, two which have direct relation to the institute. One unit is Cultural Geography and the other is Political Geography. Within these two units, students briefly study ethnicity, religion, nationality, and race, along with conflicts in relation to each of these topics. These conflicts include ethnic cleansing and genocide. As of right now, we study the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide but I would like to take this further and encourage a more inquiry-based approach to studying genocide.

There are so many opportunities for this institute to have a direct impact on a curriculum that serves around 150 students each year. Furthermore, I will be able to share my experience with my Social Studies Department at Luverne, where I collaborate with five other colleagues ranging from 6th grade to 12th grade teachers. Additionally, I will also be hosting a student teacher in the next school year, so I would have the opportunity to serve as a mentor and share my newly gained skills with a prospective teacher that will soon be entering the profession.

In addition to this institute being relevant to my courses, there are also other important reasons why I am interested in attending. First, every year I strive to improve on both my

education and my pedagogy. And I believe that this institute will help in both of those areas. When I read the compelling questions and the goals set forth by the institute, I find myself both aligned with its goals and curious about its answers. It is more important than ever to understand why the Holocaust and other genocides were able to happen and its consequences to our modern world. This allows us to recognize patterns and ideas that we want to avoid as a society moving forward. Unfortunately, with a rise in anti-semitism and other hateful speech, understanding the past has never been more relevant than it is now. Second, I hope that this institute will give me the necessary skills to better cover challenging topics. The Social Studies classroom is a place to study both the human triumphs and human tragedies of the past, so I want to be prepared to properly and responsibly have these discussions and facilitate that learning. Third, I believe that this institute will assist me in developing an inquiry-based pedagogy that relies heavily on multiple perspectives and critical thinking. This will not only make my teaching on the Holocaust and genocide better but also other tough topics throughout the curriculum.

Finally, several questions that I would hope to explore throughout my participation in this institute are quite similar to the enduring questions that are put forth by this program. First, I want to better understand how the Holocaust could happen. In what ways did rhetoric, policies, laws, and regular Germans play a role in allowing the Holocaust to happen? I hope that answering this question will allow for a larger conversation on extremism and citizenship in society. This leads me to my second question, how can we prevent extremism, hate, and racism from spreading like this? How could things have been different and what measures would it have taken by both regular citizens and by the people in power? And finally, what are the consequences of the Holocaust to the world today?

The National Endowment of Humanities Institute, "Making Holocaust and Genocide Education Relevant Through Inquiry and Classroom Application," would be an incredible opportunity to develop professionally. I believe I would come away with a stronger curriculum, more confidence in my teaching, and a better understanding of what it takes to responsibly teach tough topics like the Holocaust and other genocides. This will not only help the 150 students in my own classroom each year but I will also be able to share the knowledge and skills I gain through such a comprehensive opportunity. It would be an honor to be selected to attend this National Endowment of Humanities Institute and I appreciate your consideration.