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Honors Program at Minnesota State University,
Mankato

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Christopher Zuelsdorf Honors Portfolio

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Christopher Zuelsdorf

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Welcome

I'm Chris Zuelsdorf. I am attending Minnesota State University, Mankato, and am in my third year. I'm majoring in Statistics, and minoring in Information Technology and History. I hope to work as a Data Scientist or Analyst after graduation.

Mission statement: I aim to be the best sustainable person that I can be. In doing so, I have a higher level of confidence that my efforts will result in the most good and least harm possible.

Christopher Zuelsdorf

Home

Honors



I joined the Honors program in my third semester at MSU. The three competencies comprising the core of the Honors program are leadership, research, and global citizenship. To learn more about my experience within the program, select from the pages to the right. To learn more about the program itself, visit mnsu.edu/honors.

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Research

For a long time, I have considered research to be an essential part of modern life. Being a product of an interconnected world, I've had the privilege of having as much information as I wanted at all times. As such, I see the research-related experiences I've had at university as having improved certain aspects of my research skills, rather than entirely transformed them at any point.

There was one semester (Spring of 2018) in which my research skills and abilities were tested, strained, and improved drastically. That semester was probably the most difficult one in my academic career, but it was also the most enjoyable and memorable one as well. There are two classes which I think of as having been vital to my research development.

The first was **HONR 401: Writing Home**, where we chose a place that we enjoyed, lived at/in, or otherwise considered important to us, researched it thoroughly, and then wrote an interestingly styled paper (best described as a creative-nonfiction research-oriented study of place). The most important lesson this taught me is flexibility of research product format, and that I could put my personality into research; both of those help to make research projects less of a chore and more of a challenge.

The second was HIST 407: Age of Absolutism and Enlightenment (which consisted of two experiences), a history class focused on part of the early modern age, from the 1600's up until the French Revolution. Both the midterm paper and the last few weeks of the class were vital research experiences for me, in my eyes. The midterm **Louis XIV Paper**, which focused on absolutism in Louis XIV's France, for the first time made me truly deal with conflicting sources and organize a large research project. I learned how to manage a number of sources (thorough documentation) and how to deal with conflicting sources (the information around and about the source helped a lot). The last few weeks of the class were occupied by the **Estates-General Simulation**, which involved each person in class representing a character of the time frame; we had to research ours and others' opinions and positions, pen articles, give speeches, and debate issues (all in character). The simulation was interesting because I had to continually integrate more and more information on the same topic to develop an understanding of my character. I learned more about organizing my resources, and a lot more about using the library to its fullest effect (how to find and use multiple kinds of resources).

I had a chance to employ some of my strategies in late fall; I had another excellent opportunity to employ and grow my research skills. **MinneMUDAC** is an annual data science event that offers students a chance to show off their skills in a competition. 2018's challenge, which was to predict election turnout for Minnesota's 8 congressional districts, was unique in that students had to find their own data (usually, the data is provided by the event sponsors). That alone gave the competition a unique dimension, because we had to not only determine what data to use, but what data to look for; because of that, I learned much about sourcing data, and put into practice my ideas about data ethics. Additionally, we had to think for each idea whether it was appropriate for the competition, whether it was the correct venue to share that particular idea. Some were important and interesting but did not fit the purpose of the competition. Many ideas came from reading others' work on the subject, and so I learned about organizing and synthesizing others' ideas. The third area in which I learned a lot was dissemination; we had to present our ideas to panels of judges and were asked questions about our ideas and methods.

The final research experience that I have seen as key to my development up to this point was **MUDAC**. In some ways a bigger version of MinneMUDAC, MUDAC offered a chance to test my skills again. The challenge focused on water quality; this time, we were given data to analyse and limited to 24 hours in which to analyse the data and prepare our presentation. During our 24 hours, we did our research and prepared our presentation; during that time, I learned a lot about efficiently researching (compared to the weeks it had taken me during the history projects) and how to accept that research is 'good enough'. The next morning, we submitted our abstract and presentation, and presented our results to the panels of judges. During the presentations, I practiced presenting to less-than-technically-inclined people (some of the judges), a skill which I think will be extremely useful in my career. During MUDAC, I had also practiced putting myself into the research by deliberately using my methods and knowledge, rather than making something in an 'ordinary' way; I used data science and statistical methods as an art form to represent myself in the final product.

My future research development will include applying the skills I have learned to my classes in my final semester here at MNSU, in extracurriculars (MinneMUDAC 2019), and in my career and life beyond.

[MUDAC • 2019 • DREAM \(Extracurricular\)](#)

[MinneMUDAC • 2018 • DREAM \(Extracurricular\)](#)

[Louis XIV and Absolutism • 2018 • HIST 407](#)

[Honors Seminar: Writing Home • 2018 • HONR 401](#)

[Estates-General Simulation • 2018 • HIST 407](#)

Leadership • Synthesis

Before I started a job, I saw leadership as personally unattainable, yet something to be aspired for. To me at that time, leadership was something very authoritarian in name and deed. My first major experience to challenge my beliefs was my job at the **Hardware Store** in Sun Prairie, where I worked from summer 2014 to summer 2019 (excluding time here at university in Mankato). There, I learned to interact with co-workers for the purpose of achieving a shared goal and was introduced to a variable interpretation of leadership for the first time – where leaders could be understanding and personal, or could be stern when necessary. More than anything, I learned what I valued in a leader, and how I interact with other people in a work setting.

I took the lessons learned at the hardware store to university with me and had my first big opportunity for leadership at **MinneMUDAC** in fall of 2018. There, I competed in my first data analytics competition, and was somewhat of a de facto leader in my group. I applied what I thought my leadership style should be which failed drastically. We were completely unprepared in the days leading up to the competition, and did most of the work the night before the competition. I re-evaluated my stance on the day of the competition, and I like to think that our presentation was better for it. In any case, I learned that my leadership style had to be mine (not anybody else's), that I could be a more effective leader if I put my personality into my leadership style. Further, I learned at least a little bit about how roles actually work within groups.

My next big opportunity was another data analytics competition. **MUDAC** is the bigger component of MinneMUDAC and took place in the spring of 2019. The problem posed to us concerned water quality, and that unique twist offered the opportunity for me to learn more about roles in a team. Some aspects of the work were better done by a data analyst, like me, while other portions were better done by a field scientist (one teammate was in the biological sciences area of study). Seeing how we changed roles helped me to see that we all, when given the chance, will do our utmost to help the team in the way that we think we can best. That is crucial when starting a team, because assigning roles rather than choosing can deny some people the ability to assist in the best way. When it was my turn to lead, I used the lessons I learned from MinneMUDAC to better our end result. I also took note of how others lead, which let me observe still more styles of leadership, and evaluate which were better than others.

My final experience was, in my mind, a fitting finale. It tied together my experiences thus far and guided me in developing my own leadership style that is uniquely suited to my career and my personality. I took the **Honors Seminar: Leadership and Interpersonal Communication** course over the summer semester of 2019. It led me through my past experiences to rethink how I have experienced leadership. The important realization I had here was about what leadership is: it is just a form of communication, trying to influence others. Viewing it like that changed my outlook and allowed me to be more open about putting my own persona into my leadership style. As part of the coursework, I did just that – developed my own leadership style, using StrengthsFinder results from my Intro to Honors class. The class helped me to plan out how I will use my acquired and reconsidered experiences in future endeavors. Although the plan was developed specifically for my career, the skills will help me far beyond my workplace.

Touching back on the hardware store, I think that processing leadership experiences has helped me to understand the managers more fully and has helped me to better assist new employees. Seeing leadership as a relationship has helped me to better understand why my coworkers and managers act the way they do in the workplace.

My future development in leadership involves practicing the skills I have learned, and continually honing my leadership strategies based on the results and feedback I receive.

Experience Reflections

[Hardware Store](#) • 2014-2019

[MinneMUDAC](#) • Fall 2018

[MUDAC](#) • Spring 2019

[Honors Leadership Seminar](#) • Summer 2019

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Global Citizenship • Synthesis

My global citizenship journey at MNSU started with my job at the hardware store before the start of my freshman year. It seems to me a fitting lens through which to view my experiences. Working there I had the experience of interacting with people from a wide variety of backgrounds, from farmers and suburban dads to career construction contractors to Hmong- and Spanish-speaking parents whose kids are their translators. I just accepted each interaction as fact and moved on. My experiences over the years changed my perspective on my interactions with people of these cultures.

In my first semester here at MNSU, I took **AIS 102: The Story of American Indian Country to 1900**. That course served to open my eyes about myself, that I had a culture, that I need to be willing to learn alternative perspectives to view myself in the cultures around me, and that I need to be aware of my cultures' biases so that I can counteract them. We did this by studying different aspects of the Indigenous experience, from Hawaii to the Dakota War. It allowed me to view a common history from a different perspective, which is always an eye-opening experience. It also forced me to confront historical wrongs that we still try to fight tooth and nail not to have to confront (the discussion regarding the treatment of Indigenous Peoples even nowadays).

During the next fall (2017), I shared a room with **Shotaro**, a Japanese foreign exchange student. The experience of talking with him every day turned out to be quite engaging and was crucial in my later reflecting on a general philosophy of Global Citizenship. Getting to know him, I asked many questions and took a fair amount of time to figure out the similarities and differences between life here and life in Japan. My philosophy of global citizenship is based on how I connected with Shotaro: we started small, and gradually talked about more and more complex and 'thorny' topics. In phrasing of my philosophy, I sought to show that progression of simple to complex by emphasising the aspect of starting small: "We all wake up each day." It is based on the idea that if we can relate to others on a small scale, then it is easier to do so on a progressively larger scale.

The next experience I had was in Spring 2019, when I participated in the **Language Partners Program** and was paired with Saud, a Saudi exchange student. We discussed a variety of topics but found between us that geography was most interesting to us. I had many connections to a class I had taken the previous spring, an Honours seminar entitled "Writing Home", in the form of finding connections between both myself and the US, and Saud and Saudi Arabia. Answering some of his questions about American geography made me question myself about what and/or who I consider myself to be and led me to a greater understanding of how I view myself in the world around me. For example, a question we came to was "Are you more Wisconsinite or more American?" Further, realizing that he abstracted the US as I abstracted Saudi Arabia made me understand more fully the range at which I understand the world around me. Finally, our discussions about the political systems of our countries (Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy) gave me new understanding about how similar our day-to-day lives are despite being completely different orders of society; this part of the experience truly reinforced my philosophy that I developed following my semester living with Shotaro.

The penultimate Global Citizenship experience of my college career was also during the Spring semester of 2019, when I took **Spanish 201**. Taking the class gave me a better understanding of the Spanish-speaking world, because I had for the first time a teacher who'd studied in a Spanish-speaking country for more than just a semester. The class also focused more heavily on speaking than any Spanish course I had taken prior. That component gave me the confidence to begin speaking Spanish in more public settings when given the chance.

My final Global Citizenship experience necessarily took place following my Spanish class; I used Spanish to help customers in the **Hardware Store** over the summer. One customer was patient and appreciative of my efforts, while another was less than cooperative. I reflected on my interaction with the prior that improving relations with people of other cultures, who speak different languages, is as simple as a bit of patience and a show of appreciation for efforts given. I had been moving towards understanding the power of those actions, and the practice of them, for several years without fully realizing it.

That experience nicely concludes my collegiate journey of Global Citizenship – through my experiences, I came to realize the significance of what was already before me. I came to understand some of the challenges the people in front of me face each day and was able to relate to them at the very least on a basic level. Finally, I was able to move beyond just realizing the challenges they face and was able to try and make their experience just a little bit easier, by speaking their language. Moving forward, the knowledge and experience here will be invaluable when encountering new people from different backgrounds, both in the workplace and out.

Experience Reflections

[AIS 102 • Fall 2016](#)

[Shotaro • Fall 2017](#)

[Language Partners Program • Spring 2019](#)

[Spanish 201 • Spring 2019](#)

[Hardware Store • Summer 2019](#)