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# National Security Council Role-Playing Simulation

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**Abstract:** The first-year seminar Global Challenges fosters critical thinking by tasking honors students ( $n = 16$ ) with role-playing in the Council on Foreign Relations' Model Diplomacy program. Curricular objectives and assignments are presented.

**Keywords:** situated learning theory; high-impact practices; critical thinking; Georgia College Honors Program

In spring 2019, I designed a course built around four role-playing simulations. The course was titled “Global Challenges” and was in the institutional option area of the University System of Georgia core curriculum. Georgia College First Year courses focus on critical thinking and have three institutionally defined student-learning outcomes:

1. Students will be able to explain multiple intellectual approaches that clarify or respond to problems, topics, themes, and/or issues.
2. Students will be able to effectively explain and analyze evidence in support of an argument.
3. Students will be able to form logical conclusions from the information presented.

This class consisted primarily of four Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) “Model Diplomacy” simulations: Global Climate Change, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Drones in Pakistan, and Dispute in the East China Sea.

The sixteen second-semester honors students in the class role-played U.S. National Security Council (NSC) members such as the president, secretary

of defense, and national security advisor. Depending on the number of roles in each simulation, two or three students worked together on the same role, so two or three students might be on the “State Department team” although only one spoke as the Secretary of State.

The first day of each simulation was a set-up day spent assigning roles, explaining roles, explaining the scenario, describing policy options (without going into the pros and cons), discussing historical and geostrategic context, and going over the ground rules and game mechanics. The students then researched the issue at hand outside of class (using, for instance, articles and videos available on the Model Diplomacy website) and came back on the second day of the simulation to present and discuss policy options from their institutional perspective (e.g., as Secretary of State) and make policy recommendations to the president over two class periods, with more specific research being conducted between the two discussion sessions. The president and national security advisor then issued a national security presidential directive.

Each simulation, played over four or five class periods, ended with an in-class debriefing on the pros and cons of the various policy options, taking into consideration the broader geostrategic context as well as reflection on, for instance, the special challenges associated with the simulation, what worked, and what didn't work. Some adjustments were made to later simulations based on early reflections. For example, more time and detail were devoted to (1) setting up the simulation; (2) discussing concepts that the students would encounter in the simulation, such as sovereignty, terrorism, nationalism, alliances, and preventative measures; (3) assigning specific research tasks to specific students depending on their role, and (4) introducing flashpoints (unanticipated developments) that disrupted the decision-making process and caused participants to reevaluate their positions.

Each simulation required two written assignments:

1. A position memo in which students explained the national security issue before them, presented and analyzed the available evidence, and formed a policy recommendation for consideration by the White House team (consisting of 4–6 students depending on the simulation). Drafts of position memos became the basis of more in-depth discussion on the second day of the simulation. The drafts could then be revised and used to inform the presidential directive. The position memos were written from the institutional perspective of the role the student was playing, e.g., energy secretary.

2. A policy review memo in which students reflected on the case, the decision-making process, and the simulation. Students were specifically asked to consider (a) the strengths and weaknesses of the simulation as a learning exercise and (b) how future simulations might be improved to facilitate learning.

In a final leadership reflection essay, students reflected on the leadership lessons they had learned in these decision-making simulations.

The crisis scenarios, the applied research, the discussions, the role-playing, the teamwork, and the in-class and written reflections made for a successful, engaging, and high-impact honors class.

For more information about the Council on Foreign Relations Model Diplomacy program, see <<https://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org/#>>.

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