


Senior Exhibition: coming full circle

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Maverick Notes

Two days before needing to decide on a topic to research for a project that makes or breaks whether I graduate from high school, I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to do.

Senior Exhibition is somewhat of a tribute for seniors at Riverdale High School, a culmination of our interests, ambitions and, mostly, our education. It reflects everything the seniors at Riverdale High School have learned up to this point, and it potentially echoes our preparedness for post-graduation.

To say the least, the task is legendary: two months of gathering and processing resources and data, then formulating all findings into genuine opinion backed by facts. The product is three-fold: a 10- to 15-page research paper, a presentation to the community and a form of service or outreach.

The project involves developing an essential question, the framework that guides the process and what must be answered at the end. The idea of an essential question, affectionately known as an EQ, comes from the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), a network of schools that emphasizes small, personalized learning to which Riverdale High School belongs. Since my freshman year, I have grown up with EQs, which frame the curricula of most courses at Riverdale. I even remember an honors project that consisted of writing essays about the influential educators that developed the CES system.

According to CES principles, EQs “reflect depth and higher-order thinking” by placing value in the discoveries found in big ideas and content. Because EQs are not easily answerable and, furthermore, can be answered in myriad ways, students must create their own conclusions, which promote originality and critical thinking.

Senior Exhibition demonstrates this process of taking raw materials and creating an accessible product. As the deadline for choosing a subject drew closer, I heard about what topics my classmates were going to explore via an EQ: the targeted delivery of nanoparticles for medical treatment, the science of neurotheology, the effectiveness of foreign aid in Africa, advances in digital imaging technology in cinema, art therapy for children with disabilities, the future of China and its economy, etc. Each topic was more different than the last. Like the focus of my classmates, I knew my EQ needed to engage with the areas of politics, ethics and sociology. I immediately thought of civil rights.

After exploring the evolution of Christianity and Islam in a recent history course, I was fascinated by how those two separate paths and religions influenced the present day. Far from the realm of Christianity and its blossoming in the United States, Islam and the minority community of Muslim Americans captured my curiosity.

The history course instilled a big idea into my developing understanding of Islam. I learned that Islam mirrors the same beliefs that the United States values as freedoms. Equality, rule of law and justice for humanity are incorporated in the teachings of Islam, just as in the U.S. Constitution. I was interested in why Islam was not heralded in the same esteem as Christianity when it came to fitting in with the American truths we hold as self-evident.

Aside from having Christian founding fathers, I took a step back and thought about how Muslims are portrayed in the United States media today and how that affects our collective view of the religion. What I found was a lack of fair representation and unhelpful misconceptions. I wanted a topic that would change that.



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When it came time to develop my own EQ, I drafted, "How are Muslim Americans seeking to deconstruct the misconceptions about their faith, and why is it important for non-Muslim Americans to change how Islam is viewed culturally?" The research I conducted, the places I visited and the people I met were, in my eyes, idealistic, as I pursued the big ideas and content that would lead to my eventual findings and subsequent answer to my EQ.

I emailed an Islamic studies professor and an expert in the history of Islam in the United States, both of whom helped refine my EQ and suggested new themes and resources. I read anthologies, such as "Inside Islam," edited by John Miller and Aaron Kenedi, and scholarly books, such as "Major Themes of the Qur'an" by Fazlur Rahman and "Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity" by Tariq Ramadan. I interviewed a federal defense attorney to discuss the fairness of the judiciary process for minority groups, which led to the answer of the second part of my EQ. I contacted the Muslim Educational Trust of Portland.

The Muslim Educational Trust referred me to the Oregon Islamic Academy. Within a couple weeks, I visited with a dozen high school students, the Youth Ambassadors Club, at the school in Tigard. After listening to the club's presentation and discussing life as a Muslim American youth, I wanted to bring their message to life not only in my paper and presentation, but also in an immediate and direct way at my high school.

In mid-April, the Youth Ambassadors Club gave an hour-long presentation and Q&A session to a group of 60 Riverdale students. Seeing my peers interact with a completely new community of Americans in our age group epitomized the experience of Senior Exhibition for me. As I conclude my project this week, I will keep in mind what goes beyond a printed paper and polished PowerPoint.

Sure, there were visible differences between students at Riverdale and students at the Oregon Islamic Academy: non-uniform vs. uniform, mostly white vs. non-white, mostly non-Muslim vs. Muslim. But, as friendliness and genuineness pervaded, as they always should, a new community of understanding was formed and, within a larger scope, demonstrated what is beautiful about this country. Without Senior Exhibition, EQs and the brilliance of a CES education, I could not have comprehended nor concluded my four years here in a more perfect way.

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