

Examining Cultural Influence on Education Systems
Student's Research Gets a Boost from AHSS Grant
by Janette Ballard



Walid Hedidar is passionate about education reform. As a high school student in Tunisia, Hedidar founded a youth-led movement to examine the effect of culture on the Tunisian education system. Today, as a second year anthropology and international studies major, Hedidar hopes to continue his research and one day be a change agent for education reform in Tunisia and across the world.

Before coming to DU, Hedidar founded two education reform projects that studied the link between culture and education in Tunisia: The Workshop for Adult Leaders in Teaching English (WALTE), and the Tunisian Youth Lead (TYL).

Data compiled from the two projects pointed to the strong influence of religious beliefs on the way teachers teach and their overall perception of education.

Thanks in part to an AHSS summer research grant, Hedidar will return to Tunisia in July to follow up on these projects.

Hedidar has organized a two-week training camp that will combine WALTE and TYL and bring together 16 teachers and 16 students to discuss educational methodologies in the country and come up with solutions to the problems of Tunisia's education system.

"My research project is going to consist of several discussion circles on the state of education reform in Tunisia with teachers and students," said Hedidar. "During these discussion circles, I will be asking the participants several questions to understand their perceptions of education reform in Tunisia."

"I am hoping to do a comparison between the teachers' perceptions of education reform and the ones of the students," he added. "The structure of educational institutions in Tunisia is decentralized and little interaction happens between teachers and students. Through this research, I want to analyze and expose the impact of this decentralization on the future of education in Tunisia."

He also hopes to examine how an unreformed Tunisian educational system can lead to national and international consequences, including youth radicalization.

As a student in Tunisia, Hedidar's ambition and intellect was not overlooked. At 16, he was selected to participate in a cultural exchange program, the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. He lived for one year in Minnesota with a host family where he attended an American high school and served as a young ambassador of his country and culture. "The main goal of this program is to build bridges of understanding between the U.S. and countries with significant Muslim populations," he said.

When looking at colleges, he chose to study at the University of Denver because of its strong anthropology and international studies programs, as well as the undergraduate research and study abroad opportunities.

“As an anthropology major, I am interested in understanding how culture impacts the behaviors of people and how that relates to educational behaviors across different societies,” said Hedidar. “As an international studies major, I want to look at how international political economy impacts educational policies both in developed and developing countries.”

During his first year, Hedidar presented the results of the 2015 WALTE and TYL project assessments at DU’s Internationalization Summit, Teaching and Learning Week, Research Symposium and Writing Program Composium. He was awarded the Outstanding First-Year Student Award during the Pioneer Awards ceremony for his contribution to the DU community, and received the 3rd Best Overall Presentation Award during the Research Symposium.

This year, he hopes to present his most recent research again to the DU community and will be looking for opportunities to publish his findings both in Tunisia and the U.S.

In addition to working on research, writing and presentations, Hedidar serves as the Josef Korbel School of International Studies Senator for Undergraduate Student Government and is chair of the Internationalization Committee. Through it all, he keeps his eye on his career goal:

“After graduating, I want to get a Ph.D. in educational anthropology and continue contributing to education reform across the world through research and community organizing.”