

## **The Importance of the Model United Nations Experience**

by Mary Beth Brennan (1996)

The Model United Nations is a series of programs run throughout the country and the world with the goals of furthering understanding about the United Nations, educating participants about world issues and promoting peace and the work of the United Nations through cooperation and diplomacy. The value of the Model UN experience for a student is based on what benefits a student can gain from participation. Many different kinds of talents can be developed by participation in Model UN conferences - including such skills as teamwork, expository and persuasive writing, debating, and negotiation that are important for personal development and future success.

### Part I: What is a Model United Nations?

#### **Definition of "Model UN"**

The Model United Nations is a series of programs run throughout the country and the world with the goals of furthering understanding about the United Nations, educating participants about world issues and promoting peace and the work of the United Nations through cooperation and diplomacy.

Students gather in groups of 15 to over 1000 to simulate member states representation in the bodies of the United Nations. Smaller simulations usually are of the Security Council and last several hours. Larger groups are held in convention centers, simulate many bodies of the UN concurrently and last several days. More than 160 Model UN conferences are held globally involving approximately 100,000 students each year.

Simulations at large conferences usually include several of the six committees of the General Assembly. These committees each have a different topic they specialize in for debates. Conferences may also simulate councils other than the Security Council, such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC.) They might also simulate any number of special committees the General Assembly has mandated in the past years including the Economic and Finance Committee (ECOFIN) or the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA.) Conferences sometimes simulate the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or a historical Security Council body reconstructing an especially turbulent year of history.

#### **History of Model UN**

The Model UN started as the Model League of Nations Assembly. In 1947 the Model League of Nations Assembly made the transition the League of Nations had made in 1945 and became the Model United Nations Assembly. The Model UN program, like its forerunner, has traditionally been a student-driven organization. The program has been and remains a collection of independent conferences. In the 1980's an important organizing force, the United Nations Association of the USA, (UNA-USA) recognized the momentum of the Model

UN programs and founded its Model UN and Youth Department to coordinate and track the development of the Model UN on a global level. (Muldoon, 1995)

## **Goals**

The purpose of the Model UN is to provide an interactive educational experience that teaches in an interesting and enjoyable way about the United Nations. The process affords participants an understanding of how the process of international debate and negotiation that we commonly call diplomacy functions. The simulation of the diplomatic processes are especially important in this post-Cold War period when the world is quickly becoming more interdependent. In this interdependent world, Model UN makes for informed global citizens who not only understand the decisions their nation makes but also how those changes effect politics nationally, regionally, and globally.

## Part II: The Value of Simulating the UN

### **Determining the Value of the United Nations**

The value of Model United Nations - simulating the United Nations - must certainly be determined in great part by the value of the United Nations itself. The United Nations' value as an international organization is evaluated by many people toward a number of different ends. Academics attempt to apply political science models to its workings to define it and its impact on member states. Politicians confer differing value upon it dependant on the day and issue being discussed. Despite these differing evaluations, the true worth of the United Nations can be determined by simply analyzing the continuing existence of the United Nations as an important world body.

### **The Dedication of the World Community**

The United Nations has the dedication of its member states. This dedication is due to recognition by member states that the role of the UN is "to provide governments with the ability to do together what they cannot achieve separately." (Carlsson, p.2) Member states realize that the expanding problems of a planet know no national boundaries and understand that poverty, disease and pollution are a few of the plagues affecting citizens of all states. Some policies (official or non-official) of member states do not agree with the stated community goals of the UN. However, all members choose to remain members of the UN despite their differences - demonstrating the importance nations place on the institution. Theories on why states participate are gaining a new focus on the emerging global community and placing less emphasis on the state.

### **The Valuable Work of the United Nations**

Many times unrealistic expectations are set for the UN by those outside the organization, while the reality of the excellent work performed by the world body goes unnoticed. As Richard Falk notes, "the U.N. is a complex actor with multiple roles that have growing importance in many domains of international life ... despite this diversity, the overriding test of U.N. success or failure focuses on its handling of peace and security challenges." (p. 626) Peace and security is an important part of what we can expect the UN to do but, misinformation or lack of information should not be a reason for ignoring the other valuable work that occupies the majority of the UN's time.

#### *Peacekeeping and Enforcement*

Peacekeeping is just one part of the complex process of conflict resolution. With the super power conflict concluded, the face of UN peace keeping is changing as the world looks to the UN to intervene in greater numbers of more complex conflicts. The end of this period of East-West hostilities has dramatically changed the security landscape of the world, removing "the lid and permitting the explosion of violence and civil wars." (Weiss, et.al, p. 83) To deal with these new crises, the Security Council is moving away from its

traditional role in conflicts between states, and moving into disputes which would previously have been classified as purely internal problems.

Although some recent peace keeping missions have been less than successful, the UN's record throughout the years has been exemplary in keeping the peace between warring parties who have attained a cease fire, but are still in conflict. Situations around the world, including Cyprus and the Middle East are testament to this, as well as the UN's role in making peace in the Korean and Iraq/Kuwait conflicts. Finally, many Cold War battles were fought at the UN, instead of on a battlefield. The UN's role in preventing any world-wide conflict since World War II cannot be overlooked.

Peacekeeping was not originally intended to be a duty of the United Nations. It is not mentioned in the Charter of the organization and today is deployed and mandated entirely by the Security Council. It is however, based on fundamental principles of the UN Charter such as consent by all parties to the conflict, the neutrality of peacekeeping troops, and the use of force only in self-defense or to protect the mandate of the operation. (Boutros-Ghali, p. 404) The security council has recently extended the bounds of peacekeeping missions to include peace enforcement. Peace enforcement is used when peaceful means fail and the international peace and security is threatened as determined by the Security Council. Peace enforcement includes whatever measures the Security Council deems necessary to control the conflict and prevent escalation into the international arena.

#### *Humanitarian Aid and Development*

United Nations agencies have helped ease hunger and starvation in many parts of the world. The UN is the major provider and coordinator of humanitarian aid in the world. Between the estimated 23 million displaced persons forced to leave their own countries and the additional estimated 19 million refugees fleeing over international borders, the UN has responsibilities to over 40 million people whose lives are disrupted by war, repression and natural disaster. (Boutros-Ghali, p. 404)

Development relates to the UN mission in more than a simply humanitarian way. Development relates to all members of the global community, rich or poor, because it is undeniably tied to international peace and security. Without development on the widest scale, including not only resources but also social, educational and environmental development, "the young will be restless, resentful, and unproductive. People will understandably fight for resources, and creativity will be misdirected." (Boutros-Ghali, p. 405)

#### *Human Rights*

The UN has been a constant proponent of human rights, convincing governments to recognize the rights of their citizens and establishing international awareness of the worst human rights violations. The UN Charter, signed in 1945, opened a new era of human rights awareness. It opened internal human rights issues to the scrutiny of the international eye. "In seven different references to human rights the Charter declares the promotion of

human rights to be one of the basic purposes of the United Nations and specifies the responsibilities of major organs for implementing this goal.” (Bennett, p. 372) To this end, the UN General Assembly passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

The United Nations is a valuable organization as it brings together diverse members of an increasingly interdependent world to make collective decisions for the betterment of all. The worth of the United Nations can also be determined by merely analyzing the continuing existence of the United Nations as a world body. The United Nations has the dedication of its member states, this dedication is due to recognition by member states that the role of the UN is to provide a forum for negotiation among interdependent states. Member states realize that the expanding problems of a planet know no national boundaries and choose to utilize the UN to discuss them and attempt to regulate and even solve them. They further recognize the UN as a unique environment where problems can be discussed and the world’s best minds meet. It is evident that the UN will grow in the post-Cold War years as its member’s demands upon it grow. The mere fact that it exists and will continue to exist shows that the United Nations is a valuable resource for the world.

Many times unrealistic expectations are set for the UN by those outside the organization, while the reality of the excellent work performed by the world body goes unnoticed. Those unrealistic expectations are where Model United Nations programs come in. As a simulation of the United Nations and as a forum for discussion of world issues, students gain a unique knowledge of how the international system works. Model United Nations programs have the special, unique capability to educate tomorrow’s world leaders and world citizens.

## Part III: The Model UN Experience

### **Experiential Learning**

"Student receptivity and the demonstrated pedagogical value of experiential learning or 'learning-by-doing,' has resulted in the growing use of simulations and games in the field of international relations." (Hazletín and Mahurin, p. 149)

In this "learning-by-doing" approach students can, through the Model UN program, be involved in the vital decisions made in the international affairs arena by diplomats and world-leaders daily. This first hand involvement leads to a deeper understanding of world issues and the context these issues are negotiated and resolved within.

### **Cooperative Learning**

Research concludes that the Model UN environment, as a cooperative learning center, is a valuable education tool. Cooperative learning promotes higher achievement, greater motivation, more positive interpersonal relations among students, more positive attitudes toward the subject area and teacher, greater self esteem and psychological health, more accurate perspectives, and greater social skills. (Johnson and Johnson, 1988)

In simulating the actual workings of the UN, the Model UN provides an essential feature of the cooperative learning environment. In preparing to go to a Model UN, each student becomes an "expert" in one aspect of an issue or policy for their delegation. At conference all the "experts" from different delegations gather in a subcommittee to discuss their issue. The "experts" then return to their delegation in a plenary session and teach the others what they have learned. This feature is part of the cooperative learning environment where students working together to accomplish shared goals are given two responsibilities: to learn the assigned materials and make sure that all other members of the group do likewise. (Johnson and Johnson, 1988)

### **Multicultural Education**

In 1983 Montgomery and Diehl wrote, "Based in UN policy-making bodies and issues, these games can help students break out of their own prejudices and appreciate the frustration felt by members who perceive developed nations as controlling economic growth and arresting change." A decade later, multicultural requirements were in the process of being installed in most universities. Model UN fulfills the objectives of multicultural education as stated by James Banks, "the major theorists and researchers in multicultural education agree that the movement is designed to restructure educational institutions so that all students, including middle-class white males, will acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in a culturally and ethnically diverse nation and world." (1993)

## **Future - Focused Skills**

Through this hands-on approach the more than 100,000 students who participate in Model UN throughout each year gain a global perspective on world problems, leadership, speaking, writing and teamwork skills they can apply to their future lives. The nature of this active involvement in learning allows students to witness the consequences of their decisions and actions.

Beyond the verbal and writing skills students gain, Model UN can contribute to the mental development of students. They can expand both cognitive ability and subject matter tolerance. In practical terms, self-confidence of students in having participated in a large group and awareness of political issues will certainly increase.

## **Who Benefits?**

Model UN offers opportunities for anyone who wants to learn about the processes of international diplomacy. Each country represented at a conference needs a diverse delegation to be successful. To succeed the delegation will need to have followers as well as leaders, researchers to determine a national policy, writers to convey the country's position and speakers to present and support that position to the body.

The teamwork needed to prepare a good delegation is excellent experience for students who work mostly on papers and tests in college but are expected to function as team members in a work force. This is one aspect of Model UN that is valuable to business school students. The communication and negotiation aspects of Model UN should also be considered by some non-traditional majors as justification for attending a Model UN.

Model UN is not a program just for International Affairs or Political Science students. The broad nature of the skills learned cut across nearly all majors and it is valuable for any major if the student has an interest in the functions of international negotiation and policy-making. Former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld stated: "everything will be all right when people stop thinking of the United Nations as a weird Picasso abstraction and see it as a drawing they made themselves." (Childers, p. 8) A first step in the process of understanding that will lead to a clearer understanding of the UN is education.

## Part IV: Model UN Instruction

### **Educator Preparation**

Without well-prepared background materials, students are likely to stumble through what could have been an exceptional and memorable learning experience. An instructor preparing a delegation to attend an established Model United Nations Conference should do several things to help ensure a positive learning experience for their students. These include researching a workable curriculum format for their proposed plan of study that includes a comprehensive preparation for rules and procedures, country background and information, resolution drafting and verbal resolution support and, most importantly, background in the United Nations functions and international diplomacy. This preparation should also include researching the program and staff of each conference being considered, and researching the proper type of country for their group to represent.

Due to the diverse nature of the many conferences held across the country and the world, programs vary greatly in size, educational goals and overall professionalism. Staffs of Model UN conferences are generally composed of undergraduates who have been participants in Model UN programs in the past. These staffs will vary greatly as volunteer organizations do and one should look for a conference run by knowledgeable staffers who have been educated about the educational philosophy and purpose of the Model UN as well as the actual logistics of running a conference. Montgomery and Diehl suggest that all other things being equal “(1) programs that have fairly well-articulated educational goals are preferable to those that do not; (2) programs that develop and distribute detailed preparation materials are superior to those that do not; (3) Model UN programs that do not emphasize competition are generally more accurate and educational than those that do.” (p. 366) Their final point about competition is important for a realistic simulation because if students feel pressure from you or from their delegation to win awards they are more likely to do things that are out of character for the country you are representing, making the simulation less realistic for everyone.

Attending an established conference is beneficial to students because they are exposed to the broad variety of simulated bodies of the UN. It is a danger inherent in classroom simulations that students walk away thinking the United Nations as a whole and the Security Council are one and the same thing and function in the same way. Attending an established conference can often be cost prohibitive, but it is an experience worth the efforts to establish funding. Therefore, one should also include costs in their research of specific conferences. Travel and lodging can be cost prohibitive enough, one should look for a conference with good arrangements for lodging and reasonable fees so as not to be more cost prohibitive than necessary. Model UN is an experience worth self-funding if institutional support is not available, to that end a fund raising guide is attached as an addendum. A good place to begin your research for a conference is with the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA.) They publish a Model UN calendar that lists the conferences held nationally and internationally.



## **Student Preparation**

Members of extracurricular clubs obviously have self-motivation to succeed at a Model UN conference. Class members often need extra motivation from an instructor who can steer them toward a solid basis of knowledge about the issues before the United Nations. A student benefits most from participation in a Model UN Conference when he is able to go to the conference confident that he has a solid knowledge of the issues that will be discussed. It is important that a student have a solid understanding of her country's position in these issues as well. If a student comes to a conference lacking these fundamentals she will likely be able to pick up what she has missed along the way at the expense of the real learning experience - multilateral diplomacy in action. Hazleton and Mahurin note "the simulation takes on a different focus for the more prepared students as they are better able to assume their 'roles' and actually engage in the 'practice' of international diplomacy." (p. 165) To this end, it is most important that the student be prepared to learn about the workings of diplomacy and the UN by being able to realistically portray their country at conference.

Notes

### Notes for Part I - What is a Model UN?

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### Notes and references for Part II - The Value of Simulating the UN

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Notes and references for Part IV - Model UN Instruction

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