



Excelsior College

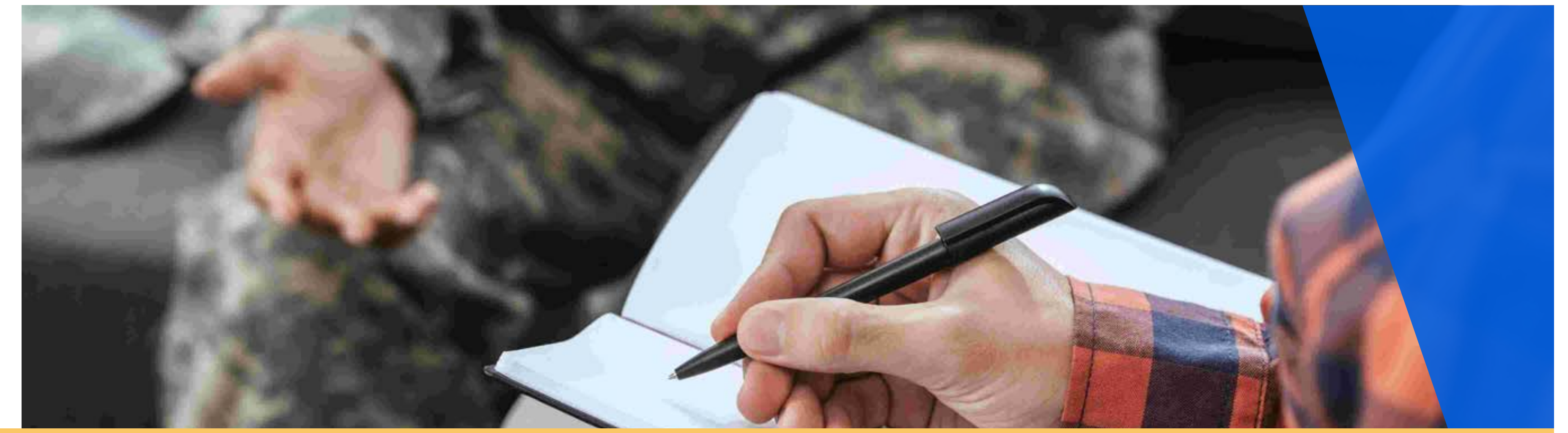


MUZZY LANE

Case Study

The Institution: Excelsior College is a not-for-profit distance education college focused on providing education for adult learners. The average student age is 36, with learners aged 30-39 comprising 37% of the student body and another 24% of students in their 40s. Current military members, veterans, and full-time workers represent 35%, 14%, and 72% of the student body, respectively.

How Excelsior College Uses Muzzy Lane Simulations to Build Students' Social-Emotional Intelligence



As an online learning institution, Excelsior College has been working to improve student engagement and deliver social-emotional learning in nontraditional learning environments since its inception in 1971. When Excelsior launched a game-based learning initiative, educators in two very different departments—health sciences and history—saw it as an opportunity to instill empathy in students no matter where they were learning.

The Challenge:

Because distance learning is often text-heavy, Excelsior was interested in engaging students through educational activities that provided a break from traditional assignments like essays or research papers.

“I come at my work from an equity perspective,” said Anna Zendell, who is currently a senior faculty program director for the School of Graduate Studies, overseeing the Master of Science in Health Sciences degree program.

The Solution:

Simulations, or educational games, developed with Muzzy Lane.



“And I had this vision in my mind of creating some kind of gaming experience that debunked myths about issues such as food deserts, poverty, and choice in nutrition, because they’re dangerous for healthcare workers to take into their careers with them. They can really hurt people.”

At the time, Excelsior had a director of game-based learning, who gave Zendell a list of vendors to consider partnering with to help bring her vision to life. She settled on Muzzy Lane for a very specific reason.

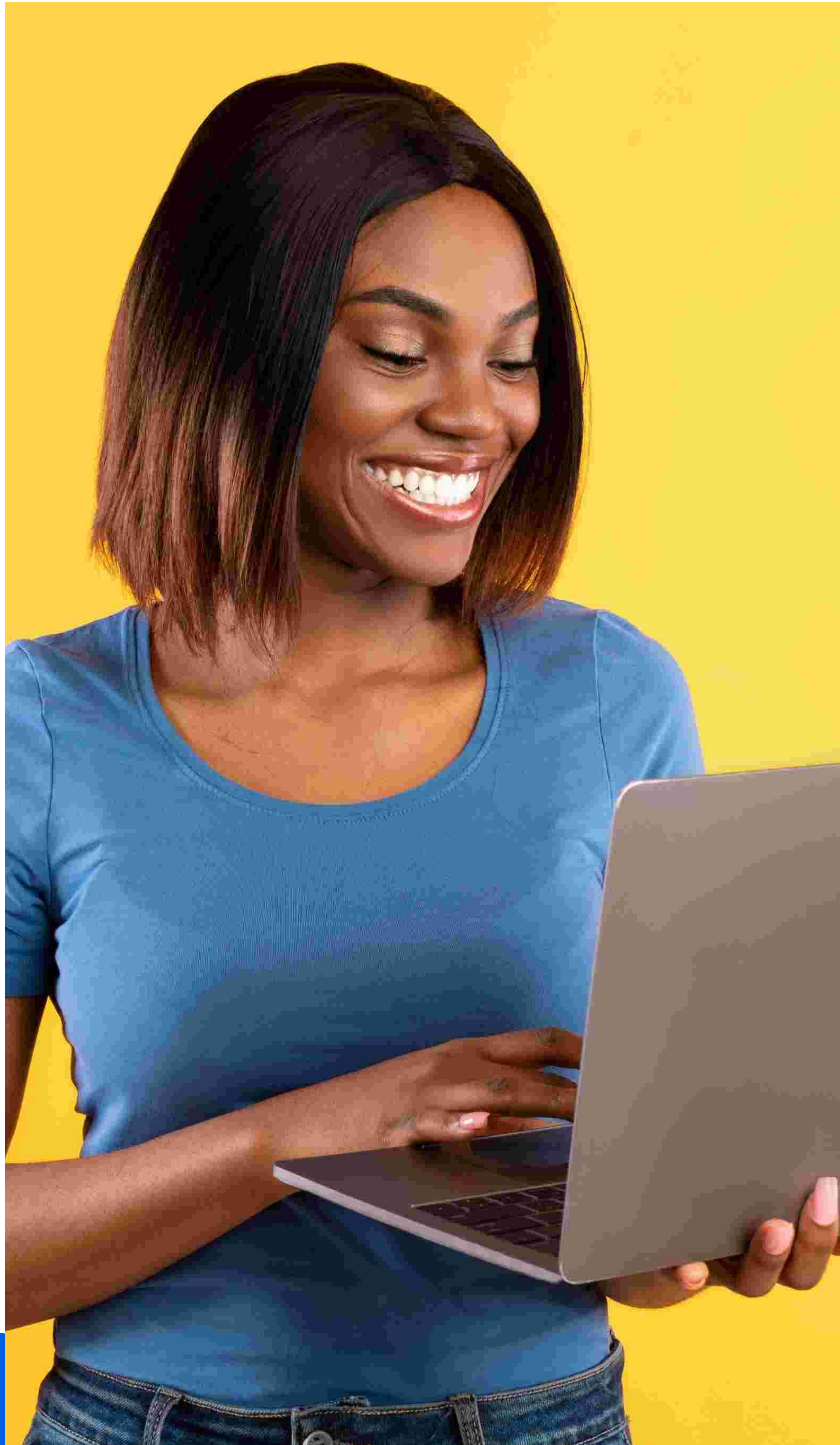
“They talked about the pedagogy of games, and the others I considered weren't doing that at all,” Zendell explained.

Health Science Simulations

Working with a registered dietitian as a content expert and Muzzy Lane as the authoring platform, Zendell developed two simulations for a class called Nutrition for Health and Wellness.

“The first simulation centered around the DASH diet for hypertension,” Zendell said.

“We created a short game that had students go to a fictitious grocery store and purchase foods that align to the DASH diet and then talk about the barriers they encountered, which we built into the game.”



The content expert, a registered dietitian who taught the nutrition course regularly, collected nutrient information on a variety of foods that students were able to buy in the game, and the team built prompts into the simulation. They were charged to purchase food for a full day, encompassing breakfast, lunch, dinner, and several snacks. Students had a limit on the total amount of sodium that could be in the purchased food and were encouraged to work through the simulation as often as they wanted to practice shopping for a particular diet.

“That game was placed into the early part of the course, to get the students used to playing games,” Zendell said.

“We embedded the games into online discussion, as well, so students could talk about it, and they had to write a reflective essay about it. The students loved it, and it let them get comfortable with the interface.”

In the second simulation she and the content expert created for the course, Zendell introduced a lot more barriers.

“We put them on a high-stakes shopping trip for a family of four that had been living in poverty for a long time and who faced many of the struggles and health conditions that co-occur with poverty,” Zendell said.

“The family has a mother and father, a grandmother, and a teenage son. Students have \$25 to buy the family food for four days. Mom and Dad work long hours, so the teenager has to do the cooking. Hence, food has to be easy to prepare. They travel to and from the market on the bus, so the food has to be carryable. The grandmother has loose dentures and no dental coverage to get them fixed, so ease of chewing is a factor. The parents have hypertension and diabetes. Each of these chronic conditions has specific nutritional needs for disease control that have to be factored into food selections.”



Zendell said she was worried that all those challenges were setting up a no-win situation for students, but persevered because these kinds of constraints reflect the lived experiences of many Americans.

“A common myth is that all poor families get public assistance, and this is far from true. But the beauty of this is that students can do the game as often as they like, and they learn the hardships that real families face and the decisions people are making every day,” Zendell said.

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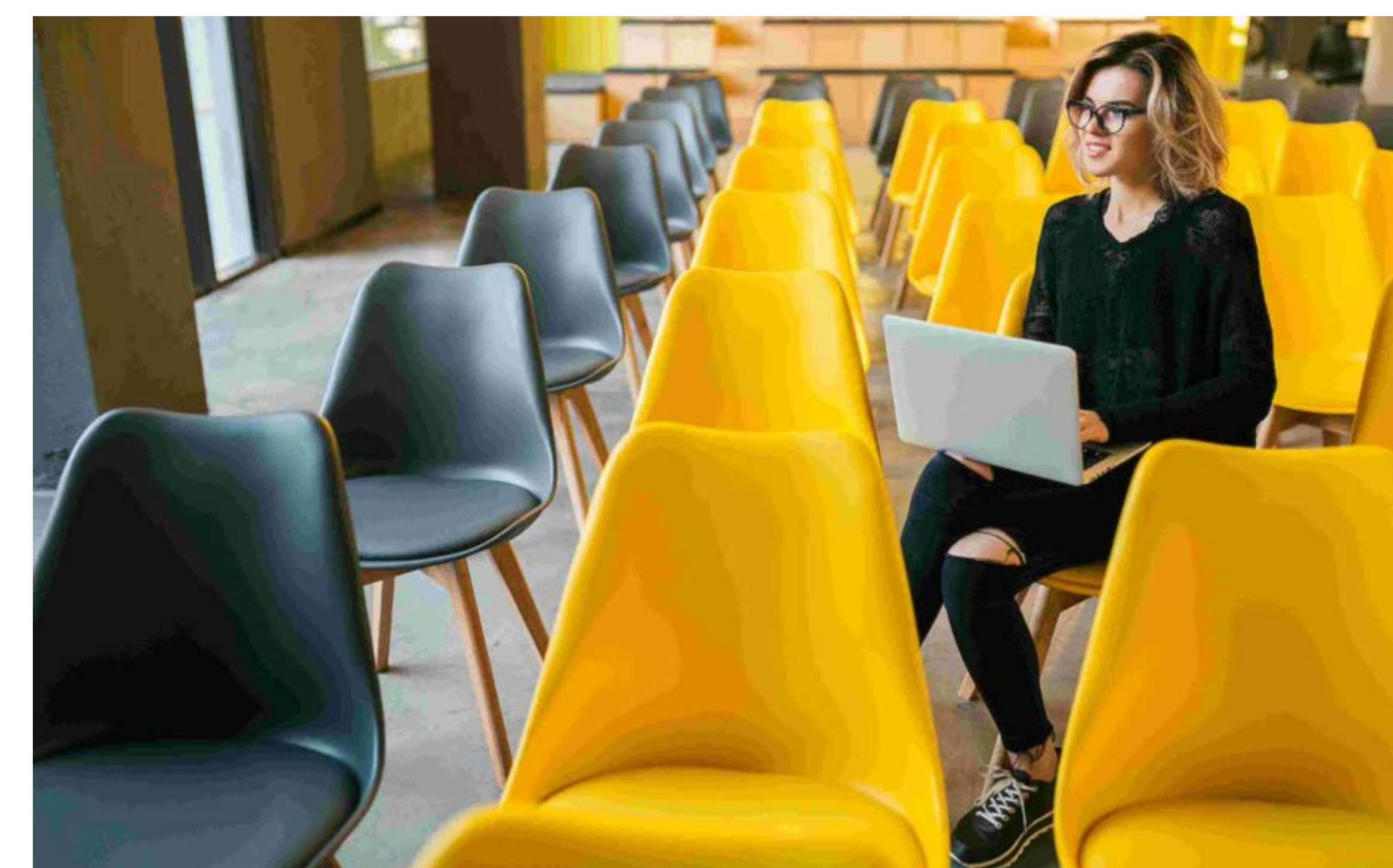
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“And, interestingly, I've had a lot of students who have taken this challenge to their own families and reported back to the instructor on how it went. So they really take it to heart.”

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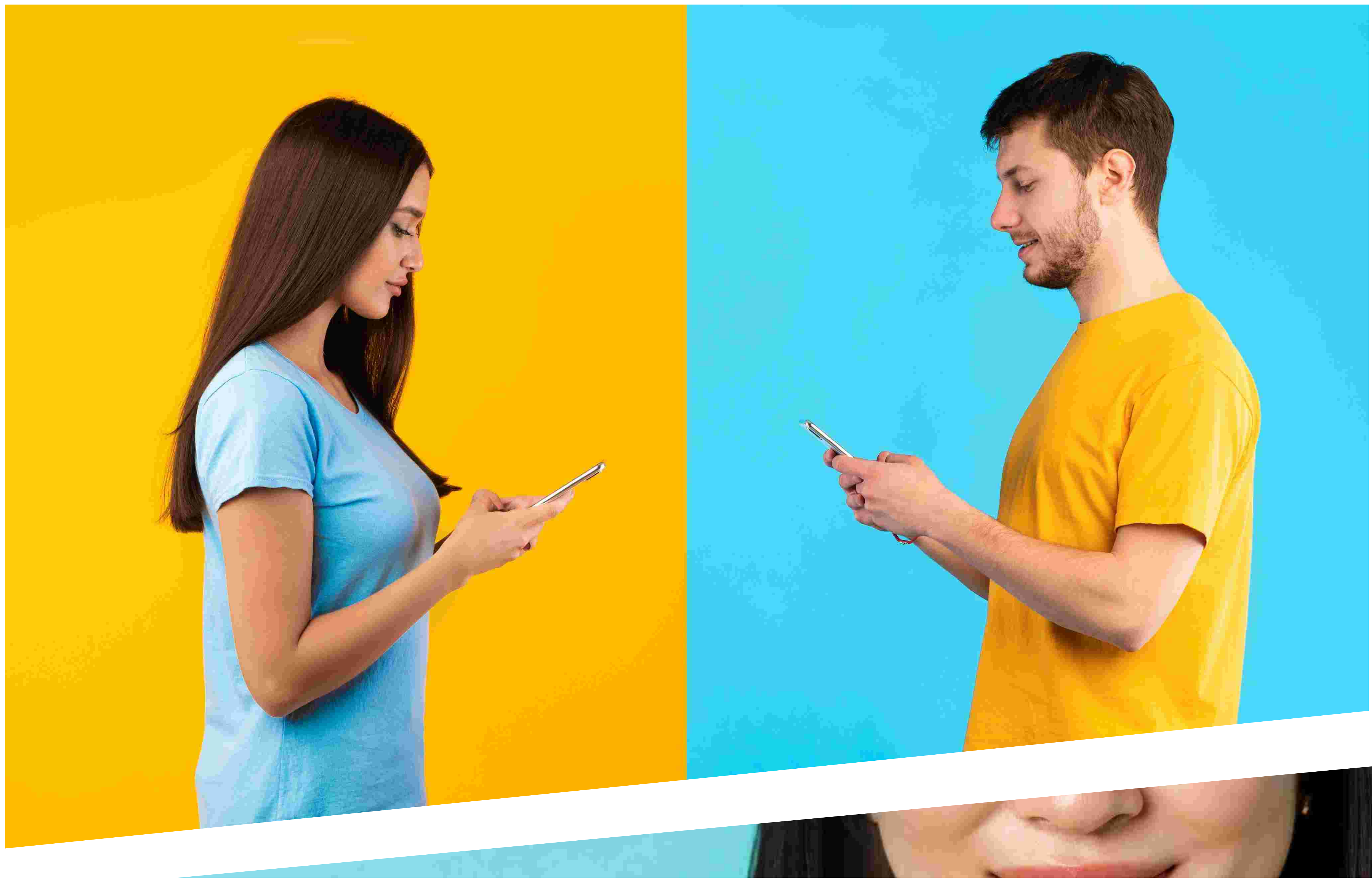
▶ [HOW IT WORKS](#)



Zendell said that change of heart was visible through students' academic journey, culminating with their capstone courses, despite the fact that the simulations weren't designed to provide new information.

“We knew they would pretty much learn the same things, just in a different way. We still have the textbook, we have the videos, we have journal articles, we have sources for all the content someone is going to learn as they study nutrition,” Zendell said.

The goal of the simulations was more about challenging students' assumptions.



“Maybe they were blaming people for the dietary choices they made, or at least thought diet was strictly a matter of choices, without realizing how everything from the built environment to personal health conditions and the economic toll can constrain people’s dietary choices. When the students who had been through the simulations came to my capstone courses, I saw that empathy, that understanding of the lived experiences of other people carrying through beyond this course. I had not seen that before.”



▶ Historical Perspective Simulations

Mary Berkery, the program director for history at Excelsior College, also developed simulations for her course HIS350: World War I with content expert Dr. John Riley and Muzzy Lane. As with the health science games, Berkery said the point was not to teach students new content, but to develop their understanding of the perspectives and decisions of people who lived through and shaped historical events.

In Excelsior’s first history simulation, “The July Crisis: Be Kaiser Wilhelm,” students view the leadup and beginning of World War I through the eyes of Kaiser Wilhelm. In the characters of the Kaiser, they speak with, for example, Russian and British diplomats and the Kaiser’s “Cousin Nicky” who also happens to be the Czar Nicholas of Russia. Their decisions along the way affect the support their people show them or the amount of money the empire has, among other things.



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In the second simulation, “The True Cost of War: Be the General,” students play as a general commanding troops engaged in trench warfare. They make decisions such as how to gather intelligence—by balloon, military plane, or a night time raid?—and if they should use poison gas. “We’re all prone to presentism, but these games help students break out of that so they can judge the past on its own merits instead of through a contemporary mindset,” Berkery said.

“The decision about using poison gas, for example, is an easy ‘no’ today because we know its aftereffects, but for a general trying to break the stalemate in the brutal trench warfare, the cost-benefit analysis is going to be very different.”

In the final game, “Making the World Safe for Democracy: Be President Wilson,” students step into Woodrow Wilson’s shoes. “This one is a little different than the other two in that there is only one outcome and the students know that going in,” Berkery said. “This simulation always ends with students going to Congress to request a declaration of war. Along the way, they gain the support of the people and Congress so that request goes smoothly, and the country is prepared to go to war. They speak with military personnel to decide if they should institute a draft and talk with a suffragist, a labor leader, and congresspeople, among others.”

There are no right or wrong answers, and students aren’t graded on the simulations because the point is experiential, to develop greater historical empathy. Students must complete the simulations, and they are required to participate in discussions about them afterwards, but they all get 100% on the assignment—worth about 10% of their final grade—if they meet those requirements.

“Right after the simulation, students engage in discussion to unpack it,” Berkery explained. “They look at primary sources and their textbooks to put it into context, and they often go back and do it again two or three times to see how things shake out differently when their decisions change. Finally, at the end of the course, they turn in a research project on a topic that is related to one of the three simulations.”



The Results:

Berkery says the course is a huge success, explaining that it is Excelsior’s “most popular upper-level history course year after year and is also one of the most highly evaluated by students. It is a credit to Muzzy Lane’s development process and the Author tool that the simulations have continued to run smoothly for each group of students in the course since 2016, even as we changed our LMS.”