

Siebel Center for Design

DTX 495: The Designer's Guide to Resisting Oppression Fall 2024

Impact Report

Semester Offered: Fall 2024

Development and Purpose of the Course

This course is a collaboration between the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) and the University of Johannesburg (UJ). It examines the distinctions between historical patterns of enslavement and the types of abuses that are currently defined as modern-day slavery. Most importantly, this course equips students with human-centered design (HCD) tools to develop solutions to address these problems. HCD is a research methodology that leverages human experiences, behaviors, and social contexts to create practical solutions for global challenges. This course combines the study of history with HCD to come up with solutions to the issues of modern-day slavery.

Following an HCD approach, faculty members and employees from UIUC, UJ, and the Siebel Center for Design (SCD) collaborated to review relevant literature and design a hybrid course that includes a thorough exploration of HCD, discussions on modern-day oppression in the United States of America (USA) and South Africa (SA), multimodal content delivery, and frequent assessment and feedback checkpoints. Following these design principles, UIUC offered an 8-week course composed of 15 in-person course sessions which included 5 online, synchronous, collaborative sessions using Zoom between UIUC and UJ that introduced students to HCD and how HCD tools can be used resist, address, and resolve various examples of modern-day oppression. The first iteration of the course ran in Fall 2024.

Course Objectives

The course's objectives centered on 1) understanding the fundamentals of HCD, 2) comprehending modern-day slavery in the USA and SA, 3) interconnecting HCD with social issues (e.g., forced labor and human trafficking), 4) developing empathy and ethical awareness, and 5) encouraging critical thinking and reflection.

Brief Description of the Course

The course is a hybrid 8-week course consisting of 15 course sessions with 5 sessions being synchronous, online, and collaborative using Zoom between UIUC and UJ. It included the following assignments: Introduction to Human-Centered Design, Design Thinking Tools: Empathy Mapping & Journey Mapping, multiple Read & Document Your Understanding reflections, two Watch & Reflect assignments, a Listen & Document Your Understanding reflection, HCD Workbook Assignments for 5 weeks of the course, HCD Synthesis, HCD Ideation, HCD Prototyping, and Final Group Presentation.

The course included weekly assignments as well as a final group presentation that required the creation of a low-fidelity storyboard or other form of prototyping. The weekly assignments included multimodal content delivery that students needed to complete after each course session to ensure sufficient engagement in the course materials had occurred. Assignments were carefully designed to engage the students in applying concepts they learn during the homework assignments and in-class discussions and activities to understand or analyze real-life examples of modern-day oppression. The synchronous, collaborative sessions were designed to allow the UIUC and UJ students to learn about examples of modern-day oppression in the USA and SA, respectively, from their peers and how HCD tools can be used to address these issues. Discord was also used in the course to encourage further dialogue and discussion between the UIUC and UJ students. The Final Group Presentation provided students with a performance task that required them to use what they had learned in the course to respond to a specific real-life scenario of modern-day oppression using HCD tools. Students presented their Final Group Presentation in the last synchronous, collaborative session between UIUC and UJ. During the Final Group Presentation course session, one group from UIUC and two groups from UJ presented their low-fidelity prototypes. Each group was given 20 minutes to present with 10 minutes for discussion and Questions and Answers (Q and A).

Participants

In Fall 2024, 3 students (2 Males, 1 Female) from UIUC took DTX 495 and 8 students (3 Males, 5 Females) took the accompanying UJ course. The UJ students were all Honours students studying African Studies with concentrations in History or Politics and International Relations. For UIUC, one student was an undergraduate student majoring in English, one was a graduate student in the master's in Industrial Design program, and the other was a doctoral student in Informatics.

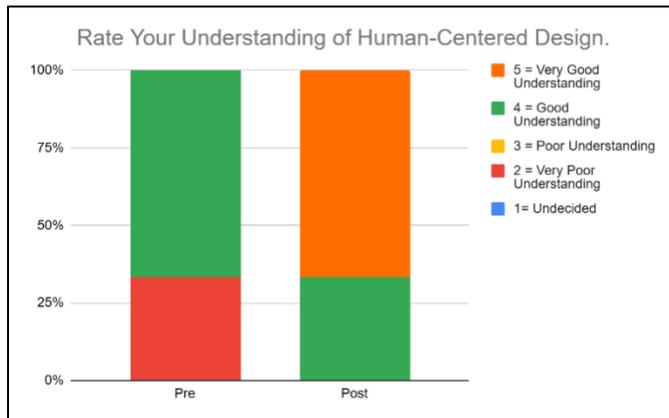
Evaluation

To evaluate the impact of the course on the students' learning experience, a Retro-Pre and Post Survey was administered at the end of the course. The survey was designed to measure the impact of the course on students' understanding of HCD; students' ability to brainstorm, create, prototype, and communicate online; and students' understanding of modern-day oppression in the USA and SA. The survey also included sections inviting the students to give feedback on the collaborative course sessions and general feedback about the course. Six students (2 UIUC and 4 UJ) completed the Retro-Pre and Post Survey at the end of the course.

Students' Understanding of HCD

To evaluate the impact of the course on students' understanding of HCD, students were asked to respond to two 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=Undecided, 2=Very Poor Understanding, 3=Poor Understanding, 4=Good Understanding, 5=Very Good Understanding) and two open ended questions: 1) What was your definition of Human-Centered Design before participating in this course?, and 2) What is your definition of Human-Centered Design now?

The chart below indicates the students' understanding of HCD improved after taking the course.

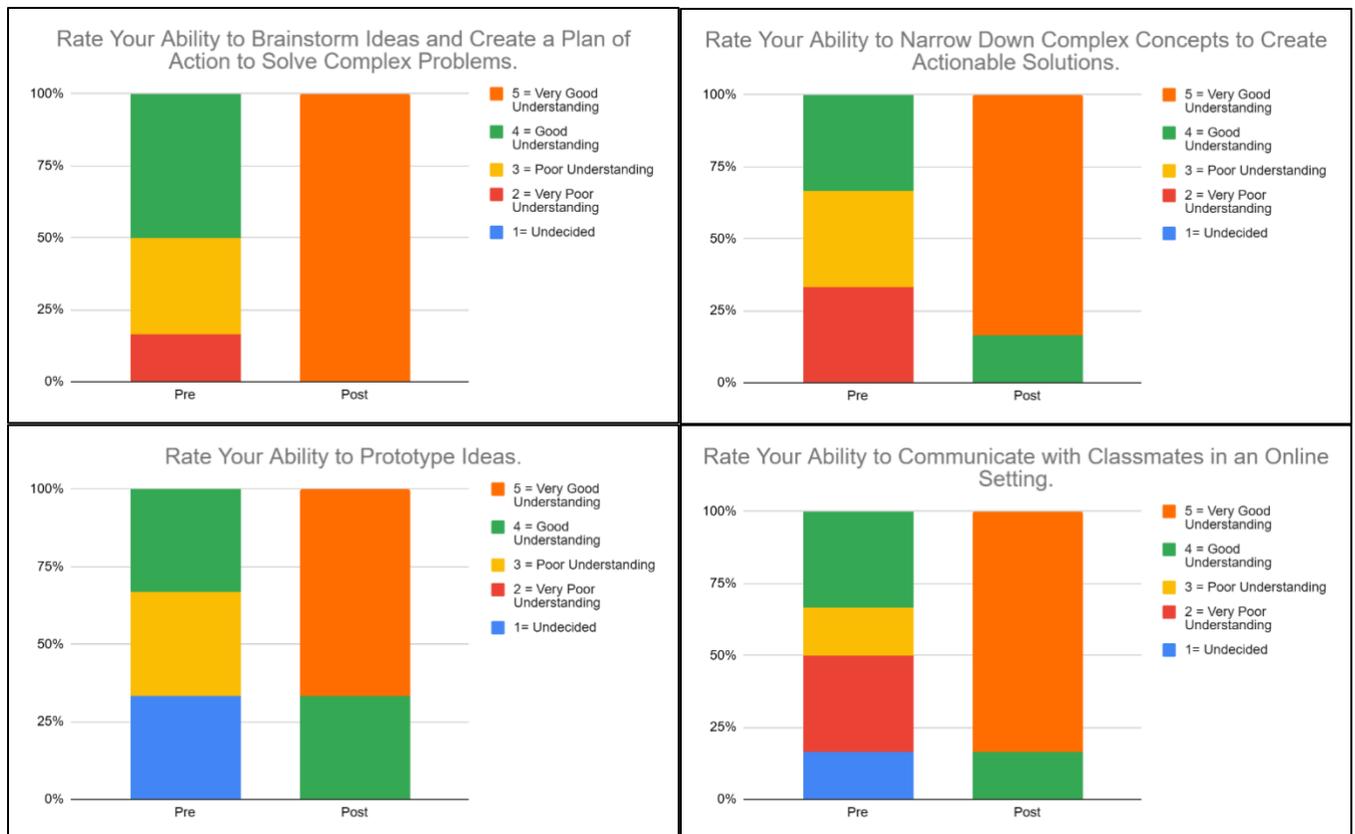


In addition, examining the students' responses to the two open ended questions indicated that the students possessed a more nuanced and detailed understanding of HCD after completing the course. Two students did not have a definition of HCD prior to the course ("I had none," and "Not clear") and another student defined HCD as "Something that had to do with designing." After completing the course, all students were able to define HCD with only one response being limited in scope and explanation (i.e., "Life Plan(chat)"). The other responses reflect a more comprehensive definition (e.g., "A tool that provides one with the possible options of solving a problem," "Human Centered Design is a way of tackling problems and being uncomfortable by putting yourself into the shoes of those who cannot be accommodated [sic] by Modern society, and ruminating on the lived experiences so that you may go on to utilize this understanding," and "Using forward thinking through empathy and problem analysis to come up with solutions to real life issues and problems") that highlight the iterative processes of HCD, the importance of empathy, and using HCD as a problem-solving tool. The survey also shows the students gained insights and clarity throughout the course and have moved from a limited understanding of HCD to a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of HCD.

Students' Ability to Brainstorm, Create, Prototype, and Communicate Online

To evaluate the impact the course had on students' understanding of the HCD iterative process, students were asked to respond to eight 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=Undecided, 2=Very Poor Understanding, 3=Poor Understanding, 4=Good Understanding, 5=Very Good Understanding).

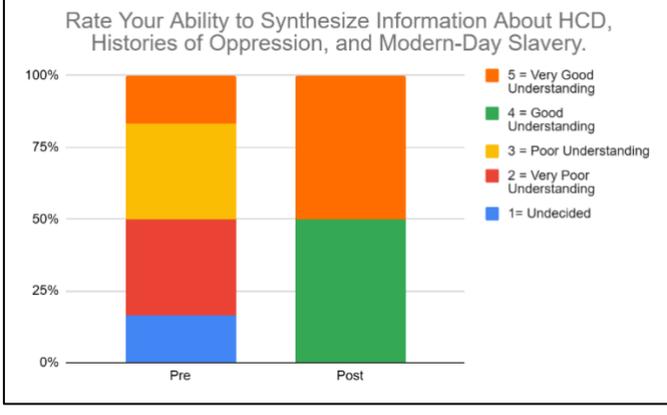
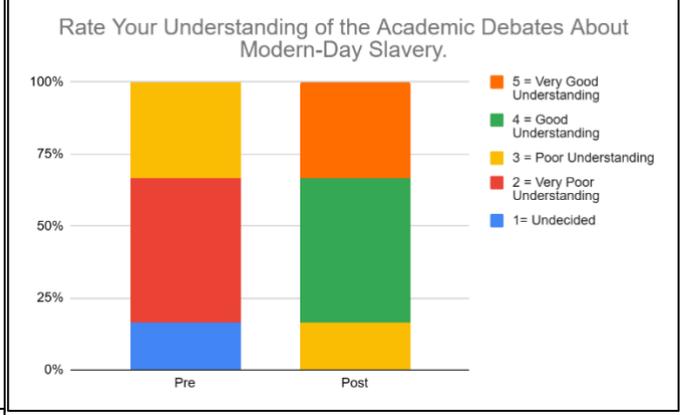
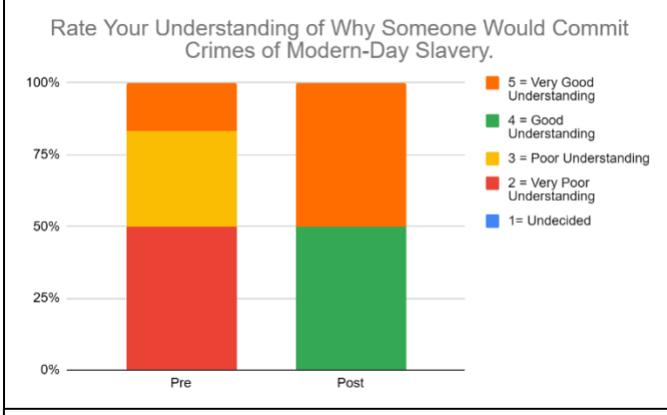
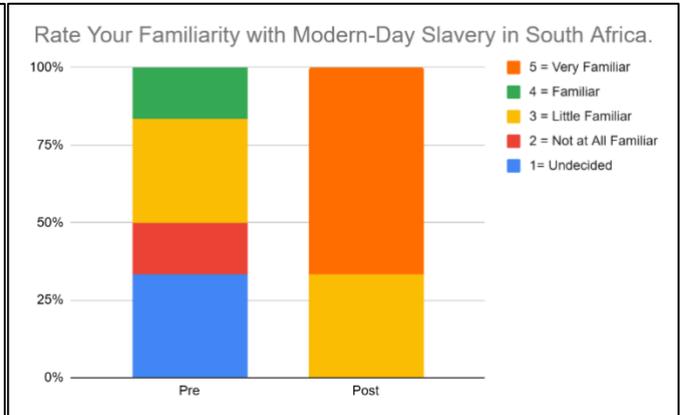
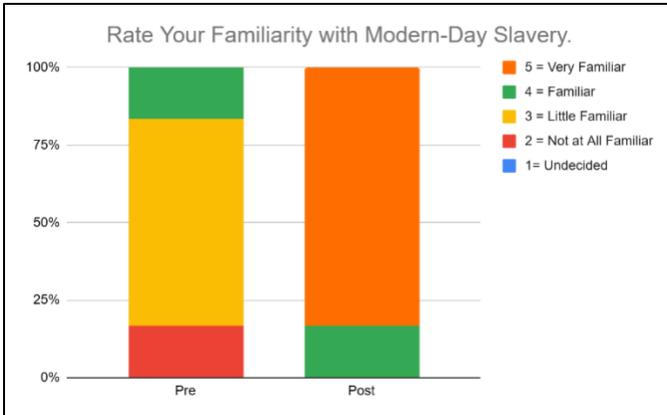
The following charts examine students' understanding of the HCD iterative process before and after completing the course. Specifically, the charts document the students' ability to brainstorm ideas and create a plan of action to solve complex problems; to narrow down complex concepts to create actionable solutions; to prototype ideas; and to communicate with classmates in an online setting. Based on the responses, the students' ability to brainstorm ideas, create plans and actionable solutions, prototype ideas, and communicate in an online setting improved after taking the course.



Students' Understanding of Modern-Day Slavery

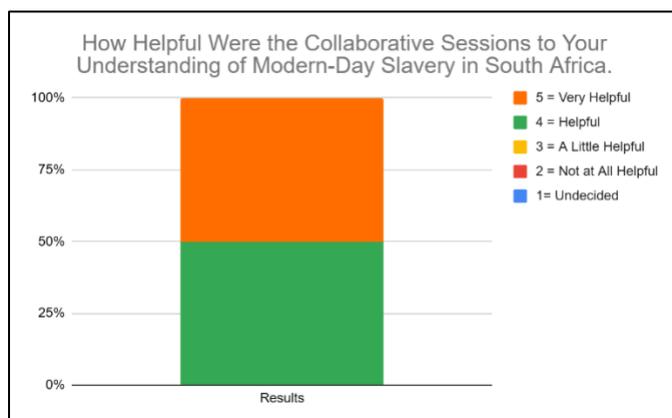
To evaluate the impact of the course on students' understanding of modern-day slavery (a primary example of oppression discussed throughout the course), students were asked to respond to six 5-point Likert-scale questions using the following criteria (1=Undecided, 2=Not at all familiar, 3=Little familiar, 4=Familiar, 5=Very familiar) and eight 5-point Likert-scale questions using a slightly different criteria (1=Undecided, 2=Very Poor Understanding, 3=Poor Understanding, 4=Good Understanding, 5=Very Good Understanding).

The charts below show the students' understanding of modern-day slavery prior to and after completing the course. Specifically, the charts examine students' understanding of modern-day slavery in the USA and SA; the lived experiences of victims of modern-day slavery; why someone would commit crimes of modern-day slavery; the academic debates about modern-day slavery; and the students' ability to synthesize information about HCD, histories of oppression, and modern-day slavery. Based on these responses, the students' familiarity and understanding of modern-day slavery significantly improved after taking the course.

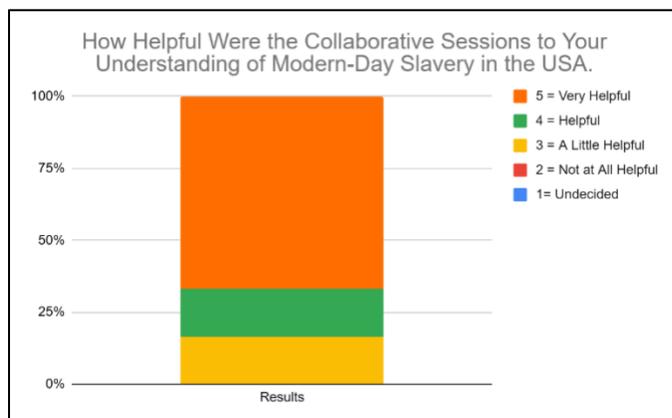


Students' Feedback on the Collaborative Course Sessions

To evaluate the impact of the online, synchronous, collaborative course sessions, students were asked to respond to two 5-point Likert-scale questions (1=Undecided, 2=Not at All Helpful, 3=A Little Helpful, 4=Helpful, 5=Very Helpful) and four open ended questions. Two open ended questions encouraged students to explain why they responded to the two 5-point Likert-scale questions. The two other questions asked students what they learned from the collaborative course sessions and what they learned from the Discord channels used throughout the course.



Most student responses (4 of 6) mentioned the ability to learn from different perspectives as why the students found the collaborative sessions helpful to their understanding of modern-day slavery in SA. One student response indicated they benefitted from the exchange of experiences and stories between SA and USA. Another student shared they were able to “relate better with my colleagues” due to the collaborative sessions.



Students' responses about understanding modern-day slavery in the USA showed most students found the collaborative sessions helpful. One student said they were confused because the UIUC students focused on several examples of modern-day slavery rather than one example which is valid. Another student indicated they learned a lot from the collaborative sessions and from the other students. One response detailed the unique perspectives in the UIUC class (i.e., the three students enrolled in the course are all international students) and how these unique perspectives allowed the students to form “ideas that were more empathetic toward migrant workers.”

Examining the students' responses to the two Likert-scale questions and accompanying open ended questions indicate the synchronous, collaborative Zoom sessions were helpful in increasing the students' understanding of modern-day slavery in the USA and SA.

Overall, what did you learn from the collaboration sessions between UIUC and UJ?

The students' responses to this question vary but express the benefits of collaborative online international learning (COIL). One student summarized their learning as “[t]eam work,” while another student responded that the collaboration sessions allowed them to gain “a better understanding on human trafficking in America and South Africa.” The other responses focused on the “power of collaboration and idea exchange” and how resource sharing and different perspectives are valuable to learning.

Overall, what did you learn from the Discord discussions between UIUC and UJ?

One student admitted they did not learn anything from the Discord discussions, and two other students shared they were not familiar with Discord prior to the course and had some technical difficulties. However, these students also mentioned the course allowed them to learn how to use Discord and mentioned Discord was a good method to collaborate between UIUC and UJ. The three other responses spoke about the “idea exchange and insightful debates” that occurred on the Discord channels, how Discord allowed for “interacting, swapping ideas and getting feedback” from foreign sources, and that the Discord discussions helped build awareness about relevant issues in the USA and SA. Based on the responses, most students benefitted from the Discord channel discussions and enjoyed the use of this platform.

General Feedback

To collect students' feedback on the course, the survey asked the following questions.

Did the course meet your expectations?

The six students all responded that the course met their expectations.

What activities of this course did you find to be most beneficial? Why?

The students found various activities most beneficial to their learning with the collaboration sessions, in-class discussions, and the mind mapping activity being the most frequently mentioned. One student mentioned groupwork as the most beneficial activity because it allowed them to work with different people while researching a shared problem. Another student mentioned the use of Miro boards to collect ideas and collaborate with their teammates. The use of documentaries was also valued by a student because the documentaries helped the student learn from a different perspective.

What do you think about the use of online collaborative sessions in the course?

The students' responses reference the value of the synchronous, online collaborative sessions. The responses mention the sessions were “good,” “nice,” “useful,” and “[v]ery useful.” One student shared how much they enjoyed using the Miro board in the course. Two of the responses offered suggestions about the synchronous, online collaborative sessions (i.e., one response mentioned the time difference negatively affected the UJ students and another

response recommended changing the sessions to every other week instead of weekly). Lastly, one student response detailed how they enjoyed learning from peers around the world and the importance of learning beyond what is familiar.

What do you think about the use of Discord channels in the course?

Three students' responses found the use of Discord channels to be "helpful," while two other responses thought the use of Discord channels were "useful" in the course. One student mentioned the use of Discord channels was a good idea, but they struggled using the platform due to a lack of familiarity.

What was the most important learning takeaway from this course?

The most important learning takeaways for students were the different forms of human trafficking, how slavery continues to evolve around the world, and how collective awareness and empathy can help address modern-day slavery. Additionally, one student mentioned the continued exploitation of developing countries for labor and another student's response referenced the use of HCD to address complex issues.

What was your most enjoyable part of this course?

Students found numerous aspects of the course enjoyable with many highlighting the in-class discussions and assignments (e.g., the HCD Workbook and Final Group Presentation) as well as the collaboration sessions.

What was the most challenging part of this course?

Students identified various challenges except for one student who responded that nothing was challenging in the course. One student stated the beginning of the course was difficult due to the vast amount of information covered. Another student shared the course readings were dense and should have been more equitably spread out. Other challenges included prototyping and identifying solutions in the Final Group Presentation, difficulties in character mapping and understanding all parties involved in modern-day slavery beyond the victims, and the time difference between the courses.

What topics you felt were Not Adequately Covered in the course and you wanted to learn more about?

One student did not respond to this question, and two other responses mentioned no topics were inadequately covered in the course. One student requested more case studies on modern-day slavery and another response wanted to learn more about HCD prototyping and storyboard creation. The final response recommended more sources/references on racial discrimination in the USA, the inclusion of a bibliography of sources and references for students to use, and the use of a discussion board for students to respond to their peers.

How likely will you recommend this course to a friend?

The students all responded that they are "Very Likely" to recommend this course to a friend.

What changes do you recommend for future iterations of this course?

For future iterations of the course, students offered several suggestions. One student recommended completing the course should result in a degree and/or certificate. Another student referenced the time frame of the course. One of the UJ students commented that the two teams from this course should have presented to their classmates in person rather than trying to present primarily to the UIUC class via Zoom. Other responses recommended more interactions from the UIUC students on Discord and the inclusion of makerspace sessions to allow the students to develop physical prototypes and integrate more design thinking into the course.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your experience with the course or suggestions for improvement?

Four of the students had no additional comments or suggestions besides one student sharing the course was a great experience. One student wrote, “[t]he time of the course is quite little,” which may reflect how the UIUC course only ran for 8 weeks. One student provided their concerns that the time difference between Illinois, USA, and Johannesburg, SA, resulted in the UJ class taking place until late in the evenings. There is an 8-hour time difference between UIUC and UJ, so this comment is valid and understandable.

Recommendations for Future Iterations of the Course

Considering the positive impact of the course on the students’ learning experience and based on students’ feedback, future iterations of the course must 1) maintain the focus on HCD and empathy, 2) maintain the historical analysis of modern-day slavery and consider expanding the scope of the course to include examples of oppression from other countries, 3) maintain the multimodal content delivery, 3) maintain the use of Zoom or another app that allows for synchronous, online collaborative sessions, 4) maintain the use of Discord channels but require more interactions from all students, 5) keep the reading and reflection assignments but equitably distribute these readings throughout the entirety of the course, 6) ensure that the course workload is well-balanced throughout the course to accommodate students’ schedules and commitments, 7) include a course session focused on training students to use the apps and platforms used to collaborate in the course, and 8) consider scheduling the course to start at an earlier time (e.g., 8 a.m. in Illinois) to better accommodate the time difference between UIUC and UJ.

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