Vision
To simplify the complex and taxing process of applying for asylum in the United States by:
- providing a user-friendly and interactive online interface for filling out the I-589 form
- connecting asylum-seekers with pro bono lawyers who can review their applications before submission

Background and Motivation
In 2013, almost 90,000 refugees from across the world filed for asylum in the United States, claiming a legitimate fear of returning to their countries of origin and facing persecution. Under United States law, a refugee has a one-year window after entering the country to file an affirmative application in which they present their claim for asylum under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). In their asylum application, the refugee must present a credible (and corroborated) claim that he or she has a "well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (INA).

The process of seeking asylum is long, challenging and often requires multiple rounds of appeal. For all affirmative asylum-seekers, this process begins with the I-589 form (http://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/files/form/i-589.pdf). Published by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the I-589 is a 12-page densely-packed tangle of over a hundred questions and fields to fill out, replete with miniscule text and legalese. For those asylum-seekers who feel overwhelmed, the USCIS provided a 13-page "instruction" packet containing almost 10,000 words of dense, complex legal language explaining the form and asylum requirements.

Filling out the I-589 properly and comprehensively is crucial for making a successful asylum claim. A missing piece of information or mistake on the form can undermine the asylum-seeker’s credibility and have extreme negative consequences on the asylum-seeker’s chances. Studies have shown that asylum-seekers have a significantly higher chance of receiving asylum if they have legal representation and assistance throughout the process, in large part because of the complexities involved with filling out the I-589. However, most refugees cannot afford legal representation, and pro bono lawyers are a scarce resource. Despite the existence of legal aid organizations, many refugees are left without legal assistance and are forced to navigate the process on their own. Although there are some free informational packets available online that offer guidance on filling out the I-589, the available options are complex, and also overwhelmingly written in English – problematic given that the majority of refugees are not native English speakers.
Core Functionality

Asylum Assist is an interactive website that walks the asylum-seeker step-by-step through all of the questions on the I-589 form. Instead of simply presenting a massive and intimidating form, Asylum Assist takes the asylum-seeker through questions one at a time. Alongside each question, the site provides guidelines, relevant background information, and advice on how that question should be filled out. This can run the gamut from: notifying the asylum-seeker that their last name should be inserted in all caps; a longer explanation of the best way to formulate a claim of past political persecution; examples of what kinds of external evidence are admissible or regarded highly by judges vs. those that are frequently ignored.

Where relevant, sample answers to questions will also be provided. Since many of the questions on the I-589 are extremely open-ended – for example, one question reads, “Do you fear harm or mistreatment if you return to your home country” with very little explanation of how to structure such an answer – Asylum Assist can show examples from previous successful asylum applications to help direct asylum-seekers on how to answer such questions.

Unlike the I-589, which is offered only in English, Asylum Assist will be localized to a number of the languages most commonly spoken by asylum-seekers. The asylum-seeker will have an option when first visiting the site to set an alternate language. Although the answers will have to be provided in English (at least in v1), the questions as well as the accompanying advice and guidance will be translated into the asylum-seeker’s native language.

When the asylum-seeker is done answering all of the relevant questions, Asylum Assist will take the provided answers, fill out the I-589 form (which is available as a PDF form and can therefore be filled out automatically), and then email a completed copy to the asylum-seeker.

User Interface

A central challenge of this project is ensuring that the user interface (UI) is intuitive and easy-to-use, even for those who are not familiar with using computers. Although the web application format has the inherent advantage of being interactive (compared to a static paper form), this advantage can be minimized or even neutralized if the user interface is not properly constructed with the user in mind.

I hope to utilize research on human-computer interaction (HCI) and user interface design when designing the UI for this project. A sampling of relevant papers and books includes:

- Usability in Government Systems: User Experience Design for Citizens and Public Servants
Testing
Because ease-of-use is a crucial component of this project, user testing will be an important mechanism for collecting feedback on the interface and its usability. This feedback will hopefully be collected in two primary ways:

1. Approaching the development of the user interface using agile software development principles that rely on rapid prototyping and testing. I plan to create a range of interface prototypes and weigh their pros and cons to determine the best possible UI structure to begin with, and then be flexible throughout the development process to adjustments.

2. Testing the application in its more final stages on volunteer Yale students (pending approval from the human subjects committee) to see how those unfamiliar with the asylum application process are able to navigate the UI.
v2
Four potential expanded features (time permitting):

- Upon completion of the form, the asylum-seeker will have the option of entering their completed I-589 into the lawyer consultation pool. Pro bono lawyers who have volunteered to review asylum applications for Asylum Assist will be given log-in credentials to the site and, upon logging in, will be shown an interface where they can easily search through asylum applications for review based on key criteria like country of origin, age, and what kind of persecution the applicant is fearing. Once they choose an application to review, they will be shown the completed form and given space by each answer to write comments specific to that response, as well as extra space at the bottom where they can provide more general feedback. If they so choose, they can check a box that indicates that they are willing to follow-up over the phone with the asylum-seeker, in which case the asylum-seeker will be provided with the contact information for the lawyer.

- In addition to providing textual advice and guidance, Asylum Assist could provide short videos of lawyers specializing in refugee law to be shown on the pages for the important questions. In these videos, the lawyers could briefly explain what makes an asylum application particularly compelling and what immigration officers are specifically looking for in a successful I-589.

- Asylum Assist could offer asylum-seekers the opportunity to answer the I-589 questions in their native language, and could hire volunteer translators to translate these responses into English before they are filled into the form. This would allow asylum-seekers with particularly poor English skills to have a better chance at presenting a compelling application.

- Asylum Assist could follow-up with asylum-seekers who have used the service and record in the system whether said asylum-seeker was successful or unsuccessful in their claim. The site could then provide a platform for aggregating data and extrapolating trends on what makes an I-589 successful or unsuccessful based on this data.

Deliverables and Technologies
I plan to use Ruby on Rails deployed on Heroku. By the end of the semester, I will have a completed version of the app that is successfully deployed and able to be used by a potential asylum-seeker.