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Olsen Public Service Scholarship
August 28, 2013
Reflection Essay

Building Bridges across Cultures:
Engaging in the Practice of Citizen Diplomacy

At any given point during the year, approximately 250 official international visitors are in the United States. The International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) is the U.S. Department of State's premier professional exchange program. Current and emerging foreign leaders are selected by U.S. Foreign Service Officers at U.S. Embassies around the world. Launched in 1940, IVLP aims to build mutual understanding between the U.S. and other nations. The majority of IVLP projects include visits to three or five cities over the course of three weeks.

Moreover, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs funds and administers the IVLP in cooperation with National Program Agencies (NPAs), a group of seven private, non-profit organizations based in Washington, D.C. NPAs work with Councils for International Visitors (CIVs) across the country, which are volunteer-based community organizations. Under the professional association of the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), local CIV members and citizen diplomats develop professional programs, arrange cultural activities, and provide home hospitality. The World Affairs Council of Oregon is a local council for international visitors.

The mission of the World Affairs Council of Oregon is to "broaden public awareness and understanding of international affairs and to engage Oregonians with the world." The Council offers over forty public programs with experts and world leaders, hosts over 500 emerging leaders from around the globe, and provides assistance to K-12 schools in the important work of teaching students to become citizens of the world. The Council's public education programs stem

from its mission statement. My internship enabled me to gain exposure to various programs, but it specifically focused on the program that hosts over 500 international visitors annually.

This summer, I interned with Ms. Amy Barss, the Director of International Visitors and Training Programs. IVLP projects vary based on themes and Embassy requests. Projects cover a broad array of themes, some of which include: civil/human rights, combating trafficking of persons, democracy, diversity, volunteerism, economic issues, entrepreneurship, journalism, and youth leadership. Thus, throughout the course of my internship, I worked with delegates from 20 countries focusing on various professional interests. I gained firsthand experience in the daily operation of an international non-profit organization, developed skills in event planning, researching, project management, and intercultural communication, and attained new database usage abilities. The most personally rewarding aspect of my internship involved engaging in person-to-person diplomacy, and observing the interactions between foreign visitors and their professional counterparts. My position as an intern required a high degree of confidentiality; I had access to biographical and sensitive information pertaining to the visitors. This information was used to create and implement programs tailored to the specific professional interests of each visitor.

My primary responsibilities as an intern included: researching and drafting proposals for incoming visitor delegations, drafting visitors' professional programs, maintaining and updating program outreach databases (i.e., eCIV and NCIV databases), and assisting with administrative tasks such as preparing information packets for visitors, ordering brochures, writing thank you notes, photocopying, answering phones, archiving and filing.

After my second week at the Council, I worked on a sub-regional project for Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The visitors' project explored the theme of "Economic Models

for Community Sustainability in the U.S.” Two of the visitors were directors of non-profit organizations, Business Kind Myanmar, Amungme and Kamoro Community Development Organization, and the third visitor was a municipal mayor. For this project, I assisted Ms. Barss in writing the final program book for the visitors. In essence, I spent several days with visitors and English Language Officers or interpreters once they arrived in Oregon.

For example, upon the visitors’ arrival, I accompanied them to professional appointments with TriMet, EcoDistricts, and Sustainable Northwest. On the day of the visitors’ meeting, I had the opportunity to escort them to lunch. I briefly toured them through food cart pods in downtown Portland. We had lunch at a park, and discussed our dreams and ideas with each other. During our conversation I realized something incredible, the things that make us the same, such as envisioning a better future and wanting the best for our citizens helped me recognize that we didn’t seem that different from one another. The visitors, Ms. Daisy Sayangda, Ms. Kyi Kyi Oo, and Mr. Yohanes Arwakon were truly remarkable and inspiring individuals.

In addition, we volunteered at the Blanchet House of Hospitality. To end the day, we served meals to Portland’s homeless. Prior to the visitors’ departure back to their home countries, they had a closing conference call with the State Department at the World Affairs Council of Oregon offices. In the office, my supervisor and I bid the visitors farewell, and Daisy, a municipal mayor from the Philippines, said to me before leaving, “We will always share our experience at the homeless shelter. I will never forget you because of that experience we shared.” Those words allowed me to understand how powerful and meaningful the IVLP is for international visitors. As an intern, I gained new insights into a program that promotes cross-cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and professional growth.

Furthermore, throughout the month of July, I worked closely with a visitor from Japan. Ms. Aya Muto was an IVLP Fellow from Ministry of the Environment. Ms. Muto's fellowship required her to remain in the U.S. for a year, and Oregon was the second to last segment of her year-long program. During her stay in Portland, I was Ms. Muto's English conversation partner on a daily basis for three weeks. I provided tours of farmers' markets, numerous restaurants and food cart pods in downtown Portland, parks and plazas, and Portland State University. During our lunch meetings, we discussed pop culture, U.S. culture, Ms. Muto's professional background with the Ministry of the Environment in Japan, and her coursework at the Portland English Language Academy (PELA).

In late July, I accompanied Ms. Muto to her professional appointments with Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects (ZGF) and EcoDistricts. However, another intern, Ms. Wilaene Gonzalez, a student from Boston University, also accompanied us to these meetings. Ms. Muto's English had improved substantially over the course of a month. Ms. Amy Barss, Ms. Gonzalez, and I concluded Ms. Muto's program with one last informal meeting to celebrate her accomplishments and time in Portland.

During a similar timeframe in late July, I assisted my supervisor with another project; a regional project for Africa called the African Women's Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP). AWEP aims to introduce the women to tools and opportunities that can accelerate the growth of their businesses, promote their role as leaders in their communities, and drive further social and economic progress in their regions. For this program, seven French-speaking businesswomen from different countries in Africa were accompanied by three simultaneous interpreters. The countries represented were: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, and Senegal. The women in this program had backgrounds in processing

dried mango, organic and fair trade vanilla, and lavender for export, fruit juice companies, and producing organic cosmetics and nutraceuticals.

Upon the group's arrival in Portland, my supervisor and I accompanied visitors to their first meeting with Alaffia, held in the World Affairs Council offices. Alaffia is a company that produces a line of sustainable fair trade shea butter skin care products designed to help empower women in West African communities. At these professional appointments, my role was simply to act as "a fly on the wall" and observe the final stage of the planning and programming process. The interpreters carried devices for interpreting discussions for French-speaking and English-speaking audiences. I observed the women ask great questions and become profoundly engaged in dialogue with the presenters. As a whole, with this particular meeting the women were immensely grateful to have met with Alaffia representatives and thoroughly impressed with the company's practice and promotion of fair trade, sustainability, and community empowerment.

Within the next few days, I accompanied the group to their day trip at Columbia River Gorge and Hood River County Fruit Loop. The visitors were enthusiastic and delighted with our visit to Multnomah Falls and the Gorge. Our excursion was enjoyable, the visitors were able to see Hood River's agricultural area and learn about the fruit produced in this region of the country. We were able to tour a lavender farm, and one visitor benefited from the visit because her specialty was growing and producing lavender products in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The excursion was memorable for everyone in the group.

The following day, my supervisor and I accompanied the group to their meeting at a hazelnut farm with Hazelnut Growers of Oregon, a hazelnut processing plant, and Made in Oregon. At the hazelnut farm, visitors met with a field agronomist and crop consultant. They were able to learn about the hazelnut industry in Oregon, from visiting a farm and touring a

processing plant to finally seeing the packaged products at the Made in Oregon store. The visitors learned about the hazelnut industry from start to finish. Thus, I observed as the visitors gained more and more meaningful insights into Oregon's unique community. The visitors departed for the next segment of their program in New York, and left Oregon with an enriched understanding of the social diversity within the United States.

In early August, I worked with visitors from Latin American countries exploring the theme of "Law Enforcement & Community Policing." Portland, Oregon was the last segment of this group's program. The participants had backgrounds with human rights organizations, tourism security, violence prevention organizations, journalism, and law enforcement. The countries represented were: Paraguay, Honduras, Panama, Colombia, Haiti, Peru, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Uruguay, and Chile. Working with this group was rewarding and pleasant because the visitors had vibrant and enthusiastic personalities. I appreciated the diversity within the group, and being able to easily converse with the visitors. During their stay, I was able to act as an informal interpreter at times.

Additionally, escorting the visitors and foreign language interpreters to professional appointments with the Portland Police Bureau's Mounted Patrol Unit, Willamette Week, and Human Rights Commission was especially enjoyable. At these meetings, I acted as a liaison for the World Affairs Council by meeting and engaging with new and existing representatives of each organization. The other intern I mentioned earlier, Ms. Wilaene Gonzalez, also accompanied me to some of the professional appointments.

The World Affairs Council arranged an International Visitor Program Barbecue Reception, sponsored by a sub-member of the Council, the Young Professionals (YPs). The event was designed for the visitors to mix and mingle with fellow visitors and other counterparts

in law enforcement and community policing. Attendees included members of the World Affairs Council of Oregon, community members, some of the group's professional meeting hosts, and another IVLP group that was in Portland from Latin America looking at international crime. Overall, assisting in the preparation, execution, and conclusion of the event with other interns and staff was exciting and gratifying.

Moreover, I also assisted in other public programs sponsored by the World Affairs Council. For example, these events included: "Ambassador João Vale de Almeida: How the European Union Approaches Peace Building" and International Trivia Night. The event with Ambassador João Vale de Almeida was discussion and lecture based for the public, and I primarily assisted with preparation and registration. I learned about the Council's co-presentation abilities with other organization, the Wholistic Peace Institute. They worked together to arrange the ambassador's lecture.

The trivia night was sponsored by the Young Professionals (YPs) and enabled members of the program and the Council to participate in trivia about current events, world culture, history, and geography. The event created an energetic atmosphere and engaged the audience. I enjoyed joining a group with a former Council intern, and participating. At this event, I met members of the YPs program and we shared our interest in international affairs and global issues. The International Trivia night was an enjoyable event because I had the opportunity to network with other individuals interested in politics.

In terms of World Affairs Council staff, I worked with incredibly remarkable, dedicated, and passionate individuals. I requested informal informational interviews with some of the staff members. A majority of staff were attracted to their jobs due to their interest in international relations, educating the public on global issues, working directly with foreign leaders, and

promoting the arts, food, music, and culture. I informally interviewed three IVLP Program Officers, Ms. Alison Wohlers, Ms. Mariko Gilman, and Mr. Andrew Neal. I gained insights into their professional and academic backgrounds. For example, Ms. Wohlers plans to pursue a master's degree at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies. Her interests stem from the desire to work with international visitors.

On the other hand, Ms. Gilman expressed her interest in international education and has been able to develop this aspect of her career pursuits at the Council. She recently completed her master's degree program. Finally, Mr. Neal described his joy in working with youth, especially with Iraqi high school youth on a special annual summer exchange program. Also, Ms. Jackie Roth, Membership and Office Manager, shared with me her interest in non-profit management. After serving for six months as the Council's Volunteer Coordinator, she temporarily entered the unpredictable world of politics to work as a Legislative Aide to a state representative. Ms. Roth explained that her interest in non-profit management and current position as Membership and Office Manager aligns neatly with her future career goals.

Another staff member at the Council, Mr. Tim DuRoche, Director of Programs, described the unique path that led him to find interest in international affairs. His interests revolve around cultural equity, arts, and educational issues. Mr. DuRoche previously worked for Portland Center Stage, where he developed innovative engagement strategies, public programs and community partnerships connecting sustainability, civic engagement, historic preservation and the arts. Since moving to Portland, he worked for Northwest Film Center, City Club of Portland and as a freelance journalist—writing regularly about the arts, urban history, and cultural policy for Oregon Humanities, Willamette Week, Portland Spaces, and The Oregonian, among others. Mr. DuRoche arrived at the Council through a different angle relative to his counterparts. After

conducting these informal interviews, I concluded that Council staff members are driven to continue improving their programs or projects, find their work incalculably fulfilling, and tirelessly brainstorm innovative ways to connect Oregonians with the globe.

The World Affairs Council influences the development of U.S. foreign policy through a variety of programs sponsored by the State Department, but there are constraints that limit the capacity of this organization to meet its goals. For instance, the IVLP program hosts 500 visitors annually through the hard work, dedication, and ambition of four staff members, the Director of International Visitors and Training Programs and three Program Officers. According to my supervisor, Ms. Amy Barss, within the last 20 -25 years the number of visitors has not changed too dramatically, but the number hosted by the Council has increased between 100 and 150 visitors within the past decade. She hopes to increase the number of visitors this year to 50 more visitors and reach a new funding level. These limits are not necessarily a result of the democratic political process, but rather institutional politics. For example, during a brief and informal interview, Ms. Barss explained the efforts she made several years ago, and continues to make, in order to promote a different and new image of the World Affairs Council of Oregon to National Programming Agencies. In the past, the Council was viewed by NPAs as only a resource for international visitors with interests in environmental issues or sustainability. However, within the past decade Ms. Barss and Programming Officers broadened their professional connections and diversified resources by discovering new methods of outreach to remain at the forefront of new, unique, and emerging professional resources throughout the state.

At the Council, I was introduced to a new concept—citizen diplomacy. NCIV defines citizen diplomacy as the individual citizen’s right, even the responsibility, to help shape foreign relations “one handshake at a time.” I learned about the interesting programs implemented by the

U.S. Department of State to achieve certain foreign policy objectives, and how these goals correspond to each project. During another conversation with my supervisor, we discussed the competing notions of what the IVLP program is meant to achieve. Members of CIVs seem to believe that the visitor's perspective is paramount, and in the long term it is important for visitors to understand who Americans are as people, whereas the NCIV perceives a citizen's ability to explain foreign policy as the core of professional exchange programs. Both points of view are valid, but arguably these two outcomes shape foreign policy whether or not the connection is explicitly linked.

My coursework at Linfield overlapped neatly with the lessons I learned at the Council. For example, the Current Debates in U.S. Foreign Policy course posed various questions throughout the semester that I revisited this summer. These questions included the following: What are the central U.S. national interests and what types of strategies and tactics should the U.S. employ to promote them? What is the U.S. role in the world today and how has it changed over time? What, if anything, makes the U.S. "exceptional"? What is diplomacy and how is it exercised most effectively?

I found myself asking these questions in a variety of contexts. My internship, however, enabled me to process my thoughts through a new set of experiences. I learned that in promoting these professional exchange programs those involved must be careful about leading heads of state or other leaders to believe the U.S. wants to change the way things are done in their home countries. The overarching slogan of the IVLP is "creating mutual understanding." These programs, for the most part, achieve just that—a feeling of kindness and common ground on the issues we face as people.

In conclusion, interning with the World Affairs Council of Oregon this summer was an immensely rewarding and enriching experience. It has solidified my interest in pursuing a career in international affairs. The International Visitor Leadership Program has been a powerful tool for bringing people from different countries together to engage in dialogue with one another, and broaden their worldviews. Henry Miller is quoted as saying, “One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” The IVLP holds true to Miller’s point of view. This program has not solved the world’s problems, but it has helped people better understand what those problems are, who they affect, and what can be done to solve those problems collectively. To close, I think back to my first interaction with each visitor I worked with this summer from escorting them to professional meetings, our honest discussions about ideas and dreams, and the roar of laughter that erupted during our commutes from one excursion to the next. I truly broadened my horizons without ever leaving home.

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