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Deborah Olsen Public Service Scholarship Essay

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Maura Hand
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Summer 2017

As an International Relations major, I know the United States Department of State and its decisions, policies, and leaders are essential to nearly every theme in my Linfield courses. It is a massive department that stretches from directly advising the President via the Secretary of State, to supporting the Foreign Service Officers working tirelessly on the ground to better the lives of people around the world. The textbooks, however, focus on much of the glamour that seems to come with the State Department, such as the flashy dinners, the networking, and the split-second decisions that could be the difference between war and peace. When I was offered an internship in the San Francisco branch of the State Department, I was not only excited to have the opportunity to learn and gain experience in an unprecedented age of diplomacy, but also to see for myself if the lifestyle went well with the job.

My internship was with the Office of Foreign Missions (OFM). This office mostly interacts with the consular community located within a certain region, and then reports back to the headquarters of OFM in D.C. who will work with the Embassies if there are issues. The OFM regional offices have three objectives: 1. to defend the American People from abuses of diplomatic privileges and protect U.S. security interests; 2. to advocate for U.S. and Foreign Diplomats by pressing for better treatment of citizens abroad, and assisting foreign mission workers during their U.S. tours; 3. to serve foreign diplomats by providing them vehicle titles, diplomatic driver's licenses, and property acquisitions--all means for monitoring reciprocity, making sure everything is equal for our diplomats abroad. The San Francisco regional office is the largest region, so our duties also include updating emergency response procedures, participating actively in special event protocols, managing the relationships with the foreign

diplomats even when “upper management” changes their tones towards each other, and organizing community outreach and engagement activities.

Issuing vehicle titles and property acquisitions is a far cry from the flashy war and peace decisions I read about in the textbooks. On my first commute to work, I was worried and thought to myself, “This is the path I want to be on, am I going to be disappointed?” But the reality was far from disappointing. I experienced a whole different side of diplomacy that was not flashy, but vital. I saw firsthand how the OFM promoted our government, law enforcement and security community relationships. The small team I worked with encouraged me to experience as much as possible in my ten weeks. My experience allowed me to see a whole different side of diplomacy, one essential for everyday operations of consulates and embassies, and in turn, essential to the functionality of diplomacy and foreign policy all together.

My duties included interacting with foreign diplomats and other consulate staff members on a daily basis to accredit or terminate staff, process driver’s license renewals and requests, tax exemptions, vehicle insurance renewals, and vehicle registrations. I was otherwise available to foreign officers as a connection to the staff in my office. We held weekly telecommunication conferences with all the Regional Offices and Headquarters and received direct orders from the Director of the Office of Foreign Missions.

However, outside the office, my experience included a bit of flash. I thoroughly enjoyed visiting City Hall and meeting San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee on multiple occasions as part of San Francisco’s multiculturalism celebration honoring specific countries on their national holidays. Additionally, dining at the home of the Consul General of China Luo Linqun’s home (the largest personal residence within the city limits of San Francisco) was also an enjoyable night. Furthermore, touring Twitter and viewing its application in an emergency situation; visiting

NASA and meeting students in their international student internship program; and going to San Francisco's Emergency Response Command Post really allowed my internship to become a well-rounded, immersive experience, in and out of the office.

As much as I enjoyed these fun events, I left my internship with solid new relationships and a greater understanding of the State Department and Office of Foreign Missions. After my time at OFM San Francisco, I feel more confident addressing and assessing the issues facing diplomats today, and am more convinced of the direction of my studies. Unlike my first-day nerves, I was never disappointed in my time at the State Department and look forward to continue pursuing a future with U.S. Foreign Policy.