

Views From the Summit

By: Mike Overby

As we grabbed our luggage upon arriving in the Santiago airport, I braced myself for the long lines of tourists going through Chilean customs inspection. Having traveled abroad before, I knew that standing in line at customs could be a pain, especially after sitting for 10 hours in one uncomfortable position.

I headed over to the “Aduanas/Customs” sign along with the rest of the Furman crew, only to be stopped by smiling attendants in APEC clothing who informed us that as student delegates, we were to follow the special customs procedure for diplomats. Not only did we get an official welcome to Chile by APEC coordinators, we didn’t have to wait in line with all the other passengers from our plane!

The global importance of the summit began to sink in as we entered Santiago, and at the hotel we received formal press and media credentials which, to us, cemented our status as important people. The flashy green tags, complete with our picture IDs and labeled “APEC CHILE 2004,” definitely made us feel official.

But when I went to my first interview at the media center, I soon discovered that my green tag wouldn’t let me follow the man with a red tag, and that his red tag couldn’t compete with a blue tag. And even if I had found a blue tag lying around, I still would not be as important as the people with black tags.

Seeing all these multicolored credentials helped me understand that I had access to some of the most important diplomats and international figures in the world. These were government leaders and directors of major corporate enterprises, and it was my job to learn from them. I might have been given only the lowly green pass, but it provided me the opportunity to learn firsthand about the role America plays in the Pacific economy.

I’m already working on getting a red tag for next year’s conference.

Circling the wagons

Because the Furman students were the only students from an American university participating in the APEC Voices program, we often bore the brunt of criticism leveled at the United States during debates and discussions on international trade and economic policy. American high school students were there, representing excellent institutions from Texas, Indiana, and North Carolina, but they had yet to

benefit from the kind of in-depth study that those of us majoring in political science and economics possessed.

Thus, among the youth of APEC Voices, the Furman crowd assumed the role of defenders of American foreign policy. And we circled the wagons, as Amer Ahmad has said.

Presenting a united front proved interesting. The seven people in our group held a wide variety of opinions on the current administration's policies, so debating as a cohesive unit wasn't easy. Imagine taking a staunch Democrat and the vice president of College Republicans into a room full of students from universities around the world, then asking them to jointly explain why the United States has yet to sign the Kyoto Protocol, which proposes to limit the production of greenhouse gases among developed nations.

Through both group debates and informal conversations, we quickly learned the extent to which American decisions affect other nations — and the value of understanding all sides of an issue. We learned a lot by listening to people our own age describe how U.S. policies created serious challenges for their countries. For example, a Mexican friend of mine argued that while NAFTA provides the United States with cheap labor and an open market for the sale of American goods, Mexican products are often excluded from the mainstream U.S. marketplace due to tight restrictions on international trucking.

However, we also came to realize something else: that our government, regardless of which party runs the Oval Office, operates to serve and protect the American people above all others.

While a crucial element in strengthening our own economy is stabilizing the economies of our trading partners, in the end we are committed to the success of the United States. Despite our disparate political opinions, we Furmanites closed ranks in an effort to help our friends from other nations understand why our country makes certain choices.

Not all of us agree with every action America makes, but as a result of attending APEC, we have a better understanding of the commitment we hold as Americans to our fellow citizens and to the world around us.

Admissions owes us

One of the most interesting aspects of the APEC conference was that, among all the international students, the Furman group was actually the most diverse!

What, you say? The “Harvard of the South,” with its country club campus and upper-middle-class students, a symbol of diversity?

Indeed. With the possible exception of the Malaysian delegation, no group brought such a unique cross-section of people from such diverse circumstances. We were Americans, but we drew our heritage from Pakistan and India; from Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity; from Egypt and France; from Iowa and Arizona and New Jersey and the Carolinas.

In recent years the Furman student body has become increasingly diverse, and I would argue that it is not exclusively due to admissions policies or administration goals. Furman has worked extremely hard to expand the racial and international mixture on campus, but students have also labored for similar results. In fact, during our stay in Chile, we spent as much time recruiting for Furman as we did studying globalization.

While Cindy Youssef and Monica Handa spent the most time actively convincing high-schoolers from APEC countries, many of whom were already investigating colleges in the United States, to consider Furman, all of us hung out in the hotel lobby, ice cream shop, tango club or shopping mall, exchanging stories and becoming friends with these potential recruits. Invariably, they were impressed with what we had to say about Furman, and we even convinced two amigos from Chile and Peru to come for a campus tour this spring.

The diversity of our delegation and the impression we left on those around us resulted from what the Riley Institute calls “educational diplomacy.” On these kinds of trips, while studying international issues and developing career goals, we are also representing our school and our country.

Opportunities like APEC Voices are unique benefits of a Furman education — I couldn’t have attended this program with any other school — and significantly improve both Furman and the students within it.

The Big Cheese

There he is! If I squint a little and position my gaze in just the right spot between the heads on the four rows in front of me, I can see Colin Powell perfectly!

While students from other countries had already met their foreign ministers, I got to watch Secretary Powell in action on the last day of the APEC summit.

We filed into an exclusive press conference for Voices students given by Powell and Ignacio Walker, the Chilean foreign minister. Powell had recently announced his decision to resign from the Department of State, and his presence was in great demand among diplomats and the media. For me, standing 20 feet away from America's senior diplomat was a big deal and a priceless opportunity.

While listening to Powell and Walker discuss such topics as the recent United States-Chile Free Trade Agreement, I was pretty sure that their answers were carefully crafted, routine responses. But even rehearsed lines are interesting when someone important is saying them.

When one of the questions caught Powell off-guard (it referred to his youth, when he graduated from the City College of New York with a degree in geology), I was impressed with his ability not only to respond quickly, but also to make connections between his studies in geology and his current position. I have been known on occasion to put my foot in my mouth, so I can only imagine the difficulty of a job in which one's spontaneous response to a question could literally inflame violence or significantly alter our relationships with other countries.

But since I aspire to a career in foreign policy, the best I can do to improve myself is to study the leaders around me and the decisions they make. As all 130 students crowded around Secretary Powell and Minister Walker for a group photo — giving a heart attack to the American and Chilean security forces, I'm sure — I smiled for the camera, pleased with my experience at the press conference and further inspired to pursue my career goal.

Connecting the dots

Great experiences seem to link themselves together in unexpected ways. Last summer, through the Furman Advantage Program, I had the opportunity to intern with the Organization of American States in Washington, D.C., the regional diplomatic body that oversees relations between North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean. Think United Nations, but on a smaller scale.

Washington, I also took a part-time job as a waiter at a Cuban restaurant. One day, between trips to the kitchen for black beans and fried plantains, I began talking to a customer and came to realize that he worked in the Department of State as an

advisor to Roger Noriega, who as Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs is the top diplomat for U.S. relations with Canada and Latin America. As a typically desperate summer intern, I immediately dropped my role as waiter and calmly begged my new friend for his contact information. When I got in touch with him later, he continued to be extremely kind and helpful, providing me with excellent advice on achieving my career goals.

When I learned in September that I would be attending the APEC summit, I called him for information and advice. During our conversation, he informed me that Noriega would be attending the summit — and that he was interested in meeting with some Voices students. After many e-mails and conversations between Voices leaders, the U.S. Embassy in Chile, and me (!), Noriega agreed to have lunch with a group of about 10 students and five educators.

Chris Schoen and I were the Furman representatives, and after the excellent meal all of us were able to question Noriega about such issues as the growth of Chinese investment in Latin America, the new U.S.-Chile Free Trade Agreement, anti-Hispanic sentiment in the United States, border security, and the development of fair immigration policies. We received nothing but enthusiastic and engaging answers in return. I could not have asked for a better experience, nor could I have anticipated such a result from my summer in D.C.

Furman talks a lot about engaged learning, but I would say that at APEC, we lived it.

The author has been awarded a Rotary International Ambassadorial Fellowship for 2005-06 to study in the Master's Program for Human Rights at La Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City.