Inventor, a CEO, and Obama Walk into a Bar

By Gray Johnson and Mallary Taylor

As the details of the Paris terrorist attacks unfolded on CNN, our group sat solemnly and ate our traditional Filipino breakfasts of eggs, rice, and sweet bread rolls. Surrounded by our peers from Furman and from countries around the world, we couldn’t help but acknowledge the juxtaposition of the environment we were in and the chaos we were watching unfold on TV.

This past November, we were given the opportunity to represent the United States and Furman University at the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Manila, Philippines. In 1989, APEC originated as an informal meeting of twelve Asia-Pacific economies bordering the Pacific Rim. Today, it has evolved into a well-established annual economic forum consisting of 21 member economies whose goal is to promote sustainable economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region.

As student delegates, we were part of the APEC Voices of the Future program, which allows the region’s youth to participate in the formal APEC programming in addition to events designed specially to facilitate delegate-to-delegate dialogue. The Riley Institute at Furman has played a pivotal role in growing the Voices of the Future program and sends a select group of students to attend each year.

The theme of APEC 2015, “Building inclusive economies, building a better world,” was particularly fitting, given the global context of issues like terrorism, the refugee crisis, and climate change. The discussions centered on the idea that building prosperous economies must include both the CEO and the small business owner. This theme reflects APEC’s background and overall mission, and it also reflects my group’s experience throughout our week in Manila.

Our delegation was diverse in more ways than one: academic background, personality, and career interest, just to name a few. We represented a range of majors such as economics, political science, Asian studies, and psychology. One student in the delegation grew up in Rwanda, providing an international perspective. Most likely, each of us will pursue a different path beyond APEC and Furman. However, it was our unique backgrounds and personalities that allowed us to each contribute something meaningful to the conversation at APEC, strengthening our group as a whole. Beyond our own delegation, we interacted with dozens of other delegates from around the world, representing a multitude of worldviews and life experiences.

Beyond its participants, the summit itself exhibited extraordinary diversity. We heard talks from an activist who educates women to become engineers on solar panels; from a strategic advisor to Uber; and from social entrepreneurs combatting poverty through community farms. The convening of all these different views is perhaps best illustrated through one of the highlights of the week. President Obama served as a moderator on a panel alongside Jack Ma, CEO of Alibaba, and a Filipino woman who had designed lamps that run on salt water and can charge cellphones. It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke—“an inventor, a CEO, and Obama walk into a bar”—but it was a perfect embodiment of the ingenuity that is possible when government, business, and nonprofits intersect to tackle the world’s most pressing problems.
Diversity in all its forms—heritage, nationality, experience, job sector—proved to be the element that truly allowed us to learn, engage, and connect with each other, resulting in meaningful solutions to the world’s challenges. During that week, the Paris attacks highlighted the destruction and violence that can arise from intolerance. Meeting with the other delegates from around the world gave us hope that there is still plenty of room for respect, discussion, and collaboration as we progress towards a shared vision for our global future.

Gray Johnson and Mallary Taylor are seniors at Furman University and members of the Riley Institute Advance Team. They would like to thank the Riley Institute and professors Cleve Fraser, Department of Political Science and Jason Jones, Department of Economics, for facilitating this opportunity.