

An Inventor, a CEO and Obama go to a conference...

GRAY JOHNSON and MALLARY TAYLOR, Guest Columnists 1:02 a.m. EDT March 20, 2016



(Photo: Provided)

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 University 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, six Furman students were given the opportunity to represent the United States and the college at the annual Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit that took place in Manila, Philippines. In 1989, APEC originated as an informal meeting of 12 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 it 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 the group's experience throughout our week in Manila.

Our delegation was diverse academic background, personality and career interests, 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. Beyond our own delegation, we interacted with dozens of others from around the world, representing a multitude of worldviews and life experiences.

We heard talks from an activist who educates women to become engineers on solar panels, a strategic advisor to Uber, and social entrepreneurs combating poverty through community farms.

The convening of all these different views is perhaps best illustrated through one of the highlights of the week. President Barack 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 toward a shared vision for our global future.

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