

APEC 2014 China

Meeting international students, political and corporate leaders and learning about a rapidly globalizing world are just some of the benefits four Furman University students received from their trip to the APEC conference in Beijing, China, earlier this fall.

Kelly Dickson, A.J. Calhoun, Blake Baldwin and Sarah Katherine DeVenny attended the Riley Institute's Voices of the Future Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) program along with Furman's Dr. Cleve Fraser, a political science professor, and Dr. Jessica Hennessey, an economics professor. Furman's participation in the program, created by Noel Gould, chief executive and president of The Virtual Trade Mission Foundation, began in 2002.

The APEC/Voices program, now in its 12th year as a program of The Riley Institute at Furman, has allowed more than 50 Furman students to represent the United States in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation countries including Vietnam, Chile, South Korea, Indonesia, Mexico, Japan and China.

"I honestly hadn't heard of the program" until an economics professor mentioned it, said Dickson, a senior majoring in economics and political science. "I really wanted to widen my perspective. I've never traveled to Asia."

In fact, she hadn't traveled far from her home in South Carolina until she studied abroad in Belgium and interned at the European Parliament during her junior year at Furman. That time "made me interested in policy, specifically economic policy."

Baldwin, a senior majoring in economics and Chinese studies, said he learned about the APEC program through the Asian Studies Department. Prior to the APEC traveling and Furman's Fall in China study abroad program from which he just returned, "I had done no international traveling."

Dickson said "the interaction with all the delegates," was the most important part of the trip, citing Dr. Nathan Cook, a Furman economics professor, who has said that "APEC happens on the bus" while all the students are traveling together to events.

Calhoun, a senior majoring in urban studies and political science, agreed saying that their bus trips were "a class in comparative politics" as students from different cultures viewed various issues differently.

He has studied abroad in Brussels, Belgium, where he became interested in the European Union when he interned with the U.S. Trade Representative. He said he wanted to augment the skills he learned in Europe because he knew little about the Asian-Pacific Rim area.

"I learned to graft some of that European trade knowledge to a different area," he said.

"The single most important thing that I learned was the value of thinking differently, having a unique perspective and being able to make connections between subjects and between people", Baldwin said. "There is value to seeing things differently than those around you, to see potential where others do not, and then being able to communicate this to others."

The students said they learned to frame their own ideas by being pressed by other delegates to avoid seeing everything through the viewpoint of the Western world.

Baldwin said that generally all the students were well-informed but somewhat biased to their countries. Still, “everyone I met was willing to entertain the thought that they could be wrong about what they think and that takes a lot of maturity and education.”

Learning to accept the differences in how people think is one of the goals of The Voices of the Future program. Another is to have students from the various economies meet political and corporate leaders and learn about the issues facing the 21 Asia-Pacific countries, Hennessey said.

“It’s this big, grand conference. You’re seeing Obama. You’re seeing Putin,” she said. But “it’s also meeting these other students who are going to be leaders in their countries. It’s a wonderful perspective to see through the lens of someone else.”

Voices of the Future APEC “exposes students to a particular part of the world that is going to be increasingly important,” Fraser said. The students they meet will become leaders who will “have an impact on our lives.” Also, “it kind of gets students to reflect on what it is to be American.”

Learning to see issues through a broad viewpoint “is why we go to a school like Furman,” Calhoun said, adding that international students in many other countries don’t have the opportunity to gain a liberal education rather than one focused on a particular skill or base of knowledge.

He said the trip and his association with other students showed him that the world is becoming increasingly globalized but the various economies are very different and have issues that need to be resolved in varying ways.

Furman became involved in the program through former S.C. Gov. Dick Riley, who served as the Secretary of Education under President Bill Clinton and was a friend of Noel Gould’s. Riley introduced Gould and Don Gordon, executive director of the Riley Institute. Gould created the Voices of the Future in 1997 in an effort to connect college and high school students from the 21 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation countries with each other, allowing them to exchange ideas and learn a little about participating in global negotiations.

Under the direction of Gordon, the APEC/Voices program is co-directed by Fraser and Dr. Ken Peterson, chair of Furman’s economics department, and is administered by Carol Asalon of the Riley Institute.

The first year several U.S. colleges participated but “we have become the only game in town in the United States,” he said.

Students are recommended by professors and a team is selected. The Riley Institute and Furman’s Department of Economics fund the trip for the students.

Dickson said one of the surprises of the trip was the pollution, or the lack of it. Students had been told about the extreme pollution problems in China and specifically Beijing. But the Chinese government shut

down some factories and instituted a program that kept about half the vehicles off the road on any one day.

“I don’t think I realized what a big difference that could make,” she said, adding that the skies during their trip were “APEC blue” because they were so clear.

Calhoun agreed, saying it showed “the extent to which a command economy can take action and have results immediately.”

Baldwin sees hope in the biggest surprise of the conference to him. That surprise “was the aura of cooperation surrounding the student delegations. There was little tension between students even if there was tension between students’ governments – and that is promising,” he said.

Both the conference and his study abroad have broadened his perspectives, he said. “During the study abroad I am with 14 other Furman students and constantly surrounded by another culture and language. I have been able to see how other people live their day-to-day lives and experienced everything from great food and friendly people to Internet restrictions and pollution.

“During APEC, I was with over 100 students selected to represent their economies from all over the Asia Pacific region,” engaging in dialogue and sharing idea and concerns with students from the Philippines, China, Taiwan, Russia, Australia, Japan and elsewhere, he said.

Dickson said she knows that the APEC conference “ will shape me. It has. I have felt the tension of coming back and dropping back into Furman.”

A Voices of the Future alumni, Rachel Parrish, now serves in the U.S. Foreign Service in Manila, the location of the 2015 APEC conference, Fraser said.