

Pickering Fellowship Personal Statement

by Maximilian Aviles '17

As an amiable and outgoing college student, I don't think that I would ever have imagined that one of my most rewarding experiences would be one where I was constantly yelled and cursed at. But this past year, as part of a political internship, as I walked door to door canvassing on behalf of Katie Stuart, candidate for the Illinois State House of Representatives, I had my diplomacy skills tested as never before. People would open their doors and automatically grow so angry and defensive when they realized that I was there to talk about the election, shouting at me that I was wasting my time, and even threatening me by saying that it would be dangerous for me to canvass through their neighborhood again. Quickly, I realized that canvassing would not be easy, and that it would test my ability to forge the interpersonal connections that I was accustomed to so easily making. But I was not deterred, and I was determined to find a way to connect with those people who did not want to listen. I found that when I did two simple things, people became more willing to have a constructive conversation. First, it was important to affirm their feelings and let them know that I was not there to negate or belittle their beliefs. This generally eased the tension to a point where people became comfortable enough to have a conversation with me. Next, rather than preaching, I found it most effective to provide people with the resources they needed to be able to conduct their own investigations. By empowering people, rather than arguing with them, I was able to connect with and convince those people who would have otherwise written me off.

Looking back on it, my experience learning about and interacting with people from other countries, prepared me well for that internship experience. During the spring of 2014, for example, I had the opportunity to take a service learning class about Jamaica. Throughout the semester, we dissected Jamaican politics, history, and culture; then our class traveled to Jamaica to experience first-hand what we had been learning about in the classroom. I wanted to immerse myself in Jamaican culture and to help improve the lives of local residents. With the money that we helped to raise for the trip, our class was able to build a house for a family, provide electricity and much needed renovations for a school as well as educational supplies to many of the other schools in the area. This service trip opened my eyes to the problems plaguing people in developing countries and helped me to realize how even seemingly small investments can significantly improve people's daily lives. This trip made such an impact on my view of the world that I have decided to return this Spring to continue and expand the work that we began two years ago.

Since taking my first class on globalization in high school, serving a leadership role in Model United Nations, and pursuing my major in international relations, I have known that I wanted to pursue a career where I would play a part in our increasingly interdependent world. And, as I continued through school, I became more interested in the role that Foreign Service Officers play in promoting peace, economic development, and U.S. interests abroad. My great-grandfather, an immigrant from Mexico, stressed to my family that we should do as much as possible to give back to this country that has given so much to us and, having watched the majority of my family follow his entreaty by serving in the military, I too want to serve my country by joining the Foreign Service. By becoming a Political or Public Diplomacy Officer, I would be able to pursue my academic passion for international relations, while simultaneously representing the best interests of my country.

While my undergraduate studies have given me a firm base of knowledge about international politics, graduate studies will help to give me the skills and expertise necessary to be able to more thoroughly understand international affairs and United States diplomatic history. Although I plan on applying to several universities, four schools that I am particularly interested in are the University of San Diego, Syracuse University, Seton Hall University, and American University because their programs are built on providing the hands-on experiences necessary for a career with the Foreign Service. However, graduate studies, much like my undergraduate studies, which have been funded in part with a Pell Grant, will only be possible with the financial assistance provided by grants, scholarships, and fellowships. The assistance and opportunities provided by the Pickering Fellowship would allow me to continue in my pursuit of higher education and career with the Foreign Service.