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Fall 2011, Experiencing Diplomacy in the Heart of the Arab World

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The UNH Center for International Education Newsletter

Fall 2011

ALUMNI VOICES:

EXPERIENCING DIPLOMACY IN THE HEART OF THE ARAB WORLD

by **Raul Bernal** (International Affairs/Geography/Spanish '03)

In summer of 2010, IA alumnus Raul Bernal travelled to Egypt. He shares his thoughts about interning at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and his interdisciplinary preparation for a career in international affairs.



Raul Bernal '03 and Allison Power '08 in Egypt

The most exciting part of studying international affairs is the opportunity to live and travel in other countries, especially those that you never expected to be in. In the summer of 2010, I had just completed my first year of graduate school at the Fletcher School at Tufts University and was on my way to Cairo, Egypt, for a summer internship at the U.S. embassy. The Foreign Service was a career I always had in the back of my mind, so this was the perfect opportunity to see if diplomatic life was for me.

I arrived in late evening to an empty airport, unsure if the embassy-appointed driver would be there to pick me up. Thankfully, after a brisk visa process, I was taken to my hotel. During my stay in Cairo, I crossed the Nile to work every day, felt the heat of the never-ending desert, and had an opportunity to touch the Pyramids at Giza. In addition to this rich history, the city had also become the focal point of a renewed approach in U.S. foreign policy towards the Arab world. President Obama's famous speech here a year earlier raised hopes for increased democracy,

religious freedom, women's rights, and economic development in the region. As one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid, Egypt was the perfect place to start.

The embassy in Cairo is one of the largest in the world and is filled with representatives from all parts of the U.S. government –

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the State Department, USDA, Homeland Security, USAID... you name it. My internship was with the U.S. Foreign and Commercial Service (FCS), a division of the International Trade Administration under the Department of Commerce. FCS officers are the country's commercial diplomats, in charge of promoting American exports around the world and helping U.S. companies to operate overseas.

I worked on several projects during my internship, including the strategy phase of the Presidential Global Entrepreneurship Program. The program was a key part of President Obama's new economic development policy and Egypt was the pilot location. I also worked on anti-corruption training for U.S. diplomatic staff across the Middle East, helped author the embassy's first report on American corporate social responsibility activities in the country, and attended the opening of one of Proctor & Gamble's biggest international manufacturing facilities.



Raul (bottom left) and colleagues at U.S. Embassy in Cairo

Of course, the political situation has changed drastically since my time there. To everyone I met and spoke with, the upcoming elections were the hot topic of discussion. Most people wanted a change from Mubarak's nearly 30-year rule, but they weren't sure how or even if it was going to happen. Needless to say, watching the demonstrations on television afterwards was a surreal experience. People filled the streets and bridges where I used to walk. One of my friends assured me that her family was fine, despite the tanks on the road next to their house. Tahrir Square, which became the movement's epicenter, was only three blocks away from the U.S. embassy. If you've got a good arm, it is literally a stone's throw away. Although there is still a lot of uncertainty, I'm hopeful that things are changing in the right direction.

I finished my master's coursework this past May, and am preparing to take the Foreign Service Exam this spring. In the meantime, I am volunteering for an organization called the Afghan Scholars Initiative, which educates Afghan youth and prepares them for college in the U.S. When I think back to my time at UNH, I'm so grateful for the opportunities and preparation that the IA major provided me. The broad, interdisciplinary approach of the curriculum is a key strength of the program since global problems tend to be complex matters that involve a wide range of issues. I hope my education and my field and volunteer experience will help me succeed in the Foreign Service and be part of the next generation of internationalists addressing those problems and making a difference around the world.

