

The Global Identity
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I passed by a car this evening with a bumper sticker that declared, “American by birth, Texan by the grace of God.”

As a fellow Texan, I echo the sentiment. There’s a stereotype about Southerners that we don’t shut up about how amazing our culture is, how Southern food is to die for, how nice the people are – Texans in particular are famous for their inexplicable pride in the second largest state in the United States, the only state whose flag may fly at the same height as the American flag because, as you know, Texas was once its own republic.

“Every Texan I have ever met has told me that exact same fact,” Kevin Roberts sighed in response to my dutiful mention of the Texan flag’s height privilege. I had just met Kevin, a fellow colleague in my master’s program, during our summer Intensive Preparation for the Study of International Education course (fondly known as IPSIE).

IPSIE functioned as a preliminary get-to-know-you stage before the school year officially began, a rigorous 9-5 schedule of modules occurring in the same two classrooms everyday under the unflattering fluorescent glow we now fondly know as characteristic of the Gutman Library third floor. Here, I matched faces to names, and names to background and accomplishments.

In September, I heard stories of driving a book truck in Jordan, working in a pueblo in New Mexico, teaching English in the Czech Republic, and instructing deaf education in Kenya. Accounts of administering health projects in Guatemala, taking inner city students on service trips to Ghana, working for an NGO in Chile, and serving street children in Romania and the Philippines filtered through daily exchanges with my colleagues.

As the year progressed, we forged friendships based on shared struggles with microeconomics, late nights at Gutman Library and mutual interests ranging from board games to concerts to salsa dancing. The obligatory “so-what-did-you-do-before” question disappeared from conversation as we forgot our hesitations and toasted happy hours at Grendel’s and celebrated birthdays at boisterous restaurants and bars that resented our apologetic parties of 25+.

One of the most poignant experiences of the fall semester occurred when I sat in a room full of citizens from India, England, Australia, Thailand, France, Kuwait and eight states across the U.S., watching Barack Obama deliver a speech after he won the 2008 presidential election.

“This election is important because it affects us in the U.K. It affects the rest of the world,” my friend Mangala Nanda declared earnestly.

Conversations throughout the semester in Fernando Reimers’ class incorporated questions of how we, as future practitioners, might improve the education of children of every color, of every gender, of every nation. Classmates spoke of the plight of indigenous Australians, of low achieving schools in urban America, of administrators in Indonesia, of girls’ education in Pakistan, of the lack of libraries in Venezuela, and of education as a fundamental human right.

Those international perspectives on politics and education, as well as the late night Chipotle conversations about globalization and understanding different cultures, resonated clearly in my graduate education in a way that no textbook ever could. The adventures in Ethiopian, Bostonian, Chinese, Thai, Indian, Korean, and Southern cuisine hosted by various people allowed us to share traditions and taste foods we had never experienced. The evenings anxiously pondering the future while juggling papers in computer labs, the cold weekends standing in line at J.P. Lick’s, the swiped dinners at Cronkhite, and the frequent gatherings at a friend’s warm and happy home served not only as a forum for these dialogues on diversity but as a constant reminder of how unbelievably privileged I am to have met these people, my colleagues – my friends – through the International Education Policy program.

Looking back at that first conversation with Kevin, I realize that although I still proudly talk about Texas, my peers have influenced my perception of my identity. I came to HGSE last August as a recent college graduate recovering from a year's worth of work experience in human resources and a brief love affair with Namibia. In June, I will leave with a fuller heart, a group of lifelong friends and a hopeful vision galvanized by my colleagues of how I might help to shape the world. I continue to learn from each member of my cohort, whether I encounter them every day, or every once in a while. They constantly inspire me with their tremendous insight, intellect and cornucopia of creative talent. My colleagues have taught me the language of understanding, and the immaculate beauty of diversity.

I may still be proud of Texas, but my friends in IEP have instilled in me an even greater sense of honor in belonging to a group that actively challenges my way of thinking, compassionately supports each individual, and stands for a genuine collaboration and commitment to serve humanity throughout the world. My friends in IEP have contributed to the development of my identity as a global citizen, which I will carry with me for the rest of my life.