U.S. Department of State Internship

For ten weeks this Summer I had the privilege to intern with The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affair’s SportsUnited office in Washington, D.C. The office uses sports as a public diplomacy tool to create people-to-people exchanges between U.S. citizens and citizens from various countries around the world. The programs intend to engage youth, coaches, and/or administrators at the grassroots level, with or without English language skills, to learn about the United States’ culture and foreign priorities through sports. Sports are used as a hook for teaching various topics such as gender equality, environmental conservation, disabilities sports and awareness, LBGT rights, and health in areas where traditional education may not be available or supported through another facet.

SportsUnited's programs involve four pillars. The first pillar is the Sports Visitors program where groups of youths, coaches, and/or administrators at the grassroots level visit the United States for two weeks based on a particular theme. I was able to meet with a group of female soccer coaches from Sudan and South Sudan and a group of coaches for youth with disabilities from Egypt. I assisted in the programming by attending and providing support at various cultural, sports, educational, and leadership opportunities provided to the groups. Specifically, I was able to watch a professional soccer game with the group from Sudan and South Sudan and hear their final reports on how the program has allowed them to formulate a strategy to implement when they return home. Another example of my duties was when I helped guide the group of Egyptian coaches through a series of teambuilding and trust exercises, which
are extremely vital when working with youth with disabilities, and helped guide the group rock climbing for the first time.

The second pillar, Sports Envoys, involves sending current or former professional athletes to various countries to perform clinics, serve as mentors, and teach a curriculum with a theme chosen by the local embassy for that community. I created a tracker system on Excel so that every envoy program, since their creation in 2005, is accounted for from every angle such as who the envoys were, which countries they visited, any underlying themes, etc. These trackers are useful for staff because specific program information for a country is often requested surrounding a traveling Foreign Service Officer or a special event like the Women's World Cup.

The third pillar, Sports Grants, allows U.S 501(c)(3)s to partner with organizations in specific countries chosen by the State Department. They create their own grant proposal for a two-way exchange program and apply for funding. I was able to read 74 grant proposals, learn to write a grant proposal analysis, take notes during panel discussions and voting, and be a part of choosing nine grant program finalists for funding.

The final pillar, the Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports Initiative, partners with the University of Tennessee's Center for Sport, Peace, and Society and espnW to create a Global Sports Mentoring program. Seventeen female participants from around the world, who work in the Sport for Development sector, are paired with a prominent female executive in the Sports World in the United States. They work together to create an action plan, which incorporates sports in some way, for the betterment of the participants home community. The visitor also job shadows their mentor while they are in the United States. The next program
begins in September, so I edited a culture guide for the participants and edited biography highlights. I also updated SportsUnited's Women's World Cup website in preparation for the games in Canada.

Outside of these four pillars, I was highly invested in various local events such as the 2015 U.S.-China People to People Exchange which had a Sports Pillar. I was able to assist in all aspects of the event such as RSVPs, room set-up, photos, social media, and drafting talking points which gave me an understanding of how much work goes into such mega-events. Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of Kerry spoke at the event, and hearing them speak was one of the highlights of my internship.

Overall, my internship allowed me to develop a diverse set of skills in the small, but growing field of Sports Diplomacy. Sports can be used as a tool to counter violent extremism, increase gender equality, increase world-wide cultural awareness; the applications are endless. My involvement in all four pillars provided a very thorough and well-rounded experience. The passion exhibited by my colleagues pushed me to be creative, work hard, and have a desire to remain connected to the field. Cultural exchanges, based on music, art, dance, education, sports, or any other medium, can create a lasting impact. My internship made me interested in seeking out different ways people who don't speak the same language or come from conflicting communities can share a field, be their own referee, be on the same side, or be on different sides and still succeed. I now realize that these opportunities to engage with people from other countries and make a difference exists in the Federal Government and not just at non-profits which will certainly impact my job search after graduation.
The greatest lesson I learned was simple, in that I learned that these types of programs exist. It was not about meeting professional athletes or working with major federations. It was about seeing everyday how sports can create a two-way exchange of knowledge which can break down barriers between the U.S. and other countries. I am very grateful for my experience and have certainly been impacted by what I have seen and learned.