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## Immersion into diversity reinforces its importance

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By Cindy Youssef


*A visit to Chile for a conference provided a chance to share views with people from other nations.*

I never felt that I truly understood diversity until I experienced it firsthand late last year. I traveled with six Furman students and two professors to Santiago, Chile, for the VOICES program that runs concurrently with the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Conference, an international diplomatic summit on trade issues.

Diversity ran on many levels during this trip. As we were the only university level students from the United States, we had our work cut out for us.

Our Furman group in itself was diverse, with students from Florida, Virginia, North Carolina and of course Furman's own state, South Carolina. However, we also represented places that weren't so near: the Middle East, Asia and Europe. Some students were liberal minded, others conservative, but we all shared one identity: We were from the United States of America.

As we entered the Diego de Velazquez Hotel in Santiago, which would be home to the VOICES Program for our weeklong stay, my eyes opened wide with great surprise. Inside the lobby, there were students from nine of the 21 member economies of APEC. While we spent the better half of the plane trip down to Santiago discussing who we would meet and what we would speak about, I was surprised to see that even though people were from different

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### More details

Cindy Youssef is a Furman University sophomore majoring in political science. She is a graduate of Southside High School and a regular contributor to this page in its Our Turn young reader forum.

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economies, they all seemed to mingle with one another so that you couldn't easily pick out the group of Canadian students from the group of New Zealanders.

**About Top Jobs**

As participants of the VOICES program, we took on many diverse roles. We spent parts of our days interviewing leaders of member economies who play an important role in either the political or business sector of their nations. We met with leaders in the Chilean government, including the ministers of finance and trade. We also were given the opportunity to speak with leaders from the U.S. State Department.

As an entire group, we were given the opportunity to participate in a joint press conference with Chilean Foreign Minister Ignacio Walker and U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, both of whom provided us with insight into the similarities and differences between the U.S. and Chilean governments. As students from the United States, having the opportunity to meet one-on-one with our country's most senior diplomat was an amazing opportunity.

Perhaps one of the greatest roles I played during my experience in Chile was as a citizen diplomat, in which I was given the chance to meet and interact with people from other parts of the world. As the only college-age group from the United States, we were prepared to answer questions from other nations that dealt with our foreign policy, our views of the situation in Iraq, and our vision for a better world. However, it was during the times that we weren't speaking about politics that I truly gained a wealth of knowledge.

During my week in Chile, I lived with a high school student from Malaysia and a medical student from Korea. We spent many evenings talking in our room or meeting with the other students from the member economies and we discussed how one culture differed from another. We shared pictures, stories and literature together and through this, I began to see diversity on a deeper level.

One of my greatest memories of this trip is the casual debates we would hold each night after dinner. A participant from Malaysia was interested in hearing about foreign policy from the perspective of a Korean, a Chilean and a student from the United States. These casual discussions quickly became a highlight of the VOICES program, as participants eagerly gathered together each night to share information and debate current events and topics.

These debates allowed me to see each student in a different light. It is one thing to read about Peru or Malaysia in a textbook and automatically make presumptions about the society that resides in the respective countries. However, it is quite a different experience to interact with other citizen diplomats and break down my preconceived beliefs of a society or of a culture.

My experience in Chile opened my eyes and taught me to view the world as constantly changing and evolving. Each part of the world has its own distinct culture and tradition, and yet it is because of these differences that I have begun to see why diversity is an asset that organizations seek. The lasting friendships, the engaging discussions and the experience of being a college student in a foreign land have transformed my expectations of diversity and convinced me of its necessity in our schools, our work environments, and in our communities.



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