

Interview with Rodrigo de Souza, 2015 Henry Fong Award Winner

The 2015 Henry Fong Award winner, Rodrigo de Souza, is a student at Malmö University. Vesna Hart, the INU Project Coordinator, interviewed Rodrigo before he left James Madison University, where he studied as an exchange student for a semester.

It has been wonderful to have you study here at JMU. To begin, please tell me about yourself.

My name is Rodrigo de Souza. I was born and grew up in Brazil, where I earned a degree in Business Administration. Following graduation I started working at an investment bank but quickly realized I did not want this kind of life. It seemed like I was working for the sake of money and nothing else. But, in relation to my work, I became addicted to news and wanted to know what was happening in the world because this was important for banking finance. As I learned more about world politics, I realized that there is so much work to be done around the world and even locally. I wanted to be able not only to talk about politics with friends in a bar, but to have an informed opinion about politics and possibly to work and give back. So I decided to study international relations and peace and conflict studies at Malmö University.

Why did you choose to study at Malmö University?

First off, it has to do with one of the privileges I had. A couple of years ago my family and I became Portuguese citizens, so I now have a dual citizenship. It was completely by luck (thanks to my relatives) that I was able to get this dual citizenship. Since I got my Portuguese citizenship, I tried to make the most of it, and I figured out I could study at some places in Europe. I chose Malmö University because it is affordable and offers international relations and peace and conflict studies courses taught in English. I read the syllabus, and it was exactly what I was looking for. Along with international relations I studied Swedish language culture and society, which was specific about Sweden, a country I admire a lot for its social progressiveness.

What motivated you to attend the Student Seminar?

When I am doing something, I like to make the most of it. So the first thing I did while studying at Malmö University was to look on their website at all of the extra-curricular opportunities. I discovered that I could write for their student foreign affairs magazine, so I did that. I also noticed Malmö University is part of the INU, a group of universities that focus on an interesting concept—global citizenship. Malmö University participates in this seminar in Japan every year, and I decided to apply. I was not accepted the first year I applied, probably because I did not have



Rodrigo at a Henry Fong Award winner recognition event, with JMU participants in the 2016 INU Student Seminar

any grades yet to show that I was a good student. I applied in 2015, the second year of my studies, and was approved. It was a great experience.

What were the highlights of the Student Seminar?

I really enjoyed the focus on gender in international relations and peace and conflict studies. I did not have much background knowledge in this topic. Another thing that made the program stand out was that we were divided into small groups to represent different countries in a UN General Assembly simulation. I had an opportunity to work with people from Japan, Spain, and Italy. I really enjoyed working with this diverse group of people from very different countries and cultures. It is very important to learn how to deal with different cultures, and I had a good experience doing so in my country group and during the UN simulation. We still communicate on Facebook all the time in a group chat.

Why did you choose to study at JMU for a semester?

I chose JMU because it is an American university and, as most people know, a lot of resources are put into American universities. They are expensive, but all of that money supports programs dedicated to students. It was a great opportunity to experience what it is like to study in the United States. Studying here was very intense because there was so much going on. The professors expect a lot of extra work besides the in-class work, which was great. Hard, but great! But there are also extra activities like student organizations. I got the opportunity to join the Debate Club and do the Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation with Dr. Scherpereel. I loved it and wanted to do even more extra-curricular activities, but I did not have time to do everything I wanted to do.



Rodrigo with the JMU Debate Club on its way to a competition at West Point, NY

And you audited a class, too? You went above and beyond what you needed to do...

Yes, I audited monetary policy, because it is something that I used to do while working in banking and still enjoy. I like it because it is related to political science, international relations, and peace and conflict studies. The economy part is very important in any of those three areas. I kind of try to connect all the dots. Often times a conflict happens not just because of ethnic identity problems. For example, the IMF told Yemen to cut its subsidies for gasoline. People got angry, protested, and helped trigger a civil war. In this example, the conflict was about money, and people died because of financial aspects. Some people in the IMF said, "No, you should not have subsidies; that's how the economy should work." Unfortunately, they didn't care about the social consequences when demanding something like that. That is an example of why I think it is important to study politics along with economy.

What are highlights of your time at JMU?

The highlights would definitely be the classes themselves. The classes are so intense because of the time you have to spend working on content outside of class. Quite often you have three midterms during the semester. Most places I've studied have one midterm, one paper, and one final. Here, it's like three midterms, a paper, and quizzes; so you are constantly studying. The Debate Club was another highlight. We traveled to different universities, like West Point, NY. Everyone rode on the bus together and people were hanging out and studying. On our way back we watched the last U.S. presidential debate, which was pretty cool. The Mid-Atlantic European Union Simulation was also interesting in itself. I ended up even getting credit for it. The social part of JMU was another highlight. I got to go to a couple of tailgates, which was cool because I didn't even know what tailgating meant. It was interesting, a very American college experience. It was fun.



Fun at the JMU Gymnastics Club

Where do you feel you have grown the most?

Probably my ability to consider different perspectives. Because I had the opportunity to study in Brazil, then in Europe and Asia, sometimes I would experience that people were very critical about the United States. I was the one to say that things are not black and white. In Korea the focus of my classes was a lot about Asia. Here, at JMU, information is presented in a way that is more focused on the American perspective. Some professors try to focus more on the world, but others have a distinctive American view. So it was funny that in Europe I was defending the United States, but here I was more critical of the United States. Because the world is complex, issues are not black and white; I think it was good for me to consider different perspectives in terms of the European way, the Asian way, and the American way. No perspective is completely right or, always wrong.

What are your plans for the future?

I am applying for my masters in Political Science at Gothenburg University. I started with international relations, but I kind of figured out that a lot of problems in international relations are related to what is happening inside the state, which affects the state's international policy and politics. So, I am turning more toward political science. Even if I am studying political science, my goal is to work in the international system, like the European Union or the United Nations.

Thank you, Rodrigo, for all you have contributed to the 2015 Student Seminar and for enriching the learning experiences of your peers at JMU this semester. We wish you all the best as you complete your degree and pursue your graduate education.