

Last November, several of my Furman University classmates and I had the privilege of participating in the 2009 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Singapore. The trip was sponsored by the Riley Institute at Furman and led by its director, Don Gordon. Since I and my classmates — Hannah Johnson, Kelly Cressy and Carry Fontana — are all majoring in either economics or political science, it was the perfect opportunity to take what we had learned in the classroom and see it displayed on a grand scale.

APEC is made up of 21 member countries from the Asia Pacific, a region which makes up 54 percent of the world's GDP and contains 40 percent of its population. In particular, APEC seeks to “facilitate economic growth, cooperation, trade and investment in the region,” and the 2009 theme was “sustaining growth, connecting the region.”

Furman was the only college representative from the United States to participate in the “Voices of the Future” program, which brings together more than 100 youths from member economies each year to meet and interact with various APEC business representatives and leaders. During the week we were there, we had the opportunity to gain additional insights into Singaporean culture by visiting places such as the Marina Barrage (which serves as a freshwater reservoir) and the “Heartlands” (a government-run housing project).

This was a truly eye-opening experience for all of us. Singapore's tight schedule and attention to detail was impressive, providing a welcome change from past delegates' experiences. For starters, we had our own line at customs and a welcoming committee of other students ready to greet us in the airport, even though we arrived after midnight.

For the first couple of days, we got to see the city, delve into local culinary delights, and explore some into the country while meeting new friends from Singapore and other countries in the Asia-Pacific rim. The city itself, in my mind, is like a cleaner version of Manhattan, and the entire country is only 48 miles long. On the first day, we embarked on a “duck tour” of the city in a renovated Vietnam-era boat, and we took opportunities to sample the country's infamous chili-crab and some of us even braved the spicy octopus hotplate at the conference center. We got to meet Jet Li (China's equivalent of U2's Bono, sort of like Jackie Chan) and went to the headquarters for the upcoming youth Olympics. After a “night safari” on day two, we got to work writing reports of our experiences and prepared for the APEC meetings which took place for the remainder of the week.

For the remainder of our visit, we had the opportunity to rub elbows with well-known world leaders during the summit meetings for business leaders and APEC CEOs. Some of those notable leaders included Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Michael Elliot (Editor of TIME International), John Key (Prime Minister of New Zealand), Shaukat Aziz (former Prime Minister of Pakistan), Peter Scher (Executive Vice President for JP Chase Morgan), Kurt Campbell (Assistant Secretary of State for

East Asian and Pacific Affairs), SR Nathan (President of Singapore), and Lieutenant General Paul Selva (Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff). I also had the opportunity to gain clearance to speeches by the heads of government for Thailand, Australia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Mexico, Japan, Russia, and Singapore, among others.

As students, the experience provided us with insight into the political context of how the U.S. interacts with the Asia Pacific. From our vantage point, it seems Barack Obama's election and Secretary Clinton's diplomatic efforts have changed the world's impression of the United States for the better.

The U.S. Trade Representative, Ron Kirk, gave the keynote address on behalf of the President, during which he committed our nation's "engagement" with the Trans-Pacific Partnership. This is a broad-based regional trade agreement in Asia Pacific, and Kirk expects it to increase exports as well as create new opportunities for jobs for Americans. The move has been praised by both Democratic and Republican members of Congress.

I speak for my fellow students when I say our participation in APEC 2009 was a hallmark of our Furman educational experience. As college students, it was indeed an incredible opportunity to travel to Southeast Asia and receive a fascinating lesson outside the classroom.