Brexit. Impeachment hearings. War in Syria. The Democratic primary campaign. Climate change. It sure is an exciting--and important--time to study politics or to put your political science degree to use! Greetings from the second floor of Old Main and welcome to the first edition of the new Department of Political Science alumni and student newsletter. In this edition you’ll find news from alumni, current students, and faculty to give you a taste of what we’ve been up to in classes, research, and life away from Gustavus. In future editions we’d love to feature more stories from alumni, so please contact Kate Knutson if you’d be willing to write a brief article at knutson@gustavus.edu.
Dr. Leitch’s International Relations class discussing the role of international organizations.

Why study International Relations?

What will future Gustavus students learn about current international relations and domestic politics throughout the world? What will this time in world history be called? Political scientists of earlier eras could apply the labels of wartime, postwar, Cold War and even post-Cold War to their analyses, and with those labels came convenient assumptions.

But the present era does not lend itself to such conceptual neatness. At all points across the globe, it appears, chaos abounds. The tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring is near, yet for the people of those countries conditions are no more democratic and are in fact more unstable than they were before. We see the entrenchment of autocratic regimes throughout the world, and even beyond those countries people protest and often riot for their liberty and rights. A more assertive China defies the accepted values of the international community and, to some, brazenly challenges US world leadership. Yes, it is an exciting time to study the politics of the world.

But analyzing international relations is not just an interesting intellectual exercise, and some might wonder why it matters at all. Why learn about the workings of a repressive regime half a world away, or potentially lose sleep wondering if a group of individuals is plotting to terrorize part of the world? Why learn about global problems that did not exist in those earlier generations, for example cybersecurity and climate change, while existing issues from earlier generations, like nuclear weapons proliferation and human migration, are still largely unresolved?

The easy response would be to invoke the tenets of the Gustavus Mission Statement, especially the commands that we create a just and peaceful world and affirm the dignity of all people. But more practically, earlier generations of Americans were guided by a sense of American exceptionalism, however conceived and for good and for bad, and we are at a point in world history when that exceptionalism is being questioned. What that means for the US, and for the world, is not yet clear.

Richard Leitch is Associate Professor of Political Science. He teaches International Relations, Comparative Politics, The Politics of Japan and China, Environmental Politics, and the Politics of Poverty.
Reflections on an Internship

One of the most rewarding experiences of my life was interning at Senator Amy Klobuchar’s Congressional Office in Minneapolis.

This past summer, I developed the most meaningful relationships with staff members, such as my Intern Coordinator, Ruby DeBellis. She taught me the importance of working efficiently under time constraints, being a Constituent Advocate who handles approximately 200 cases at a time. Ruby also stressed accountability of serving an entire state.

When the Senator is not in the Metro Office, the staff members are on the front lines working on her behalf. For every phone call we answered, I needed to be mindful about the language I used, even if the caller was unfriendly. Given the current political climate with our highly problematic President, I interacted with racist, xenophobic people on a daily basis.

It was heartbreaking to see their disturbing views attacking immigrants, racial/ethnic minorities, and women, but I just had to bite my tongue to prevent them from continuing to speak, so they could hang up on their own. All we were allowed to say was that we appreciated their call and would pass their message along to the Senator.

As I became familiar with the office, I helped Madeline Coles, Senator Klobuchar’s personal assistant, create in-depth scheduling memos about which events she was invited to, and the ones worth attending. Most of the time, Senator Klobuchar could not attend because she was busy with her presidential campaign. In this case, I would need to write a letter describing the value and significance of the organization, thanking them for inviting her to the event, and have it be written from her voice by signing it with the auto-pen. This was really cool and disappointing because when we do write to our legislators, the staff members are most likely the ones drafting the responses.

It was interesting to be in this position of power where I was responsible for crafting the Senator’s message. What I wrote would stick with the recipients of the letter, believing that the Senator wrote it herself, so I needed to look through old speeches and press releases to learn her lingo, and act as if it was coming from her. It was a challenge at first, but then I got the hang of it.

My favorite part was working with Gammachis Bokku, the Constituent Advocate for Immigration. His exceptionally hard work ethic that helps so many deserving, underserved communities is phenomenal and will always inspire me to do the same. Every action he took was purposeful, such as understanding people’s backgrounds as they tried settling in the U.S. and bringing their loved ones from overseas. It was heartwarming to see him be willing to put his full effort into advocating for the people, and taking the initiative to be proactive under hopeless circumstances.

This motivated me to keep consulting with USCIS (United States Customs and Immigration Services) to expedite a particular VISA, provide answers to applicants, issue an OPT for international students, etc. I wrote Letters of Due Considerations for people visiting the U.S. temporarily for job or family commitments (wedding, funeral, etc.), and sent them to Embassies around the world. It became natural to get so invested in a case which compelled me to put extra emphasis on what I was doing.

Sadly, I witnessed some of the most sensitive, heartbreaking situations where people were unable to petition for family members or they had been trying to get their citizenship, and had to deal with arbitrary obstacles through no fault of their own. We hear about Trump’s discriminatory policies on the news, but it does not become real until you watch it play out in front of you.

It was heartbreaking to see how the racist travel ban is shattering the hopes of refugees who just want to make a better life for themselves. It takes immense courage and sacrifice for people to leave what they know and situate here. I sometimes think about my open cases, and wonder if there was any progress made.

I hope the constituents’ I worked with received good news. While I wanted to provide reassurance that everything would be okay, I knew that I was not entitled to say that since USCIS would make the final decision. I thank Gammachis for showing me what it means to be a true hero, both selfless and determined.

Monali Bhakta is a senior majoring in Political Science and English. She interned in the Minneapolis office of Senator Amy Klobuchar in summer 2019. Monali currently serves as the Student Senate co-president and she is involved in organizing the annual Building Bridges conference on campus.
While students were getting settled into their new dorm rooms and faculty were in retreat about the new curriculum, I traveled to Washington, DC for a conference on “Populism and Privilege,” the 115th annual meeting and exhibition of the American Political Science Association. Some of you may be wondering why anyone would choose to spend the first part of Labor Day weekend at a conference! After years of complaints by members, APSA has moved the date. Next year it will take place September 10–13, 2020 in San Francisco. Even with a new date, APSA is a conference that many faculty love to hate (or hate to love). It’s absolutely massive – this year’s attendance was just under 7,000 -- and can be intimidating. A lot of people describe it as a sea of navy blue blazers in over-air conditioned hotel rooms. Sounds fun, right? So why go?

I go for a few reasons: First, to reconnect with colleagues and friends at other colleges and universities. My friends from graduate school are scattered all over and this is one place we can actually get together, face to face, to talk about our work and lives. For the past ten years, I have been in a writing group with a friend who works in Michigan and another in Georgia. We always have dinner together at these conferences and check in. Second, I go to find out what new work is out there in my fields. I find it especially useful to go to panel discussions on material I am considering for my research or teaching, but is relatively new to me. There is also a massive book room where all of the academic publishers present their new work and you can order books on steep discount. (If you’ve seen my office you know I have a book buying problem.) Third, I go for my own professional development. I was just appointed to an editorial board for a journal in the field and this year I went to my first board meeting. I also regularly present papers or comment on other peoples’ work, and it’s a nice opportunity to get feedback from fellow panelists and the audience.

APSA is not my favorite conference. (Although this year they did have therapy dogs in the book room, which may have moved it up a notch!) But I return year after year because I find it energizing – it kicks me into gear for the academic year and has become a back-to-school ritual of sorts.

See you in San Francisco?

Jill Locke is Professor of Political Science. She teaches Political and Legal Thinking; Sex, Power, and Politics; Feminist Political Thought; Race and Racism; and a senior seminar called Revolting Children. Her most recent book, Democracy and the Death of Shame: Political Equality and Social Disturbance, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2016.
One of the reasons I chose to attend Gustavus was where I could study abroad: namely, anywhere. As a college freshman, I was ready to get out and see the world. I spent my first J-term at Gustavus in Salvador, Brazil. I have always been interested in South America, and the J-term focused on inequality and resistance. I was excited to work on my Portuguese skills and learn about another country’s culture and history. In Brazil, we had two courses. The primary class was led by Scott Ickes, a Gustavus faculty from the history department. This class explored Brazil’s history of colonialism and slavery, concepts of race and how they differ from U.S. conceptualizations, and social movements and diverse approaches to resistance. The other class was a Portuguese linguistics course. We learned how to introduce ourselves and have basic conversations in Brazilian Portuguese. Once we established the basics, we expanded our vocabulary by studying words associated with specific locations and events. We even went on a field trip to the beach and the mall to learn words associated with those locations. Our program provided other opportunities to help better understand important cultural aspects of Brazil. While I was there, I took cooking, samba, yoga, and capuera classes at the university. The program also arranged trips to observe Olodum drumming performances, a Caipuera martial arts school, the bonfim festival, and Candomblé religious rituals. My experience abroad enriched my ability to navigate other cultures. I continue to build upon and explore concepts that I studied in Brazil.

Amelia Espinosa is a Senior Political Science, Spanish, and International Relations Major. She has studied away in Washington, D.C., Brazil, and Spain and is a tutor for the Spanish language in the Culpeper Language Center. Amelia is also an active member in Model UN, GAC Democrats, the International Culture Club, and the Organization for LatinX American Students.

Participate in our Alumni Survey
The Political Science Department is conducting a survey of our alumni! Your responses will help the department evaluate our program’s impact on the lives of our students. The survey takes 8 to 10 minutes to complete; answers are anonymous and will be seen & used only by department faculty. Follow this link to complete the survey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CT6DBSZ
If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Dr. Chris Gilbert (cgilbert@gustavus.edu). The survey will remain open through the end of November, 2019.
Two political science graduates were recognized by the Alumni Association for their outstanding achievements at the Alumni Association Awards Dinner on September 27.

Mikka McCracken ’09 was named one of two First Decade Award winners. Mikka serves as planning and engagement director for ELCA World Hunger, where she works to ensure a world where all are fed. View Mikka’s speech at the 2015 Evangelical Lutheran Church in American Youth Gathering.

Klaus Sitte ’69 received the Golden Anniversary Award. A recently retired attorney with Associated Students of the University of Montana Legal Services, he is also emeritus faculty at the University of Montana School of Law, teaching alternative dispute resolution and negotiation. For 40 years he served the Montana Legal Services Association.

Upcoming Events

Share your expertise: Professor Kate Knutson is teaching a course on Minnesota Government and Politics in January Term 2020. If you currently work in Minnesota government and would be interested in joining the class as a guest speaker, please contact Kate at knutson@gustavus.edu

Gustavus Day at the Capitol: Each year, students from Gustavus travel to the Minnesota State Capitol to advocate for the Minnesota State Grant program. In the afternoon, we host a networking event featuring alumni who work in politics and government. Look for more information from the Alumni Office if you would like to participate in our networking event. Look for more information from the Alumni Office if you would like to participate in our networking event in the afternoon of March 10, 2020.