

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Gretchen Coleman:

I'm really curious, and this comes kind of from my past background working in elections as well, is the voter information side of things or the voter education piece essentially because we have voter ID laws and while I wish that we could change them, that will take a couple of election cycles to hopefully fix.

Gretchen Coleman:

So I definitely owe all the credit to the Center for Fellowship and Scholarship Advising at Syracuse. So I was working with Jolynn from CFSA as early as my freshman year to apply for a bunch of different awards, but more than just applying to get scholarships and fellowships and that kind of a thing, working with CFSA really helped me kind

run elections are which a lot of them are run very well and we have full reason to be able to trust in elections, but the fact of the robustness of an election isn't going to convince people to trust it.

It is a more deeply rooted thing that you could be influenced by family members, a political leader that you like, by misinformation. And if that sits with you, that's the reason you're not going to trust your distrust in election. So I think when we figure out how to get people to buy into elections, we have one, have the really good research out there to say that this is an election you should trust. All of that is really important, but we should recognize that that's all aren't going to do it. We have to have some level of, I guess, empathy for people who have misinformation about elections to get them to trust it as well.

John Boccacino:

What else did you learn from talking to students and the rest of your research base about what maybe manifests when people think about election results and not being completely accurate? Trust is 1.0 is c

Gretchen Coleman:

I'm really curious, and this comes kind of from my past background working in elections as well, is the voter information side of things or the voter education piece essentially, because we have the ID laws and while I wish that we could change them, that would take a couple of election cycles to hopefully fix. But in the meantime we have people who need to be able to get to the polls and cast their ballot and make their voices heard. And key to that is making sure that people are aware of the ID requirements. So if they have an ID, they can bring it with them to the polls, but also if they don't have an ID that they know about their options to be able to get an ID. For example, in the UK if you don't have an ID, you can apply for a free voter authorization certificate or something like that.

But so few people have applied for them so far that that's not going to end up enfranchising the people who need to be able to get out there and make their voice heard. And so I really think that it is on the government and it's on political parties and it's on anyone who has a stake in getting people out to vote to bridge that information gap and to let people know about their options. It's all of that. And that's not exactly what I've been seeing. I think that there are going to be some gaps in who is letting people know about the new voter ID requirements. And that's kind of the angle that I'm coming at this with.

John Boccacino:

And then with the fact that you are again, over in the United Kingdom at the University of Manchester with elections coming up in May, how do you plan on boots on the ground studying the election lead-up and then the aftermath to pertain back to your research?

Gretchen Coleman:

So still trying to finalize the methods a little bit, but I'm really curious in kind of analyzing the actual materials that are being put out to let people know about ID requirements, whether that's a government website or social media or mailers sent to people's houses, people who don't have access to the internet, trying to figure out exactly what's feasible for me to analyze. It'll definitely be looking at that. In terms of election day itself I'll be putting on a slightly different hat and I'll actually get the chance to be an election observer for the election. There is an organization in the UK called Democracy Volunteers that organizes this huge domestic election observation effort. So I'll get to go from 7:00 AM to 10:00 PM or whatever it is on election day, running around to as many different polling places as I can to collect data for that organization on how these polling places are being run. And they're going to put that into a report to talk about how the UK could improve their elections.

John Boccacino:

It's fascinating and I'm so happy you'll get a chance to be again there on the ground to take all this in, to contribute, to put your research into practice. I just want to get a sense, do you have any inclination... I know our country, there could be a lot of voter apathy sometimes, especially at the level where



itself, the people that you have running elections, your secretary of states in many states or even your county clerks are all elected. They're partisan leaders who are in charge of running elections. Even when I was a pollworker in Illinois, it was one of those people running the polls on election day and they wanted to have one Democrat and one Republican in every precinct because it was a really partisan atmosphere. And that's just something that is unthinkable to people in the UK where they have this big nonpartisan watchdog group in charge running elections.

John Boccacino:

Now I know mention you mentioned, Gretchen, that this dissertation, again studying and comparing the voter ID laws in the United States and the United Kingdom, that's one part of your master's experience. What else are you trying to get out of your experience over the United Kingdom? What are some of the other classes you're taking and how else do you hope to advance yourself holistically through this experience?

Gretchen Coleman:

Another goal that I had for my academic program was a focus on quantitative skills. That's something that a lot of people pushed me to do at Syracuse and I probably should have done and just never really got the chance because I was just so wrapped up in loving my political philosophy degree. But I really wanted to get that kind of quantifiable application to political science. So I definitely have been seeking that out. I'm learning [inaudible 0:16:16], which is a little bit over my head at times, but I'm really glad to be embracing that. Doing some of the more nitty-gritty data analysis.

John Boccacino:

How do you want to use this moving forward? What are your career goals and ambitions off of this program and this line of research?

Gretchen Coleman:

I have, for the past couple years, been really interested in anything related to election administration and getting more people out to vote. So I've been trying to explore that from a lot of different angles. And then through this master's degree, I really loved doing the research side of things. And now I'm hoping to combine those moving forward into my career to do some election policy research. So looking at new election laws and how we would fix election laws so they are less discriminatory, more representative of the people. And then doing the policy research to shape those laws in order for policy makers ultimately hopefully advocating to get those laws passed and implemented.

John Boccacino:

You really are so close to so many other different countries and you get a chance to study and hear what's happening. And included in this is the European Union and NATO. And you recently were part of a really cool seminar as part of Fulbright where you got to go to Brussels. Tell our audience a little bit about that experience and what that was all about.

Gretchen Coleman:

So I just got back from Brussels a couple days ago and it was the most amazing adult field trip essentially that I think you could ever possibly go on. So it was organized by the Fulbright Commission in Belgium and Luxembourg and they invited people representing other countries with Fulbright grants all across

Europe, which fortunately for an EU focused seminar they decided to include people from the UK even in the post-Brexit era. Was very grateful for that. Basically took around two weeks to go meet with leaders and ambassadors, embassy officials from a bunch of different organizations who are part of the EU or NATO. So we went and saw people from the US missions to the EU and NATO, went to the European Court of Justice to go hear a case argued, which was a fascinating experience.

Just all of those kinds of things packed into a few days. And what was also really cool is to meet the other Fulbrighters from across Europe as well because everyone has some kind of unique research angle that they're pursuing or doing really cool teaching work in their countries and it was really cool to connect with them and to see how Fulbright has shaped their experiences as well.

John Boccacino:

What do you think it was about yourself, your research and your candidacy that stood out to merit this?

Gretchen Coleman:

So when they were inviting Fulbrighters from the UK to apply for this and to make our case that they should select us to go, it was a callback to all the days when I was working on all these fellowship applications at [inaudible 00:19:06]. I had to put it together in just a couple of days, so grateful for those skills. But it helps me reflect on what I was hoping to get, not just with that specific seminar but also the global perspective more broadly. Because I'm usually so focused on US elections, sometimes it's really easy to forget how much you can learn from how other countries run elections.

And so that's something that I keep reminding myself to do with the UK and I'm fortunate to be able to do with my dissertation. And then for this seminar I got to think more

print it out and put it in themselves, they don't like the fact that they have to print it out. And think there's a lot of distrust there.

And so I think as we're thinking about election reform in the US we have to think both about what is statistically, logically, factually going to result in a more trustworthy election, but also what do people actually trust in practice? And we have to kind of bridge those two things because we need to have well run elections. We also have to make sure that people just innately trust in the results well. I guess what I'm seeing in terms of the administration of elections and how similar they are, even though I think that what it looks like when you show up to the polls on polling day might look pretty different between the US and the UK.

Even the source for my research of having a comparison of ID laws in the first place means that the US and the UK are following really similar trends in terms of how the administration of elections is going. I think that if the US hadn't had its history of voter ID laws that are discriminating against people, then the UK probably wouldn't have implemented those laws themselves. And thinking that and working on that path going forward is reminding me again and again how important it's to get that comparative perspective, because the issues that were going with elections definitely don't happen in a vacuum.

John Boccacino:

Now I'm glad you mentioned perspective because I do want to give you a challenge about just your perspective on how fortunate you feel to be where you are thanks Fulbright. How surreal is it to wake up and realize that you're over at the University of Manchester and you're really living out your dreams from the research perspective?

Gretchen Coleman:

Just so much gratitude every day. I think sometimes hard to process. It's like, "Wow, I actually really am here and have this opportunity." Even in the everyday things, like that I am fortunate to have my tuition covered and a living stipend so I can really focus on research and focus on getting to know people in the UK and the things I'm really passionate about with the luxury of just having time to think about big research questions and to travel and explore. That's something that I will never take for granted because it is really just so meaningful.

And in terms of some of the specific opportunities that Fulbright provides and just being in that situation to go pursue whatever you're passionate about, I got to go on a random impromptu private tour of the House of Lords when I was at a democracy conference in London. And the whole time it was like, "Why am I here?" The concept of the House of Lords was something that I didn't fully understand and that I was getting shown around by a lord who was really passionate about election reform and was agreeing to meet with activists in the election reform space. That was boggling to think about.

John Boccacino:

That's so cool to hear. And again, I'm glad you're taking advantage of all the opportunities that are afforded to you as part of this program. Now, speaking of opportunities, you mentioned that you're from Illinois and you already got your bachelor's degree from Syracuse and you're working on your master's as well. What drew you to Syracuse in the first place?

Gretchen Coleman:



Part of it was just that my college advisor at my high school in Illinois said he knew some women... The Syracuse admissions office was like, "I think you should apply there. They have a good political science program." So I wanted to go to school on the East Coast, that's why I applied. But then after I applied, I got invited to apply for the Coronat Scholarship, which is a full-tuition merit scholarship for the College of Arts and Sciences. And through that application process, they flew us out back in the day. I think now they do the interviews on Zoom, but they flew us to campus to go interview and to meet other prospective Coronats and to get to know Syracuse. And from there, I just totally fell in love with the school and the people that I met during that week are still some of my closest friends today. So that was definitely a perk with it, and I just really saw how many opportunities this school has. And so when I was fortunate enough to get the Coronat Scholarship, that definitely sealed it, and it's been one of the most incredible opportunities.

John Boccacino:

And you definitely took advantage of the great student opportunities as well at Syracuse, both being a student researcher and mentor with SOURCE and course getting involved with CFSA, which I know we talked about before, the Center for Fellowship and Scholarship Advising. Can you share a little bit about both of those experiences, both with CFSA and SOURCE? How they've really molded you into the researcher and the scholar that you are today?

Gretchen Coleman:

So I'll start with CFSA because I got to get involved with them earlier in college. So they basically want to go find Syracuse students who are potentially good candidates for the National and Competitive Scholarship and Fellowship Awards and then work with them to want to apply for the awards, but also to portray or figure out what the common thread is in their life that has prepared them to go be competitive for these awards. And so I started talking with Jolynn from the Center for Fellowship and Scholarship Advising my freshman year just to learn more what the office provided and all of that. And she gave me really helpful tips from the beginning of just, "You might want to be more involved in this way or keep these opportunities in mind further on down the road."

And so each of the scholarships that I applied for ended up really impacting me in really profound ways. I think even especially the ones that didn't end up going anywhere in terms of the scholarship itself. I applied for one fellowship my sophomore year that was essentially you had to go propose an idea of a change that you wanted to make in your community, and then, essentially if you got the fellowship, you'd spend the summer being able to implement that with all this supervision and mentorship and things like that. Ended up not getting the fellowship, but the idea that I pitched to them was some kind of youth voting initiative to engage more young people in the political process. And I ended up doing that on my own. So I realized I had this great idea to go try to get more young people to vote and to give them the information and resources they need to vote in Illinois.

And then I spent the next two years really involved in this new initiative, Ballot Z that I created. I definitely wouldn't have done that without having done that application. And then from there, I think as I applied for more scholarships, I really was able to hone in, wow I really definitely get

It's great to hear how the journey gets from the past states where we are today to connect the dots and I can't wait to see what you're able to turn around with this research, again, from the great program, the Fulbright Postgraduate Award program. You're a recipient for this year studying at the University of Manchester, working on her master's program. She is Gretchen Coleman. I know she's going to do great work with this line of research here. And it's all thanks to again, Syracuse University and the Fulbright Postgraduate Program.

Gretchen, thank you for making the time to stop by and give us some insights into a world that we really haven't covered here on the podcast. It's really been eye-opening and I hope you have nothing but the best of luck with your research moving forward.

Gretchen Coleman:

Thank you so much for having me, and thank you for giving the opportunity to share.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the –Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the Cuse Conversations Podcast.