

The Value of Model UN

Traveling to San Francisco to the Model UN Far West (MUNFW) conference during April provided students at Utah Valley University (UVU) with student engagement opportunities which differ from on campus engagement. On the Third Committee of the General Assembly of the United Nations, addresses agenda items pertaining to social, humanitarian affairs, and human rights issues. Students, including me, worked in the Third Committee together to advocate for their assigned countries on three topics: Freedom of Religion and Belief, Hashtag Activism: The Empowerment of Women and Girls, and Strengthening the Rights of Older Persons: Elaborating the Convention on Aging. Only two of these topics received resolutions, it may be that students had some misguided understanding of the role of the Third Committee, but there exists a large body of engaged students who study and have the ability to effectively communicate.



(L to R): Brandon Pedler, Permanent Representative of Austria to the UN, Ambassador Jan Kickert, Dr. Geoffrey Cockerham, Associate Professor at UVU and William Gum-Casey

I was assigned Austria and thanks to the visit of the Permanent Representative of Austria to the UN Jan Kickert back on February 19, I believe that I had a better understanding of how I should participate at the Model UN Far West (MUNFW) conference. I asked then Austrian diplomat many questions about Third Committee issues. In addition, my trip and participation at MUNFW conference in San Francisco provided me with an opportunity to make a comparison the Commission on the Status of Women 63rd where fellow students and I advocated for the inclusion of women living in mountainous regions in the final draft submitted to the UN Economic and Social Council. The 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women took place in March from the 18th to 20th, 2019.

By traveling to another state, students are immediately exposed to surroundings which are, at times, starkly different than Utah. San Francisco is city with sea ports; it has one of the largest populations of LGBTQ, and the cost of living there is one of the highest in the United States of America. Pier 39 looks like a carnival. People from around the world travel to this popular destination to shop and buy souvenirs. There is simply too much to experience in San Francisco, and the MUNFW requires a lot of committee meetings which consumes the majority of the trip's time; however, any brief stop to any of San Francisco's tourist attractions will likely be rewarding and educational. During the MUNFW conference, students meet in committees and advocate for their countries' position with students from many different states. This provides them with the ability to compete, discuss, and resolve problems with other students to fulfill the agenda of the countries they have been assigned.

The Dias, the student delegate representing Russian Federation, and student delegate representing Morocco, were some of the most prepared and believable students. The student delegate representing Russia was one of the most effective delegates; they gathered the most support for the Resolution prepared by a student delegate representing Cuba in addressing Freedom of Religion and Belief. Even when the Russian delegate had less support on the topic of Hashtag Activism: The Empowerment of Women and Girls, he was able to heavily limit the wording of the resolutions; specifically, any wording of social media. The Moroccan delegate was probably the most articulate student in the Third Committee, and it was my preference as Austrian delegate for Morocco to be selected to speak on behalf of the Third Committee at the closing ceremony.

When the Third Committee discussed the topic of Freedom of Religion and Belief, it became apparent that there was a divide regarding a state's right to consider what religions would

be recognized and what religions could be considered threats to the public. I stressed that Austria only recognizes 16 religions, many of which do not enjoy the ability to worship in public and does not enjoy the same tax consideration privileges that some recognized religions enjoy. The Russian delegate intent was to protect its citizens from the potential dangers of religion, terrorism, and harmful practices. Delegates representing some countries like France, Indonesia, and Morocco focused on universal religious tolerance education, expanding protections to all religious groups, and limiting language on xenophobia. Ultimately, both voting blocks were successful in channeling the language that resolution adopted; however, concerns of delegates, representing Russia and Austria took the lead on uniting voting blocks to prevent any language requiring states to recognize religions or label them as dangerous. The Austrian delegate sought to use Russian position as a vehicle for establishing states' rights to recognize religious organizations. As the Austrian delegate, I went to each voting block to voice the importance of states being able to classify religions and took to the Speakers List to address the third committee stating:

Thank you, honorable chair, and honorable delegates. When deciding to support a resolution, Austria must consider its people's wellbeing. As we all know, each state has the authority to determine which religions are allowed to be recognized, as well as their classification of rights which include public and private status, tax exemptions, and public advocacy. There are organizations which seek to abuse religious recognition as vehicles for criminal activities. Heaven's Gate cult persuaded 38 followers to kill themselves, telling them that they wouldn't be dying. The Manson Family taught that a race war was coming. The Peoples Temple, Jones had his followers kill themselves by drinking a cyanide-laced drink. Rajneeshpuram, at least 700 people were poisoned to influence a local election. As members of sovereign and autonomous countries, it is Austria's position that we do not pass a resolution which hinders a country's right to determine what religions are allowed to be recognized and protected. The delegate of Austria is working with other nations on a resolution where this issue is addressed. The delegate from Austria believes that all major concerns of the Third Committee have been addressed. Austria urges this body to reject factionalism, seek to work with us, and to help pass a resolution that speaks for the concerns of this entire body and not focus too heavily on single issue politics.

Looking back on the language which I used as the Austrian delegate, our entire delegation should have likely reconsidered language like "factionalism" and perhaps more. As the Austrian delegate, I still feel that it has had a huge impact on the delegation because of its ability to be heard by the Third Committee.

Hashtag Activism: The Empowerment of Women and Girls took the most time for student delegates to consider. Most, if not all students, disagreed on what should be included and what should not. As Austria has had established the right for women to vote in the early 1900s and legalized abortion in the 1970s, as the Austrian delegate, I found little disagreeable when students discussed the empowerment of women and girls; however, no language specifically mentioning social media was included in any resolution's final draft. After speaking with each block, my peers and I as the Austrian delegate quickly realized that most other delegations wanted to exclude any language regarding social media. Instead, preferring only to mention all sources of media because small countries had little access to the internet. As the Austrian delegate, I voiced its concerns when it was called from Speakers List:

Thank you, honorable chair, and honorable delegates. The idea that Austria or the delegates of this body must sacrifice the social media component of Hashtag Activism is impossible. A hashtag is reliant on social media for contextual meaning on this topic. The hashtag is not a symbol for communication on a phone - that's called a pound sign. A hashtag is not relevant to tv or radio, except to reference tv or radio within social media as a communication platform. The UNITU addresses the Digital Divide (Point 5) between urban and rural areas, as well as and the Empowerment of Women (Point 9) in their Key Areas of Action which seeks to support internet infrastructure and efficacy for women. Economic development is dependent to the internet, businesses and consumers exchange through a social engagement for the trade of goods on the internet. This is the definition and purpose of social media. This topic was chosen as a topic of discussion for the purpose to utilize social media's utility to improve communication globally to improve the status of women. There is enough support within this body of delegates that we do not need to compromise what we do here to the furthest extremes of ideological differences. Social media creates a global venue for establishing communication channels to address violence and inequality directed toward women.

As the Austrian delegates, my peers and I found little to disagree with in the language of any resolution that passed, and instead I focused on the inclusion of social media in every resolution. As this was excluded from all resolutions, as the Austrian delegate that it still made an impact on the Third Committee as a few delegates did speak out for the inclusion of social media when they were called from the Speakers List.

When discussing Strengthening the Rights of Older Persons: Elaborating the Convention on Aging, the entire conversation derailed to focus on countries that do not have older populations. As the Austrian delegate, the primary focus of Third Committee was to pass a resolution

strengthening rights of aging populations, I began to fear that older persons would be excluded from any resolution completely. As the Austrian delegate, I felt that it was important to address the body early on:

Austria feels that there are many important points to bring up when discussing aging populations. Just under a billion people were aged over 60 and in 2050 that number will double. We should be sensitive to places on earth where lifespans never live to participate in this age demographic. However; aging populations are the topic matter. Infrastructure opportunities and the addressment of health services to lower income countries are different topics which are being held outside of this delegation agenda today and we can be productive in establishing policy that makes a difference to this demographic.

This did not have the desired impact. When finished at the end of the event, no resolution was passed regarding this topic. Lower income countries did not care for this topic and instead, wanted to focus on the income gap between developed countries and underdeveloped countries. While this does advocate for lower income countries, it falls short on the purpose of the Third Committee and may indicate some misconceptions delegates had at the MUNFW.



UVU team at the MUNFW in San Francisco

Despite any potential misconceptions, one thing was clear – there exist a good number of extremely intelligent students at multiple universities who are engaged in education, trying hard to demonstrate the critical learning skills they have, and have a deep caring to learn more about the processes that occur at the United Nations. As the delegate from Austria on the Third Committee I was thrilled to work with so many intelligent students. It is always encouraging to see students working to find solutions to the challenges of multilateral and bilateral issues. The Third Committee received an award for best resolution which was drafted by a UVU student, which is rewarding to all those who participated in this committee.

MUNFW exposes students to new experiences of traveling and communicating with students from other schools outside of Utah. The Third Committee was full of energetic, smart, and engaged students. Even though as the Austrian delegate, I was unable to gain the language I sought on Hashtag Activism: The Empowerment of Women and Girls and Strengthening the Rights of Older Persons: Elaborating the Convention on Aging, I very influential in the outcome of Freedom of Religion and Belief. As the only member assigned to Austria's Third Committee, I was able to effectively communicate Austria's message, which did have an impact. Reflecting on the MUNFW one thing can be understood: there are many youths who genuinely care about what takes place at the UN.

I was able to ask diplomats from Denmark and Great Britain who were a part of the organizing committee of MUNFW, whether they could help us with our advocacy campaign at the UN. Julie Kofoed is the Senior Human Rights Policy Adviser for the Permanent Mission of Denmark to the UN. She has a history of advocating for the empowerment of women, working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, as an attorney, and now for the UN. Her experience in adopting language in resolutions, CSW final documents, and legislation should prove to be extremely valuable to the UIMF's efforts in advocating for the inclusion of women in the final draft document at CSW 64 in 2020.



Aron Holtz and William Gum-Casey

Aron Holtz is an Advisor at the United Kingdom Mission to the UN. He demonstrated advanced knowledge about the dynamic diplomatic relations at the UN, he is an enthusiastic character, and has extremely valuable information about how the UIMF can proceed forward in contacting UN delegates. These UN representatives who oversaw the MUNFW conference were surprised at the level of engagement that UVU has in global affairs, and when asked if they have visited and university, they both responded no. When I offered them to visit UVU, they were surprised and seemed interested at the prospect. I believe that these two members may not have been approached by students who are engaged in learning more about the critical role they provide for their permanent missions. This will give us an opportunity to be prepared for the CSW64 in 2020, help UVU to establish a more assertive role in international student engagement, and provide UIMF with an expanding network of international diplomats who are aliened with advocating for the empowerment of women.

My comparison of MUNFW conference with CSW63 experiences are that each offer different keys to succeeding in influencing policies at the UN. While at CSW63 a delegation of students must prepare to present their case for the inclusion of women living in mountainous areas on the final draft document submitted to ECOSOC, the MUNFW conference helps students maneuver around opposing agendas from a diverse international organization. At CSW, students

contacted Permanent Missions of different countries hoping to bring attention to the need for the inclusion of mountain women, presented at a parallel event, and network with NGOs. At MUNFW, students worked directly with other students hoping to influence final resolutions in order to pass the agenda of the country they represent. Each one of these events offers students new knowledge about how to work with Permanent Missions in order to influence the outcome documents that the UN creates every year. If one hopes to positively impact the UN as an organization, both of these classes can help one understand how to prepare, what to do, and what kind of dedication it takes to achieve ones goal.

www.un.org/en/ga/third/

Dirk William Gum, UVU student