

Final Internship Report

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Dickey Intern, Summer 2018
U.S. Embassy in Mexico City
Mexico

At a glance

Anabel Moreno-Mendez is a government major from Umatilla, Oregon. During 18X, she served as a U.S. Department of State intern assigned to the political section of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, MX. While there, she assisted foreign service officers as they worked with the Mexican government and other strategic partners to strengthen the bilateral U.S.-Mexico relationship. Her duties included attending events on behalf of the U.S. government, analyzing 2018 Mexican elections results, monitoring migration trends, preparing materials for the annual International Religious Freedom Report, and supporting official visits (including the visits of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Senior Advisor to the President Jared Kushner, Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin, and Secretary of Homeland Security is Kirstjen Nielsen).

Overview of the Internship

This internship served as an opportunity for me to see what a career in the United States foreign service would entail. I completed my internship with the Western Hemisphere Affairs office of the U.S. Department of State and was honored to have served for Mission Mexico, specifically as a political intern for the embassy in Mexico City. While there, I was able to witness what has been called the most historic elections in Mexican history, as well as how the United States mitigated the family separation immigration scandal. I also learned how transitions in leadership affect the culture of an embassy. I was able to see how the chain of command shifted when there was a lapse in leadership as the highest levels, the transition between one Chargé d’Affairs to another, and how an embassy functions without an ambassador.

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Projects + Types of Work

As an intern for the political section, I was asked to attend and help host various events, such as receptions with embassy contacts, human rights roundtables, and NGO events, both in the embassy and around the city. In the first week of the internship, I was assigned to be a “mingler” at the farewell reception for the then minister-councilor of the U.S. embassy. The reception was attended by federal senators, governors, and prominent NGO leaders in Mexico, and I spoke (in Spanish) with many of them at the event. During PRIDE month, I and my fellow interns attended numerous events on behalf of the embassy, including a movie night reception hosted by the Embassy of Great Britain and the Mexico City PRIDE parade. The U.S. embassy also hosted a PRIDE “happy hour” (the event was actually 8 hours long) and a concert; interns were responsible for helping to mitigate security risks to the embassy during this time. Additionally, Mission Mexico held a Fourth of July reception at the ambassador’s residence, and I served as a mingler at this event too. I attended talks on women’s rights, election transparency, and migration, and events in which past U.S. ambassadors to Mexico were panelists.

I was working at Mission Mexico in the midst of what has been called the biggest election year in Mexico’s history. On July 1st, 2018, Mexico held elections to replace its president, 500 federal chamber deputies, and 128 federal senators. At the state and local levels, 8 governors were elected as well as over 2700 local deputies, mayors, council members and municipal judges. Suffice to say, the 2018 election was unprecedented in

its scope and impact on Mexico's political landscape, and I got the opportunity to help inform Washington about the developments as they happened before my eyes. In the days leading up to the election, I helped to prepare transition documents for Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's (the then projected winner) announced cabinet. On election day (a Sunday) I came into the office to monitor election-day coverage and assist in hour by hour reports. After election day, I analyzed and consolidated local election results and created easy-to-follow infographics for the embassy's consumption. I also began creating a database of prominent figures in the new government, and by the end of my internship, I had written nearly 70 full page biographies.

Given my person interests in the promotion of human rights, I chose to work closely with the Human Rights and Migration Unit (HMU) in the embassy's political section. As part of this, I helped to organize human rights and rule of law roundtables between embassy officials and top NGO leaders in Mexico. I also prepared and consolidated migration data to an easy to read format for the incoming head of HMU, since there was a personnel transition in the middle of my internship. I monitored detention and deportation rates at Mexico's southern border as well as political developments from the current and incoming administration. My experience with the unit would culminate when I wrote a cable on the topic of what the United States could expect from the incoming administration on migration and border security issues. Given how critical that information is to Washington and the political salience of the issue, I was honored to have been asked to write that cable.

Expectations vs. Experience

I expected that this internship would allow me to see how foreign diplomats negotiate with their neighbors to protect and advance national interests while still managing to promote multilateral cooperation. I fully anticipated being able to explore my interests in varying global issues through the lens of a US foreign service officer. Specifically, with Mexico, I was interested in seeing how migration issues and unexpected rhetoric from top officials affected the bilateral relationship.

I would say that in terms of my broad overarching goals, this internship completely met my expectations. I was able to see and be a part of several interactions between U.S. government officials and Mexican government, NGO, and business leaders. I was also working with the U.S. embassy in Mexico while family separation policies in detention centers within the U.S. were garnering international attention, so I got have a behind the scenes look at how U.S. officials mitigated the situation and framed the discussion around the issue when speaking to their Mexican counterparts. *(SBU) I did not expect to have to personally defend the Trump Administration's policies. It felt immoral to hide my true feelings and simply restate the mandatory talking point on the matter, and I was*

surprised that the State Department, despite the stated belief in the advancement of human rights, could so blatantly ignore the trauma caused by family separation policies and simply cite the illegal entrance of “immigrants” (not asylum seekers) as justification for measures being taken.

In terms of day-to-day project workload, I expected a fast-paced environment where I would be super busy 100% of the time. During the term immediately preceding this internship, I had interned for the U.S. Senate, where I was constantly given important projects with one-hour deadlines, and I’d imagined that the work environments would be very similar. However, I could not have been more wrong about that. The embassy focused on long term projects for interns, which meant I could be working on the same project for days and weeks at a time, meaning I would not have a finished product to show for it at the end of each work day. I also felt that I was sometimes given busy-work that didn’t necessarily serve the broader mission of the embassy, and I often found myself with idle hands. The political section really had more interns than it knew what to do with while I was there (I was one of four interns in a section which only really needed a single intern), and as a result, my time-sensitive projects were far and few in between. In the first few weeks of my internship, I found myself disappointed because I did not feel like an asset that was valued. I eventually had a conversation with the intern supervisor, and I was given more short-term projects towards the second half of my internship.

Work Environment + Work Life Balance

The physical work environment at the embassy was very professional. I dressed in full business clothing whenever I was “on the clock.” The other political interns and I each had our own desk cubicle in a room which was located in the basement of the embassy. There were five floors between us and the rest of the political section due to space limitations. Partially because of the physical distance between us, our supervisor was very hands off, and we very rarely saw him, so we generally had a lot of autonomy. I initially had a hard time connecting with the rest of the political section because it was easy to feel as though we weren’t a part of the political team, since we were so isolated. This gradually shifted as I attended more events and worked more closely with individuals in the section.

I think I had a great work-life balance. Though I did occasionally have to attend evening events on behalf of the embassy, I rarely took my work home with me. I spent most of my weekends traveling. During half of my travel, I visited family. I spent two weekends visiting aunts and cousins in Hidalgo, and I took a three-day weekend to visit my mother’s hometown in Michoacán where my grandmother and most of my other relatives live. Other weekends, I would explore different areas of Mexico City or the surrounding area. With my roommate (and fellow intern), I visited Puebla and Cholula one weekend.

Another weekend, a group of embassy interns and I chose to go to Oaxaca. On the 4th of July, we went to Tenochtitlan. This was all a ton of fun, and I was super happy to explore areas of Mexico I had never before visited.

When I could, I tried to make the most of my evenings during the work week. I would go to the embassy gym immediately after work four times a week. Occasionally, I would get dinner with fellow embassy interns at some of the city's best restaurants. In the second half of my internship, I began taking a weekly salsa cubana course through a local studio with some friends from the embassy. One of my favorite things to do was to take the bus downtown to Bellas Artes, so that I could walk around and just take it all in. There were always new artisan vendors in the area, and there was never a shortage of great food to be found. I did my best to explore the city and meet locals on my own.

I was also really lucky to have met a Dartmouth alumnae who also worked at the embassy. She was a Dartmouth '10, and we met on several occasions. She showed me around the city, took me out to dinners, and provided very useful advice for navigating my challenges in the embassy. She was an amazing mentor-figure, and I was very fortunate to have made such an amazing Dartmouth connection during this internship!

Personal Growth, Skills Learned + Cultural Differences Encountered

I had a difficult time adjusting to both my work and home environments in Mexico City due to unexpected identity issues that arose during my time there. As an American of Mexican heritage, it was difficult to work as a representative of the U.S. government, because I often found my "American-ness" questioned. I physically looked like I could be a native Mexican, and my near-perfect Spanish language skills also suggested that I was not actually a U.S. citizen. This was true both when I was within the embassy walls and when I was working off-site at events. I was made to feel like I wasn't American enough for the Americans and that I wasn't Mexican enough for the Mexicans. There were subtle, micro-aggressive behaviors that often made me feel like I was an imposter or simply didn't belong. For example, a few times when I was an assigned "mingler" during embassy-hosted events, several VIP guests assumed that I was locally-employed staff or hired help rather than an American representative, and some were offended or very rude when I tried to shake their hands and speak to them. They automatically saw me as inferior, and they believed that I was breaking the stringent social class rules that are present in Mexican society by attempting to interact directly with them because they didn't see me as an American embassy representative.

Outside the embassy (when I wasn't wearing my "American hat"), I tended to have the opposite issue. I wanted to be able to blend in and embrace the comradery of everyday Mexican society. However, all too often, I found that I couldn't hide the fact that I was

an outsider. While I could physically blend in when speaking the locals, my slight accent would give away the fact that I didn't belong to their specific community. It would be like they were expecting to have a connection upon meeting but were disappointed when they found out I was a "tainted good." Some could automatically tell that I was a Mexican-American, and given the political climate under the Trump Administration, I could feel their instant negative judgement weighing down on our interaction. I wouldn't say that I completely resolved my mini identity crisis, but towards the end of the internship, I found that I was less bothered by this dynamic. Sometimes, there were things you couldn't control, and I learned to focus on what I could control and enjoy the experience despite feeling unwelcomed at times.

In terms of broader learning, I was amazed to have discovered just how much more diverse and vibrant Mexican culture could be. While my parents are Mexican, and I grew up with many aspects of Mexican culture integrated into my everyday life, I didn't necessarily have the best idea of broader Mexican traditions. I was actually surprised to discover that customs and traditions in Mexico could vary so widely based on regional and socioeconomic factors. Many of the things that I had originally believed were Mexican were actually very specifically "poor, rural Michoacán" Mexican. This experience allowed me to explore various cultural aspects of other Mexican regions. I discovered new foods, dialects, traditions, and mannerisms.

On a personal level, I found my ability to think, read, and write in Spanish dramatically improved during my time in Mexico. I fine-tuned my time management and social interaction skills. I was able to feel fully independent and competent in a workplace where I was not under constant supervision (a first for me). I learned how to speak to my supervisor to advocate for myself and address my personal needs. I learned more about the Mexican political scene and how the U.S. government interacts with one of its most important partners. I also discovered more about the inner workings of the Department of State and the various other executive branch agencies that work so closely together in larger embassies, and I believe this knowledge will be very useful in the future.

Lasting Impact

I fell in love with Mexico City, and I can't wait to return (frequently) in the future. Professionally, the exposure to various aspects of the embassy operations allowed me to really solidify my future career plans. I fully plan to pursue a career in the foreign service. I had already been tailoring my academic experience to prepare me for a career in international relations before my internship, but now that I definitively know that I want to work for the Department of State, I am now able to tailor my courses to acquire the skills that are valued by the agency. I am extremely grateful to have had this awesome opportunity.