Debra Steger Talks about Reforming the World Trade Organization

The Future of the WTO  By Ayelet Haran

On Monday, November 9th, 2009, Dr. Debra Steger of the University of Ottawa led a panel with Professors Michael Ewing-Chow of the National University of Singapore and Merit Janow of Columbia University to discuss the future of the World Trade Organization. This panel was a part of trade-lecture series held by the IFEP concentration for the fall 2009 semester. Dr. Steger had recently edited a book titled Redesigning the World Trade Organization for the Twenty-first Century, in which a number of academics and experts tackle the problems that face the WTO in today’s economic and political reality.

In her talk, Steger highlighted an important issue: in the aftermath of the financial crisis several international organizations and forums, like the IMF and the G-8/G-20 went through a series of reforms that should assist the organizations to preempt and respond to future financial meltdowns. The WTO, however, has been ignored in the process. “The WTO is not unique, it’s really one of many international organizations” said Steger, expressing her surprise that the WTO was not included in the list of organizations undergoing reform. Steger’s project wishes to put forward the fundamental structural problems with the operations of the organization and offers ways in which the problems can be solved (Continued on page 6).
IFEP Gala

On Wednesday the 18th of November, alumni, faculty and students gathered at the famous Lotos Club at 5 East 66th Street for the Annual IFEP Gala, sponsored by Christofferson, Robb & Co. The Lotos Club is the oldest literary club in America. Founded in 1870, the club aims to promote and develop literature, art, sculpture, music, architecture, journalism, drama, science, education and the learned professions. The beautiful French Renaissance-style building that houses the club today was built in 1900 by Mrs. Elliott F. Shepard, daughter of William H. Vanderbilt. The event was a fun-filled evening of networking, great conversation and far too much champagne...

By Francis Eliot

COMPANIES REPRESENTED AT THE GALA
Q&A
with Professor Robb

Professor Robb, you have a wealth of experience in the hedge fund world. First off, can you give us some inspiration as to why you think a SIPA student is a valuable asset in a hedge fund? As an employer, what do SIPA IFEP students bring to the party that, for example, a business school student can’t offer you?

I don’t think hedge funds care about how students have mastered the intersection of geopolitics, economics and public policy. That’s not a concern for an entry level job. Normally, they won’t value the ability of SIPA students to speak lots of languages. In my experience, international business is conducted in English. But IFEP rivals the top business schools in terms of skills students acquire in finance, economics, accounting and statistics. Many SIPA students have the edge of business school graduates due to their friendly, cooperative personalities.

Are there any courses that do not fall into the IFP required curriculum that you would highly recommend? Are there specific courses in other schools - e.g. Law, Business - that you believe it would be in the best interests of SIPA IFEPers to try and take in their time here at Columbia?

The IFP track requires quite a few specific courses. Professors Morgan, Janow, the administration and I designed a curriculum that lays out what we think you need to study to prepare for a career in finance. Beyond that, you should choose classes that you would enjoy. If you have the chance to study tax, accounting or law, this will benefit you. I would not recommend too many classes in “financial engineering.” This field has been battered by the crisis. Why not take a class in philosophy, literature, economics, math or history? They are generally open to SIPA students. As a prospective employer, I would be more impressed by “G9255, Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason” than one more class on asset pricing.

The new curriculum requires students to choose both a concentration and a specialization. Do you think there is a particular specialization that would be most valuable? Many first year IFEP concentrators are registered in the Advanced Policy and Economic Analysis specialization at the moment. Do you think this is a good fit of skills for the hedge fund world? Or would it be preferable to choose a regional specialization for example?

I think students should do whatever they want. They will have skills they need to get started from the IFP-track core curriculum. The rest they can learn on the job. The most unlikely interview question I can imagine would be, “OK, but what’s your specialization?”

If students want to work in a hedge fund, do you advise them to first gain experience in a bank or on Wall Street?

I advise against planning a career two steps ahead. Careers don’t work that way – they are much more random. If a bank offers you a job that appeals to you, take it. Do your best and see where it leads you.
Interview with SIPA student Laura Gassman: MIA/MPP dual degree with Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy 2011

By Francis Eliot

Laura is a first year MIA student with an interesting profile. Whilst studying full-time at SIPA she continues to work part time at a US bulge bracket investment bank where she has worked as an analyst since 2006.

After graduating magna cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in International Relations, she was selected as an Alternate Fulbright for the country of Uzbekistan. She was due to move to Uzbekistan in the summer of 2005 to research intercultural negotiations. But political events in Andijan led to US exchange programs with Uzbekistan being cancelled that year.

Says Laura: “So my plans had suddenly fallen through and I wasn’t sure what to do next. I was lucky enough to land a role as a research assistant at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. reporting directly to a former Under Secretary of State for Economics.” Laura smiles: “The best advice ever given to me, when I was at college, was to work for someone with a big Rolodex”.

Laura could be considered an expert on the global financial crisis. As far back as 2005, two years before the crisis hit the Bloomberg screens, she was researching vulnerabilities in the global economy, particularly in the financial risk posed by the proliferation of derivatives.

After less than a year at CSIS, however, Laura’s boss gave her two weeks to decide if she wanted to join him in New York where he was taking a job as Vice Chairman at the investment bank where she now works. She decided to do it.

“I never intended to join an investment bank,” she admits. “Banks don’t normally hire people with an IR background, especially junior people, unless they have financial training or experience”. Because of her direct report to a Vice Chairman, she found herself working as an analyst in the executive suite, researching international economic and political issues.

In 2007, she was recommended for a role in global client coverage where she worked on the bank's redevelopment of its Middle East and North Africa strategy, producing analysis of the region's financial markets, economic trends and political/regulatory environments. When the credit crisis began in earnest in August 2007, she got a call that she still finds hard to believe.

The International Chief Operating Officer of the bank had heard good things about her work and wanted to interview her about a potential role working directly under him. Before she knew it she was reporting to the international COO. “That I could be having one-on-ones, briefing him directly, was amazing to me given how few years I’d worked there.” Her role was advising him on strategic and operational issues in order to ensure that the bank’s international goals aligned with its overall strategy.

Laura’s advice for fellow SIPA students is that one has to work hard, work on the skills one has to offer and always try to do whatever is most helpful to one’s organization: “Do everything you can to be helpful to people - all jobs in a company are important. You also have to sometimes take risks. What would’ve happened if I’d decided to stay at CSIS instead of moving back to New York? Do things that you care about, not just for the money. You’ll be better at them if you care. And sometimes accidents can lead to the best opportunities. When Uzbekistan fell through I was devastated, but then none of this would’ve happened.”

And finally: “It’s about the people too. If you’re working with good people, the project will be good. If you choose the project because it sounds good you may not be able to accomplish as much.”
Alex Anich

What electives are essentials?
Courses that provide quantitative skills are in high demand. I read an article in the New York Times saying employers find the labor pool to be lacking sound quantitative abilities. Students should take courses like accounting, cost-benefit analysis, and quantitative analysis II if they don't already have these skills. Such skills have broad applicability and will be valuable during job searches.

How can students make the most of the new curriculum?
While the IFEP curriculum has less flexibility than other concentrations, much flexibility exists. Two courses can be double counted between a student's concentration and specialization increasing the number of electives a student has. Students should use the flexibility to structure the degree to what they want. SIPA provides great variability in course offerings that other schools don't match. For instance, students can concentrate in economic policy and specialize in advanced policy and economic analysis (APEA). They can count two of their economic policy courses as electives for APEA, and then compliment it with relevant elective courses on environmental policy and emerging markets.

How can students make the most of their time at SIPA?
Don't get lost in the system. Be sure to talk to PA's and get advice to create the degree you want.

Maria Paula Carvajal

What electives are essentials?
My answers are focused on MPA students: 1) Emerging Financial Markets; 2) Investment Strategies in Developing Countries; 3) Accounting & Finance for International Affairs (elective for IEP track); 4) Applied Quantitative Analysis for IA (elective for IFP track).

How can students make the most of the new curriculum?
Students should take advantage of the economic and quantitative courses to create analytical skills. They should strategically combine the concentration and specialization to reinforce the skills they want to develop for use post graduation. It is important to identify and specialize in a topic the student is passionate about, and not to get lost among all the options that SIPA offers. Employers value graduates with a clear vision of what they want to do and the strengths of their skill set.

How can students make the most of their time at SIPA?
Students make the most out of the new curriculum by exploring areas that are of interest to them or that can benefit their professional development.

Dario Vilchez

What electives are essentials?
Quantitative are always helpful when looking for employment. However, students should use their electives to study an area of interest or develop a particular skill. For example, I have used my electives to learn about energy.

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How can students make the most of their time at SIPA?
I have maximized my experience by researching the different courses offered in SIPA and the professors who teach them. When different professors teach the same class, I research their backgrounds to see which background I find to be more interesting or suitable to my interests. Another crucial thing that cannot be emphasized enough is networking. I am going to school with the next generation of leaders. Having good relationships with your peers allows short term benefits such as getting an internship and long term benefits such as getting a job or sealing a business deal.
The Future of the WTO

By Ayelet Haran

Steger and Michael Ewing-Chow, who have worked extensively on WTO issues, are optimistic about the possibility for reform. Building on the successes of the dispute mechanism of the WTO, there is hope that legislative arm of the WTO can become more efficient, effective and relevant. The WTO’s legislative process is very cumbersome and slow, and all-encompassing trade agreements are often hindered by controversy and politics. As a result, there has been an explosion of regional and bilateral trade agreements signed over the last decade, which undermine the operations of the WTO. Regional trade agreements, however, cannot tackle many major trade-related issues such as climate change, US-China coordinated interest rates, and other financial issues. The WTO is, therefore, indispensable.

Ewing-Chow challenged the debate by asking - “let’s consider what if we didn’t have the WTO?” He sees the book project as a fearless, timely approach, and does not see RTAs as a good alternative to the WTO, since they lack transparency and institutional integrity. As climate issues are solved using trade solutions, it become imperative that the WTO’s legislative arm catches up and takes control. Ewing-Chow added that the WTO also needs to grant NGOs and non-state actors “a place at the table and an equal vote” so that they guarantee the proceedings are democratic and representative.

Before a lively Q&A session, Merit Janow commented on the lack of inherit power of the WTO. She suggested that the WTO may need an external body to “evaluate the functions [of the WTO], particularly in the failure of the WTO to oversee regional agreements.” Several of the questions raised the issue of the WTO “green room” policies. The panel discussed how procedural changes in the WTO have become more inclusive and transparent. One suggestion raised to solve “green room” procedures is to facilitate negotiations in smaller forums that are transparent but also efficient. Steger concluded that “more formal mechanisms should be developed in the WTO” to make the legislative process more inclusive and democratic. Steger’s book will be available in January 2010.