

Molly: Hey Hoosiers! Welcome back to another episode of All Careers Considered the IU Walter Center podcast, where we connect with IU College of Arts and Sciences alums and hear all about their interesting careers. So today, I'm here with Suzanne Shaffer. She's the foreign policy communications manager at the Brookings Institution excuse me which is a think tank in Washington DC and of course she's also an IU alum, So I'm excited to have her here virtually today and talk a little bit more about her time at IU and her career thus far so thanks for being here Suzanne!

Suzanne: Yeah, thanks so much for having me!

M: So, tell me a little bit more about you, your time at IU and maybe what kind of inspired you to pursue a career in your field.

S: Sure! so I attended Indiana University from 2012 to 2015. so i did graduate a year early and only spent three years there but i did pack in a lot I think in that time. I guess one of the biggest things that... one of my biggest takeaways from Indiana University is the student organizations I was involved with. So I was a political science major. I minored in international studies in French and Spanish so I was all about the classes there but I was also really involved in an organization called students for liberty, which is an international Libertarian nonprofit organization so that kind of colored a lot of my time there because I connected with other students who are also interested in like political philosophy and things like that and was able to get a lot of professional experience. I think early professional experience out of that I had business cards by the time I was a sophomore, I was planning events, I was bringing speakers to campus, I was traveling to Washington DC for conferences and things like that so IU was kind of the breeding ground for that, that's where I got involved with SFL but SFL kind of took me beyond the university setting and really helped to give me, I think kind of an early look at what life as a young professional would look like and also i was also able to get my internship one of my internships actually both of my internships I got through SFL just connections that I made there so I did after my sophomore year I did a Washington DC internship as a research intern for this organization called Drug Policy Alliance which does policy research on drug policy um so that was a really good opportunity for me to learn about life in Washington DC another thing I'll just quickly mention that I really value for my time at IU is my study abroad experience so I did study abroad for just one semester in Lima, Peru which was really cool and I miss it a lot. It was a really tough time just in terms of being away from home and making new friends and things like that and all my classes were in Spanish and I had commute two hours to get to school but you know it was my first opportunity to really explore another country and to experience another culture and so I'm definitely glad that I was able to take advantage of that opportunity at IU. In terms of... I guess, did you ask what inspired me to pursue government foreign policy? So I think I kind of, I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, you know, I still don't. It's a learning experience to kind of navigate but I was always interested in political philosophy ever since I was fairly young, just kind of those ideas I was always reading like you know everything from like anarchist literature to like you know all different other kinds of things

and just really interested in those different ideas because I think it's really easy especially as an American to think that there's only Republicans and Democrats and those are like your two options in terms of what your opinion is but that's just not the case and when I realized that there's all these different opinions out there I got really kind of interested in that so it was kind of a natural thing for me to study political science and then I was also always very interested in languages. I studied French and Spanish in high school and throughout college obviously I really loved traveling so foreign policy for me kind of bridged those interests a little bit and so that was something that was always kind of interesting to me but I didn't actually really start working for it wasn't my first job working at Brookings so I worked in non-profits in DC and kind of a political philosophy space but Brookings was really when I got into foreign policy career-wise.

M: Gotcha. I do have a quick follow-up question. I love that you said, you know, in your sophomore year of college you already had business cards it sounds like you were already making connections and you kind of were already envisioning a career in Washington DC after graduation, so are you intimidated to do that I mean I think a lot of our students um especially if they're more of an underclassmen they're still trying to kind of get their footing and get confident with making those connections and getting business cards and all those things so what was that like for you as a student

S: Yeah, so it can definitely be intimidating, I wouldn't say I'm shy but I'm definitely introverted and I'm not the type of person who's like super bubbly and out there and I think it can be easier for those types of people but I think one of the best things that you can do and what I was lucky to do is to get involved with student organizations that reach beyond your campus so you can get involved with like you know student Democrats or Republicans or things like that but I mean for me what was better is that SFL is headquartered in Washington DC and then they had you know worked with students all across the world actually and so they really wanted to equip people with professional skills so I did like webinars through them they're the ones who gave me my business cards I was I published on their blog like things like that so finding organizations like that that want to help students develop those professional skills and want to help you network like I mean they we would do like classes on networking and they would you know plan happy hours and things like that um so I kind of stumbled into that because I literally... I looked for like Libertarian organizations to get involved with because that's such a niche thing. There's not a lot of people who aren't like who are interested in that so I wanted to find people like that and so I just kind of stumbled into that organization and then they really helped me develop my professional skills and then I was able to kind of like make connections through that so I think the biggest thing I could have done better at this but just putting yourself out there and you know it can be hard but there are a lot of people that want to help students

M: Awesome, yeah, I think that's really relatable for students because I know you know a lot of people are like oh I'm introverted and maybe this is more for someone who's extroverted so I'm glad that you mentioned that and it sounds like it's kind of just something you just have to get practice in and as you do it more you just get more comfortable so we have a lot of students who are interested in careers at a think tank like the Brookings Institution where you work but I

think also some students might be a little more familiar with what exactly is a think tank? What do you? What does the work look like a think tank so maybe for someone who isn't quite as familiar with how a career think tank works maybe you could explain it a little bit more.

S: Sure so a think tank is just a term to describe a place that is specifically dedicated to research and usually research for the purposes of policy making. So often, times you know policymakers themselves are not experts on a given topic like foreign policy um so they will rely on full-time scholars who spend their lives researching various topics and writing about it to learn about issues and to explore different policy options so think tanks are kind of hubs of that research Brookings, specifically has five different research programs, so five different like basic research topics that they explore one of which is foreign policy so our scholars are all you know phd's experts in their field sometimes ex government officials usually professors also like they they tend to have multiple kind of titles and whatnot, who write books and papers and policy briefs and talk to the media and just kind of you know like they will be for instance an expert on everything about Taiwan foreign policy and like U.S. relations with Taiwan, so when Taiwan is in the news or a policy maker or whoever needs to know something about the very like the minutia of Taiwan politics, they'll go to one of the experts so there's the research side of things but then of course to produce those books and those papers and those events and all that stuff that we do, there's a ton that goes into that, so think tanks have you know finance people and development people and communications people events people all kinds of stuff um they also have you know research assistants people helping the scholars with their research so there's a lot of different things that go on there I am, as you said the foreign policy communications manager so I work on largely on the communications side of things so I work with our researchers I myself am not doing policy research but in my role it's it's fairly dynamic, I get to do a lot of different things I get to kind of wear a lot of different hats which can kind of be fun for people who might not be interested in like... reading all day on one specific topic. So I guess just talking a little bit about my day-to-day I guess some things are definitely the same every day like emails. The world runs on emails. So I do a lot of that kind of thing but I manage three kind of main buckets of projects in my whole and that is I manage our database and I manage our media relations and a few other communications related projects and I also oversee our foreign policy events so kind of what I do day to day kind of depends on you know what projects are in the works at that moment. So some days, I might be working on spreadsheets and working on the back end of our database other times, I will be on phone with reporters crafting press releases or hosting private media briefings and other times I'll be working on and quite a lot of the time actually I'll be working on about logistics and overseeing the production of our public events. Brookings is a fairly prestigious institution and a lot of people come to speak there at least before the quarantine began to speak there now we do webinars but that's kind of fun because I get to oversee that process and so you know in my job I've been able to host people like Madeleine Albright and Ban Ki-Moon and presidents or prime ministers of everywhere from like Ireland and Croatia, Norway, Finland, Estonia, Greece. I don't know, all kinds of cool people come through Brookings and I get to work with all different types of people, so that's cool and I do think it's a fairly dynamic job compared to some of the other jobs out there.

M: Yeah that sounds like a really cool job. I'm like, "man I need to apply for a job like that". Um, so what kind of advice would you give to students who are interested in maybe pursuing a job at a think tank or maybe specifically doing the type of work that you do as a foreign policy communications manager? Do you just have any advice for students that are kind of figuring out exactly how to get one of those jobs, especially during kind of this crazy time that we're in right now?

S: Yeah so it does depend a little bit if you have a sense of what you want to do whether that's more on the business side of things like communications or if you're more interested in research um if you are, I mean in both cases, I think that this is a good idea but I'll say it's more important for people who are interested in research. You should, you know, take advantage of the opportunities to write those longer research papers you get assigned in college, you should write your thesis, you should study abroad, you should take a language, you should take economics and quantitative coursework. That's something that a lot of people avoid but if you want to go to graduate school in the future which I'm on track for you um you'll need those quantitative courses the other thing I'd say is don't keep yourself in a bubble in terms of your experiences or the experiences that you pursue. Any professional experience is gonna help your resume and when you're looking for a job you know, don't only apply to your dream jobs like you need to apply to everything. I put out hundreds of applications when I got the Brookings job and not everything that I applied for was like the greatest job ever or my dream but DC is an extremely... and I guess this is speaking to people who specifically are interested in DC but frankly most policy jobs and foreign policy jobs are they're very heavily located in DC. I don't know if that will change with virtual environment but anyway DC is an extremely competitive working environment, people who go to DC are all kind of like type A go-getters. Everybody's got really good gpas everybody's applying to the same job so you have to just increase your chances by applying to a lot of things and just getting that first job, I really think that getting like into DC is like, the first step you know, so like once you work in DC, you're gonna be more hireable than the person who's applying from Ohio and doesn't live there yet you know, it's easier I think to kind of switch jobs once you have that first job even if that first job isn't research assistant and as I was saying earlier you know get involved with student professional organizations at your campus and really take advantage of those kinds of opportunities like student conferences or you know events or whatever it might be, not just for networking purposes but also for you know just practicing being a professional, talking to other people seeing what other people do and and maybe even just getting like I did, intimately involved with those organizations and then getting to do like cool stuff with them and having them hook you up with internships or whatever you know, that kind of goes back to the whole put yourself out there type thing

M: yeah! So thank you so much for being here today. If students have any questions would it be okay if they reach out to you on WCSN to connect?

S: Yeah, definitely I have, I'll have a profile set up and I have a LinkedIn page.

M: Okay perfect! Well thank you so much Suzanne for joining me it's been great talking to you!

S: Yeah thanks so much!

M: Thanks everyone for tuning in to another episode of All Careers Considered and we'll see you next time!