

August 29, 2017

## Harvard Kennedy School Students Participate in the Negotiation Challenge



This past April, three Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) student negotiators were invited to participate in the Negotiation Challenge. Sometimes described as the “World Championship of Negotiation”, students from Harvard Law School were the first to win the Challenge in 2007. This year’s event was hosted by the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, and sponsored by the Gap Partnership. It included graduate students in business, law and public policy from universities on four continents. The Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government provided financial support for the HKS students to participate.

The HKS negotiators – Amy Zhou, Benjamin Clayton, and Jonathan Williams –received extensive preparation for the competition within their Master in Public Policy (MPP) program.

*Fundamentals of Negotiation Analysis* is a compulsory course for first-year MPP students, and all three had also taken part in the *Advanced Workshop in Multiparty Negotiation and Conflict Resolution*, among other relevant coursework.

HKS employs innovative pedagogical methods in negotiation analysis whereby students learn primarily from practice and collaborative reflection on their successes and missteps. This approach relies on an array of negotiation simulations for students to work through with their peers, developed by faculty and staff at HKS, along with Harvard Law School and Harvard Business School. Typically, HKS students start their training with more simple scenarios involving only two stakeholders, but over time come to navigate far more advanced simulations that may involve dozens of parties with diverse interests.

HKS negotiation scenarios often include private- and public-sector parties who must work together to accomplish their goals. Williams, who graduated from the MPP program this summer, considers his negotiation coursework to be an essential complement to his concentration in Business and Government Policy. “I believe the Business and Government nexus is about negotiating cooperation, or managing conflicts, to reduce market failures and achieve public goals”, Williams said. “I don’t think I could work in this policy space without understanding how to negotiate.”

The simulations used for the Negotiation Challenge resembled those from HKS courses. The HKS team ended up participating in four scenarios, one on-line and three in-person, involving a procurement deal in the specialty foods sector, the divvying up of treasure, ending the war in Colombia, and co-financing expansion of the Panama Canal.

The competition nevertheless presented new challenges for the HKS students. For one, ranking negotiators and their outcomes cannot help but reinforce instincts to claim value first, and

build relationships second. HKS students often have competitive instincts in spades, and sometimes bitterness over tough labour-management scenarios washes over into lunchtime at the Forum. To counter this, HKS training emphasises looking past win-lose approaches, as good negotiators in public policy must pursue joint problem-solving and value-creation whenever possible. The Negotiation Challenge organisers made various efforts to elicit a fuller range of negotiation skills and foster cooperative dynamics, instead of simple value-claiming. In one of the negotiations, as much emphasis in scoring was placed on each team's assessment of the relationship as on the dollar values of the deal. In two others, scoring relied mainly on experienced judges' assessments as to the quality of negotiation methods used, the strength of the relationship and the sustainability of the deal.

In each negotiation, the HKS students' counterparts came from outside the United States, from Colombia, Albania, Denmark, Iceland and Poland. This meant the students had to navigate cultural and linguistic differences, which is also a frequent aspect of negotiations at HKS given the diversity of the student body. The additional hurdle in the Negotiation Challenge was combining cross-cultural communication with distinct training, including not only different individual instructors but also different disciplines – law and business schools can foster different negotiation skills, strategies and cultures than schools of public policy.

In the end, the quality of HKS negotiation training shone through. The team finished with a bronze medal, narrowly missing out on the final. In a re-negotiation to reach a deal on peace in Colombia, IPADE Business School (Mexico) won the competition.

The Negotiation Challenge provided an important chance for the HKS participants to build and demonstrate their skills, as well as an opportunity to build their reputations as negotiators with integrity. Competing would not come at the cost of poor relationships. The HKS negotiators left the event with new friendships with peers from across the world, who one day they may negotiate with again.

The University of California-Hastings is hosting next year's Negotiation Challenge in San Francisco. Zhou and Clayton, who will be returning for their second year of studies, hope that HKS will send another team.