

Law Foundation LLM Report

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2015 Law Foundation Fellow

Background

When I took my first law subject, I had no idea what a plaintiff was and had nothing more than an intuition about this phantom notion of “human rights.” I did, however, care a lot about people and the environment. As I progressed through my degrees, I sought out volunteering opportunities in Aboriginal legal aid, employment law for vulnerable people under 30, and constitutional human rights litigation in South Africa. I spent the last two years of my undergraduate degrees working for a top tier law firm, being trained as a junior lawyer and assisting on pro bono matters.

This experience, coupled with the electives public international law and human rights, led me to conclude that law should be demystified and made accessible for all. In particular, it should be used to alter power imbalances between power wielders and in favour of the vulnerable and marginalised.

I then spent two years working as a clerk to the Honourable Justice Tom Gray of the Supreme Court of South Australia. Justice Gray allowed me to explore the human rights dimensions of matters before his Honour in the trial and appellate divisions, and in my spare time, I became a South Australian Co-Convenor of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights.

Why Columbia Law School?

It was at this point in my career that it became apparent to me that in order to pursue a career in public international law, a Master’s degree would be essential.

Columbia University beckoned to me as one of the world’s top universities, offering me the famed Socratic style of teaching and an injection of American assertiveness to an otherwise laid back

Aussie disposition. It, along with the buzz and intensity of New York City, certainly delivered!



In terms of my study focus at Columbia, in the preparation of my university and scholarship applications, I discovered a fascination for food and nutrition. It struck me one morning as I was eating my porridge and reading an article about how the global quinoa craze had caused a price hike such that poor farmers who produced the grain in

Bolivia could no longer afford the nutritious crop and were instead forced to eat nutritionally devoid, imported Chinese white rice. This collision of global economics with human rights was the catalyst for my investigations into food systems as the epicentre of the many problems I care about – poverty, inequality, the environment, and the ability of all human beings to live a dignified life. At Columbia, I devoted my studies to trying to understand how international rules shape food and economic systems and how the law can be used as a mechanism to improve the situation of those who benefit the least global economic integration.

To that end, I took the following courses, each of which proved a rich and satisfying opportunity to broaden my mind and abilities:

- International Environmental Law
- Law and Development
- Comparative Constitutional Law
- Advanced Issues in International Law
- Human Rights, Law and Development
- International Trade Law
- Animal Law
- Global Food Systems (SIPA)
- Capstone (SIPA) – a practical subject working on extractives in Peru



I also undertook supervised research and ultimately published a co-authored article entitled “Corporate agricultural investment and the right to food: Addressing disparate protections and promoting rights-consistent outcomes.”¹

It was a very happy day when I graduated from LLM as a James Kent Scholar (equivalent First Class Hons.)

LLM Highlights

It is hard to pin point one specific experience in what was an utterly overwhelming, inspiring, challenging, career-affirming year. Highlights include being told very frankly by Dean Sylvia Polo when deciding on which university to accept that “You need to do whatever is right for you.” Feeling like my brain was going to explode in [Katharina Pistor’s](#) Law and Development or [Jamal Greene’s](#) Comparative Constitutional Law

classes. Organising an event on food democracy at which the former UN Special

¹ Cordes and Bulman, “Corporate agricultural investment and the right to food: Addressing disparate protections and promoting rights-consistent outcomes” 20 UCLA J. INT’L L. & FOR. AFF. 87 (2016) available at http://ccsi.columbia.edu/files/2016/09/Corporate-Ag-Investment-and-RTF_Cordes-Bulman_JILFA-2016.pdf

Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, presented. Interning and then working over the summer with the amazing team at the [Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment](#) on international land investments contracts.

Life after the LLM



During my LLM, I was awarded a [Leebron Fellowship](#) that enabled me to return to South Africa and lead a project focusing on the human rights to food and nutrition for one and a half years. One particularly interesting research project I ran during that time was an investigation into the implementation of the National School Nutrition Program in the Eastern Cape. The full [report](#) and advocacy [booklet](#) are now publicly available.

At the end of my fellowship in South Africa, I spent four months consulting for Philip Alston in his capacity as UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. I then moved to Geneva and spent three months working in international agricultural trade at the World Trade Organization, before returning to New York to take up a full-time advisory position to

Professor Alston in his mandate.

In this role, I am pushed to my intellectual and creative limits in the most satisfying and enjoyable of ways. I work with amazing people for one of the human right's community's most brilliant yet humble advocates.

Alongside work, I continue to publish in the intersection of public international law, and food and nutrition. My next academic article will be published in the Columbia Journal of Transnational Law and is entitled "Tying the Knot: An interdisciplinary approach to understanding the right to adequate nutrition."



After a total 4 and a half years away from home, it is with great excitement that my husband and I will be returning to South Australia at the end of 2018. I will relish the opportunity to re-join the Adelaide profession, while continuing to work for Professor Alston remotely. This is an opportunity I would never have had, had I not been the fortunate recipient of a Law Foundation Fellowship that facilitated my undertaking an

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