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by Chris Pollock

The Disarmament and International Security committee of the United Nations had been working feverishly all weekend to craft a resolution on non-state paramilitary groups, when a delegate from Liberia stood up to remind the assembly that certain weapons import restrictions should be included in the resolution.

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Sounds like another typical day at the United Nations – but it was hardly that. The setting was the Harvard National Model United Nations (HNMUN) conference, where nearly 3,000 college students from around the globe gathered for one of the largest annual Model U.N. simulation exercises. The Liberian representative was actually Jason Atwell '09, one of ten Wells students who organized a trip to Boston in February to participate in the conference.

Each student was assigned to a particular committee, in which he or she spent most of the weekend. For example, Maryann Hines '08 and head delegate Nadirah Blessingame '08 joined the Social, Humanitarian and Cultural committee; Ke Huang '09 represented the African Union; and Kate Barnes '07 participated in a new committee, Unilateral Acts of States. Committee meetings were marathon events, with some lasting from early morning to well past 11:00 p.m.

The idea of a U.N. simulation for educational purposes pre-dates the current United Nations, and was born in the 1920s during the era of the League of Nations, the U.N.'s precursor. Other schools in the area, including Cornell University, Syracuse University, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, hosted Model League of Nations conferences or sponsored official student clubs as early as the late 1920s. In fact, the name of Hobart's sports teams, the Statesmen, is a reference to the real League of Nations.

Today there are 400 conferences of all sizes that take place in 35 countries every year. While Model U.N. clubs at most schools are independent entities, they typically work together to send delegates to various selected conferences. The Harvard event is one of the largest and longest-running Model U.N. conferences; similar events are hosted by Princeton, Johns Hopkins and Rutgers, among many others.

The HNMUN conference brought together students from a variety of American colleges and universities, as well as international students from 20 other nations, including Australia, China, Germany, Japan, Peru, and Venezuela. The country assigned to each college was based on the size of the delegation. More powerful countries were typically represented by schools that were able to send large numbers of delegates, such as Yale (Russia), the University of Pennsylvania (China), or the University of Chicago (United Kingdom). The Wells delegates submitted a number of possible country choices, and were assigned to represent the west African nation of Liberia – which, coincidentally, now has that continent's first democratically elected female president.

But whether one's school represented Germany or Grenada, each delegation was responsible for performing an extensive amount of research on its country. They are expected to be prepared on a variety of topics pertaining to that nation: its history, economy, political situation, current events, and government structure. Before they appear at the conference, students also must learn the basics of parliamentary procedure, resolution writing, and the internal workings of the real United Nations.



“Students who go through this come back enriched academically and morally.”

~ Ambassador Bob F. Jalang'o

Fortunately, the Wells delegation was assisted in these hefty tasks by Mr. Bob Jalang'o, a former Kenyan ambassador to Italy, Greece and Poland, who later spent three years as Kenya's envoy to the United Nations. "Ambassador Bob," as he is known, has lived since August 2004 in Ithaca where his wife, Jeannette Monaco, is director of marketing and participation for the Cornell University Fund. He is still active in politics and social issues, and is a frequent speaker at local schools and colleges.

Ambassador Bob spoke to the Wells Model U.N. club in April 2005 about "Diplomacy for the Model United Nations Delegate." He returned to campus again a week before the Harvard trip, briefing the attendees on how to use proper diplomatic language and parliamentary procedure, and how to follow U.N. protocol – subjects in which this longtime diplomat is certainly well-versed.



“I got a better appreciation for learning another country’s perspective because we’re always [viewing world affairs] from our perspective as American citizens.”

**~ Nadirah Blasingame '08,
head delegate**

“You have to talk the U.N. language, because you’re no longer students from Wells – you are delegates from Liberia!” he said. He reminded the students that, should other countries at the conference want to talk about human rights violations in Liberia (for example), students would have to defend their country’s position in the same sophisticated, persuasive manner as their real-world counterparts.

“I told them it wasn’t going to be easy,” said the ambassador, who also read through the students’ policy papers and suggested additional sources of information. He recommended several books published by a U.N.-affiliated organization and gave tips on how to form a team, perform the extensive research, and select the committees in which they wanted to participate.

“I thought it was really awesome that he was able to give us that information, to help us out,” said delegate Barnes.

As the ambassador told the Wells club during his 2005 visit, “Your delegation’s wishes and concerns can only be presented by a team of ‘professional and persuasive diplomats’ that fully understand foreign policies on all global governance issues.”

Several of the club’s members also benefited from participating in “The United Nations Simulation” class (POLS 210), a one-credit independent course of study taught by Wells’ Professor of Political Science Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo. Like the Model U.N., students taking the course choose two countries – a developed nation and one in the developing world – and use the cases to assess the effectiveness of the United Nations in responding to situations in those countries. “We have to contextualize how the U.N. system works, and put it within the context of the level of economic development of the member states,” Lumumba-Kasongo said.

The class also looks at the relationship between the U.N. and various regional institutions such as NATO, the African Union, the European Union, and the Organization of American States. Such groups are taking a broader role in working with the U.N. in responding to conflicts in their local areas. In addition, students analyze whether U.N. initiatives in their countries achieved the stated objectives.

Most of the time, students met with Lumumba-Kasongo individually and performed the research on their own. But they did come together several times during the semester as a group and also present their findings as part of the International Studies Colloquium, a series that regularly hosts researchers, both from Wells and other institutions.

The course “challenges a student who comes with any kind of weak knowledge about the region or the world,” said Lumumba-Kasongo. “I think every student that takes the class comes out with comprehensive knowledge of the United Nations.”

Lumumba-Kasongo, who is also the Model U.N. club's adviser, surprised the students by driving to Boston and back – a 12-hour trip in one day – to see them in action at the Harvard conference. “I just wanted to show them that I support them,” he said. “This is something that is going to be beneficial to them, and it is also going to open up their minds. They are going to make connections here that are going to help them even further when they are going to apply for graduate studies or even for jobs ... Let's be proud of seeing Wells delegates in this conference!”




Despite the long hours of preparation, there are some skills that can only be learned when students participate directly in a Model U.N. conference, large or small. For example, Ambassador Jalang'o noted that real U.N. delegates spend less time debating in general assembly than they once did, preferring to work out most major resolutions behind the scenes – thus the students needed to understand the finer points of political maneuvering. “It is all through consensus-building,” the ambassador said. “You have to look at the people who are not on your side – and if they aren't, what are the points of view keeping you apart?”

Blassingame remarked on how the Model U.N. delegates ended up reflecting the provincialism of their real-life counterparts: “When we had to draft the resolution ... we would have unmoderated caucus, and we noticed that all the African countries would team up, and then the European Union countries. The countries in your region were really your closest allies.”

Professor Lumumba-Kasongo said that, though the experience can be immensely challenging, 90 percent of students who go to a conference like Harvard's get hooked and want to participate in the future. Ambassaor Jalang'o heartily agreed: “You go to a conference once, and you want to go again. And again. And again! The more you go, the better equipped you are and the more confident you become.”

Though there was some disorganization behind the scenes at the Harvard conference, the Wells students responded enthusiastically about the idea of participating in future Model U.N. events. Not only do they want to attend a smaller, regional conference next year – which would allow more in-depth participation by the delegates – but they are also planning a trip later this spring to visit United Nations headquarters in New York City.

Several students were also optimistic about the possibility of future collaboration with other nearby colleges and universities. Barnes said that, by interacting with other schools, “you get to toss ideas back and forth and bring them back here and apply them. Because other places are doing things that we haven't even thought of. And by doing that, you're not only strengthening connections with other people but you're also strengthening yourself.”

You can read a speech Ambassador Jalang'o gave to the Wells Model UN Club in April 2005 at his web site, www.africasbeauty.com. Click on “Lectures & Seminars,” then on “Role of Diplomacy in International Peace and Security.” 

“I thought it was really great to get out there and meet other schools...you're not only strengthening connections with other people but you're also strengthening yourself.”

~ Kate Barnes '07