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By James Mikkelson, high school English teacher, Puxi campus



I first met Rachel Leng when she was a sophomore in my English class. She was quiet, studious, and persistent. As she entered the International Baccalaureate (IB) program I was able to teach her for two more years. In that time I saw her grow from someone who was tentative to someone who was pushing herself academically without regard for grades but for the sheer learning. That attitude has taken her a long way.

She is a recent graduate of Duke University with highest honors in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies as well as Public Policy studies. While at Duke, she published 10 academic articles, including her IB Extended Essay written her senior year at SAS. She was first runner up in the Miss Singapore 2012 contest, and that same year was named by *China Hands* magazine as one of 25 young people under 25 most likely to influence American-Chinese relations. Now, she is pursuing her graduate degree at Harvard University. I caught up with her between classes for this interview.

MIKKELSON: *At this point in your academic career, could you share the role SAS played in preparing you for your academic journey and how would you assess its value looking back?*

RACHEL: The taking IB and AP courses really had a significant impact in starting my university studies—freshman-year classes were a breeze. A lot of my peers had a difficult time adjusting to the difficulty of serious academics. Non-academically, the chance to interact with such a diverse student body along with the teachers at SAS really helped me in adjusting to a foreign country and a university where you have to interact cross culturally with so many people with alternative perspectives. That is the most important thing that SAS contributed to me.

MIKKELSON: *A lot of students that I hear from during their first year away at college talk about the difficulty they encounter that first year, and it rarely has to do with academics, but seems to have to do with finding themselves. What*

difficulties if any did you have adjusting to your first year at Duke?

RACHEL: Most students at SAS are third culture and have the sense that they belong everywhere and don't belong anywhere. It's very easy to feel isolated and even feel that they can't achieve the same depth of understanding that American students can. I had trouble communicating and establishing good relationships with many American students when I first arrived. It's difficult for people who haven't had an international school background to understand what the experience is like if they haven't been through it themselves.

MIKKELSON: *When did you decide on a public policy major and why?*

RACHEL: I actually stumbled onto public policy by accident. I heard a lot of talk about how Duke was one of the few institutions that offered public policy courses at the undergraduate level, and really got caught up with it once I started with my first few classes. I saw public policy as a less structured major, offering me a greater chance to explore.

MIKKELSON: *You came to China while you were at Duke on a research fellowship. How important was it for you to get outside the walls of the university as part of your learning experience?*

RACHEL: It was really important! I went abroad every year (across Europe and East Asia) and every time I came back it helped me to see what kind of work environment I like to work in and what topics I wanted to study. I definitely recommend visiting and actually spending time in a different country. It opens people up to new experiences and new perspectives. It really does shape you to be a more open minded and well-rounded individual.

MIKKELSON: *At Duke, how important were the relationships you developed with your professors. Was that an important part of your experience?*

RACHEL: It was very, very, very important in so many ways. I'm so glad I went to Duke for this very reason, because Duke provided a strong support system. Students are provided with a lot of encouragement and support and given mentors, or at least strongly encouraged from day one to find their "board of directors" (i.e.: faculty or professional mentors) during their time on campus. At Duke, professors made such a big difference in advising me in every thing from work to personal life decisions, and often welcomed me into their homes for meals and conversations.

Especially for someone who's a first generation college student, it was so helpful to have professors around whom you could go to ask questions regarding courses or your future.

MIKKELSON: *Often I hear people say that the brand of the university is the really important thing and not the actual education or professor mentors you can get at schools outside the Ivies.*

RACHEL: I was really lucky to be able to develop such close relationships with my professors and advisors. At Duke almost everyone practices an open door policy where the professors are always available, where you can just drop by to say hi or talk about your day. You're encouraged to do that. Whereas at Harvard, especially for the star professors, you have to make an appointment, and you often don't get to speak to them directly, but have to communicate through their assistants, and then have to wait a week or sometimes two weeks to finally see them.

Ultimately, I am a strong believer in the need for students to find a school where they can truly thrive in and grow, rather than just blindly chasing brand names. Choosing the right school, with the right academic and social environment for you, is so important in defining your college experience and the person you will become after these formative years.

MIKKELSON: *You published many academic articles while still an undergraduate—in fact, I have you down for ten—which is extremely rare for an undergraduate. How did you go about accomplishing this?*

RACHEL: In my very first writing class, which everyone has to take here and which I was not that interested in as a subject. However my professor took an interest in me and put in a lot of effort to encourage me personally to try different styles of writing. She guided and encouraged me to submit to journals for publication. When I was successful I realized that this was something that maybe I wasn't bad at.

The way I thought about it was that I should be writing things that should all be able to be published if I'm going to be spending so much time on it anyway. It's a pity when you have been working on a paper, you turn it in, and then let it sit on your hard drive. In the end, it feels good to see your paper in print.

MIKKELSON: *You were recently the first runner up in the Miss Singapore Beauty Pageant, the next step of which was the Miss Universe. You missed getting that by one place. That does not seem to be the thing most people would find on the CV of a graduate student at Harvard. Can you tell us how you got involved in that and what your take away from that contest was?*

RACHEL: [laughs] It was so random, especially since I have lived outside Singapore for so long. There is a stereotype about girls who compete in these pageants have nothing else going on in their lives. People think that you just go up there and act pretty and say things like you want world peace, help poor kids, and solve the hunger problem. But the truth is that you have to learn how to brand yourself, and how to develop a good narrative to introduce yourself to the public so that they will vote for you. Being in the limelight really toughened me up a lot more.

Being in the pageant also forced me to achieve a new level of self-acceptance: no matter how confident you may be, it is never easy to face a barrage of insults, and you really have to learn to be comfortable in your own skin. I guess ultimately, I realized even more strongly what it means to be a woman in the modern world.

MIKKELSON: *In the magazine China Hands you were named one of the 25 people under 25 most likely to influence U.S.-China relations in the future. How did you find out about it and how did it make you feel?*

RACHEL: I was surprised and felt it was amazing. I feel the weight of additional pressure on me to perform. Anytime you have these expectations it makes you a lot more careful about things you say and do and how you present yourself. A more important takeaway was learning even more from my time at SAS that your nationality doesn't determine what you end up doing; I am the only Singaporean on the list working on US-China studies.

MIKKELSON: *If you can say something to the parents of SAS, what advice would you give them?*

RACHEL: I am the most grateful to my parents, even if they don't necessarily agree or understand what I am doing. Having their support enabled me to deviate from the status quo, especially concerning the expectations that many Asian parents. I see a lot of my peers get so much pressure from their parents on their career path, who end up feeling like they have no choice except to go through the rite of passage of attending an Ivy League school and major in something like economics or premed. I would say that they should allow their children to explore deeply and not to commit to a merely conventional route.

MIKKELSON: *From hindsight as a very successful university graduate what you feel is the most important message the students now here should hear.*

RACHEL: Once you get into university, you will be bombarded with the idea that what you do in college doesn't really matter much because so many people end up in careers that are entirely unrelated to what they studied. College is the place to learn to develop the way you think. Get as much exposure to different perspectives as you can. My peers who are now out in the work force find that they are not doing what they studied and wish they had taken classes that they thought were genuinely interesting. Study what really interests you, and the rest will take care of itself.



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