A day in the life of a MIA student

In a Q&A complementing our Flickr tour of a day in the life of Juan Sebastian Herrera, the 2020 MIA candidate paints a picture of what attending GPS looks like today

By Rachel Hommel | GPS News

Committed to serving his country and his people, Juan Herrera’s graduate school dreams started early as an advisor to the Ministry of Culture of Colombia and programmatic advisor for the presidential campaign of Humberto de la Calle Lombana. Realizing the need for advanced study in development and economics, he applied to the UC San Diego’s School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS).

After his leadership experiences in Bogotá, Herrera realized the impact he could make on his country and how a Master of International Affairs (MIA) degree from GPS could inspire and fuel his passions.

“I’m very excited to be at GPS. I’ve been planning to pursue graduate education for years,” said Herrera. “While it will be challenging to live outside my country, I am excited for the cultural differences and the language immersion. Language is the way you perceive life.”

Eager to share his language and culture with his fellow globetrotting cohort, you can find Herrera cooking up some of his favorite Colombian food, including arepas or enjoying a meditative walk among the eucalyptus groves. Catch a sunset on the beach with him, one of his favorite places to unwind.

For the full story, check out our Flickr album as we follow him around his life at GPS.
What drove you to GPS to pursue your MIA?

“It was a difficult decision and I spent over a year reviewing programs before applying. My undergraduate degree is in architecture. I had no background in the social sciences. While I had hands-on experience in regional development, I desired a rigorous program but also a place I could have a meaningful experience, not only academically but socially.

Policymakers and development practitioners cannot afford to improvise. I liked that GPS offered a really strong quantitative program, a capstone in strategy and negotiation, in addition to approachable and accessible faculty.”

What is your specialization track and why did you choose it?

“I wanted to pursue two career tracks - international development and nonprofit management and international economics. I started my career working in urban affairs and planning, but when I moved to the capital city Bogota, I started working more on regional development.

While many talented people are working in urban affairs in major cities, there are not many people concerned with regional development. It’s an opportunity to exercise a social responsibility to these rural areas of Colombia. This degree will maximize my impact and contributions to my country.”

Is there a particular class or professor that already has made an impact on you?

“There are a lot of classes I want it take, it’s overwhelming! Professor Barbara Walter is doing research on conflict resolution and civil wars. In Colombia, we just completed a peace negotiation. She is one of the key faculty members that brought me here. I’m very excited about her class. I am also eager to see how Latin America is understood through the lens of UC San Diego.”
Professor Gordon Hanson is also doing important research on economic development, focusing on migrant populations. In Colombia, we have enormous challenges with migrants. It’s a major and important policy challenge I hope to learn more about.

**Is there one facet of the program that has been most challenging?**

“The last time I studied was five years ago as an undergraduate. The topics are all new to me, especially statistics. I think the School’s Prep Program was really helpful. It gave me the proper pace and confidence for graduate school. When you are learning the tools for quantitative research, it’s really useful to get down the speed and discipline.”

**What motivates you to come to campus every day?**

“I want to go back to Colombia to contribute to my country. I think there is a lack of qualified and sensitive human capital in my country. The brightest minds and people pursuing education decide to leave. It’s not a good way to give back. I’m committed to returning to Colombia and helping people who live in the most neglected areas. We’ve had a civil war for 53 years and we have many areas that are still neglected. It’s a good moment to be there contributing to the future.”

**Amid your rigorous academic schedule, in what ways do you strike a work-life balance?**

“During prep, I quickly understood that one of biggest challenges here is not only
academics but how to manage time. Time management is really important. For me, I found visiting the Gliderport to watch the sunset was a really great way to decompress. It’s great to have a couple minutes alone to just think and reflect. I also love cooking, especially food from my home country. Arepas are my favorite to prepare!

**Where can we find you when you’re not on campus?**

“I always wanted to live in a city close to the beach, it has always been a goal of mine. It’s my way to relax, to feel good and appreciate all of life’s possibilities. GPS has been a great experience so far...and we are only five minutes away from the ocean! I also really like that we are close to Mexico, as it’s a way for me to still be connected to Latin America.”