A day in the life of a teaching assistant

In a Q&A complementing our Flickr tour of a day in the life of Aimee Barnes, the 2020 BA/MIA candidate reveals what attending GPS looks like today

By Virginia Watson | GPS News

If you ask UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) student Aimee Barnes to choose a word to describe her life, she’d probably say “busy.”

Raised in rural Kelseyville, California, Barnes said she was drawn to UC San Diego “because it was the school in the UC system with the best reputation that had a location that I actually loved.”

Once she arrived, she decided to pursue her Bachelor of Arts in International Studies and Master of International Affairs (BA/MIA), a consecutive program offered in collaboration with UC San Diego’s undergraduate International Studies Program (ISP).
“I knew the program would be a good fit for me,” Barnes said. “The BA period gave me more exposure to economic theory and modeling, while the MIA portion taught me more about when and how policymakers use these skills in practice.”

While pursuing her combined degree, Barnes also maintains a teaching assistant position for the Quantitative Methods series and a part-time job at TechPolis, a consulting firm to leading players in the information and communication technologies sector. There, she edits memos, gathers resources and helps to write reports.

Despite the rigorous schedule, Barnes said she strives for a work/life balance, thanks in part to her husband and her dog Bambi.

“We like to go to the different dog beaches across San Diego and get the best tacos at Tacos El Gordo in Chula Vista,” Barnes said. “On the weekends, we always sleep in and have a big brunch before I study for the rest of the afternoon. One episode per day of something on Netflix also tends to be required.”

To see more photos from a day in Barnes’ life at GPS, check out our Flickr album.

What drove you to GPS to pursue your BA/MIA?

“A program like the BA/MIA was perfect because it offered me a good balance of economic theory and policy applications. I am not interested in economic modeling or statistical methods in isolation but rather how they can be applied to public policy and development specifically. Also, a combined degree program saved me time and money because I still qualified for undergraduate financial aid for the first year that I was taking classes at GPS.”

What is your area of specialization, and why did you choose it?

“My area of specialization is international economics, and I try to take all the data-heavy electives like ArcGIS or the econometric capstone. I focused on economics as an undergraduate as well and wanted to continue building an analytical skill set that could be applied to a range of topics. I think an economics-related degree gives you a framework to think about policy systematically, even policy subjects that aren’t traditionally considered as the primary concern of the economics field.”
What’s been your favorite class so far and why?

“My favorite classes have been International Health Economics and Education Policy. I’m interested in the provision of public services, when are they provided and how can they best be provided. Both elective courses touched on a lot of these aspects and provided exposure to how health or education policy differs across development contexts. They also provided a great review of what development economists are currently doing to study and improve health or education outcomes, specifically with a focus on randomized control trials, which I became really interested in.

My other favorite class is my capstone course because I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to engage in a quantitative project that is completely self-directed and to have the freedom to explicitly work on my areas of interest (i.e., welfare programs, poverty alleviation and public services).”

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

“I won’t pick a favorite, especially because I also have worked with multiple professors as their teaching assistant! However, there are a few professors that stand out because their own research is most interesting to me, like Teevrat Garg, Gordon McCord and Craig McIntosh. It’s nice when a professor can bring some of their own subject matter expertise into broader courses.”
Describe your “day in the life” as a teaching assistant at GPS.

“A normal day as a teaching assistant is a mix of preparing to help students, either in office hours or the lab I teach, and working on my own schoolwork. As a TA, you need to review the course material carefully to be able to answer questions later, but sometimes you have no idea what students are going to ask, so you try your best to be over-prepared. There is also time spent on other tasks like responding to student emails, grading assignments or meeting with the professor and co-teaching assistants.”

Describe the most rewarding part of being a teaching assistant for the Quantitative Methods series.

“One nice part was getting my student evaluations back after my first quarter teaching and reading nice reviews—thanks, y’all! The Quantitative Methods series is also known to be the most challenging of first-year courses so I’m glad whenever someone says I have helped them understand something better in the course.”

What general advice do you have for admitted GPS students?

“Get to San Diego as early as possible before your program begins to enjoy the beach! The program flies by, and you should take advantage of living in such an amazing city. My other advice: ask for help, and ask early! If you’re struggling in the program or with life, everyone wants to help you, from Student Affairs to Career Services to professors to your teaching assistants.”