Internship at the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Field of study: MA American Studies
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Placement supervisor: Ms. C. Bundy
University supervisor: Dr. J. Olthof
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Introduction: how and why did I choose this internship?

Before I started my American Studies Master’s degree, I decided for myself that I really wanted, and needed, to do an internship that would give me some valuable, hands-on, experience in my fields of interest: culture, international relations, and governmental policy. Through the website www.netherlandsworldwide.nl, I was able to find a few internships that interested me. Most of these internships were at the Dutch Consulate-Generals all across the United States and Canada. I applied for most of them, but the internship that I just finished was definitely my number one choice.

The reason this was my first choice was because the internship seemed like a place where I would be able to combine my knowledge about the United States with my passion for writing and for culture. During my placement I would have to write press releases, write-ups of events, content for social media, and background pieces for other departments such as the political department. Because of my affinity with the United States and strong writing skills I figured I could be a good addition to the team at the embassy as an intern.

Besides this, the embassy in Washington is the largest embassy that the Kingdom of the Netherlands has. Because of its size, every ministry of the Dutch government is represented at the embassy, essentially making it a microcosm of The Hague. Considering that for many years I have thought of working for the government, this was an ideal place for me to figure out what I do and do not like about the work.

On Monday, October 24, after having gone through three steps in the application process, I finally received word that I was to be the intern at the Public Diplomacy, Press, and Culture (PPC) department at the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Washington, D.C. For the first round of the application I had to send in my resume, a cover letter, and two writing samples in English. I got through the first round and the next step was a Skype video call with Ron Linker (Deputy Head of the PPC department) and Carla Bundy (Press Officer, and my supervisor). Even though I had little confidence that I would get the placement out of the many people that send in their applications, I was selected for one final call with the head of the department, Jacquelien Nienhuis. She asked me a couple more questions, before telling me that I was indeed to be the new intern at the PPC department at the embassy, which had me jumping around my room ecstatically.
Not only was I ecstatic about the fact that I got to work in a field that I’m very interested in, but also because I got to work in the capital of the United States and its political center. I had already studied in the United States before, at the State University of Geneseo, in a town with less than 10,000 inhabitants. Having had this experience, I knew I wanted to come back to the United States, but be able to live in a larger city, such as Washington. On a road trip during my study abroad semester at Geneseo, Washington had surprised me as a very pleasant city. It’s a beautiful mix between pompous architecture around the National Mall and friendly neighborhoods such as Georgetown. At times it’s as overwhelming as New York City, while still being accessible and having plenty of parks spread around the city.
Placement organization: The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Washington D.C.

As per their website, the embassy’s mission statement is:

“The Netherlands diplomatic network in the US promotes strong bilateral relations between the United States and the Netherlands, especially in the areas of agrifood and horticulture, water management, sustainable urban planning, peace and justice and creative industries. And the ties between our two countries keep growing stronger, thanks to efforts like Holland on the Hill, among others.”

To realize this broad mission statement, the embassy has over a 150 employees in total, making it the largest overseas resort of the Dutch government. Four different branches were housed at the chancery during my time there: the Regional Support Office, Consular Affairs, a separate Defense Department and the embassy. For my internship, I only dealt with the Defense Department and the embassy.

The embassy, in turn, is roughly divided into three clusters: an economic, political and communications cluster. The economic cluster deals with promoting the strong economic and trade relations between the United States and the Netherlands. Ministries such as Finance, Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, Health, Welfare and Sport, and Infrastructure and Water Management are represented in this cluster, which is located on the 4th floor of the chancery. Next is the political cluster which is made up of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Justice and Security, the Dutch intelligence services (AIVD) and the Dutch National Police Force (KLPD). These were all housed on the 5th floor. This cluster, especially the core made up of Foreign Affairs diplomats comes closest to the traditional conception of diplomacy. These people monitor political developments in the United States, report back to The Hague, and negotiate with American government officials. Our ambassador, Henne Schuwer, is the official head of this department, which signifies its position at the core of traditional diplomacy.

Lastly, on the 6th floor is where I spent all of my days, at the Public Diplomacy, Press and Culture department. Not including me, the department consists of six people: Jacquielien Nienhuis (Head of the PPC Department), Ron Linker (Deputy Head of the PPC Department), Jeffrey Allanach (Senior Editor), Carla Bundy (Press Officer), Annet Awendo (Communications and Ethics Officer), and Jesper Dekker (Digital Officer). As a whole, the department is tasked with a large variety of duties. Essentially, the PPC department is responsible for translating the Dutch national and foreign government policy to an American audience. The goal is to give
Americans a better understanding of the Netherlands, and promoting the core values of our country, embodied in the mission statement. To this end, the department disseminates information about Dutch trade relations, water management, agri- and horticulture, peace and justice, sustainable urban planning, and our creative industries. This is achieved through social media, events, campaigns, partnerships and conferences. Besides that, the department maintains good relationships with American journalists, and it is the primary source for information for Dutch correspondents in the United States.
My role as an intern

As an intern I got to support each of my department’s coworkers, and various other departments at the embassy, in their work. During an early conversation I had with Jacquelien Nienhuis and Carla Bundy, the head of the department and my internship supervisor respectively, I was asked what competences and tasks I wanted to focus on during my internship. I replied that I would love to further improve my writing skills by working on background stories, reports, and press releases. I also indicated that I would prefer to not focus solely on social media, as that is not a field I see myself working in in the future. The entire department did a great job at accommodating my wishes and finding projects for me to work on within my competences, but also outside of my comfort zone, which helped a lot to improve my confidence and knowledge of the work that’s done at an embassy. Two of the many projects I worked on, stood out for me, namely: Dutch-American Friendship Day, and Prime Minister Rutte’s visit to the Trump White House on July 2\textsuperscript{nd}.

Dutch-American Friendship Day is the annual day of celebration of the 400 plus year old relationship between the two countries, in honor of John Adams being received in The Hague and recognized as Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States of America in 1782. By this, official diplomatic relations were established that have stood the test of time. In order to promote this long-standing peaceful relationship, I was in charge to manage and organize a day of celebration. To tie in this theme of ‘peace and justice’ with another theme that is part of the embassy’s missions statement, we handed out over 5,000 tulips in total at Dupont Circle to all passersby, with a little card attached to the bouquets explaining the occasion while also promoting Dutch agriculture with some information about where the tulips came from. As mentioned in the letter of recommendation (appendix 1), I managed both the budget and messaging side of this event. After finishing this project, my supervisor commended me on my ability to manage an entire project without needing much assistance, which was great to hear and quickly helped me grow in confidence.

For Prime Minister Rutte’s visit to the Trump White House I got to work on various projects that all made me realize how lucky I was to get this internship and be so close to the action that you usually only see on TV. First of all, I got to think of the gift that Prime Minister Rutte gave to Trump on July 2\textsuperscript{nd}, which is part of the protocol of any foreign visit to the White House. For this, I worked with the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) in Boston, who
manage the ‘Adams Papers’. Together, we found the original letter in which Dutch bankers confirmed the so called Holland Loan of 1782, a multi-million dollar loan to a fledgling American Republic. A facsimile of this letter was framed in a Dutch 17th century-style gilded frame and presented to Trump during the visit. I was in charge of communicating with the MHS, managing the strict budget set by the Prime Minister’s Office, and bringing it all to fruition.

For that same visit I also worked on background reports in cooperation with the Political Department at the embassy. We wrote background reports on the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the tariffs imposed by President Trump, and many other issues that made the visit an especially interesting one. This work was something completely new to me, but it taught me a lot and it made me seriously consider working towards getting a job at a political department at an embassy at some point in the future as I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Lastly, on the day of the visit itself, I got to work with my colleague Ron Linker to assist the Dutch and American media at a wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery, and at the Hay Adams hotel across from the White House where a press conference with Prime Minister Rutte and Sigrid Kaag, the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation. We made sure that the press knew where to go and what to do. This was a great opportunity for me to get a behind-the-scenes view of how the media cover such a visit by a foreign head of state.

Next to working on these bigger projects, I had multiple day-to-day tasks at the office. First of all, every morning at 11 AM, together with Carla Bundy, our Press Officer, we sent out a report to the entire embassy and the Dutch representation at the Delegation of the European Union to the United States. In this report, all media coverage by American outlets about anything to do with the Netherlands was summarized to give everyone a good sense of the media’s sentiments about developments. Secondly, whenever the embassy would visit a state outside of D.C. as part of the “Beyond the Beltway”, I was tasked with preparing a write-up of the respective state and local politics. I did this for a visit to Virginia, Arizona, and North Carolina. After these “Beyond the Beltway”, or other, visits I would also produce a short write-up for the embassy’s social media channels and its website: www.nlintheusa.com. Finally, I worked closely with Jesper Dekker, our digital officer, to monitor the social media of all the Dutch resorts in the United States. The embassy was the main resort, but it also included the Consulate-Generals in
San Francisco, New York City, and Miami, as well as the Netherlands Foreign Investment Agency (NFIA) and Dutch Culture USA in New York City.
Critical reflection

What did I contribute to the placement provider? What knowledge and skills was I able to use from my studies, and how did my studies tie in with the professional practices?

While it is hard for me to assess my own contributions to the team, I think I proved to be a motivated, sociable, and meticulous colleague. Whenever I felt like I finished the tasks at hand, I would come to any of my colleagues and ask them whether I could assist them with their work. Maybe once or twice there wasn’t anything I could assist them with, as they were handling personal tasks, but on all the other occasions, they would have something for me to work on. Sometimes this meant having to do a little bit of research for them and reporting back to them, while at other times I would actually take responsibility for the entire task and work on it from start to finish. This way I felt like I was able to assist the entire team, and because they let me manage projects from start to finish, it made me feel like a valuable part of the team.

Through my skills in historical research and writing I was also able to take up a few projects that the embassy had been wanting to take up for some time but did not have the right person for. For a “Beyond the Beltway” visit to Orange County, Virginia, for example, I was tasked with digging through the archives of the Library of Congress and finding a document from November 20, 1734, by then-Lieutenant Governor William Gooch. This document was known to exist, as it has been used as a source for other research, but the librarian at the archives was unable to tell me exactly where it was, so I had to work that out myself, which I was able to do ultimately. The document, it turned out, was kept in the wrong stack of files because of a numbering error in the catalog. The reason this document was so important, was because in it, the Lieutenant Governor wrote that the “in Honour to the Prince & Princess of Orange, the new erected County is named the County of Orange.” During the embassy’s visit to the county, a facsimile this document was presented to the Board of Directors of Orange County.

As described above, I also worked on finding and researching a letter from 1782 in which bankers from Holland confirmed a loan to a struggling and fledging United States. Besides finding the document, I also worked on writing a piece on the context of this letter that was to be presented to the President of the United States.

My writing skills did not only help me write historical background pieces, but also social media content, summaries of the media’s coverage of a variety of topics, and press releases about the embassy’s projects and events. While writing social media posts wasn’t my favorite part of
the internship, as I didn’t find it very challenging, it nevertheless helped me understand how to write for an online audience. The same goes for having learnt how to write press releases that would be posted on the embassy’s website. After writing anything in English, I would always sit with our editor, Jeffrey Allanach, to go through all of it, and even though I would sometimes think that there isn’t much to improve about the piece I wrote, he would always find a multitude of improvements. One of the main comments I got was that I would usually be too thorough and write too academically. This helped me understand how to write for a different audience than the one I would usually imagine whenever I wrote papers for classes. Even if I might not write again for such an audience in my future job, I would still consider it a useful skill to have acquired. It helped me understand how to adjust your writing style depending on your audience.

Lastly, the general understanding and knowledge that I gained during both my bachelor’s degree in History and my master’s degree classes in American Studies helped me a great deal. My understanding of American politics, media, culture, and history made for a smooth transition into the organization. It helped me to contextualize and make sense of the events going on in Washington, D.C. and the subjects I was writing about and working on at the internship. I noticed that other interns at the embassy were having a harder time in this regard, especially those with backgrounds such as engineering or biology. Those interns from a humanities background seemed to have an easier time integrating into the organizational structure of the embassy, as well as life in the United States in general.

To what extent did I achieve my learning outcomes?
The first learning outcome, as stated in my contract, was to acquire knowledge and experience in the field of international relations, with an emphasis on exploring all the different departments at the embassy. I definitely feel like I was able to do this, because of the broad scope of my internship. I was able to support and work on projects for all the different departments, giving me a broad view of the ‘microcosm’ at this embassy. This way I not only gained a better understanding of the workings of public diplomacy, but also of the embassy as a whole. Some of my favorite projects I worked on were in cooperation with other departments that allowed me to step the department and get an idea of what others at the embassy worked on.

The second learning outcome was to acquire more knowledge on the workings of American media, as I have already acquired a lot of knowledge about American culture, history and politics, but not so much on media specifically. This internship, obviously, offered a great
way to achieve this learning outcome as exemplified by my first duty that was explained to me by my supervisor: monitoring the coverage by American media on topics concerning the Netherlands. This gave me a feel of how American media cover things and how the American media industry is made up. I had to monitor the media every morning for 6 months, and a few occasions required special attention, for example: Katie Couric’s slip-up during the Winter Olympics broadcast about Dutch people skating to work on the canals, or with the international dismay towards Halbe Zijlstra’s comments on having talked with Vladimir Putin in his dacha.

One of the learning outcomes in my contract also stated that I would like to set up my own project in the context of the Honours College track that I’m enrolled in. However, the study advisor of the Honours College did not allow me to complete this abroad, unfortunately. I will be doing that this semester instead.

What new knowledge and skills did you gain from this internship?

One of the main things that I learnt that hasn’t explicitly been mentioned yet is how to act and work in a professional and formal environment. While all the interpersonal contact at the embassy was relatively informal (except for whenever I would need to approach the ambassador), the work still required a strong sense of professionalism and etiquette. I attended formal meetings, wore formal attire (suit and tie), organized formal networking events, and worked with confidential material during my time at the embassy. This meant that my time at the embassy was in stark contrast with anything I had done before, as the first time I wore a suit was during the first interview for this internship. Before arriving in Washington I had never found myself in such a formal setting.

Being thrown in the deep end like this turned out to be a great way for me to gain a lot of self-confidence. I quickly learnt how to network at formal events, how to carry myself during official ceremonies, and how to address dignitaries working at or visiting the embassy. With a group of about fifteen concurrent interns at the embassy, we made up a large share of the team, which meant that we all had to carry a lot of responsibility and were trusted with managing our own projects. While this was daunting to me at first, I quickly grew more comfortable in my role and more confident with myself.

I also gained a lot of organizational skills through an initiative a coworker and I built from the ground up, called ‘Young Embassy’. With this initiative we set out to bring all interns
and trainees from embassies all around D.C. from all over the world together. We organized a monthly networking event and drink, on top of some smaller events that we set up, such as a mini-World Cup of soccer. While our first networking event in February only had about 30 people show up because of some mistakes we made in organizing it, the next one in March already had over a 100 people attending from every continent of the world. This project was something that we set up outside of the embassy, but we were lauded by our colleagues for setting it up. The new group of interns that arrived in September continued this initiative, and we’re hoping to see it grow even bigger.

Besides the personal development I went through, this internship also taught me a great deal about American media, international relations, and how to write pieces for a bigger audience as already described above. When I left D.C. in late July I felt like I improved my understanding of the very complex country that is the United States. This was done not only through the internship, but also through all the things the other interns and I did after work. I travelled to new parts of the United States that I hadn’t been before, such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Louisiana.

*What was the supervision like during the internship?*

I have absolutely no complaints about the supervision at the placement organization. The team took the time to get to know me, and for me to get to know them. They helped me find my way around the embassy and get to know all the various departments. They were also very honest in their feedback which helped me a great deal in improving myself during the internship, and I think that showed, as towards the final weeks of the internship I was increasingly more able to work independently. I also sat down every now and then with Jacquелиen Nienhuis or Carla Bundy, my supervisor, to talk about how I’ve done, what I need to improve on, and the future projects that I would like to work on.

There was no supervision from my supervising lecturer, dr. Jelte Olthof, during my internship, which is what we agreed on in my contract. The only supervision took place before and after the internship.
How did the placement help me sharpen my career goals?

First of all, the placement helped me realize that I do not want to go into the Foreign Service as a diplomat, of which I used to think that it was suited for me. However, after spending time at the embassy and talking to all the diplomats that work there on 4-year contracts, I realized that I probably wouldn’t be able to justify making the sacrifices that these diplomats have to make.

Apart from helping me decide what I do not want to do, the internship also made it clear to me that I wanted to enroll in a second Master’s Degree, in International Relations. This semester I will start my premaster’s in International Relations at the RUG, before writing my thesis for American Studies. As of now, I also strongly feel like I want to apply for the so called “Rijkstraine” programme at the Dutch government in two years after finishing my Master’s in American Studies and International Relations. So the internship definitely helped a great deal in sharpening my career goals.
Conclusion

All in all, my internship at the embassy was one of the best and most educational adventures of my life. While working long hours and waking up early weren’t my favorite part, I still felt very blessed every time I got to walk into the gates of the chancery. I would have never guessed a year ago that I would be working on the projects that I did and that I would be attending the events that I did. I am very grateful to my colleagues at the PPC department for being very considerate and making sure that I got the most out of my time in Washington, D.C. While at times I found it hard to gauge what my colleagues thought of me, I think the letter of recommendation shows that they were also grateful for what I was able to provide them. Carla Bundy requested the ambassador to write the letter for me, which was something, she told me, that they don’t do for every intern at their department. Getting that letter without ever asking for it was the perfect note to finish my internship on. I left the embassy fulfilled, happy with myself, and happy about all that I had experienced during my six months there.

The internship lived up to all of my ridiculously high expectations, and while daunting at first, I think my studies prepared me really well for an internship such as this. The heavy focus on (English) writing skills during my bachelor’s and master’s classes made for a smooth, albeit not perfect, transition. The same goes for the knowledge about the history, culture, and politics of the United States that I gained in my studies. I would definitely recommend this internship to anyone who has an interest in American culture, media, international relations and writing.
Appendix 1: Letter of recommendation from the Ambassador

The Ambassador

Washington, July 3, 2018

Dear Sir/Madam:

This letter is to certify that Mr. Stef Lage Venterink worked as an intern in the Public Diplomacy, Press and Culture department of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Washington, D.C., from January 22, 2018 through July 6, 2018.

While an intern at the PPC department, Stef has proven himself to be a highly conscientious and diligent worker. He has progressed in responsibilities to become an integral member of the department’s outreach using social media and public relations practices.

Stef is a quick learner, well-versed in various social media platforms and a meticulous researcher. The embassy made great use of these talents, and tasked him with researching the provenance of a historical document to be presented to President Trump, on the occasion of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s first visit to the Trump White House.

While interning at the embassy, Stef has strengthened his communications skills, while playing a key role in several initiatives including: the visit of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte to Washington, D.C., and the embassy’s “Beyond the Beltway” initiative.

Stef was given primary responsibility to organize and manage the embassy’s recognition of Dutch-American Friendship Day. He managed the budget, messaging and an event where the Ambassador and embassy staffers gave away 5,000 tulips to passersby in Dupont Circle.

Stef consistently volunteered for more work and handled each task in a professional manner. He also worked closely with the department’s editor, digital officer and press officer to bring strategies to fruition such as drafting Facebook postings, articles for the embassy website and tweets. He contributed to monitoring the media’s coverage of the Netherlands on a range of policy issues.

On behalf of the Embassy staff, I would like to wish Stef all the best in his future endeavors, we have every confidence that he will be successful.

For further reference, please contact Ms. Jacquilien Nienhuis, Counselor for the Public Diplomacy, Press and Culture department at jacquilien.nienhuis@minbuza.nl or 202-274-2606.

Henne Schuwer
Appendix 2: Placement assessment form

Career Services Faculty of Arts, PO Box 716, 9700 AB Groningen, the Netherlands
Tel.: +31 (0)50-363 5844; www.rug.nl/let/careerservices; stages.let@rug.nl

Evaluation form for placement providers

Placement provider: Carla Bundy

Department: Public Diplomacy, Press and Culture

City: Washington, D.C.

Country: USA

Name student: Steff Lage Venterink

Placement period: Jan. 22, 2018 – July 6, 2018

Description of tasks

1. Which tasks have been performed by the student? (This concerns main tasks as described in the contract and possible other activities)

Steff has assisted in the public relations work of the embassy by writing articles, covering events, organizing projects such as Dutch American Friendship Day, conducting research and monitoring the US media’s coverage of the Netherlands.

2. To what extent has your organisation benefited from the activities of the student and to what extent will you use the results?

O not at all
O to some extent
✓ sufficiently
O to a large extent

Evaluation of the tasks

3. What is your opinion about the quality of the content of the reports, notes, publications, research, translations, etc. written by the student?

O insufficient
O sufficient
✓ good
O excellent
4. What is your opinion about the student’s writing skills?
   O insufficient
   O sufficient
   ☑️ good
   O excellent

5. What is your opinion about the student’s oral skills?
   O insufficient
   O sufficient
   ☑️ good
   O excellent

6. What is your opinion about the student’s accuracy and thoroughness?
   O insufficient
   O sufficient
   ☑️ good
   O excellent

7. What is your opinion about the pace at which the tasks were performed?
   O insufficient
   O sufficient
   ☑️ good
   O excellent

8. What is your opinion about the student’s organisational skills?
   O insufficient
   O sufficient
   ☑️ good
   O excellent

9. In general, what is your opinion about the quality of the student’s performance?
   O insufficient
   O sufficient
   ☑️ good
   O excellent

**Evaluation of the student’s functioning**

10. What is your opinion about the student’s ability to perform his/her tasks independently?
    O insufficient
    O sufficient
    ☑️ good
    O excellent

11. To what extent was the student interested in his/her tasks?
    O insufficient
    O sufficient
    ☑️ good
    ☑️ excellent
12. To what extent was the student interested in other activities within your organisation?
O insufficient
O sufficient
O good
R excellent

13. How did the interaction between supervisor and student develop?
O badly
O not very well
R well
O extremely well

14. How did the cooperation with co-workers develop?
O badly
O not very well
R well
O extremely well

15. What is your opinion about the student's level of knowledge?
O insufficient
O sufficient
R good
O excellent

16. To what extent did the student's attitude fit in with the work climate of your organisation?
O insufficient
O sufficient
O good
R excellent

Additional questions
17. Have there been problems supervising the student?
O Yes, concerning ........................................................................................................
R No, however Stef would leave his desk for long periods of time without informing his supervisor.

18. In future, would you again offer a placement to a student of the Faculty of Arts?

- Yes, because ...Stef was a good representative of the school. He is well-rounded with an interest in the US and a familiarity of US institutions, government, and culture.
- ..................................................................................................................................

O No, because ........................................................................................................

19. Would you now or in the future appreciate a meeting with the supervising university lecturer or the placement coordinator of the Faculty?
20. Do you have further question or comments? Stef took full advantage of his time in Washington to learn about the US and explore parts of the country he has not been to before. He certainly came to us with a better understanding of the US and that made his transition to working in our department a smooth one.

DATE: June 6, 2018
NAME & SIGNATURE: Carla Bundy
Appendix 3: Samples of work

http://nlintheusa.com/holland-loan-of-1782/


http://nlintheusa.com/the-search-for-the-172-african-american-soldiers-memorialized-at-margraten/

http://nlintheusa.com/ambassador-schuwer-leads-delegation-to-pennsylvania/

https://twitter.com/NLinthESA/status/987435740316381185