

Q and A with PLEN Attendees

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Edited by Emily Kreller (SLA '26)

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Every year Newcomb Institute gives undergraduate students the opportunity to go to the Public Leadership Education Network (PLEN) conferences every year since. PLEN is a non-profit preparing college women and marginalized gender groups for leadership in the public policy arena. This year, four Newcomb Institute students who participated in the event shared about their experiences and how it shaped their perspectives.

What's your name, major, and career interest?

Neiberg: I'm Maya Neiberg, and I study Political Science/International Development & Public Health. I would love to be a Foreign Service Officer.

Báez: My name is Yuanelis Báez. My majors are Political Science with a focus on International Studies and Philosophy with a Concentration in Law, Morality, and Society. I'm interested in working with International Law and Policy.

De Leon: I'm Emma De Leon, and I'm an Environmental Studies and Communications double major with a Political Science Minor and a GIS certificate. I am interested in working with federal or state environmental departments to implement environmental policy or working with nonprofits and other actors that research and design environmental policy from an advocacy standpoint.

Duarte: I'm Lila Duarte. I'm majoring in Political Economy and Environmental Studies, and I want to be an Environmental Policy Advocate.



Describe yourself and why you wanted to attend the PLEN Conference.

Neiberg: As someone who wishes to pursue a career in global policy, the PLEN conference offered me the opportunity to meet with professionals in my field of interest in Washington, D.C.

Báez: As a first-generation college student passionate about justice and advocacy, I was eager to attend PLEN. I wanted to connect with like-minded individuals and gain insight into how legal frameworks influence policy decisions, as well as how public policies shape the interpretation and application of laws. I also wanted to better understand how I can use my legal education to make meaningful contributions to international human rights and immigration law.

De Leon: I am dedicated to combating climate change and advocating for environmental justice and am interested in environmental and energy policy. I wanted to attend the PLEN Conference to learn more about what working in policy could look like for me because I am not interested in running for an elected position. I also wanted to learn what the pathway to a career in policy looks like.

Duarte: My cultural identity as a Mexican American is very important to me and connects to my passion for intersectional social justice, especially within the environment. I have never known a world not impacted by climate change since drought and wildfire season has been a regular part of my life. Since middle school, I've had an interest in environmental law, but it wasn't until college that my focus shifted towards policy as a way to address systemic issues. With this newfound interest, a perfect opportunity fell into my lap when I opened LinkedIn and saw that the Newcomb Institute was offering grants to attend a PLEN conference on public policy.



Describe your favorite parts of the conference.

Neiberg: I enjoyed hearing the panelists talk about both their work and career trajectories. The conference provided us with the opportunity to learn about a wide range of professional fields, including immigration law, international trade, diplomacy, and more.

Báez: The networking event was a highlight, as it allowed me to interact with inspiring leaders in law and policy while gaining advice and insight into potential career paths. Another unforgettable experience was the tour of the U.S. House of Representatives, which gave me a deeper appreciation for the legislative process and the role of law in shaping public policy.

De Leon: One of my favorite parts of the conference was the networking aspect. While I considered myself to be good at networking, I learned ways that I can further improve my skills. I also enjoyed getting to explore Washington D.C. President Jimmy Carter was lying in state while we were in D.C., so I was able to pay my respects in the Capitol Building and sign the condolences book for his family.

Duarte: My favorite experience by far was when I visited the office of Senator Ed Markey, a co-author of the Green New Deal. After the session ended, I checked which senators' offices were in the building and were excited to see Senator Markey in the directory. I didn't get a chance to speak to him, but I did have one-on-one conversations with two of his legislative aides who work on climate policy. They were

both kind, intelligent people, and we discussed the future of environmental policy in our country, which gave me some much needed hope.



Highlight a speaker or a job site you visited.

Neiberg: My favorite speaker was Matthew Tripsas, Director of Community Fundraising at World Central Kitchen. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have long admired WCK's work, and it was fascinating to see how the organization functions in conflict zones.

Báez: One of the standout moments of the conference for me was attending the immigration panel. The panelists shared their diverse experiences working on immigration policy, advocacy, and legal cases, offering valuable perspectives on the complexities of this field. One speaker who particularly inspired me was a human rights attorney who spoke about her journey working on asylum cases and advocating for displaced communities.

De Leon: I particularly enjoyed Amy Meli's presentation on Grassroots Engagement in Legislative Campaigns. This felt connected to not only my political science coursework (e.g. thinking about what influences lawmakers) but also my fossil fuel divestment advocacy work on Tulane's campus. Thinking about how people make

decisions and how they can be influenced was very informative to my own campaign. It was also interesting to consider the ways the modern Congress is changing.

Duarte: A speaker that stood out to me was Meridith Singer, who worked for IBM on immigration reform. In my mind, the interests of industry rarely coincide with those of the public, but Singer proved that they're not incompatible. This speaker changed my perception of working in the private sector and exposed me to a career that I could see myself pursuing.

Detail what you learned that you hope to never forget.

Neiberg: The guest speakers demonstrated the importance of authenticity. The conference reaffirmed for me that as long as you stay true to both yourself and your passions, then you will succeed.

Báez: One of the most important lessons I took away from the conference was the value of mentorship and networking. Hearing firsthand from legal professionals about how mentorship shaped their careers really stuck with me. It made me realize that success in law and policy isn't just about what you know—it's about the relationships you build and the support systems you create along the way. As someone navigating the professional world as a first-generation college student, this advice felt especially meaningful.

De Leon: I hope to never forget the ways I successfully did things that I would typically be uncomfortable with. I usually would be too nervous to walk into a senator's office and to speak with their staff or to give a speech about an issue I am passionate about as if I were running for elected office. I also would be nervous to participate in a diplomacy situation, but I thrived in the problem-solving aspects of a simulation of an international nuclear crisis. I want to remember that I can do things that feel out of reach and that there are people who can support me from my peers to my mentors.

Duarte: I've grown up in an increasingly polarized political climate, but it wasn't until PLEN that I truly understood the importance of coalition building. The skill was explicitly stressed in a panel, but also interwoven throughout the whole seminar from our diplomacy simulation to talks about career advancement. With the intense split we've seen in the last decades, this is the most essential leadership skill that I took away from the seminar. To heal the wounds of ignorance and bigotry, open

discussion and coalition building is crucial.



Why should other students attend a PLEN conference?

Neiberg: PLEN provides students with the opportunity to truly connect with inspiring individuals who are more than willing to act as resources for emerging professionals in the future.

Báez: With its focus on empowerment, PLEN provides students with unique mentorship opportunities and practical tools to navigate the legal field, build meaningful connections, and shape their careers in ways that prioritize both personal and professional growth. Whether you are passionate about making an impact through law or simply curious to learn more about leadership and policy, this conference is an invaluable experience.

De Leon: Other students should attend a PLEN conference to meet peers and professionals in fields that they are interested in exploring. You will make connections that will help you grow your career and network while diving deep into the issues you are interested in. You will learn about careers that you did not even know existed and develop skills to help you grow professionally and build your confidence.

Duarte: PLEN was such an amazing experience, and I really would encourage students even remotely interested in policy to apply. Not only do you make meaningful connections, but you're exposed to so many career opportunities that you wouldn't even know exist. It's so helpful in clarifying your interests, not only by

discovering new ones, but also through finding what's not for you.