Application Essay
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In 1999, I escaped from college with a bachelor's degree, not expecting ever to return to continue my studies. During my preceding four and a half years as an undergraduate, I had grown in many ways, but lost most of my enthusiasm for formal education. Amidst my outrage over textbook costs, my concern about the inequalities within the American education system, and my growing cynicism about the socioeconomic role played by universities, I had come to view higher education as a series of expensive but arbitrary hoops through which American youth must jump in order to join the unappealing rat race of professional life. Burdened by student loan debt, but relieved finally to have received my Latin-inscribed piece of parchment, I was excited to enter adult life and make something of myself, salvaging the best parts of my education: a more informed view of the world and a sense of duty, as a global citizen, to improve that world.

My first "real" job after college was at an organization called Delphi International (folded later into a larger organization, World Learning). I didn't know much about Delphi before beginning there, but I found the work interesting from the start. Delphi plans and implements international educational and cultural exchange programs, primarily as a contractor for the federal government. Here was a cause I could rally behind, nicely complementing my strong hunch that the most important kind of education comes from human interaction, and that the best way to help the world is through improving communication and understanding. Delphi specialized in International Visitor programs for the State Department, bringing mid-career foreign professionals to the United States to meet their colleagues here and to learn more about American life. I was especially heartened by the conviction of my colleagues that these International Visitors should take time out of their busy schedules to meet ordinary Americans of all classes and backgrounds, in cities and towns across the country, from Vermont to Oklahoma to Montana. The point was to show what America is really like, not what the government says it is like, not what TV and cinema portray. Delphi was practicing *citizen diplomacy*,

based on the belief that ordinary citizens, through honest and fair exchange of ideas, could get beyond their preconceived notions and achieve intercultural understanding. Once I'd grasped the concept — one of my primary professional accomplishments — I wanted to try it for myself.

By 2002, I felt that the security constraints of the global war on terrorism were suffocating my hometown of Washington, DC. I found national politics frustrating and felt powerless as our elected leadership seemed to hold in disdain my vision of the path towards world peace. Also, at twenty-five, I was in the mood for a new adventure. I decided to move abroad and ultimately ended up going to a small town in northeastern Poland to work as a teacher. Though my friends and family were a bit shocked, it was a great decision, and a wonderful experience personally and professionally. Surviving and thriving in a foreign culture has been the most significant achievement in my adult life. I ended up staying for two years, with little contact with any other Americans — two solid years of nonstop citizen diplomacy. My work, which I took quite seriously, included teaching American history and literature (among other subjects) to college-age students. I was stunned at how little they actually knew about the United States, even though the Poles are regarded as perhaps the most pro-American Europeans. It was disconcerting to realize that I was the only American many of my students had ever known; I felt that I ought to give them a balanced picture of the United States; I wanted to convey to them that I was not really a typical American, that in fact there is not really such a thing as a “typical American” at all. I wanted to present the United States with all its blemishes, while still demonstrating my love for my country. Occasionally, I think I succeeded.

As I gradually learned how to teach effectively, I found myself grappling with an old problem from a new perspective. The majority of my students had no interest in learning for learning's sake. They participated in my classes and studied for my exams only because they wanted a good grade; my attempts to transform them into free-thinking inquisitors failed and I realized that, for them, I was there only to provide a basic service: exposing them to large doses of native English. It was disappointing, but made me carefully reconsider the purpose of education. I had never doubted the value of learning,

and have always attempted to continue my own self-education, but I still doubted the value of degrees, programs, and even teachers themselves. Having a degree opened doors in professional life, but otherwise said little to me about a person's skills, qualities, or real level of education. As a teacher, though, I had to ask myself what it is that classrooms can provide but books cannot.

The obvious answers are of course correct: formal classes provide a clear structure for learning; an instructor's expertise can lead to new sources of information; classroom interaction adds to the educational experience. The main value of classroom instruction, however, comes from the necessity for thoughtful reflection — the same process that so many of my students struggled with. I can read books and articles on my own, but without a structured environment in which to analyze them, and without writing syntheses of the material I've absorbed, I am not getting as much out of my self-education as I could from a rigorous academic program. Teaching led me to a new appreciation of this aspect of education, and I realized that part of my misgivings about my own undergraduate experience came from a sense that I'd never really completed my studies to my own satisfaction. I'd struggled during college, especially towards the end, and limped to the finish line without completing the overarching synthesis that I know I am capable of. From this realization came my first inklings of desire to return to school.

Additionally, during my time in Poland I discovered for the first time something that approaches an actual life goal. I enjoyed the process of sharing America with young people who would never have the chance to visit there, but as global events played out (including the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the beginnings of a new presidential election season), I learned that what I really desired was to help educate Americans about the rest of the world and their impact upon it. I returned to the United States in 2004 with a new sense of urgency and a strong desire to improve the dismal state of American knowledge. Our ignorance of other cultures is one of the more embarrassing aspects of life abroad, but it is possible for me to do my small part to improve our general awareness of the world beyond our borders.

This task is multidisciplinary and wide-ranging, encompassing the worlds of public policy, media studies, anthropology and cultural studies, globalization studies, literature, and religious studies. I am eager to synthesize many of these scattershot fields, as I believe that all of them will offer assistance in my overall mission of improving the world. I am eager to pursue an MALS program with a focus on international affairs, where I will be able to feel a sense of personal satisfaction and completion, while also eventually contributing to the entire global community. By furthering my own intellectual development and immersing myself in the education experience more fully than I did as an undergraduate, I look forward to a future of educating those around me.