My goal was lofty but clear: make Seattle a global city. On loan to the city of Seattle from the U.S. State Department, I had a year to convince four million people of greater Seattle that international engagement could improve their lives. At the same time, I would seek to convince millions more around the world that Seattle was a serious player on the international stage.

As the pioneer of the State Department’s Pearson Subnational Fellowship, I was the first U.S. Foreign Service Officer embedded in a U.S. city government. My job was complex. I needed to articulate U.S. foreign policy to Americans and understand their needs so I could better represent them in future assignments in U.S. embassies and consulates around the world.

What is the Pearson Subnational Fellowship?

Since its inception as part of a 1974 amendment to the Foreign Service Act, the Pearson Fellowship assigned Foreign Service Officers to offices in the U.S. Congress. The State Department piloted the Pearson Subnational Fellowship in 2015, deploying U.S. Foreign Service Officers to five U.S. cities beginning with Seattle.

The Department linked the program to the prestigious Pearson Fellowship, which traditionally assigns Foreign Service Officers to U.S. Congressional offices for one-year assignments. The initiative was popular among Foreign Service Officers, with hundreds of inquiries about participation. The State Department planned to assign up to 20 Subnational Pearson Fellows annually but paused the program in 2017.

In 2015, Seattle sought an expert to advance its international engagement. I had been in the State Department for nearly ten years, so they posted me to Seattle as a Pearson Fellow. I was the first Foreign Service Officer in recent memory to serve as a Pearson Fellow in a sub-national government.

The skills I brought to Seattle from my experience and training as a diplomat included identifying how international engagement benefits citizens. Soon after I arrived, I developed a proactive international strategy for the Seattle region to strengthen its $80 billion in annual international trade, encourage international investment and tourism, promote Seattle as a global leader in climate action and social and economic issues, and inspire Seattleites to become more internationally aware and pursue global service.
Running the city’s international affairs team, I worked closely with Seattle’s mayor and City Council to boost the city’s global leadership. Applying experience of federal interagency coordination, I launched a robust campaign, including dozens of presentations and a televised hearing, to secure a larger budget for Seattle’s international affairs team. I hired two more staff members and established the 30-member Seattle International Affairs Advisory Board, composed of advocates for international engagement among Seattle’s business, academic, media, and civil society sectors.

We employed outreach strategies I learned in the State Department to vastly expand Seattle’s international engagement, including organizing over 50 activities and events with the consular community (foreign diplomats assigned to Seattle), students, businesses, civic organizations, immigrants, refugees, the media, schools, and the general public. One standout event was a reception our team organized for 500 people to commemorate the 2016 Summer Olympics and Seattle’s strong relationship with Brazil.

With extensive experience as a control officer at overseas embassies and the diplomatic network I brought from the State Department, I organized high-profile international trips for the Mayor to visit China, Japan, Canada, and Mexico, during which he engaged in over 100 meetings and events and reached millions of people through a media campaign to promote trade, attract tourism, and showcase Seattle as a leader on global issues. In Tokyo, U.S. Ambassador Caroline Kennedy hosted a reception for the mayor, where they spoke to 200 Japanese leaders to encourage them to invest in Seattle.

Our team transformed Seattle’s effectively moribund Sister City program to be the pride of Seattle’s citizen diplomacy and international engagement, connecting to cities like Kobe, Japan and Reykjavik, Iceland. We coordinated a Seattle Channel television special showcasing the Sister City program that reached over 10,000 viewers, which led to a 20 percent boost in Sister City membership.

Complementing the Sister City program, we created Seattle’s “Partner City” initiative, a new model of municipal diplomacy to connect cities of similar demographic, economic, or geographic profiles. Seattle signed Partner City memorandums of understanding with 12 cities—including Vancouver, Shenzhen, and Mexico City—to develop thematic linkages, such as disaster resilience and green energy, and to increase access to over $1 trillion in combined municipal markets.

In an effort to increase the international awareness and engagement of Seattleites, we launched the annual “Seattle Diplomacy Day,” where Seattle’s consular community and other international thought leaders addressed 2,000 Rotary Club International members on the importance of global engagement. We also partnered with the World Affairs Council to develop a “Global Competency” certificate, awarded to 13,000 Seattle public high school students who demonstrated excellence in international affairs.

One of our most important accomplishments was engaging Seattle’s diaspora community. In a city where citizens speak over 150 languages, we realized that immigrants and refugees were a critical component of Seattle’s potential global footprint. We launched an outreach program for over 5,000
South Asian employees at Amazon and Microsoft and supported the U.S. Ambassador to Somalia’s visit to Seattle to meet leaders of the city’s 30,000-strong Somali immigrant community.

Using skills gained from the State Department’s public affairs programming, I launched an active marketing campaign to tell the story of how foreign policy benefits the people of Seattle. We arranged for the mayor to deliver a televised address at the World Affairs Council reaching over 30,000 people, outlining his vision for a more global Seattle. We increased diplomatic visits, including from 12 ambassadors to the U.S. and 18 U.S. State Department officials, and sponsored visits by the German Trade Minister, a Cambodian prince, the Polish Foreign Minister, and the President of Ireland.

Since my posting in Seattle, I have served in U.S. Foreign Service assignments in Honduras, Washington DC, and now Thailand, where I am the U.S. liaison to the United Nations regional commission based in Bangkok.

One of my priorities in this position is to promote implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at a subnational level in Asia and the Pacific. My experience as a Pearson Fellow continues to pay dividends in my diplomatic career. Crucially, I have a better understanding of the needs and interests of the American people, my most important constituents. As I shape U.S. foreign policy overseas, I have a more clear perspective on how it will benefit Americans back home.

Additionally, the contacts I made as a Pearson Fellow, from local officials to academics to multinational corporate executives, play a vital role in my current work. For example, I have coordinated Seattle-based venture capitalists to explore opportunities for investment in Southeast Asia and instigated university exchanges between universities in Washington State and Central America.

My experience in Seattle shows the value of the Pearson Fellowship in explaining and promoting foreign policy at local levels. More U.S. cities, especially of smaller sizes, could benefit from the skills and experience of our diplomats to build local capacity to engage internationally. In turn, the immersion of future generations of diplomats in the reality and priorities of the American people can be a powerful driver to connect U.S. foreign policy to domestic prosperity.

Restoring the Pearson Subnational Fellowship is an innovative approach to engaging the State Department’s real customers—the American people—to better tell their stories abroad and communicate U.S. foreign policy back to them.

This City & State Diplomacy Toolkit compiles a collection of case studies and how-to briefs to support the international engagement and global initiatives of local actors. These short, digestible, and practical briefs are written by local practitioners, city and state leaders, and experts based on their direct experience. If you’re interested in learning more about this brief or wish to connect with the Truman team, please fill in this short survey.

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