

IBEI Graduation Talk (Barcelona June, 22 2015)

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It is a great pleasure to be here today, and to have the opportunity to address this year's cohort of IBEI graduates. First, of all, CONGRATULATIONS! You made it, and you deserve to celebrate and be celebrated tonight!

This might sound strange at the first glance, because, technically, you are still not done yet. There is this tiny little hurdle you still need to take. The final thesis... But forget about these 10,000 words for now. When I say you deserve to celebrate, I really mean it. The biggest part is done, you mastered the challenge of completing all your course work, you survived the two traditional crunch months at IBEI, May and June. I am sure that, after this experience, writing your thesis will be a breeze. So just enjoy this night with your peers, and your friends and families that came to celebrate with you.

You are the 11th cohort that completed a Masters in IR at IBEI. In this sense, you encountered a Masters program already well-established. But you are also very special to us. You were the first generation we received in the new building at Pompeu Fabra, after our big move last summer, which was also a breath of fresh air into IBEI's everyday routines.

The question of what comes next after your time at IBEI probably has been on your mind already. There are no cookie-cutter answers to this, as it depends so much on your interests, individual strengths, and opportunities. From my part I can tell you that I am amazed again and again at how different and rich the post-IBEI trajectories of former students are, whether they work in security consultancy in the United States, at the Spanish Embassy in Australia, or for development programs in Nepal and Ecuador.

But let's drill into this a bit more. What is it that you will likely take with you from your studies at IBEI? What will remain in a couple of years?

Memories tend to be spatially tinted. So the experience of living in Barcelona will probably feature very prominently in your memories. This was certainly not Gütersloh or Stoke on Trent (on a wet Tuesday night) were you spent the good part of the year. So my guess is that you will recall, with fondness, at least some of your nights out in the Old City, hopping from one bar to the next, sampling local wines and delicious tapas. You might also remember IBEI's closeness to the beach, and the occasions when you toyed with the idea or actually did grab your swimsuit to take a quick break from books and coursework. And you might also recall that you were here when IT happened, the second Treble for Barça, won by the best forward line ever in football history. I certainly wish that you take at least some of those memories with you. But I also hope, no, I am actually quite sure, that you also will take something else from this year.

For one thing, there is the IBEI community, the new friends you have made over the course of the year. It is intimate and at the same time highly diverse group with respect to background and

interests. And as members of previous cohorts report, this community will remain, not in a direct way, in that you will see each other as regularly as you did in Barcelona. But the IBEI community will be there when you take your next steps, tips will flow and experiences will be shared, and some of you might even reencounter each other in surprising and unanticipated ways.

And last but not least, you will take some of contents you studied at IBEI your with you. Probably at least some of you already encountered the professional hazards that come with doing an advanced degree in international relations: Game of Thrones just looks very different after a year at IBEI. You cannot stop thinking about the role nuclear proliferation plays in the international balance of power when watching Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons rise. And you cannot stop thinking about global governance and climate change when watching the Night Watch's infighting and scimmages with the Wildlings, while the far bigger challenge of the White Walkers looms over them.

Anyhow, I am digressing. The question is what is you will take with you from IBEI. In five or ten years down the road, it may be unlikely that you remember the ins and outs of different strands of Realism, or the distinctive features of the Kopenhagen school in constructivism, unless, of course, in the case that you become an academic working on these issues.

What will hopefully remain when you have ventured into the world post-IBEI— whether you work in an NGO, a government department, an international organization, foreign service, EU Commission, or a consulting firm—are certain core competencies that come handy in all of those work environments. Building on Michael Woolcock's (Harvard Kennedy School) insights, I suggest that these skills might be best described as those of *detectives*, *translators*, and *diplomats*¹

Detectives. Why detectives? Well, this is not about solving the mysteries of a particular crime. But regardless of whether you will work on policy evaluations, NGO interventions, or academic research, you will likely encounter situations that resemble the tasks of detectives: You have to decide which project yields the best results among a variety of plausible options. To do so, you need to be able to distinguish the effects your project is likely to have from the effects of other events and processes that happen simultaneously. You also need to know how to piece together different and often imperfect sources of evidence.

Your studies at IBEI involved precisely that, making a plausible, well-argued case for a project you believe in. I also hope that we have left you with a range of methodological arrows in your quiver to disarm critics and make your case convincingly.

Translators. What about translators then? The world, and especially the politics of international relations and development, also needs skilled translators. By this I don't mean I specialists that speak Chinese, Arabic, or Russian fluently. This obviously helps, but what I mean by translators are professionals that are able to express similar ideas in different ways to different audiences. Again, regardless of whether you choose to work for an NGO, an international organization, a government agency, or a private company, you will likely encounter the challenge of building support for a particular project among different stakeholders and decision-makers that operate in different

¹ Woolcock, Michael. "Higher education, policy schools, and development studies: what should masters degree students be taught?" *Journal of International Development* 19.1 (2007): 55-73

“worlds” with different working assumptions and sometimes incommensurate “languages.”

Can those translator skills be taught? Actually, to an extent they can. Think for example of the different types of writing IBEI professors asked you to do: academic papers, lit reviews, op-eds, or policy briefs, all aimed at honing your skills to communicate across boundaries, a competence that is actually valued in almost any field of endeavor.

Diplomats. Finally, I am positive that IBEI has prepared you for another core competence in the field of international relations, to be effective diplomats. This is not so much about being tactful and good at small talk at cocktail parties, but about having the capacity to negotiate, to make ideas work and come to a final agreement—even when different parties with legitimate differences in their interests are involved. Seen in this light, diplomats need concrete negotiation skills, coupled with acute awareness of how and why different people and organizations make sense of the world in the way they do. Maybe this sheds new light on most IBEI professors’ obsession with group projects and teamwork exercises.

In sum, when asking what will remain and what you will take with you I am hopeful that—when you take stock in a couple of years—that you will link the formation of at least some of your skills as a detective, translator, and diplomat to your time at IBEI.

In the meantime, please stay in touch with us, wherever you are, whatever you do, send us a quick update or stop by when you are in Barcelona. We love to hear back from our alums, and we are currently extending our activities specifically tailored towards IBEI alums. And in the short-run, enjoy your celebrations tonight and in the upcoming days, with San Juan around the corner. You deserve it! Thank you!

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