

MISSY REIF

Featured Alumna

Current location: Washington, DC
Dialogue Role: Program Associate,
Conferences and Special Projects, 2016-2019



What is your occupation or most recent work experience?

I am a senior program officer for Latin America & the Caribbean at the National Democratic Institute (NDI), where I work closely with colleagues in our Colombia and Mexico offices and partners across the region to implement USG-funded programs strengthening democracy and democratic governance. I oversee NDI's work in Jamaica and Mexico and manage a regional South America program (which includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru). I also work with another Dialogue alum, Zuleyma Alvarez, and the LAC team deputy director on the Global Debates program. Sometimes, I get a little panicked that my portfolio is so large, but I enjoy that I get to work on really diverse programming—on everything from open parliament and transparency to women and youth political participation to political party strengthening. In pre-Covid times, I had the opportunity to travel quite a bit to join program activities in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and Mexico. While I don't anticipate traveling for work anytime soon, Covid has created a great opportunity to join activities in the field. For instance, I've moderated two panels on electoral campaigns for Mexican political parties; observed and led trainings for women political candidates; and participated in advocacy trainings for youth activists in Bolivia.

What has surprised you most about your career?

I think the most surprising thing is that I'm actually working in this field. When I attended my five-year college reunion (I won't say when), a classmate pointed out that I was the only one from our international studies major actually doing "something international." I feel very lucky that I knew from a young age that I wanted to work at some intersection of international relations, Latin America, diplomacy, and government but I'm still surprised that I'm actually doing it!

What advice would you give to a young professional?

It's cliché, but I think networking is still extremely important, especially in DC. I would recommend that you begin networking before you're actively job searching. It's often a lot more natural when you're asking questions about an industry or a person's trajectory rather than a specific ask ("do you have openings?"). Also, people love talking about themselves! Then, once you have a relationship with that person, even if you've only spoken once, it is easier to go back to them to ask for a favor ("can you connect me with X?" or "I'm interested in Y opening at your company"). I'm grateful that several Dialogue alumni, even people who were quite senior, took the time to speak with me about their careers and am happy to do the same for other Dialogue alumni.

What was your most impactful Dialogue moment/experience?

It's hard to pinpoint a single experience, but when working on events like the CAF Conference or the Gala, I would spend months focused on minute details for a 1-2-day event, like how the stage is set up or inviting speakers, so to see everything come together was always an amazing feeling. Another obvious highlight was having then-Vice President Biden speak at the 2016 CAF Conference about his vision for the region. Thank you to another Dialogue alumnus, Dan Erikson, for helping us with that invitation!

I would also say that having up-close access to thought leaders from the region, including former and sitting presidents, academics and civil society leaders, was a particularly unique experience as a young professional. I'll never forget when then-President Luis Guillermo Solis (Costa Rica) came to the office for a meeting with Michael Shifter and stopped to ask every junior staff member what they worked on and thanked us for our work. While I don't work planning events anymore, I feel that these regular interactions with high-level speakers and USG officials at the Dialogue has impacted my current work. Although I am still considered "junior staff," I feel empowered to speak up in meetings with government officials from the region, moderate events in English and Spanish, and gained more confidence in my voice as an expert on democracy issues in the region.