UC SANTA BARBARA

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Applied Scholarship

The hoariest cliché about academics is that they live in an ivory tower, insulated and irrelevant when it comes to the “real” world. But here’s the reality: The people whose job it is to keep the world safe know better. That’s why they turn to scholars like Neil Narang, an assistant professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara who specializes in international security.

Narang spent the last year advising senior officials in the Department of Defense while on an International Affairs Fellowship (IAF), focusing on national security strategy. The prestigious fellowship, founded in 1967 by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) — of which Narang is an elected term member — serves as an important mechanism for U.S. foreign policymakers to recruit the expertise of prominent scholars. Past fellows include former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Powers.

During his appointment, Narang served as a senior advisor in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy in Strategy, Plans and Capabilities. As part of the office’s strategy team, he worked on assessing risk across a range of global threats. It was an assignment that he was particularly qualified to do.

Scholars, Narang said, often approach problems differently than policymakers, especially in the Pentagon, which oftentimes favors experience and seniority. By contrast, what matters to scholars is the quality of evidence used in decision-making.

“I welcomed the opportunity to engage with, and possibly influence, the policymaking process in the area of national security,” Narang explained. “As a university-based scholar, I’m really fortunate to have the intellectual freedom to ask and answer interesting questions about international security. However, it wasn’t clear to me that the published findings were making it into the policymaking process. So, when I was offered the position, I took it as an opportunity to advise senior policymakers based on research that might otherwise remain buried in academic journals.”

At its core, the appointment by the Council on Foreign Relations is meant to be symbiotic. The ambition is not just for senior policymakers to benefit from the advice of scholars, but also for scholars to come away enriched by the experience. Narang certainly found this to be the case. “My primary job was to advise policymakers on national security matters, but the appointment simultaneously bridged the gap between research and practice for me in a way that continues to benefit my scholarship and teaching,” he said.

Indeed, the year spent in the Pentagon has already paid dividends. Since returning to UCSB, Narang has secured research grants to continue his work on emerging technologies, nuclear proliferation and post-conflict stability.

Narang also hopes that the experience will benefit his students, many of whom hope to work for the federal government, he said. “I learned a lot about the pathways to getting a job in that world, and which skills appear to be more useful to policymakers,” he said. “It’s not always the 20-page paper that has the most impact. Sometimes it’s a well-written, clear and succinct one-page memo, where the bottom line is up front so that you can effectively brief a principal in a few minutes.”

His time in government also allowed Narang to form a professional network with policymakers who generally labor in anonymity. His new colleagues in the beltway impressed him. “One thing I’ll take away is how incredibly dedicated the public servants were that I worked with,” Narang said. “Ninety percent of the time, you will never see their name in the news or on any of the policy documents that they helped to produce. They’re the type of people who give away credit.”

Narang received a one-year leave of absence from UCSB for public service to accept the appointment. Research is the lifeblood of academia, but fellows are expressly prohibited from doing any research while in the program. Their job is to provide

advice. “Fortunately, my colleagues in the political science department and the administration at UCSB were really supportive of me taking a public service leave. I’m lucky to be at a university that values policy impact and public service,” he said.

Getting a nomination from the Council on Foreign Relations isn’t easy. The standards are high and the selection process rigorous. But any scholar who has the chance, Narang said, should strongly consider taking it.

“If anyone has the opportunity to apply their expertise through public service,” he said, “I can say that it continues to be one of the most impactful and personally satisfying experiences I’ve ever had.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.