

## INTRO

**Stephanie Jackson:** Now That's INTAresting. This podcast is about the Georgia Tech Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, its graduates, their careers, and how the Nunn School has helped to shape their future. Take a listen.

**Stephanie Jackson:** This season, we're speaking with alumni who received both BS and MS degrees from the Nunn School. Qualifying students can apply to the five-year BS/MS program after completing 45 semester credit hours at Georgia Tech. Students are also eligible to take up to six credit hours that will apply to both the undergraduate and graduate degrees. A GPA of 3.5 is required to stay in the program. Contact Vince Pedicino for more information.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Welcome back to Now That's INTAresting, I'm Stephanie Jackson.

**Sydney Piwonka:** And I'm Sydney Piwonka. For today's episode, we want to welcome Zara Albright, a Nunn School alum who received both a BS and MS in International Affairs. Zara is currently pursuing a PhD from the Department of Political Science at Boston University. So, welcome Zara.

**Zara Albright:** Thank you, Sydney and Stephanie. I'm excited to be talking with you today.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Great. We want to begin today by discussing, as we mentioned, the BS/MS program. And so, we'd like for you to describe your thought process behind joining the BS/MS program.

**Zara Albright:** Absolutely. Um, so it actually started when I was first touring Georgia Tech before my freshman year and still deciding between different colleges. Um, so I did the, kind of, Ivan Allen College specific tour. Um, and I learned that the Nunn School was implementing this program—the BS/MS program. And it's one of the reasons that I ended up coming to Georgia Tech and the Nunn School because it was really interesting to me to have the opportunity to get a master's degree in only one additional year, instead of two, and from the same program as my undergraduate degree. Um, and so, I hadn't, kind of, decided that early on that I was going to do a masters. Um, but, during undergrad, I realized that I had an interest in, in research and in learning more than, than was in my undergrad classes, going kind of beyond that material. So, I decided to pursue the masters because it was a great opportunity to, to continue that process and it made the most sense to stay at Georgia Tech with professors I knew and admired and a program that I loved. Um, so that's kind of how my decision evolved from my first tour of Tech.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Yeah. So, that's interesting that you started, like you said, from your very first tour at Tech. So, while you were in either the undergraduate program or branching out into the master's program, what skills did you develop as a BS and undergraduate student that helped you be successful in the master's program?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah, so I think one of the most important skills that I developed was asking interesting research questions, and that's also been very valuable in my PhD program. So, many of the undergraduate, kind of, upper-level seminars in the International Affairs program have us do seminar papers. Um, and so we get to work on a project that's related to our specific research interests and, you

know, that ideally ties in with the topic of the class as well. But that gave me the chance to really start exploring what it would be like to work on my own, independent projects that had a little more substance than, you know, a first-year paper in the intro class, or something like that. So, that gave me a chance to really explore different types of research questions, whether they were driven by a theoretical interest in how rising powers challenge the international system or something more empirical like China's interactions with the World Trade Organization. So, really those different seminar papers were important for me for developing those skills related to, you know, research projects and things like that that I was able to deepen and further pursue in the master's in those, you know, IPE—the International Political Economy—classes or International Security, things like that. So, I would say that's, kind of, the most important skill that I developed.

**Stephanie Jackson:** And we're going to ask you some more questions about those research interests in a minute, but one question I have, finally, about, um the BS/MS program, in general, is what do you wish you had known before you entered the BS/MS program?

**Zara Albright:** Ooh, that is a good question. What do I wish I had known before entering the BS/MS program? This is probably unique to me having decided to pursue a PhD afterwards, but worth considering for anyone who's thinking about it. I wish I had known a little more about the master's thesis option for the BS/MS because pretty much everyone in the BS/MS does the class focused option because the focus of the program for the MS is usually, uh, a professional degree. I think a lot of our graduates go immediately into the workforce afterwards—whether that's non-profit or government or consulting, something like that. But there is this master's thesis option, um, which I didn't do, uh, because I wasn't totally aware of it or really, kind of, knew what it was about, um, and it wasn't very common. But that is something I wished I had known about because it would give you a chance to do a longer-term research project. Um, so I think, kind of, understanding on a broader level how to tailor the master's degree to your own interests—to my own interests—um, would've been helpful. Because there's a lot of different ways you can do it. You know, there's different concentrations. You can do the class option, the thesis option. You can study abroad during the masters. You can TA abroad during the masters. There's a lot of different options. Even though it's a, a short program, it can be really flexible, um, so tailoring it is important.

**Sydney Piwonka:** Yeah, and so, now we want to dive into one of those interests that you have in research and how those experiences may have assisted in your academic and career goals. So, I think you touched on this a little bit, but when did you first become passionate about research?

**Zara Albright:** So, I think, that's a good question, um, I think it happened kind of before I realized it, I guess, I would say. Um, the first kind of substantial—somewhat substantial—research project that I remember doing at Tech was in Peter Brecke's, uh, Empirical Methods class in my second year. Um, you know, we could do absolutely any topic we wanted as long as it had some sort of quantitative analysis component. So, I did a project that looked at how languages in the world have evolved, um, in relation to economic development. So, the research question I looked at was, you know, how many languages are dying off in each country, and how is that related to the level of economic development, the income levels in each country? So, it was a very basic, kind of, correlation regression analysis with the theory that, you know, as a country develops economically and connects more to the global economy, it will converge on, kind of, some of these more lingua francas of the world—English, Spanish, Mandarin, things like that—and native languages or, you know, less commonly used languages will die off. And so,

that's the first time that I really remember being excited about an individual project that I got to design and I collected all the data and did the analysis and had an interesting result that I could present to the class and say here's all the information I collected and here's what it says and here's how this is relevant to our understanding of the world and the global economy. That was really the first big project that got me interested and made me realize what research could be and how much fun it could be.

**Sydney Piwonka:** Yeah, and then you also continued these experiences when you were a Research Intern at both the Georgia Department of Economic Development and at the United Nations. And so, how did these experiences affect your decision to pursue either a master's degree or the PhD program?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah, absolutely. I think the main thing that they impacted was they kind of shifted my understanding of what constitutes research. So, research is a very different way of learning than formal schooling which is what, obviously, most of us are familiar with. It requires a lot more self-motivation. You're responsible for, kind of, testing—quote unquote—yourself, if you will, rather than being tested by a teacher or a professor. And nobody is going to tell you the specific requirements of your project, so you get to shape it yourself, which can be really liberating but also really daunting if you have no experience with it. And so, working in these organizations gave me a chance to do a team-based, you know, a lot more team-based research. So, in the Georgia Department of Economic Development, I was on the International Trade Team. So, one of the research projects that I did there was examining the impact of the United States Free Trade Agreement on important industries in Georgia. And so, this supported the International Trade Managers to understand, you know, what those impacts were and how these larger international policies affected smaller industries within the state, and it was able to help our Deputy Commissioner, um, in the new NAFTA negotiations, actually. So, that was really important, um, to understand how research can have a tangible impact and is part of teamwork and its not just kind of me sitting at a computer hunting around for documents on run-down government websites, right? It can be, it can be interactive. It can be impactful. Um, so that was really important for me and, and, you know, similarly at the United Nations, I was working on a team there to understand how, um, small Latin American companies and startups can scale-up in the region to provide more jobs in, kind of, newly competitive industries of fintech and other technology spaces, um, again working in a, in a great team with brilliant people from all over the world. So, it really expanding my understanding of what research could be.

**Sydney Piwonka:** Yeah. That's awesome that it gave you that experience of seeing it not only from an individualistic standpoint, but also from a team perspective. And so, one last question on this, but what is a common misunderstanding that you think exists about getting involved in research as an undergraduate student?

**Zara Albright:** A common misconception about research as an undergraduate student. So, I guess it kind of goes back to what I was talking about just a minute ago of, it doesn't have to be like you sitting off in a space by yourself doing a project, um, that you have some esoteric interest in. It can be anything from one of those term papers that we talked about—like the one that I did for Dr. Brecke—or it can be you're assisting a professor on, you know, their book project, or something like that. So, research is a lot more diverse I think than many people understand it to be, especially as an undergrad because it's very foreign to our experiences in high school and things like that before it. But it's a way to really cultivate an interest in something that you care about and maybe support someone else who has that same

interest as you, and it doesn't have to be something that's separate from your coursework. It can support your coursework and kind of make you a better learner and student as well.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Okay.

**Sydney Piwonka:** When we asked Zara about what she wished she had known before going into the BS/MS program, she mentioned the option to tailor the program to her interests. Here, she explains more how she did that with study abroad.

**Stephanie Jackson:** So, switching gears a little bit, you mentioned earlier about tailoring the BS/MS program to your interests, and we know that you were a Graduate Teaching Assistant for the Argentina/Uruguay Study Abroad program one year.

**Zara Albright:** Yes.

**Stephanie Jackson:** So, tell us a little bit more about that experience.

**Zara Albright:** Yeah. So, I was very fortunate, um, to have the opportunity to go abroad, um, with Dr. Kirk Bowman in the summer of 2019—yes—to Argentina, um, and Uruguay for his summer study abroad, which focuses on economic development and politics in Latin America—specifically in Argentina and Uruguay, of course. So, this was a really interesting experience for me, um, because I had also interned abroad in Chile, so it was a chance to go back to South America and learn about different countries, um, and how, you know, they were or were not similar in how their economies were structured and things like that. And I think, you know, while I was there, I was working on a research project about, uh, soccer and politics in, in Latin America, which, of course, makes sense with Dr. Bowman.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Right.

**Zara Albright:** Um, so I was looking at China's stadium diplomacy and China's soccer diplomacy in the region. So, it gave me a chance to, kind of, visit some soccer stadiums, um, in Argentina and Uruguay and talk to people who were, you know, very intense soccer fans and understand what it would mean for a foreign country to build a stadium, um, something brand new, uh, as opposed to, you know, a stadium that has existed for decades that has a history as a hallowed ground for a community to get really a better sense of, you know, what my research means in context, um, which was a fantastic opportunity because I do think that, you know, being in the environment that you're studying and talking to people who live there, it, you know, it gives you such a richer perspective—especially as an outsider. I'm, you know, I am not from Latin America. I speak Spanish, but it's not my native language. And so, it gives me access to perspectives that I wouldn't be able to have here in the US and can help fill in at least some of the gaps in my own knowledge and experience because other people have very valuable knowledge that they can hopefully share with me, which is easier in a, in this kind of study abroad experience, um, than, than in an interview or virtual kind of format.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Right. Right. And so, one just follow-up on that, how has, or what impact has studying abroad had on your view of international affairs? Or did it have any impact also on your choice of subject for your doctoral degree?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah. So, I would kind of give two answers to that. Um, in terms of my graduate studies, um, studying abroad really cemented my interest in doing field work as part of my graduate studies. So,

once I kind of get more into the dissertation phase, I plan to go abroad and conduct primary research in the field. Um, don't know yet exactly which countries or what that will look like, um, but it will involve, you know, interviewing policymakers and officials, interviewing local populations who live and work in the areas where China is funding development projects in Latin America, looking through archival documents, visiting project sites—things like that. Because studying abroad again, you know, really showed me the value of, of learning from a diversity of perspectives and complementing the official story which you have access to through documents on the internet and things like that with the reality of lived experiences on the ground. And the second component, um, is the idea, you know, of the, of a narrative as a part of international affairs. There's a lot of focus, obviously, on how power shapes interactions in the international systems, but power is really complex, right? And it's informed not only by military capabilities of a country or a country's GDP, but it's also heavily informed by narratives—styled to both, kind of, within and outside of a country. And that's one of the most interesting things about studying China today, are the narratives used by the stakeholders involved, right. So, in the US, there's often a narrative of 'the China threat,' right? But you talk to people in Latin America, you talk to policymakers, and you listen to what they're saying, the narrative is a lot more complex. It's more about, you know, we have multiple options for our development projects. China's the best option right now. The US isn't giving us what we need.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Yeah.

**Zara Albright:** So, it's much more complex than just 'China's in control, China's a threat.' And studying abroad really gives you access to those more complex narratives.

**Sydney Piwonka:** Yeah. And so, now you're pursuing a PhD from the Department of Political Science at Boston University. And so, how do you balance this program—the PhD program—with being a Graduate Research Assistant at the Global Development Policy Center and a Pardee Center Graduate Summer Fellow?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah. Good Question. Um, it can be a lot of work for sure. It's, you know, long days, very busy hours. But, so, one of the main reasons that I came to BU was for the Global Development Policy Center—we call it the GDP Center here—and the chance to work with brilliant researchers such as my advisor—Kevin Gallagher—one of my team members—Rebecca Ray and Kehan Wang. They're brilliant researchers working in this space of China-Latin America studies in economic development and environmental impact, things like that. So, that was really a priority for me—was being able to get involved with this research center and with this team. And so, you know, I work during the academic year at the GDP Center five hours a week, doing projects that will hopefully kind of inform my dissertation later. So, for example, one of the projects that I worked on this spring was our annual China-Latin America economic bulletin. And so, I examined China's mass diplomacy in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic and looked at, you know, how many supplies were they donating, where were they donating these supplies, um, what does vaccine cooperation between China and Latin American countries, and kind of how do these initiatives support China's broader political goals in the region. And that relates directly to my research goals, you know, as an individual and as a PhD student. So, it is extra work, um, but it supports my research interests, um, long-term and is able to balance nicely, I think, with my coursework because we do a lot of, you know, work on our own research during classes—because our classes are more focused in the PhD on giving us the tools and skills we need to kind of design and accomplish our research goals as opposed to learning more content. So, it's a

different style of coursework which makes it easier to balance multiple responsibilities. Um, and then this summer, at the Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future, um, I am able to kind of bring all of those things together, because this fellowship is an interdisciplinary focus where students from all over the university, different departments come together and we work on our individual research projects but also, kind of, you know, bounce off of—work off of each other and get advice and feedback from people in different departments, um, about how to communicate our research to a broader audience and to a policy-relevant audience. So, this summer my, my research—this is kind of bringing together a lot of the work that I did at the GDP Center and my coursework during the school year to actually complete one of the projects, um, that I'm interested in doing and to communicate it, um, out to the world.

**Sydney Piwonka:** Yeah. That's so awesome that you're able to connect these experiences to kind of build both your academic goals but also work on your research. And so, I think you've talked a little bit about your current research topic focusing on China's influence in Latin America, but why did you decide to choose this research topic?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah. Good question. Um, so, this will be a little bit of a backstory, but I have studied Spanish since middle school because it seemed easier than French when I had to choose in seventh grade, right. And so, I kept it up throughout high school and college, and as I was studying Spanish came to learn a lot more about Latin America's history and culture and politics. So, I developed kind of an interest in the region and understanding more about it. And then, um, really kind of my interest in China's presence in the region came about during my internship in Chile with the United Nations because there was a lot of work starting to come out about, you know, how China is contributing to economic development goals, its foreign direct investment, its lending to the region, and I thought that was very odd. I was, you know, curious why is China putting all of this money into Latin America? It's on the other side of the world. You know, it's still—in some sense—is a developing country. You know, why—what is going on here? This seems really odd to me. Um, and so, I think that's how a lot of people get started on their research topics—is there's some sort of puzzle or there's something that doesn't make sense to them, and they want to learn more. And I definitely had that experience of 'this seems odd. I want to look into it more.' Um, and so, this internship was in between—it was kind of at the end of my undergrad, right before I started the master's program. And so, in the master's program, I looked at this some of, you know, what is China doing in Latin America. I looked at, um, one of their big investment projects, which was this supposed to be an inter-oceanic canal in Nicaragua as an alternative to the Panama Canal. Um, so I did a case study of that project, trying to understand what the goals were, what its impact would be, why China was interested in it, why Nicaragua was interested in it. And so, in the masters, I was able to, kind of, go deeper on a few different areas of that, which heavily influenced, um, obviously my decision to pursue this topic further in, in the PhD program.

**Sydney Piwonka:** What influence did the BS/MS program have on Zara's career? She tells us here about a focus on research and policy-oriented work.

**Stephanie Jackson:** So, thinking about your future career plans...

**Zara Albright:** Yes.

**Stephanie Jackson:** How has the BS/MS program influenced your career?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah. So, I'm, you know, just finished the first year of the PhD program, so I have a ways to go before I enter the job market, which is good and bad. Um, but the BS/MS at the Nunn School, in particular—in addition to my internship experiences—gave me much more of a policy-oriented focus on my research. So, in many political science programs, um, the research is heavily informed by theoretical questions and, kind of, focused on an academic audience. But being at the Nunn School, we have an environment which really supports not only academically-oriented work, but also very policy-oriented work—whether that's cybersecurity policy, environmental policy, or economic policy—the faculty and the coursework at the Nunn School support that, um, and kind of promote the policy relevance of it, right. Like we write policy papers in addition to research papers in our classes there. And so, that has heavily influenced the type of research that I want to do and the type of academic that I want to be after finishing my PhD program. Obviously, you know, I will continue to speak to the academic community, but I firmly believe that they should not—that the academic community is not my sole audience. Ultimately...

**Stephanie Jackson:** Yeah.

**Zara Albright:** I would like my research to have a meaningful impact in the policy world, and that stems a lot from the environment cultivated at the Nunn School, um, and the research that I did in these internships.

**Stephanie Jackson:** So, for our audience, of, you know, up and coming undergraduate students or even graduate students what advice would you give them if they're interested in a similar career path?

**Zara Albright:** Yeah. I would suggest, you know, if you get the chance to do research early on, go for it. And that doesn't have to be, you know, working with a professor on their book project doing data collection or a literature review, things like that. It can be in an internship like the ones I did. It can be in a longer seminar paper. It can be in a summer project that you do, or even in an independent study—where you work with a professor but still kind of design your own research project. There's lots of different opportunities to get involved with research early on, so I would certainly recommend kind of exploring those, um, even if there's really not that many people doing it, it's worth exploring.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Yeah.

**Zara Albright:** And then, the second piece of advice I would give is that, you know, don't be afraid to kind of—if you're interested in research or if you're interested in doing a PhD afterwards—don't be afraid to talk to people about that, even if it doesn't seem like anyone else is interested in something like that. I think one of the challenges I faced was, you know, the lack of examples of Sam Nunn alumni before me who had also decided to pursue a PhD. You know, as we talked about before, most of the graduates I knew and the people who came for lunch and learn type programs worked in governments, or non-profit, or consulting. So, these, to me, seemed like 'Alright. These are the options for me after graduation,' even though, you know, I was increasingly realizing how much I loved research and was thinking about, you know, longer-term graduate school. So, don't be afraid to, to talk to people about that and ask for support from your professors. Um, I'm always available as an alumni resource, of—of course. Um, but so, don't be afraid to pursue what you're interested in, even if it's not necessarily the same type of career path that you see most commonly or that's, you know, presented to you.

**Stephanie Jackson:** Thank you so much for joining us today, Zara. We have certainly enjoyed hearing about your experiences in the BS/MS program at the Nunn School and how you've progressed in your doctoral program, and we want to wish you the best.

**Zara Albright:** Thank you so much for having me today, Stephanie and Sydney. I've enjoyed talking with you.

**Sydney Piwonka:** Thank you for joining us.

## **OUTRO**

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