

Meet the SUSI staff: Joel Olufowote

What is the most adventurous thing you have ever done?

Moving to the United States as a tender 17 year old is the most adventurous thing I've done up to date. The move to the United States in the pursuit of a university degree was adventurous and challenging for a number of reasons. Culturally, the U.S. is very different from life in West Africa. Having to navigate through new experiences, customs, university life, new friends and away, for the first time, from immediate family was certainly not easy. 12 years later, however, I am able to look back at the transition and am thankful for all that I learned along the way. I am able to use the insight acquired through the relocation to assist others, such as our SUSI visitors, which find themselves in the same position I was also in.

Brief background? – Where you're from, job experience, family, passions/interests?

I was born in Accra, Ghana to Nigerian parents. Growing up, my father worked for a number of International Organizations that necessitated his movement throughout West Africa. As a result, the family rode his coattails to Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Liberia and up-state New York. I moved to the United States, on a full time basis, in 2001 in pursuit of a university degree. I received a Bachelor's of Science in Economics and Finance from the University of Indianapolis in 2005, a Master of Arts in Political Science from Southern Illinois University in 2008, and completed my PhD, also from Southern Illinois University, in political science earlier this year. Last academic school year, I accepted a one year Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University at Albany, SUNY where I taught courses and researched in the areas of comparative public policy and African politics. Starting in August of this year, I will be an Assistant Professor of political science at McMurry University in Texas, where I will continue teaching and researching within the comparative politics and international relations subfields of political science. I consider myself a product of my familial environment; all members of my immediate family are also in academia.

Away from the classroom, I thoroughly enjoy sporting activities. I'm an avid follower of, and play, basketball, racquetball, soccer, American football, among other sports. It certainly is not unusual to find me, during down time, at a professional or collegiate sporting event. Go Indiana Pacers and Southern Illinois Salukis!

What do you think are the most key issues for this generation to address?

Being my third stint as a Program Assistant with the SUSI program, I've had the opportunity to discuss pertinent issues facing students from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, and Vietnam. It seems matters that revolve around the political leadership, public policy, and governmental decision making is a common thread woven among the 60 participants of all 8 Asian countries. When comparing how government and rule of law operate in the US with that of their home country, there seems to be a deep dissatisfaction with the way things are run back home. These young student leaders return to their respective countries with a vigor and energy to improve its political landscape in any way they can and with a commitment not to naively fashion their own country's political system and institutions directly after that of the US, but to encourage the accountability and representation of public officials to their citizens.

Our students arrive with the recognition of being "leaders" in their home countries. However, they often depart fully aware of the responsibility they have in actually shaping how things function back home. The SUSI program is instrumental in cultivating this confidence and awareness of not just their talents but abilities in being a powerful force of change upon their return. I find that in most instances, the change they seek to make is found in the governmental practices of their home countries.

Who is someone that inspires you?

Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations is a name that immediately comes to mind of an individual that certainly has inspired my interest in international relations and global politics. A native of Ghana, Kofi Annan is someone I've always looked up to primarily because of his stance on conflict resolution strategies. In addition, he serves as a tangible example of how background or minority status should not deter one from attaining his/her goals, no matter how ambitious. On a more personal level, I can look no further than the man who raised me, my father, Johnson Olufowote. Through a variety of circumstances I have witnessed Dad push through, carry-on, and emerge stronger than before. He single-handedly nurtured the family through trying times, fostered in us a sense of civic responsibility, cultivated our faith, and is an unwavering foundation of support to all members of the family in ways that far exceed my comprehension. There is a common saying that, "it takes a village to raise a child." Dad raised three children primarily on his own: evidence he carries the strength and fortitude of a whole village. believe me—he does.



Joel Olufowote is a Program Assistant at Southern Illinois University-Carbondale.