
“Creating an academic program to answer the needs of society”

A Conversation with Dr.
Michael Williams

Jordan Clifford

Dr. Michael Williams became director of the International Relations Program at NYU in the fall of 2014. Williams undertook his undergraduate work in the international relations program at the University of Delaware, receiving an honors BA with distinction. He then received an MA from Humboldt University in Germany, where he studied contemporary European history. He completed his doctorate at the London School of Economics under the direction of Christopher Coker where he wrote on the social construction of risk in the North Atlantic, looking in particular at how elites of the NATO alliance constructed and responded to security risks in the post-Cold War world. But what sparked his interest in international relations in the first place?

MJW: I was always really interested in history and foreign affairs from a historical perspective, but I think it was when I was a senior in high school that I became interested. I was selected to go as part of a student delegation to Ukraine and Russia for a winter session. We went to Crimea for six weeks and we studied Russian language, culture, and politics. We stayed at this huge Soviet children’s camp called Artek. I also stayed with a Russian family living in Ukraine. I became very

close friends with one of the girls and her family, and thought to myself, “their family is just like my family and they seem to want the same things.” I had studied the Cold War in high school, but I just didn’t understand why the U.S. and the Soviet Union had a war. So it got me interested in the causes of war and the conditions of peace, which is the root of the study of international relations.

JPI: Why did you choose to do your MA in Germany and then your PhD in the UK?

MJW: I did my masters in Germany because one of my German professors suggested I apply for a scholarship for a year in Germany when I was a sophomore in university. I said to my professor, “Frau Busch! My German isn’t good enough.” She told me that I wasn’t going to Germany because I spoke perfect German, but to perfect my German. So I applied, thinking I would never get it—but I got it.

The next thing I knew was that I had a full scholarship and had to take a leave of absence for a year from Delaware. I went to Germany and matriculated at the University of Hamburg as a normal German student. I had no help, no support. I didn’t speak German that well by the way. I had taken it in high school and university, but I wouldn’t say I spoke German. You don’t really learn a language until you live the language. I got to Hamburg in August for a language class and German universities don’t start until October, so it was hard to meet people. It was tough, my mom would tell me that I could come home, but I’m not a quitter! I stayed and it was the best year of my life. Hamburg is still my favorite city in Germany.

After living in Hamburg for a year, a great international port city, I was so depressed when I came back home to Delaware. Delaware is awesome, but after you've lived in a world city that's been there for 1,100 years, it hits you. I wanted to go back to Germany to study German and European relations.

I applied to one university that accepted foreign degrees—the German university system at the time was very introverted—and I got a full float because they were eager to get good American students. My boss at the time—Senator Joe Biden—said, “Go to Europe, kid. Anyone can study Germany at Georgetown.” So I left and went to Europe. After that I applied to PhD programs, but the LSE was in London, and I loved LSE—it was one of the most interesting and intellectually stimulating places I've ever been and NYU reminds me of that. I loved it and wouldn't change anything.

JPI: You've had the opportunity to work in academia and government, what do you like about each?

MJW: Academia is good because you have free range of inquiry and a lot of time to think, which is good and bad. I think part of the problem with scholarship is that it can be introverted and there's a danger that it becomes focused on *how to* study international affairs rather than studying international affairs. Then your scholarship is very much limited in efficacy when it comes to policy and thinking about the real world as opposed to a theoretical world. Theory is there to help us explain the world, but it is also based on ideal concepts that usually aren't present.

There is a danger that scholars are divorced from reality. The best scholarship, in my opinion, speaks to reality, but also is uncompromising in its rigor and it's thinking. This is the downside to the policy world, where the scholarship is not necessarily as rigorous. In the think tank world, it can be very transitory and superficial, but at the same time you're working closely with policy makers. Policy makers are highly intelligent and motivated, but are under intense pressure. You don't have time to think about the history of the Middle East and how it relates to what is happening when you have 24 hours to turn out a memo for the President on issue X. In my experience, working with policy makers in the U.S. has a nice advantage in the sense that scholars have the ability to go into government. We have a revolving door at the highest levels of bureaucracy that means that you can think about the world while you're on the outside and you can then bring some of that knowledge to contemporary policy challenges.

The downside is then maybe you're too idealistic and think you can change the world; or you know a ton of information but don't know how to work the bureaucracy. In Europe, being in civil service means that you know how to 'get things done'. And that's the hallmark of someone who wants to bridge that gap, someone who is knowledgeable and rigorous in their study of the world, but who also understands how to disseminate that information in a way that's accessible to people who have little time to make decisions. Also, working the machinery if you're in administration—if you're the Senior Director for NATO-Europe, you need to know Europe, but you also have to know how to make the trains run on time. If you're a Dean you are ideally an

accomplished scholar, but you can also make things happen administratively.

JPI: Where have you worked in government and what was the most interesting?

MJW: Much of my government work has been as a consultant. I've worked for NATO headquarters, for NATO Allied Command Transformation in Virginia. I've done consultancy projects for the State Department, for the DOD, the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), and the Department of National Defense in Canada. As a young man I was lucky enough to work for the chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joe Biden. I've spent time at the State Department in London in addition to consulting on post-conflict reconstruction; and then I worked for a year as a special advisor for a deputy German Defense Minister. I'd say the two coolest experiences would be my time at the German Ministry of Defense and at the State Department in London. The embassy in London was great. The foreign service officers were some of the most interesting, intelligent, hard-working, overworked people I've met—I'm still good friends with some of them. And they were brilliant, and very influential role models for me. In Germany, it was great because I was an insider, but also an outsider. So sitting one rung down from the cabinet minister really gave me an interesting insight and a chance to be a different voice. So I'd say it's a tie between the two. I've been very fortunate for someone relatively early on in his career and who has been relatively academic to actually have the time to do that.

JPI: So how was the transition from student life to government and from student life to academia?

MJW: It wasn't always without error. The hardest transition from academia is that the scholarly community writes differently than the professionals do. So the first two months at the Embassy, I had everything I wrote come back with red ink everywhere because I was writing like an academic, which is how I was trained. Learning to write diplomatic cables and briefs was a challenge—a good challenge, but a challenge.

When you think you're very good with your writing and the diplomat is marking everything in red ink, it's a humbling experience, but it's important to know what you don't know. My parents taught me that so I realized that I don't know how to do everything well, but I can learn something new; and I did, it was informative. I was able to do things some of my other colleagues were unable to do because they didn't have that early experience that enabled you to become more solidified in your ways and navigate between the two. And then I had to do it in German in Berlin!

The downside is that policy work can bastardize you in the academic community—it can be difficult to bridge the two, but I think my publications and my work with Cambridge help to show that I have bona fides as a scholar in addition to understanding how policy works. And as Bismarck said: "It is like sausage-making."

JPI: Then you transitioned to NYU. Why?

MJW: The appeal of NYU was its stellar academic reputation; and I'm building the program and I like that. I love teaching

and I enjoy researching, but I like the situation, the challenge, and being busy. I do love teaching, and if there is any legacy I could leave it will be with the students that I teach. The most rewarding thing is when you get an email from someone after class saying how much he or she enjoyed it, or if they write to you years down the line saying how influential you were—that makes me feel wonderful. I like the idea of creating an academic program that answers the needs we have as a society. This along with preparing people who are going to work in that world—in NGOs, international organizations, scholarship—and helping with their goals was the real draw. I also wanted to be closer to my family after 13 years away. Mom and Dad are pretty happy to have me within 100 miles of ‘home’.

JPI: So what have been your initiatives thus far to expand the program?

MJW: I have been super busy and NYU is lucky to have me (laughs).

On a more serious note, the previous director laid an amazing foundation for the program. It was up to me to do some of the framing and put the roof on. My goal has been to harness our increasingly limited academic resources more efficiently—it must be that German influence on my thinking. So the approach has been how a program can grow under such conditions—can we make it more than some of its parts? NYU has a lot of international relations parts that have not been assembled in the most ingenious way. I have found my colleagues sympathetic to this thinking and very, very helpful.

I have done a lot of diplomacy really, with what I have found to be very willing partners—in Russian and Slavic studies, European Mediterranean studies, Middle Eastern studies, the History department, and the Politics department—to build a program that is the ‘window on the world’ as I call it at NYU. So getting professors to teach our courses, getting our students into those courses, and creating areas of specializations, e.g. IR with European studies. I’m really proud that NYU Law agreed to launch IR with International Law. NYU Law is one of the top five law schools in America and probably the best for international law in the country. I think that speaks a lot to the quality of our students, and also to the capacity of NYU to work well together.

I have had excellent administrators to work with, from our own Tina Lam, who is a superstar, on to the Dean of the Graduate School, Laurie Benton; the Dean of the Masters College, David Giovanella; the Senior Vice Provost, Matt Santirocco; Barbara Weinstein in history; and David Stasavage in Politics.

JPI: So where do you see the program going from here?

MJW: I want to see the program ranked as one of the top ten in Foreign Policy magazine’s top masters programs for international relations in the world within a decade—right now NYU is 24th in the world, which is very good, but it’s not representative of what NYU offers—partly because NYU is a big organization with lots of room for entrepreneurship. Things grow and develop, but they don’t always grow and develop together. One of the reasons why they hired me is that I’m a very outgoing person, and I believe NYU can easily rank ten within the

decade if we make more effective use of resources. I also want to develop area specialties, probably in law and global governance around the UN, as well as international business, and private and public political risk.

JPI: What does your work focus on currently? Do you have any projects you're working on?

MJW: Administration at NYU (laughs). I just finished a project looking at how the U.S. uses law and technology to wage wars with a liberal framework. One of my next projects is the evolution of weapons and law in humane warfare. I'm also working on a project on successful negotiations in international relations, what Henry Kissinger called the 'balance of dissatisfaction'. I'm in a bit of a lull and focused on NYU, but currently I'm talking to publishers and working on a textbook for Cambridge.

JPI: What are some of the trends going on in the world of IR today?

MJW: Well, it depends on where you're seated, right? It seems to me that the U.S. has overwhelmingly veered towards a very quantitative, rational choice methodologies geared around structural realism and neo-realism. I think quantification stems from economics and increasingly economics is moving away from rational actor-choice paradigms and some of that dry political science. And it seems to me that there is a little bit more of an interest in neo-classical realism. I don't think that post-modernism or post-structuralism is going to be a benchmark in American IR as it is in Europe, but I do think that meta-theory constructivism will continue to make inroads.

Neo-classical realism may evolve to have more space for agency as opposed to structure, but that in itself is fighting with the quantitative methodology approach. I think there is a danger in the American academy of becoming reductionist and quantitative and missing out in granularity. So I hope that adjusts itself a bit, I am a British trained doctorate so I am prejudiced in that regard, but I do think there is a lot more policy input from historians and scholars who are trained in interdisciplinary approaches to area studies than those who are highly quantitative.

I don't think that its rocket science to say that there is a shifting balance of power. Relative to other powers, America is in decline. The U.S. will remain the foremost economic and military power for quite some time, but as John Mearsheimer says, it's a superpower, but not a global hegemon. It's a regional hegemon. The U.S. strategy is contingent on maintaining imbalance in other regions so that no other regional hegemon can emerge—that's going to be very difficult to do in Asia where China has the aspirations and capabilities to do so. I also think that rising levels of nationalism could be an issue. We've seen it domestically, but we also see it in Europe—a pull away from integration and transnational politics. Any student of history can recall the 1930s and think that nationalism is not a great idea, but I'd keep an eye on people like Marine Le Pen in France—I hope it's superficial, but well see.

So there's a shifting balance of power, America has to accommodate a more diverse world—a collective world of power; not just with China but also with a resurgent Russia, that is basically an Upper Volta with nuclear weapons; with a

shifting regional balances in Europe and Germany; and with Latin America, where the U.S. has always had a sketchy reputation. This is probably one of the most interesting and scary periods of time to live in since the end of the Cold War, if not even further back. So it's a great time to study IR!

JORDAN CLIFFORD is an MA candidate in International Relations at New York University. He graduated with honors and distinction from Binghamton University with a BA in political science, having written his thesis on the mechanisms of successful revolutions and the role of the military. He serves as editorial manager for International Politics Reviews, a research assistant at the Center for Behavioral Research in Business at NYU Stern, and as an international board member for Dorm Room Diplomacy. His work has been published by World Policy Journal and International Relations and Security Network.

