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Final Internship Report

This past term I interned with Barack Obama, the junior U.S. Senator from Illinois, in our nation's capital. This internship was a unique opportunity to work in the personal office of a new Senator and learn about the legislative process. And, I definitely learned a lot. My internship on Capitol Hill with Senator Obama has served as the backdrop for my personal, educational, and leadership development. I gained a lot from my leave-term experience, including a whole new perspective about the political process and myself, and I would like to thank the Rockefeller Center for supporting me in this endeavor.

As a preface, I have been following Barack Obama for quite some time now and I have grown to respect him, his beliefs, and his authority. He graduated from Columbia University in 1983, and moved to Chicago in 1985 to work for a church-based group seeking to improve living conditions in poor neighborhoods plagued with crime and high unemployment. In 1991, Obama graduated from Harvard Law School where he was the first African American editor of the Harvard Law Review. Barack Obama has truly dedicated his life to public service as a community organizer, civil rights attorney, and leader in the Illinois state Senate. While some Americans think Senator Obama is "new" to the political front, he is simply continuing his fight for progress in the U.S. Senate. It is for these reasons that I particularly wanted to work with him and his staff in Washington, D.C.

Senator Obama is focused on promoting economic growth and bringing good paying jobs to Illinois. He serves on the important Environment and Public Works Committee, which

oversees legislation and funding for the environment and public works projects throughout the country, including the national transportation bill. He also serves on the Veterans' Affairs Committee where he is focused on investigating the disability pay discrepancies that have left thousands of Illinois veterans without the benefits they earned. Senator Obama also serves on the Foreign Relations Committee, which has become particularly focused on the war in Iraq. If you step back and think about the Senator's role and his priorities, who wouldn't want to work as an intern in his office?

So when I was finally offered an internship, I was too excited for words. I knew that I wouldn't be able to change the world during a 3-month internship for a junior Senator, but I genuinely believed that I was on my way down the road to making a difference. Unfortunately, my role as an intern did not allow for such activism. While my internship was an opportunity to learn about politics and the American political system, I spent much of my time dealing with politics on a more local level—office politics. As an intern, my role, as to be expected, was to do the grunt work. It just took me a little while to fully accept this role.

During my internship, I was responsible for opening, scanning, and data-entering the mail for four hours each day, answering the phones at the front desk for another two hours, leading constituent tours of the Capitol, working with the Health and Education Team, and also making several runs to the cloak room. For some, these tasks seem futile, but I did learn to understand the value of these jobs during my experience. I learned that while mail is a daunting process, it is truly important for the Senator to establish and maintain relationships with his constituents. I learned that it is important that his office be helpful,

courteous, and respectful to all residents of Illinois. I learned that these relationships will greatly affect his longevity as a politician.

Now, I always did my grunt work with a smile, and I did actually grow to understand the value of these jobs, but I also developed somewhat of a cynical attitude towards the bureaucracy. I remember taking a comparative politics government class here at Dartmouth and having such a difficult time with the concept of “bureaucracy,” but now I fully understand it and I am also equipped with the skills to work around it.

As I reflect on my internship experience, I realize that it has seriously altered the way I think about the world. I remember being so excited in the beginning of the fall. I remember arriving to work on my first day in a full suit, pantyhose and all, and walking around the office with a huge, goofy smile on my face. But I also remember how my idealistic views of the political process dwindled with each passing day. Now, that my internship is over, my perception of politics has significantly changed. I refuse to believe that I have become another disillusioned college student; I prefer to say that I have a much more realistic view of the political “game,” as I like to call it.

Fortunately, this was a “developing” experience for me in the sense that I have come away with a whole new perspective about the political process and about myself. This was not only a worthwhile experience, but something that I needed to do for my own personal growth and development. I honestly feel better prepared to meet the complex challenges that face current and future generations; I have sharpened my passion for social change and progress. I have also realized that politics is not the only way to create

change; rather, I can become an activist, stand up for what I believe, and make a difference in my own way.

Perhaps I was a bit of an idealist going into the internship, but I quickly learned that there is a lot of corruption and manipulation that not only exists, but dominates the political agenda. A learning experience, my internship opened my eyes to the possibilities of effecting change outside of politics. One such example, I have developed an interest in non-profit agencies and foundations that are committed to advancing human rights. If you asked me six months ago what I want to do with my life, I would have answered, “One day, I want to become a Senator for the United States of America. I want to make America a land of opportunity, equality, and freedom.” And, my answer today is different; I still want to make America a better place for all Americans, but I want to lead a revolution for social justice to effect this change.