

Interning on Capitol Hill: Final Report

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Table of Contents

Page 3 – Summary of Report and Daily Tasks

Page 4 – Special Projects and Final Project

Page 5-6 - Intern Lecture Series

Page 7- Lessons Learned

Page 8-9 – Personal Growth, Self-Assessment and Finances

Page 10-21 Appendix A— Constituent Letters

Page 22-35 Appendix B—Intern Guide

Page 36-38 Appendix C— Memo and Thank You letter to the
Congresswoman

Page 39 - Appendix D— Evaluation Letter

Page 40 – Appendix E – McClory Thank You Letter

Summary of Report

This summer I worked in the office of Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones in Washington D.C. The internship was a valuable experience that offered a look into the American legislative process and a view of the daily functions of a congressional office. In addition, there were multiple opportunities to listen to contemporary political stars speak about issues most important to them. This internship was challenging and eye-opening and I really feel as if I learned a great deal.

Daily Tasks

The main tasks I was assigned as intern were writing constituent letters, giving tours, and running errands.

I began writing constituent letters on the first day in the office. The office receives about 5,000 pieces of constituent mail per month and we respond to about 2,000 of constituent letters, emails and faxes per month. By responding to constituent concerns in writing, I learned to write diplomatically.

Diplomatic writing entails being tactful, lucid and non-threatening when responding to constituents. Every possible step must be taken to ensure that response letters are not offensive and that they align politically with the Congresswoman. I could take stances on issues which the Congresswoman has publicly advocated, but I had to be much more ambiguous when responding to concerns outside of her general political sphere. For instance, I responded to a lot of letters regarding international crisis in Colombia and Indonesia. The Congresswoman has never publicly addressed these issues, and therefore I had to gauge what she might say from international issues to which she has responded. Since I was speculating as to what the Congresswoman might say on a particular issue, I could not affirmatively support or oppose some international issues. Instead, I wrote in generalities, arguing points which were non-combative and hard to disagree with. Diplomacy and brevity were the two main tools needed to write a successful letter.

I understood the provisions of writing constituent letters after Terence critiqued my first letter about the humanitarian crisis occurring in Colombia. (See Colombia letter 1 pg 14) I made a series of unsupported accusations and the tone of the letter is negative. In the final letter (see Colombia letter 2 pg 15) the tone is much less combative and I substantiate claims by prefacing contentious statements with disclaimers such as "several reports by reputable human rights organizations suggest..."

I mainly used internet based research to support facts in letters. Several government websites provide current and past information on

legislative issues and votes. I also used multiple online news websites such as Newsweek and CNN to better understand both sides of an issue.

The second largest part of my job was giving tours of the Capitol. I really enjoyed this part of the internship. I regularly led constituents around the Capitol while explaining the history and the contemporary uses of the Capitol. It was my job to entertain the visitors for an hour with little known facts about the Capitol. I like public speaking and being the center of attention, so giving tours was a very satisfying activity to me.

I also attended some committee meetings in place of or with one of the legislative directors in the office. After the meetings, I discussed what was being voted on in the meeting with the Legislative Director and occasionally wrote a memo about the details of the meeting.

Special Projects

In addition to constituent letters and giving tours, I also assisted with special projects around the office. Helping with special projects involved doing a lot of busy work. For example, I worked with Melvenia Gueye, the Health legislative director, on scheduling the Congresswoman's Health Brain Trust event in Cleveland Ohio. I had to call all the CBC member's offices and speak with the scheduler to find out if it was on the Congressman/woman's calendar. This was a very tiring task, as many schedulers were not available and those who were hadn't heard about the event. So I emailed and faxed every member a copy of the flyer for the event. I then had to call back and ask if the member would attend. I made a list of members attending, not attending and unsure to document the status of each member's plans. This took two weeks to complete because it is difficult to contact schedulers in some offices and I had to keep calling offices back. Only 3 members of the CBC out of about 45 ended up attending the event.

There were several other special projects around the office on which I was able to assist. These tasks required a lot of diligence, patience and concentration, as they were continuous and involved a lot of uncertainty and dependence on participation from other offices.

Other projects I worked on around the office are making a flyer for the Congresswoman's Soul Food Luncheon, proofreading floor speeches, pulling bills and researching legislative issues.

Final Project

For my final project I created an intern guide (See **Appendix B**) for the office to be given to future interns. My first day in the office was hectic and confusing. Congress was in session and there were a ton of things going on all over the Capitol. After Terence, the intern coordinator,

introduced me to everyone in the office, he assigned me to a desk and told me to read the inter-office email and *the Hill* newspaper. After about an hour of reading information about happenings in Washington DC, I was taught to work the phones, given a letter written by a constituent and asked to formulate a response and, finally, taken on a tour of the Capitol.

To say that I was lost and utterly confused is an understatement. I felt as if I had stepped into the twilight zone and was unprepared to navigate my way through the confusion of Washington D.C. No one really sat down and explained to me how Congressional offices work or what my function in the office would be because everyone was consumed with their own tasks. I created the Intern Guide to help alleviate the initial confusion of working in a congressional office.

Intern Lecture Series

I had an opportunity to attend lectures by Representatives and other prominent political figures through the summer Intern Lecture Series. I attended the Trent Lott, Harold Ford, Barack Obama, and Colin Powell lectures.

My favorite lecture was Colin Powell. I was expecting this larger than life diplomat to speak of his accomplishments and political past and to be overtly partisan. Instead, he was extremely humble and practical minded. He talked of the importance of service of always finding a way to give back and help people. He discussed his life after being Secretary of State saying he now relaxes with his wife, has to find his own parking spot and that life is all about transition.

I asked him how he wants history to define him. One hundred years from now when high school students are reading about him in text books, what did he want them to read, I asked? His answer was simple: "I want them to read that I was a good American and served my country in the best I could." It was that simple.

Hearing him in person was different than hearing about him on TV or reading about him in newspapers. He was not much like his public image.

Lessons Learned

The three most important things I think I've learned are: the complexity of the legislative process, the importance of the amendment, and the lost art of debate.

From start to finish, creating legislation is a complicated process. Before working in the Congresswoman's office, I thought each representative sat down and wrote proposed legislation themselves. I

soon learned, however, that almost everything in a Representative's office is done by legislative directors and assistants.

After a legislative director introduces a proposed bill and it is reviewed by the Congresswoman/man, the bill is sent to other representatives along with a 'Dear Colleague' letter asking for co-sponsors. The bill may not actually be introduced on the House floor until next year or even two years later, but the search for co-sponsors begins early. Numerous phone calls and favor exchanges such as "you co-sponsor me and I'll co-sponsor you" are made while the bill is in committee prior to going to the House floor.

After the Bill reaches the floor, the bill is debated and amendments are offered. The amendment process can significantly alter the purpose and function of a piece of legislation. Amendments can change the amount of money being proposed for a program and eliminate certain parts of the bill altogether.

Another facet of the legislative process is floor debate. In our nation's past, debate was the primary medium through which persuasion was possible. Words alone were often capable of influencing position shifts on certain issues. Today, however, debate is more symbolic and ritualistic than an effective tool of persuasion.

While I was giving a tour once, I walked past another tour group who was actively listening to their Representative talk about his work in Congress. One tourist asked the Representative if he actually listens to the opposition during floor debates. The Representative coyly laughed and said "darling, I'm a very busy man. When I go to the floor, I deliver my talk and leave. I might catch something the opposition said on my way in or out, but that's about it." I think his sentiments capture the essence of contemporary House debate.

Personal Growth

The area in which I have grown the most while working for Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones is confidence. Prior to working for the Congresswoman, I was skeptical of my ability to pursue a career in Congress. The homogeneity of Congress and other parts of the American government can be discouraging to those who don't fit the prototype of a typical American politician. Although there has been remarkable progress over the last few decades, there are glass ceilings still in need of shattering.

Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs Jones is an African-American woman who has had a glass-ceiling-shattering career. She was the first African-American county prosecutor in Cleveland, the first African-American woman to be elected to the House of Representatives from

Ohio, and the first African-American woman to serve on the Committee on Ways and Means, a very prominent committee in the House.

I have had the honor of watching her work in Congress and have also had the ability to talk to her personally about her accomplishments. I cannot explain how affirming and satisfying it was to work for an African-American female member of Congress. I could see myself in her accomplishments: she was there, so that means I can also be there. I think it is incredibly important to have diverse leaders that American children can look to for encouragement and inspiration. Part of building aspirations involves looking at those who have gone before you and being able to see yourself in them.

Self-Assessment

Overall, I think my performance in Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs-Jones office was outstanding. I completed every task asked of me in a timely and efficient manner. My enthusiasm, motivation and dedication remained high throughout the internship.

My best work involved responding to constituent concerns when answering phones, giving tours and writing letters. I was regularly complimented on letters I wrote and on the manner in which I answered phones. Patrice, chief-of-staff, even told me I was one of the best interns they'd ever had in the office and Terence said I would be a hard act to follow. He also said he was considering hiring a prospective intern for the fall who had "Echoish" qualities. I was overwhelmingly humbled by these compliments and was proud of the work I had done in the office.

Although I was regularly complimented for my work, I did make mistakes. I had a harder time understanding inter-office policy. Sometimes I overstepped my boundary by assuming without asking. For example, Steven Abbott, the staff assistant, went on vacation for a week. While he was gone, it was my responsibility to forward faxes and sort mail and I could only perform these tasks from his desk. I assumed that it was ok to check inter office email from his computer and to also send email from his email account to others in the office because there was no way for me to sign into my account from his computer. When Terence and Steven learned of my use of Steve's email account I was reprimanded in a tactful, yet stern manner. After this, I understood that when using someone else's computer I should always ask about privacy guidelines and email policies.