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Eli J. Segal Citizen Leader Program

Brandeis Segal Fellows Summer Internship Report

When you arrived at your Internship site, did you know what you needed to know? Did you have the name and contact information of your site supervisor?

Through discussions with the Segal Program Director and family member as well as readings provided by a Brandeis health policy professor, I acquired background knowledge on the American health care system before my internship that was necessary and sufficient to begin work in Senator Kennedy's health office. As I expected, much "on-the-internship" training and research was required to handle the diverse project topics I encountered during the summer, ranging from "Contract Health Services in Indian Country" to the "Fairness in Nursing Home Arbitration Act."

I had the name of and contact information for both the primary site contact, Senator Kennedy's Chief of Staff, as well as the requisite information for my site supervisor, the staff assistant for the Majority Health Policy Office, Senate HELP Committee.

What did you learn that you wish you had known before you started?

I became much more proficient in memo writing, a skill that would have been helpful to have practiced beforehand. Additionally, I regret not starting the internship with much of the knowledge of the health care system that I learned along the way. A greater breadth and depth of understanding of health care issues would have made it easier to work on more advanced projects for staffers more quickly.

What did you learn about leadership, followership, human relations, teamwork, civic engagement? About yourself? About making change? (This is the most important question—please tell us what you learned from every perspective.)

The internship was, above all, a unique and valuable learning experience; I learned about the legislative process, the work of a Senate staff, health care issues, and interpersonal relations in a business environment.

I attempted to be a sponge and soak up as much as I could from the various staffers and interns I interacted with. I made an effort to get to know each staffer from the beginning and quickly attached myself to one whose area of specialty deeply interested me (health care reform). I listened to him and other seasoned staffers explain how work is accomplished in the Senate.

During the summer, I witnessed various leadership styles from individuals with very different positions in the office. The admiration for the Chief of Staff certainly was due to his friendly and self-effacing demeanor while other staffers who were not as open and friendly were not viewed as favorably.

The interns I worked with were impressive individuals and some of the most important lessons that I take away from the internship due to my interactions with them. I took away lessons from each of them, including the import of professionalism and a good work ethic to improving communication and organizational skills. I got a true sense of how to comport oneself in a work environment in order to gain the respect and trust of colleagues but also viewed favorably and seen as friendly.

I collaborated with nearly all of my fellow interns at one point on memos or research projects. Working in tandem provided each of us with the opportunity to benefit from one another's talents as well as receive criticism and feedback on our ideas and job performance. In terms of leadership opportunities, however, there was only one situation where I had the chance to help head a project. In conjunction with another intern, I led an effort to summarize and compile viewpoints of health care experts on reform. We successfully outlined the task to be accomplished, demonstrated how to

most effectively do it, and delegated the responsibility amongst ourselves and our other interns.

Invaluable on the subject of creating change in the political arena were conversations with a current Kennedy staffer and former Massachusetts state legislator whose memoir I read and discussed with him. The ideas and experiences he communicated have left an indelible impression on me, particularly his first-hand experience in “agenda setting,” using the convergence of three streams around a specific issue that make change possible (a problem, a policy solution, and political will) to create successful public policy.

Creating change in the field of public policy is usually a long, slow process that requires coalition-building, turning ostensible opponents into allies. Through reading and hearing about Sen. Kennedy, I gained tremendous respect for his mastery of using the political process to advance social change. For all the talk of Sen. Kennedy’s staunch liberalism, his success as a legislator has come mainly from working across the political aisle, finding common ground with otherwise political adversaries, and sharing the credit for success.

To be an instrument of change as a staffer, one must be able to clearly communicate his or her boss’s position and advocate strongly for them while, in most cases, remaining open to compromise and debate.

Through my summer experience, I realized that I have the capacity and interest to work in the halls of government but perhaps not as a career as my temperament may not be suited for the slow pace and unsure outcome and impact of legislative work. I have a desire to see results and know that my work will make a difference and be beneficial to the community as a whole.

What program improvements would you recommend? Pay? Program? Site selection? Anything at all? (This is also very important. Given that the program is new—you all were the first ones to go through it—I would be very surprised if the list of improvements needed was short.)

A stipend that accounted for the cost of living (rent, groceries, and travel fees) would be helpful for those whose site location preclude living from home. Undoubtedly, the Kennedy internship site should be kept and any Fellows who have the privilege of interning for Senator Kennedy should be advised to work in his health policy office as his greatest achievements, and some of his best staff, are in that office. Additionally, if a different congressional internship site is chosen, I urge that it be in a Senate Committee office as this increases the likelihood that interns will have substantive work and interact with stellar staff.

Also, a few check-in calls or emails from the Program Director during the course of the internship would be helpful. These calls would push the Fellows to reflect and self-critique on their performance during the summer and help them identify, while there is still time left in the internship, what they have done well and where they should focus on improving their efforts. While the coach/mentor can provide advice, the Program Director, understanding the overall goals of the internship, should know how the Fellows are doing during the summer and provide an extra layer of support and challenge so that Fellows can maximize their internship experience. Finally, the connection between the summer placement and leadership should be stressed and made explicit for every Fellow. Perhaps a leadership development seminar would be helpful in preparing Fellows to understand how their position relates to citizen leadership.

What did you accomplish at the internship site this summer? (This is important both if you accomplished great things and if you didn’t—the question in both cases is “Why?”)

During my internship, I attended hearings and closed-door health care roundtables on reform issues, drafted memos to staffers summarizing these meetings, wrote factsheets on Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP, and provided services to Kennedy constituents, such as providing information on legislation. I cultivated my interest in health care reform through assisting a staffer whose work and background fascinated me. The projects on reform included summarizing the opinions of health care reform leaders about the problems with the current situation, solutions offered, and obstacles identified to reform. Additionally, I aided in compiling a health care reform database consisting of a range of health care experts and stakeholder organizations. My work on health reform issues will provide staff with an easy and quick reference for determining the positions of various stakeholder groups, which will be taken into consideration when devising policy and writing legislation.

I also honed my professional communication skills through phone interactions with constituents and meetings with staff members.

What else would you like to mention that is not captured in the questions provided above?

One of the most significant parts of my summer that was not directly related to the Segal Program but will have lasting effect on me were informational lunches I had with Brandeis alumni in the Washington metropolitan area. I met with several individuals, including the Chief of Staff to the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service, a Navy JAG lawyer, a Department of Justice attorney, and even a clinical psychologist with the goal of gaining a better sense of what their careers are like and determining if they appealed to me. Overwhelmingly, the individuals who were most satisfied with and, in my opinion, had the most interesting jobs worked in public service fields. My desire to devote myself to service was only strengthened by these interactions.