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Behind the Scenes

Student interns get up-close view of politics while working alongside political superstars.

Story by Rachel Hatch



After working as a student intern for U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, Sara Froelich '01 (above) is now deputy downstate director for Durbin's office.

With the 2008 presidential election only a few weeks away, the world of politics is earning an even brighter spotlight than usual. This summer, some Illinois Wesleyan students took a close look at that spotlight through political internships.

An internship for Illinois State Sen. Bill Brady (R-44th District) offered senior Dan George many insights. George, a music major, said he is learning that government has less to do with political wrangling and more to do with understanding the needs of people.

“As an intern for Senator Brady, I am usually the first contact for his

constituents,” said George in an interview last July. “If a resident of the district calls the office to comment on the quality of the roads, I will see that the message gets to the senator. If someone stops into the office to advocate for the elderly, I will talk with the person to make sure his or her needs are met.”

Brady, who is a 1983 IWU graduate, said he has found interns vital in providing another means of support for constituents. “Our interns assist constituents on a day-to-day basis with issues and solving their needs,” said Brady, who has also utilized the research of interns on projects such as enhancing retired teacher pensions and promoting higher education projects.

This summer, Illinois Wesleyan junior Monica Shah saw not only how political offices run, but campaigns as well. Shah began the summer as an intern for U.S. Sen. Barack Obama's Chicago office, working with day-to-day operations. Later, she interned with his presidential campaign. “The word ‘excitement’ does not quite cover it,” said Shah. “It's amazing to speak with so many people who call in to voice their opinion on different decisions or acts, and to know that people are not apathetic, and really are concerned with issues.”

An internship in politics is the first step toward a career in government after graduation, as Clint W. Sabin can attest. “If you look at the Illinois state capitol, around 90 percent of

new staffers are hired from internships,” said Sabin, a 2001 graduate who once served as an intern coordinator for the Illinois House. “It is a great way for offices to try people out, and see if they feel comfortable in the job.”

While he attended Wesleyan, Sabin served as an intern for former Illinois Sen. John Maitland and Illinois Rep. Dan Brady (R-88th District). After graduation, Sabin remained in government for six years, working for the Illinois House of Representatives, where he helped to write and interpret legislation on transit issues. That work led to his current position as manager for legislative and regulatory development for the Regional Transportation Authority, which oversees transportation in northeastern Illinois, including the Chicago Transit System, the Metra and Pace.

According to Sabin, interns begin to understand that a government job reaps rewards, but not in the monetary sense. “People do not go into these types of jobs looking to get rich. Working in government means knowing you are making a difference, and having an internship is a chance to learn that lesson,” he said.

Making a difference while working in politics comes from understanding public concerns, and then translating that into legislation, said 1997 alumna Amy Tenhouse. “You have to know what is going on,” observed Tenhouse, who analyzes health-care legislation for the Senate Budget Committee in Washington, D.C. “Being in the thick of things is an incredible experience. And no matter what you read or see on TV, you can’t have a real sense of how things are accomplished and how government works until you are there.”

Tenhouse believes internships are the best introduction for students, both to the real world of politics and to the people involved. “There is no better way to make connections with people than through an internship or fellowship,” she said. “People in Springfield or on Capitol Hill are happy to help you make contacts, and those contacts are your greatest strength.” While in school, she had more than one internship, working with Sen. Bill Brady and then accepted two fellowships — or sponsored internships — in other state government offices after graduation. Throughout her career, she has worked for the offices of the Illinois Governor and Lieutenant Governor, as well as for the offices of former U.S. Rep. Denny Hastert (R-Illinois) and U.S. Rep. Kay Granger (R-Texas). “There is never an age or a place in your career when an internship or fellowship cannot take you places,” she said.



Dan George '09 (above) spent the summer working for Illinois State Sen. Dan Brady.

Carolyn Hull '08 is finding her time at Illinois Wesleyan gave her skills she would use in her career, as did her senior-year internship. “My internship definitely prepared me for

my job. I'm doing the same type of thing I did then, but with more responsibility, and I get paid," said Hull, noting the typical political internship goes without pay. Hull's internship took her on the road with Obama's campaign, interning under the Central Illinois Field Organizer, traveling to Iowa until after the caucuses, then Wisconsin, Missouri, Indiana and Ohio. After graduation, Hull was hired by the Democratic Party, and is now working on the Coordinated Campaign. Her job involves helping re-elect several Democratic candidates, including U.S. Rep. Mark Udall (D-Colorado), for whom she is developing and implementing a Latino outreach program. "When I was at Illinois Wesleyan, I participated in the Madrid program, spending a semester studying in Spain," said Hull. "I find I'm using the Spanish skills I gained there every day."

An internship had international implications for 2001 alumna Sara (Nelson) Froelich. "I never thought I could find global opportunities in Central Illinois," said Froelich, who graduated with a double major in political science and international studies. As a senior at Wesleyan, Froelich served as an intern for U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin [D-Illinois]. She worked with embassies around the world to help Durbin's constituents with international problems. "It was an incredible experience, allowing me to combine my love of politics and international issues while helping people at the same time." During her years at IWU, Froelich also interned for U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, the Refugee Relocation Division of Catholic Charities and the Minnesota Attorney General's Office. After graduation, Froelich was offered a job with Durbin's office and is currently the deputy downstate director for the Illinois senator.

While learning how people can influence politics, junior Chris Unger also discovered how politics is impacting his hometown. The Denver native worked this summer for the Denver 2008 Host Committee, preparing for the Democratic National Convention. "This is my second summer working with the committee," said Unger, an international studies major. Unger is helping to prepare the city for the influx of conventioners in August. "Helping with an event of this magnitude," he said, "gives me a greater understating of what it takes to manage a not-for-profit, which is what I would like to do." Unger plans to study social movements and human rights in South America this fall.

Both Sabin and Tenhouse credit Illinois Wesleyan faculty with developing their interest in politics. For Sabin, Associate Professor of Political Science Greg Shaw helped draw him toward government close to home. "I took away an understanding of how state government can directly affect people, and how easy it was to make an impact," Sabin said. Political Science Professor Tari Renner helped Tenhouse discover her internship as an entry to politics.

"You might say working in government is a calling," said Tenhouse. "I knew I had to work on Capitol Hill. It was where I needed to be. And the best way for anyone to get there is through an internship."