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Kim Hill

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Illinois Wesleyan Student Interning for Scottish Parliament

Nov. 13, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— For a politico like Illinois Wesleyan University student Michael Kistner '15, being part of the action as a country moves toward independence is the opportunity of a lifetime.

Kistner is currently interning for the Minister of Public Health in Scotland. A political science and English writing double major, Kistner is in Scotland to study abroad at the University of Edinburgh. As part of his study abroad experience, he's serving as a research assistant for the public health minister, Michael Matheson, a member of the Scottish National Party (SNP).

In September 2014, Scotland, which along with England, Wales and Northern Ireland makes up the United Kingdom, will hold a referendum to determine independence from the UK, dissolving its 300-year political union with England.

"Because I work for a Minister, I literally have a desk only a few feet away from the First Minister of Scotland (the head of the Scottish government)," said Kistner, a Bloomington, Ill. native. "I've been able to hear stories from people who have been members of the SNP since the 1970s, when they were a tiny minority party and independence seemed like a far-off dream.

"The excitement and energy surrounding the upcoming referendum, which for some people represents a lifetime's work of trying to make this happen, is incredible," he added. "Being part of such a momentous time in a country's political history seems almost unreal."

Because Scotland's legal system has remained separate from those of the other UK countries, its political system has some distinct differences from both the UK and the U.S.

"The Parliament in Scotland has only one house," explained Kistner. "Because of this, evaluating and making improvements on bills when they're suggested happens entirely at the committee level by specialized groups of legislators."

Kistner believes the U.S. could benefit from a more efficient lawmaking system by eliminating the filibuster and other blocking mechanisms. He adds, however, that the U.S.'s firm conception of individual rights is a distinct advantage over the Scottish system, which has no Bill of Rights.

Michael Kistner visits Scotland's Isle of Skye, home of some of the most dramatic mountain scenery in the country.



“Working in a different country’s political sphere forces you to recognize what you do well as a country, and what you can improve on,” Kistner said.

Aspiring to be a political journalist, Kistner said he sought the internship in order to learn as much as he could about different political systems.

“The biggest takeaway I’ve gotten is that politics comes down to doing the most for people, and communicating to them what you’re doing,” Kistner said. “There can be a lot of nastiness and ineffectiveness wherever you go, and Scotland’s no different. But if you can find a way to make life better for the people you represent, and you can manage to convince them that you have, everything else is just a side note.”

Kistner is one of 98 Illinois Wesleyan students who are interning this fall. “That is a higher number than usual for the fall semester, as students continue to understand the importance of completing at least one internship during their college experience,” said Laurie Diekhoff, assistant director and internship coordinator of the Hart Career Center. “An international internship experience has the added benefit of allowing students to be part of a multicultural workforce, enhancing their cross-cultural communication skills, and developing an international network of colleagues.”

Contact: **Kim Hill**, (309) 556-396