How to Guide Legislative Interns
Legislators and staff bear a responsibility for the education and experience of a legislative intern.

By Alan Rosenthal

Every year thousands of undergraduate and graduate students from hundreds of colleges and universities intern in state legislatures. They fill in on day-to-day tasks, are helpful on research projects and in some places, are virtually all the staff a legislator has. However they are used, the legislature—and our democracy—benefits.

The principal benefits, however, go to the institutions of higher education that send the students and to the students themselves. Internship programs are one of the few ways, besides budgeting, that colleges and universities interact with the state legislature.

The students receive an educational experience unavailable in the classroom. They get to see the links between theory and practice. They learn firsthand about the legislative institution, the process and the people. As a result of their experience, a number of interns are recruited to legislative staff positions, and others are encouraged to run for public office.

Some students receive course credit for their work, others don't. The large majority are unpaid and work part-time at their internships. In a few states the interns (or "fellows," as they are sometimes called) are college graduates, working in the legislature full-time for a year. The variation in programs among the states is great.

An internship offers an educational opportunity for students and a challenge for legislators. Legislators are overburdened with responding to constituents, listening to lobbyists, doing case work, chairing or serving on committees, dealing with the media, relating to staff and so many other things. Still, legislators who have interns working for them (about one out of six) bear a responsibility for the education these students receive.

"Do remember," says Ann Bailey, a California Senate staff who is also the academic adviser for the Center for California Studies, CSU Sacramento, that interns "are the future, whether in politics or out of it, and their opinion of politics and politicians is being influenced by your actions.'

On the basis of the experience of legislators, legislative staff, and college and university faculty members in a dozen states come these suggestions.

1 Meet, greet and welcome the intern immediately upon arrival. If possible, spend an hour or so getting to know him. (This may be the most important hour of the internship.)

2 Introduce the intern to relevant staff members in your office and legislative agencies. Make sure that she knows how to deal with staff, lobbyists, constituents and others.

3 Agree on rules under which interns will be working. Establish a schedule if interns are part-time, including the day of the week and hours of the day when the intern will be at the Capitol. Be certain the intern understands that deadlines are important. Also be clear on your expectation on confidentiality.

4 Do not assume that the intern understands the legislative process or understands its language. The process is confusing even to veterans and the nomenclature takes getting used to.

5 Do not take on more interns than you can do right by. If there is no work to be done, let a student find another placement. If it turns out that she cannot be kept busy and productive, offer to share the student with another member.

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Give the intern a substantive assignment that leads somewhere. Along with the immediate tasks of monitoring committee meetings and dealing with constituents' requests, an intern should also have a longer-term project that can be pursued independently when there is time.

Do not give the intern too many clerical or menial tasks. An intern is not a gofer, grocery shopper, babysitter, envelope stuffer or all-purpose flunky—she is primarily a student of the legislative process.

Do not put the intern on your campaign, unless that is specifically the placement the student opts for. If a student signs up for an internship in the legislature, he can volunteer for your campaign after the internship has ended or in his spare time.

Be sure to give the intern some supervision, because few interns can do without it. Be clear as possible about what you want in any assignment. Give the intern feedback as he proceeds. Do not wait too long before intervening if the work is off track or not acceptable. Although you need to be patient while interns are learning, do not let problems slide.

Acknowledge the presence and contributions of the intern. Be generous with praise when she does good work for you. Encourage interns whenever possible.

You do not need to be a parent, however.

Consider yourself a teacher, perhaps even a mentor.

Put "intern time" on your calendar each week. Be available and open. Encourage questions. Explain things.

Permit the intern to have some free time periodically to spend in committee, on the floor or in the other house.

Allow the intern to shadow you in the legislature for a day and also in your district if that is possible. This is as good a learning experience as the intern will get.

Make sure the intern leaves with a positive perspective on and a good sense of the legislative process. The intern will share his perceptions with others on the campus and people back home. The legislature ought to benefit as a consequence.

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