



Washington State Legislative Service Project: Legislative Interns

Executive summary - Spring 2010

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The *Washington State Legislative Service Project* focuses on preparing student legislative interns, engaging and preparing the next generation for public service and improving legislative bipartisan collaboration. As part of the project both current and past legislative interns, current legislative staff, current and past legislators, news media representatives and registered lobbyists are being surveyed. This summary focuses on the legislative intern program. The intern surveys were administered during the last month of the 2009 Washington State legislative session. Current and past legislative interns were contacted by the House and Senate intern coordinators and they provided the link to their respective surveys. Interns participated in the surveys anonymously. Of the 74 current interns, 39 responded to the survey; this represents a 53% response rate. Of the 527 past interns (within the last 10 years) contacted, 61 responded to the survey; this represents a 12% response rate owing to the fact the contact information available was quite dated.

Based on survey responses, interns are slightly more likely to be female than male. Less than half of the interns are political science majors. Most interns come from the Puget Sound region, with 80% having graduated from a Washington State high school. Almost three-in-four interns align with a political party, and they tend to be more liberal on social policy than on fiscal policy issues. Students responding to the survey found the intern experience to be of great benefit. The main reasons given for participation in an internship were to gain political/legislative experience, enhance resumes, expand networking contacts, supplement classroom experience, and “for the challenge.” Seven-in-ten of the 125 legislators responding to their survey had experience with student interns, and over 85% of the current legislators who had worked with interns want one again. The intern experience not only increased the interns’ understanding of the legislative process, but also provided an opportunity for them to contribute to the legislative process. The internship provided networking opportunities, enhanced job skills, and provided the opportunity to assist constituents and people in need of the state’s attention. Internships are characterized as fast-paced, demanding, requiring long hours, and occurring in complex environments which often require the interns to deal with rather unhappy constituents and get involved in partisan politics.

The interns and the legislators both felt legislative interns vary widely in the degree of their preparation for the experience. Interns identified the following areas which would have improved their preparation: study of legislative procedures and improving their clerical, writing, presentation and networking skills. Legislators listed the following areas as important for intern preparation: better knowledge of legislative district issues, meeting the legislator prior to session, touring the district, constituent casework experience, and knowing and communicating what the student wants out of the intern experience.

Interns strongly feel that bipartisanship improves the effectiveness of the legislative session. When identifying issues upon legislators have the greatest and least bipartisanship agreement, the interns were not in agreement. While some issues fell only in the greatest or least agreement group, there were two issues (Human Services and Budget) which were listed in both groups. When identifying hindrances to bipartisan collaboration the interns included legislator personalities, influence of political parties, effects of large majorities, “hot button” issues, and some legislators’ narrow focus on re-election.

Interns overwhelmingly feel the experience has influenced them positively toward making future contributions to public service and, if they had the opportunity to do so they would serve as a legislative intern once again. The internship experience is seen to provide valuable job experience, productive networking contacts, clarified career goals, improved communication skills, and provide an insider’s view and insight into the legislative process. Most interns plan to continue working in the public affairs arena once their academic studies are complete.