

# The APSA Congressional Fellowship: Value for Faculty from Teaching Colleges and Universities

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During its 55-year history, the APSA Congressional Fellowship Program (CFP) has influenced much of the best work written about Congress. Top congressional and legislative scholars like David Mayhew, Alan Rosenthal, David Rohde, Lawrence Dodd, and Barbara Sinclair, to name just a few, were strongly influenced by their experience as legislative fellows on Capitol Hill. To cite the most prominent example, David Mayhew remarked that his fellowship year was integral to his writing of *Congress: the Electoral Connection*: “Absent my experience as an APSA Congressional Fellow in 1967–1968, there is not the slightest chance I would have conceived or written *The Electoral Connection*” (quoted in Biggs 2003, 143).

While the CFP’s value for research is well understood among scholars of legislative institutions and related areas of American politics and policy, there is less discussion and understanding about how the program may impact the teaching and advising roles that professors practice. For faculty from liberal arts colleges and teaching universities, where teaching and student mentoring are of great concern, the potential benefits to instruction and advising are a critical consideration.

Most faculty members at small colleges and teaching universities willingly sacrifice research time to devote more of their energy to teaching, advising, and engaging their students. (See Fairweather 2002 for an analysis of the tradeoffs between teaching and research productivity). Based upon my experience as a legislative fellow

in the office of Congressman Jim Oberstar (D-MN), and with the whole of the Congressional Fellows Program, I believe the experience can have a significant and positive impact upon the quality of one’s teaching and advising. Indeed, I argue that the program has as much to offer faculty from smaller, teaching-centered colleges and universities as it does for faculty who undertake the fellowship with an eye towards applying their deepened understanding of Congress to their future research agenda. As such, I suggest that teaching faculty should seriously consider participating in a program not only as a means to strengthen their future research of Congress or the legislative process, but also to enhance their teaching, their in-class or competitive simulation programs, and their ability to advise students on internships in legislatures or careers in public service.

## CFP and Teaching: Observations of Past Fellows

Among the reflections on the fellowship experience found in the pages of *PS* or as chronicled by Jeff Biggs in *A Congress of Fellows*, there is only a limited focus on the value of the CFP experience to teaching. Biggs relates the comments of former fellow, Andrew Taylor, who reflected that his fellowship experience “will help greatly with teaching. I have some great case studies and anecdotes for my students. In addition, I think I now have even more credibility with my students; I have first hand experience of many of the things I teach about” (Biggs 2003, 112–3). David Leal, the Steiger Fellow from the 1998–1999 program, linked the fellowship’s contribution to better teaching in this way: “Professors who understand the people, issues, and processes of everyday politics and can explain them well may become more prized than those who can only refer to textbook descriptions” (quoted in Biggs 2003, 133). Most political science fellows would likely agree with Taylor or Leal’s observations.

However, given that sabbatical leave is precious and infrequent, and that there are many fruitful ways to utilize time away from one’s home institution, a program like the CFP needs to show that it can offer real, tangible benefits to one’s teaching.

## First Things First: Quality & Enjoyment of Teaching

There are several direct benefits to teaching that emerge from working on Capitol Hill. For instructors of courses on American government and particularly Congress, the comments of Taylor and Neal apply. Congressional fellows leave the Hill with a far richer sense of how people, politics, policy, and the press interact and influence the institution and its policy outcomes. The most evident lesson is the pervasive power of staff over the member’s priorities, scheduling, earmark priorities, and on some votes cast on more technical questions. Less appreciated are the many ways the quality of the office or committee operation impacts a lawmaker’s prospects for reelection, prestige within the chamber, and preferred policy outcome. (For example, Chairman Oberstar’s office and committee staff is highly effective and entrepreneurial—witness the national attention created by his committee’s investigation of the FAA’s safety inspection program. In contrast, the actions of a couple staff members in another office caused substantial harm to the lawmaker’s prestige and office morale during this same time.)

Congressional Fellows can watch intensively how institutional rules shape the behavior of members and enhance the power of party leaders. On the House floor, the most heated debates frequently centered not on policy, but process. The minority expressed great anger and engaged in dilatory tactics to protest the frequent use of closed rules and when the majority leadership bypassed the regular committee process (e.g., for the Iraq Supplemental Funding bill in May 2008). The House

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majority experienced its own frustration with the Senate. House members complained bitterly that the Senate failed to take up legislation without supermajority support, ignored PAYGO rules after House Democrats cast tough votes to fund or offset the cost of programs, upheld or leveraged the president's veto power in all matters relating to war spending, and, from the House's perspective, too frequently watered down or removed reform initiatives (e.g., wind and solar tax credits in the Energy Bill of late 2007).

A fellows' learning experience also extends beyond the Hill. Most fellows attend a significant number of presentations and discussions held within the think tank community. (This is remarkably easy given that many seminars and briefings are actually held on the Hill so that staff and members will attend.) Often, we attend those sessions related to specific office assignments. For example, as the staff person tasked with developing a legislative memo on several bills related to Chinese currency reform, I attended forums at the Center for National Policy, CSIS, and elsewhere. We asked questions of policy experts, followed up with e-mails and became a small (well, very small) part of policy discussion. Those fellows assigned to committee staff experience this in far greater depth and, depending on the assignment, may make a significant contribution to the discussion or development of a particular policy.

Having worked during an election year, I have also come to see the election process from an inside perspective. I attended some Rep. Oberstar's fundraisers, had conversations with campaign personnel, traveled with my lawmaker across the district, and generally absorbed the impact of an election year upon the business of the House. I also grasped the role and importance of the congressional campaign committees. The first half of 2008 was a particularly difficult period for the National Republican Campaign Committee. As the minority party in an obviously unfavorable election environment, the NRCC struggled to raise funds, failed to stave off defeat in three special elections that Republicans would normally win easily, and faced an internal struggle over control and an embarrassing accounting scandal.

I have only touched on a few facets of the congressional world that fellows learn about; and these depictions still raise the question: what is the impact of the knowledge gained upon teaching? Of course, fellows will utilize a series of interesting stories to enliven the presentation and discussion of Congress and other political actors that do business with the Hill. I

will make changes in my own teaching in how I approach a couple topic areas and will use different reading materials and cases that I have discovered. However, the primary impact is that I expect to better explain the congressional world, in large part because I took the time in my office to talk through many of the processes and issues with staff in my office and with other fellows in the program. I was fortunate enough to have my desk next to Rep. Oberstar's legislative director, and he was always willing to share his vast knowledge of process and people in Congress. In the end, I expect my students will benefit from greater energy and enthusiasm for all parts of my Congress course, and several parts of my introductory American government course.

### **Active Learning: Enhancing Classroom & Multi-University Simulations**

It is well understood by all teaching faculty that active learning is essential. Active learning takes students out of the lecture-text-test format and promotes discussion and application of what is taught. In legislative courses, the natural extension is some kind of simulation exercise in class or, even better, in multi-university simulations like Model Illinois Government (MIG). In my Congress and the Legislative Process course, I usually have small classes of 10–20 students. Our in-class simulation centers on the students working in committee where they write, present, mark up, and vote on legislation. I also advise our students who participate in MIG, which is a full legislative simulation that culminates in voting on many bills in the actual chambers of the Illinois General Assembly.

Like many fellows, I had the chance to work with congressional staffers as they wrote and revised legislation and as they worked with outside groups or other offices on legislative provision. I also observed several mark up sessions before the Committee of Transportation and Infrastructure. These experiences will make me more effective in teaching my students about the strategic significance of how legislation is written, how they should interpret certain actions and tactics, and ultimately what they need to do to pass or defeat legislation. In both the Congress course and MIG, I will require students to identify how sections of their legislation were written to appeal to specific members or coalitions that influence the outcome of their bill.

### **Mentoring and Advising: Value of Public Service**

Small college and teaching university professors play a direct role in the development of students. At my home institution, Benedictine University, faculty are expected to build civic engagement or public service goals into their courses whenever possible. Many colleges and universities, like Benedictine, have dedicated significant resources to centers or institutes that teach leadership and encourage public service. Institutions, and even specific classes, frequently require public service commitments that must be fulfilled. In addition to course requirements, faculty encourage these goals through student advising, class discussion, and informal interaction outside the classroom. (See Lamport 1993, for a review of the importance of faculty-student interaction toward students' perceived satisfaction with college, their intellectual and personal development, and their career aspirations.)

The traditional goal of creating engaged students complements a more urgent call for universities to inspire a new generation of public servants. Anticipating the impact of the baby boom generation's retirement from government, think tanks and institutes have issued reports, funded public service initiatives and scholarships, and taken other steps to promote public service and civic engagement. A good example in Washington, D.C., is the Partnership for Public Service, a non-profit organization that partners with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, foundations and universities to encourage talented people to enter government work. (See Partnership for Public Service 2008.)

Back in Congress, beyond the displays of power, rules, norms, ideas, and strategy, one sees the most intense dedication to public service found anywhere in government, save the military. From the lawmaker down to the student intern, the notion of trying to make a difference is valued and implemented. For example, one of Rep. Oberstar's staffers, who has a wide range of legislative responsibilities, utilizes his African studies major when he participates in developing and discussing legislation to address African health and poverty issues. During my stay, he joined a congressional delegation trip to Ethiopia to examine the impact of PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS in Africa) in the county and to understand better the extent to which family planning facilities did or did not encourage abortion practices. After the trip, he participated extensively in discussions and negotiations among House offices and the Foreign Affairs Committee about

family planning restrictions embedded in PEPFAR.

For faculty who strive to encourage service to government, the chance to discuss public service motivation among Hill staffers and to see how people from a variety of academic disciplines have come to utilize their skills is highly valuable. When students seek advice from me about potential careers, I can share details and relate stories about the path other students took toward working on the Hill and what aspiring students should expect in different parts of Congress. The experience also confirms that Hill staffers are a diverse lot, coming from all districts and settings across America. And most are proud of how they sacrificed to land their Hill positions. Indeed, I found it quite inspiring to talk to staffers who put in unpaid weeks or months as interns in order to get that first staff position.

Another side of advising involves knowing a student's skill set and level of motivation, and, based on that, to offer realistic advice about career options. Faculty often must advise students who are not as capable or focused as their peers. On the Hill, the successful staff person demonstrates an impressive set of skills: the ability to process multiple streams of data during a limited period of time, to memorize and recall lots of names and information, to write clearly and efficiently, to anticipate the motivations and reactions of the boss and other staffers, and to work well with others in a range of situations. These are skills we would like all of our students to have and we do judge their potential by how well they have used them in our classrooms and other collegiate settings. But after working with many capable staffers, I have far more confidence about how to advise students on the prospects of becoming a congressional staffer or obtaining similar positions in government service.

## The Value of the Real World

Faculty members at smaller institutions often have a more difficult time "escaping" their campus environment. We have greater time commitments in the classroom and more obligations to university/college service. My university is also typical of close-knit communities: some debates and controversies within the school seem all-important and absorb much of my energy and time. The opportunity to spend time away and to see far more critical issues debated and managed has given me an important perspective about prioritizing my university time.

CFP puts faculty in a real world experience of politics and in an office setting that shares some characteristics of the business world. Like a small to medium sized business, the lawmaker and the congressional office develop long-term goals, a series of shorter-term objectives, and face many days with chaotic schedules and unexpected problems that have to be solved immediately. The ability to meet these goals and objectives, and effectively manage the minutia of any given day, requires an effective and dedicated staff.

In this sense, CFP has similarities to taking a leave of absence from the academy to work in the business or non-profit world. While many faculty members want to remain focused on their scholarship or university endeavors—and many political science fellows do keep some of this focus during their stay—the cliché about getting out of your comfort zone has real meaning for the political scientist on the Hill. On any given day, staffers walk in expecting to do work on this project or that task, but events intervene and they end up focusing on something totally different and unexpected. We are frequently asked to quickly learn as much as possible in order to brief other staff and our representative—quite a contrast from slow, multistage processes

we experience in our university or professional committees and planning groups.

## This Student Walked in the Office

My day of the totally unexpected came when an Augsburg college student from Cloquet, Minnesota (part of the Rep. Oberstar's eighth district), along with his faculty mentor, visited Rep. Oberstar's office in mid-April. He was on the Hill to present research on a biodiesel process at the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR) poster session. As the resident professor, I was asked to take the meeting. The background reading highlighted the student's biodiesel research—a topic quite far from my areas of "expertise." But as the meeting progressed, it became evident that this college student, in the course of a summer study project, has discovered what may be a revolutionary new way to develop biodiesel fuel in an efficient and environmentally friendly method. So, quite unexpectedly, I have now become a student of energy politics and policy. And because the company that further developed this biodiesel process, termed the Mcgyan process, is completing a large demonstration plant in Rep. Oberstar's district, I am now the point person in promoting what may become no small part of America's quest for energy independence.

This encounter, and other, less dramatic experiences in the real world of congressional policy and politics, have reinforced my desire to work more directly on policy and advocacy issues. And when I return to my university, I will have even greater enthusiasm for teaching, service, and research initiatives that impact my students and raise my university's commitment to encouraging students to pursue of life of public service.

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