The LegiSchool Project: Summer Snapshot

The LegiSchool Project was proud to host the winners of the annual essay contest at the Capitol in April for the 17th annual Student Legislative Summit. This year’s topic was the DREAM Act. The highlight of the day for the students was the opportunity to discuss the ideas they wrote about in their essays with a panel of Assembly Members.

Currently we are in the process of planning the newly expanded Real World Civics Summer Internship. In addition to interning for two weeks in the legislative and executive branch respectively, students now get the chance to participate in a one week long exploration of the judicial branch called Court Camp. This new component will bring excellent educational opportunities to the students.

For more information on the LegiSchool Project please visit csus.edu/calst/legischool_project.html

The LegiSchool Project

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Spring is well under way, and that means that we’ve finished the long process of selecting fellows for the 2013-14 Capital Fellowship Programs. This year we received almost 1,400 applications for the four programs, which presents a challenge when we only have 64 slots to fill. But we once again have a capable and committed group of individuals from the Center and our partner institutions to make these hard choices. I appreciate their hard work to maintain the rigor, quality, and opportunity that characterize our programs.

I’m excited about the large number of events and programs with which the Center is involved this year. Coming up on June 5, we are putting on a symposium about citizen engagement at the local level, and its effect on local fiscal conditions. This symposium will bring together local officials, activists, and other stakeholders, and will include new survey research that the Center commissioned from the Institute for Social Research. This event marks the Center’s renewed emphasis on civic engagement issues, and will be followed by a number of related efforts. Watch for them.

In July we will once again be co-hosting the Legislative Staff Management Institute (LSMI) with our partners at the University of Southern California’s Public Policy school. The LSMI is an eight-day program that provides management training to legislative staff from around the country. And in October, we’re especially excited to be putting on the 24th annual Envisioning California conference. This year’s theme will be “Food,” and we’ll bring together a broad range of perspectives on how food relates to California culture and policy.

In addition to our conference programming, we’re working to provide more California Studies content on our website. We’ve already revamped the general layout of the site, and in coming months we will be adding a variety of elements, including videos of presentations, links to other relevant sites, a blog, and eventually some oral history archives. Keep checking back and see how this material is coming along. Thank you for your interest in our work. Your comments, feedback, and suggestions are always welcome.

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Message from the Executive Director

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The effect of term limits on California government and policy making has been the source of much research and discussion since Proposition 140 was passed in 1990. Research on this issue became salient again after the passage last year of Proposition 28, which allows legislators to serve a total of twelve years in a single chamber. On April 11, the Center for California Studies’ first Visiting Scholar, Professor Stacy Gordon Fisher (University of Nevada, Reno), presented findings from her research on how term limits have influenced the role of staff as a target of interest group lobbying. Her presentation was based on interviews and surveys she did with lobbyists and legislative staff while in residence at the Center in 2012.

In her research, Professor Gordon Fisher finds that lobbyists identify staff as the most important lobbying targets, regularly ranking them above committee chairs and legislative leadership. This result is significant since much of the research on lobbying has ignored staff as unique lobbying targets, generally seeing them as simply an extension of the legislators for whom they work. In addition, while increased staff power has been discussed as a logical effect of term limits, most analyses of the relationship between term limits and staff influence have detected a weak relationship at best. Interestingly, while lobbyists consistently rate staff as more important than members of the legislature, staff rank themselves considerably lower than legislators in almost every context.

This conflict between the perceptions of lobbyists and staff raises some important questions that were addressed in the panel discussion. Have term limits increased the power of staff or not? Why are the perceptions of staff and advocates so different and can that difference tell us something about how each group perceives the role of interest groups and staff in the legislative process? If term limits have increased the effective role of staff, what does this mean for democratic accountability in state government? Important insights on each of these issues were provided by discussants Gary Winuk (Fair Political Practices Commission) and Clyde Macdonald (former Assembly chief consultant). The panel discussion was moderated by Ben Adler of Capitol Public Radio. For more information on the Center’s Visiting Scholar program please visit csus.edu/calst/visiting_scholar.html

Former Fellow Profile: Britney Huelbig, JAF 2011-12

During my time as the Judicial Fellow with the Stanislaus Superior Court under the mentorship of Michael Tozzi, the Court Executive Officer, and Rebecca Fleming, the Assistant Executive Officer, I was given an enjoyable and illuminating glimpse into the reality of court administration. Assignments at my placement that required the analysis of data, working both as a team member and as an individual, and connecting big-picture concepts to real-world processes allowed me to learn specifically about the Stanislaus Court as well as the Judicial Branch as a whole while developing various skills. I was privileged to be regularly involved in practical and theoretical discussions about a smattering of topics with my mentors, judicial officers and Court staff at my placement, as well as with the Judicial Fellows class and our professor, Dr. Borys, at our monthly academic seminars.

This experience, while undoubtedly personally rewarding to be able to be entrenched in public service and to be an active member of the Stanislaus Court staff, prepared me to go on to work at the Santa Clara Superior Court following the my time as a fellow. I am a Legal Process Clerk and currently I am assigned to the Court Services Division, Assigned Judges and Court Reporter Unit. I schedule pro tem judges to cover Small Claims and Traffic calendars, and provide support for the Court Reporter Coordinator and Deputy Court Manager in charge of the Assigned Judges Program. I also facilitate communication and provide support for our court reporters, and process paperwork and pay vouchers for our unit. The organizational knowledge and work experience that I gained has proved invaluable, and I still find myself mentally connecting the dots between things such as clerical processes and the approaching new fiscal year. Moving forward in my personal and professional development toward a career in court administration, I will take the fellowship experience and the guidance that my mentors provided me with, and be all the better for it.