



SACRAMENTO SEMESTER PROGRAM

Frequently Asked Questions



How competitive is acceptance to the program? What is the program looking for?

The Sacramento Semester was created primarily to serve students from campuses in the California State University system, so first preference for acceptance goes to them. We hope students have a grade point average of at least 3.0 but that requirement is not hard and fast. Equally as important are a student's interest in and enthusiasm for participating in this program.

Can I take other classes in addition to the program?

It is our hope that students might be able to focus completely on their internship and classes in the Sacramento Semester program, enabling them to become fully immersed and involved in state government and their seminars. If a student must, however, take an additional class, it is possible if approved by the program's Director.

When is the best time to participate in the Sacramento Semester program?

It is ideal if a student can take part in the Sacramento Semester during the last semester of his or her undergraduate program. Since the program operates only in spring, however, that is not always possible. Planning ahead for the program is the most important thing.

How hard is it to find housing in Sacramento? How expensive is it?

First, the dorms on campus are usually full. But there are usually numerous apartments for rent, either close to the campus or close to downtown. We send incoming students information about housing right after Thanksgiving, when they have been accepted for the program. Recently students have availed themselves of helpful on-line sources such as Craigslist [<http://sacramento.craigslist.org/>] or For Rent [www.forrent.com] to find housing. Also in the first packet of information we send you is a list of the incoming students and their contact information for those who might be seeking roommates with whom to share housing.

Rents in Sacramento are probably somewhat less than in southern California or San Francisco, although as everyone knows, housing costs in the Golden State are among the highest in the country. Thus far, in the thirty years of the program, no one has had great difficulty finding housing!

How hard is it to get a scholarship? Will I be notified if I do get one?

The Sacramento Semester has some scholarship funds available from the Center for California Studies and these awards can only go to students who are qualified under FAFSA rules for federal financial aid. The award cannot be more than the student's "unmet need," as that is determined by your financial aid office. Students from campuses other than CSU Sacramento receive first preference for these awards since they must move here to participate in the program. CSUS students are eligible to apply. In addition, students from San Jose State University can apply for the Tom Truax Memorial scholarship that is awarded annually to a SJSU student who participates in the Sacramento Semester. The amount of that award may vary. Finally modest awards can be made from the program's own scholarship fund.

About half the students in the program are receiving some level of scholarship support. You can expect to learn if you will receive a scholarship by about mid-December.

Can graduate students participate?

Although the Sacramento Semester was designed to serve undergraduate students, we occasionally have admitted individuals who already have a baccalaureate degree and who are seeking an opportunity to explore career possibilities in state government. Graduate students are not eligible for scholarship awards.

How does the internship placement process work?

The Sacramento Semester program director keeps a large list of prospective internship sites, including members' offices in the Assembly and the Senate, lobbying organizations, both associations and private lobbying firms, and miscellaneous sites in the executive branch of California government and other sites. Sacramento Semester students must do their internship in a state government site, either in the legislature, the executive branch or with an organization or firm that lobbies the legislature.

We go over the process of interviewing for and selecting your internship site at the program orientation in January when we review this list and provide you with background information and insights about offices and recommendations for being an effective intern. Basically it works like this: you telephone the contact person in offices you are interested in and seek an appointment for an interview. They probably ask you to send your resume and perhaps a cover letter and/or writing sample. You set up interviews (we require at least three) and complete them. The office must then offer you an internship and you must accept. You then get in touch with the other offices you've been in contact with and thank them sincerely for taking the time to talk with you and inform them you have selected another site.

This whole process usually takes two to three weeks or so at the start of the program, but can extend a bit longer if necessary. Program faculty are available for consultation and advice throughout this process.

Am I guaranteed an internship site? How important is previous government internship experience?

No Sacramento Semester student has ever failed to obtain an internship!

Previous experience in a government or government-related internship is not necessary.

You may be amazed to learn that in fact most of the people working in and around the Capitol began their careers as interns. Most of the supervisors/mentors you will be working with will have had experience working with interns. They know that you don't have experience yet and that you need to learn your way around and learn the new tasks of the job. Mostly they are enthusiastic about helping you do that.

What are the expectations for and the general content of the academic seminars?

The academic component of the Sacramento Semester is an integral part of your experience. In addition to the six units of internship credit, you will earn six units of credit for the academic seminars, GOVT 182a and GOVT 182b. The first is a seminar on Thursday evenings on campus from 4:30 to 7:20 p.m. It emphasizes discussions that explore key issues impacting California public policy, including California's history, the legislative process, the role of interest groups, the initiative process and California's budget. There are two exams and two paper assignments of 8 – 10 pages each.

The second section of the seminar is a guest speaker series held at the Capitol from 9 until 11:00 a.m. on Friday mornings. There are approximately ten speakers for the semester and the exact dates depend on their availability. You will be provided with a list of the semester's guest speakers who, in the past, have included elected members of the California Senate and Assembly, chiefs of staff, committee consultants, executive branch department directors and lobbyists.

It should be emphasized that attendance is mandatory at these seminars and students in the program are expected to keep up with their academic assignments. The seminars are especially rich because you are studying state government and politics while you are also working in state government along with twenty-five or so others also having first-hand experience.

What general duties are expected of us as interns?

Interns do a variety of tasks, mostly depending on where they accept the internship. Most of the offices that work with our interns are small. They do not generally have extensive staffs; therefore, all interns will participate in at least some of the routine tasks that are part of any office. These include answering the telephone (telephone skills are in fact an important professional skill), getting and sorting mail, running errands and so on. It is likely that interns will be started off with these kinds of tasks, partly so the office can see that you can execute them effectively and are willing to do what's asked of you, and partly to give you a chance to find your way around this new environment.

In legislative offices a major aspect of their workload is responding to constituent mail. Interns frequently write letters in response to constituents' inquiries, sometimes regarding legislation, sometimes regarding individual problems with a state or other governmental agency. You may also be asked to do research regarding possible legislation; some interns are actually given responsibility to "staff" a bill, which involves working with the bill's sponsors, attending the hearings, and other tasks related to moving the bill through the process.

In a lobbying setting, in addition to the more routine tasks mentioned above, you may also be asked to track legislation of interest to the group or to the lobbyist's clients. You may be charged with reviewing new legislation as it's introduced and determining if it relates to your clients' interests and then tracking it through the process. You will likely write letters of support or opposition on behalf of the lobbyist and the firm's clients and deliver them to Capitol offices. If you are interning for an association that lobbies the legislature, you may become involved in mobilizing the grass roots—the association's membership—in support or opposition regarding proposed legislation. You may work on organizing a "legislative day" where the organization brings its members from around the state to Sacramento to directly lobby their legislators.

While the tasks you are given to do may vary, you should seek to be exposed to the range of activities that take place in the office where you are placed. This is an important issue to take up with the prospective offices when you have your interview.

What are the relative benefits of interning in the Capitol versus with a lobbying organization or in the executive branch?

This is a difficult question to answer! Each internship turns out to be unique, depending not only on the site but on the student intern as well. We think it is helpful to have interviews in a variety of offices and then evaluate for yourself what each office tells you they would have you working on and what you would be doing. Generally speaking, in a legislative office, the intern will get to see the variety of activity that such an office is involved with, including not only legislation but also constituent affairs. In a lobbying office, the focus will primarily be on legislation; the intern may well go back and forth between the office and the Capitol, retrieving documents, delivering letters, attending hearings, accompanying the lobbyist to meetings, etc. Ultimately, you must make the decision which site sounds most appealing to you.

How long should a student expect to search for an internship position?

The process of placing all the Sacramento Semester students in their internships usually takes from two to three weeks. Occasionally a student will need another few days to nail down the site. Most important is getting a good fit; not rushing to take the first thing offered. Offices are interviewing several prospective interns while students are interviewing several offices. Legislative staff are also doing their “regular” work. So it takes some time for all 25 or more students to complete this process.

What kinds of opportunities are available after the Sacramento Semester? How often are interns hired when the program is completed?

Many Sacramento Semester students are in the final semester of their undergraduate programs and some are ready to seek jobs. The answer to the second question is that it is always the case that some students are offered jobs as a result of their internship, either in the office where they are interning, or somewhere else. One can just never tell exactly where that prospective job will be! The Capitol, and the Sacramento political scene generally, is a place where staffers come and go and change places rather frequently. After an election especially there is a good bit of movement. If a student is interested in finding employment after the program, it is a good idea to let your supervisor and other office staff know that you would be interested in finding a job (not on your first day but as the semester progresses!) and to feel them out about their willingness to help you. There is a publication available in the Capitol that lists job opportunities as well.

Some Sacramento Semester students decide to apply for the Assembly, Senate, or Executive Fellow programs, available to individuals who have completed a baccalaureate degree. You can learn more about these programs by visiting the website of the Center for California Studies at CSU Sacramento, www.csus.edu/calst/.

No matter what, it is a good idea to dedicate yourself to doing the best possible job you can in the internship and the program. If you are enthusiastic and willing to work hard, and you do good work and are respectful of everyone, you will begin to build a reputation as someone who is responsible and has integrity. People will be more willing to help you fulfill your aspirations.

If you have additional questions that are not addressed here, feel free to contact the Program's Director, Dr. Maria Sampanis at sampanis@csus.edu