

School Innovations and Advocacy Summer 2008

How much can one discern from a name? All I knew about School Innovations and Advocacy (SI&A) when I started was the little amount of information that I received from the interview that I had with the director of the office, Teri Burns, formally titled Chief Legislative Advocate. SI&A advocates politically on behalf of schools and related organizations from all over the state of California. I am not a political science major, nor was I a follower of the political arena so my understanding of the duties of a political advocate was entirely vague. They identify as a lobbyist firm, which as a term has been demonized thoroughly. My nervousness was heightened by the impression of lobbyists equating to the devil, which in turn would label me guilty by association. Well, I'm sure that moniker is fitting for some of those lobbyists out there, but the folks here at SI&A are just fine.

Personally, I like wearing a tie and slacks. People that walk down the street or those that ride in the elevator with you treat you with more respect. I would expect there to be a noticeable difference in treatment between casual dress and business attire, but there is even a noticeable difference of treatment between wearing a tie and dressing business casual. This is not a lesson learned from inside my office - they are quite laid back - but from my walking in and around the capital and taking in people's reaction. The dress requirements in my office were straight forward: dress up if you are going to a meeting or to the capitol, business casual if not.

I was very lucky to be in an office that was friendly and helpful. There are expectations or assumptions of who an intern is and what an intern is capable of. At each point along the way, every task was prefaced with "if you have any question, let me know" and every question was answered politely, with every completed task followed with warm thanks. I understand that, to a degree, the quality of the work completed had a significant effect on the appreciation of the work accomplished, but I feel that the willingness to take on tasks that are normally part of their job descriptions was genuinely appreciated. As a result, I learned much more than I anticipated going into this internship.

How many offices stock their break rooms/kitchens with snacks and beverages, besides coffee? I personally don't drink soda but, there were cases in the fridge and plenty of bottled water to drink as well. In addition, crackers, Oreo cookies, oatmeal, raisins, and a bunch of other goodies were provided in the kitchen area. Further to this, there were several occasions where cake was served for a birthday or an individual leaving the office. A few other perks included a free parking pass and Fridays off. Not too shabby.

Growing up I have always excelled at math, while being 'proficient' at writing. Since I have gone to college, I have worked diligently to improve that discrepancy which I believe has been rectified to a large extent. This internship at SI&A has been an arena wherein I could test the 'real world' proficiency of my writing skills, of which I have been very pleased. I have gained intimate knowledge and expertise in the many facets of California's educational climate such as the California High School Exit Exam (CASHEE), No Child Left Behind, gifted children and their programs, preschool reform and most recently the 8th grade algebra mandate. During my tenure here I have read countless reports and legislative analyses, on which I have written articles and for which I have written summaries, as well as having given my political opinion. The work that I have produced has been published in SI&A's online newspaper formerly known as CLUE, Comprehensive Legislative Updates on Education, which has recently changed format and title to The Cabinet Report. Sadly, I do not receive credit for this other than as a staff contribution but, nonetheless, my articles are still there. Additionally, I contributed to the newspaper by keeping accurate summaries of bills as they were amended throughout the legislative process, which were also published in the weekly edition.

At the beginning of this experience I made one of my goals an increase in my confidence level as it pertains to the professional arena. My writing skills are a part of this, but mainly it pertains to public speaking and competent articulation. I, like most people, fear public speaking, not because I consider myself an idiot but because I fear making a fool of myself. My first task of this nature was speaking in front of the Assembly Appropriations Committee. I didn't have much of a speaking role, just what people in the biz refer to as a "me too". Proper procedure is name, organization, and

position, nothing more nothing less, but my palms were still sweating. The next day in the weekly office meeting I was congratulated for my performance to which Teri made the joke “and he didn’t stutter”, which is quite ironic since that is what usually happens when I get nervous. Since then I have spoken to different committees while representing multiple organizations simultaneously and it has gone off without a hitch. I cannot say that I’m no longer nervous whatsoever, but I don’t fear it like I used to. Further on the topic of public speaking, I have had to call various offices to gather information and to my surprise people have answered me like they owe me an answer instead of retorting with accusations pertaining to the purpose of my call. Attaching an organization to the introduction of oneself is a very powerful tool that I have found will open many doors of communication.

I have also experienced a few personal mishaps that have been unique to my experience. First, I sprained my ankle pretty badly the second week on the job. Seven weeks later and I still have a little bit of a limp; the frequent task of delivering letters to six different floors at the Capitol hasn’t been very fun. And I had my first experience of being trapped in an elevator: two hours of leg tingling fun. I am lucky not to be claustrophobic. These two events fortunately haven’t put a damper on my time at SI&A; they are things to laugh at which offer talking points for moments by the water cooler.

Before this experience, I like many Californians believed that most politicians were corrupt and that all of our problems stem from that truth. After this internship, and my insider privilege, I have a greater appreciation for what politicians, advocates, and others do. Sure there is incompetence at every corner, but that is largely subject to opinions of political philosophy and corruption isn’t as rampant as the media would have you believe. From the knowledge gained here and the knowledge gained from the classes at UC Center Sacramento I have a better understanding of the limitations of our current political structure and the laws that have handicapped California’s efficiency and therefore its prosperity. I already had an interest in public service as well as education before this experience, which is why I applied. Finding out that problems are more complex than I originally thought hasn’t scared me off that course either. In actuality, this experience has helped me hone exactly what I want to pursue in my professional career. Knowing how difficult it is to accomplish anything in the legislature has given me a greater respect for politicians and a firmer stance on the need for reform.

The knowledge and experience that I have gained while participating in this internship are things that will stay with me forever. And it bolsters my resume too, which doesn’t hurt. Intimidation can set in for most people when they are trying something new for the first time, and I was no exception. However, as time went on and as the tasks that I performed were successful, my confidence rose. I was fortunate to have been able to intern at a location that has had UC Scholar interns before, which I believe helped in their process of acclimating me to the duties and responsibilities of my position. All of those things are highlighted by the fact that the office of School Innovations and Advocacy is a great learning environment. This fact has much to do with the people who work there, their willingness to teach and their knowledge that they were willing to share. I was given opportunities to do independent work as well as the occasional remedial task and I am most grateful that I was pushed to do things that I wouldn’t have pursued on my own. The new resources that I have gained that will help me pursue my own future endeavors are invaluable and I couldn’t imagine many other experiences providing as much. I would highly recommend SI&A to any other intern who had a passion for education, whether it be in or outside the political arena.