

**Office of Senator Tom Torlakson
Winter Quarter 2009
UCCS Internship Final Report**

I joined the UC Center Sacramento to explore the political realm of public relations; more specifically how the media operates within politics and then circulates the information to the public. The first time I walked into the big beautiful capitol building was the day of my interview with Erin Gabel in Assembly Member Tom Torlakson's office. I found the room and was welcomed by three smiling faces - at that moment I knew this office would facilitate a fantastic experience. The internship started off with an office move and two new employees as the session had just begun. My tasks entailed unloading boxes at the start but my responsibilities grew as the weeks progressed and my supervisors got to know me better. The timing couldn't have been better because I not only learned the ropes of the office, but I helped set them up. I got to take part in the preliminary steps of the bill process. I wrote a lot of factsheets, support letters, co-author letters, compiled bill packets, and creating excel documents to make organizations and people easily accessible. I think this time period was especially beneficial as an intern because not being the only one learning their way around made the transition much easier.

On the topic of time, I feel very fortunate to have been interning at the Capitol when I did. I got to see one of the most controversial budgets worked out and the repercussions therein. This was both interesting and hard because one of my primary roles in the office was to handle constituent letters. It wasn't easy writing letters regarding the budget and these hard fiscal times to struggling constituents; mostly because I didn't have anything uplifting to say. This did, however, provide me with a bigger picture of how the work we do has major effects throughout the state.

Throughout this experience, I've gained many skills that are simply expected of people when entering the work force. I learned how to fax, write briefs, perform mail merges, utilize search engines and set alerts, research effectively, and communicate via phone and email professionally. My internship allowed me to do a little bit of everything as I worked under the Legislative Director, the Press Secretary, and the Scheduler. They kept me busy doing various tasks around the office. However, like any internship, being proactive and asking for desired tasks was helpful.

My favorite aspect of my internship was getting to see how the press and the legislatures communicate and operate together. I was fortunate enough to attend press conferences, topic forums, issue briefings, the State of Education, and a few Assembly sessions. It was interesting to see the events occur and then how the press presented the information to the population. One of my daily jobs, on this note, was to track Tom Torlakson in the news and any other main issue that is affecting our district or the political arena as a whole. This allowed me to tune into the state as a whole and understand the bigger picture of what happens within the Capitol building. On a happier note, I was also working within the Capitol when we elected our first African American president. Within the office, we all watched Barack Obama's inaugural speech together while cheering and enjoying a nice breakfast. Hearing Obama's speech was inspiring; it made me proud of what I was doing and, more importantly, to be an American.

The past ten weeks have really given me a good picture of what life is like working in the capitol. Although I have enjoyed the experience of working in public service, I did have a hard time spending all day in a windowless office. I am used to being very active during the day and I enjoy seeing the sky. However, there are a lot of benefits of working for the legislature. I was more “in the know” about what is going on around Sacramento and California as a whole. I felt more involved in the community and became more explorative around the city. Also, the office constantly gets invites to events and fund raisers for people working around the capital. There is a wonderful sense of community and I think overall, people truly enjoy working there.

As Assembly Member Tom Torlakson is running for Superintendent of Public Instruction, education was definitely an undercurrent of everything I did throughout my internship. I was fortunate to attend a Prop 98 briefing, the State of Education, a briefing on the stimulus package’s impact on California’s education system, and I did more research than could fit on this page. One of the most interesting and bigger research projects was putting together a state-by-state comparison regarding educational spending, more specifically per pupil spending and test scores. The final project was a large table with all the states’ per pupil spending, rankings for math and reading test scores, and class sizes. It is somewhat overwhelming to see the large amount of spending that goes towards education and knowing that it still isn’t enough to support every pupil. Learning about the state’s education demands went far beyond my expectations. Along with learning about classroom needs and making sure every student meets the standard A-G requirements, I also learned about Career Technical Education. I represented our staff at multiple CTE legislative briefings; three 5 hour events in fact. Although I learned a lot about issues I was unaware of, I felt attacked at times as a college student. I cherish my college education and respect that track that got me where I am – this is a different mentality than many people on the “Professional Panel” had. Regardless, I enjoyed listening to these panelist explain their needs and desires from the entering work force. Statistics are showing an increased demand in skilled workers rather than college graduates. This was especially interesting for me as I come from a place where everyone goes to college and other options weren’t discussed. This experience is a prime example of how this internship has raised my awareness on topics I was previously unaware of. My eyes have been opened to the complexities of public administration.

Another exciting but challenging topic which was significant to my internship was Foster Care. Our Press Secretary has been planning a forum on Foster Care and I got to help. I attended multiple briefings, a press conference, and met with various groups on the subject. I’m glad I got to learn about the subject from multiple vantage points and on a deeper level. However, it is a hard topic to learn about as it is full of struggle and hardship. The forum is actually a result of multiple tragic cases from Contra Costa County – kids falling through the cracks of foster care due to lack of communication and support. Despite the topic’s inherent challenges, I learned a lot while seeing the planning process. I got to take part in the planning process; the coolest piece for me was seeing how one of our bills was translated into a press release, which was then used to draw attention to the forum. The whole process has taught me skills I think will be beneficial for the future.

A great benefit of working in the Capitol is that you meet lots of interesting people on a daily basis. Intelligent people come into the office and want to talk with you about a topic of their interest. Whether or not our office is interested in pursuing this issue, it is still valuable to learn about the topic. Another advantage of this is networking. I was able to get to know professional people from multiple different fields, all working around the capitol. I actually was lucky enough to set up an interview with a Public Relations firm. Although I didn't get the job, due to immediate needs, it was great practicing my interview skills and getting used to that type of situation. Furthermore, it has been beneficial to hear how people got to where they are today; every story confirms that there is no one plan to reach your career goals.

As a whole, this internship has been a life changing experience for me. I got the opportunity to spend 11 weeks working in Assembly Member Tom Torlakson's office. I would recommend this office to anyone looking for an internship. The staff was very nurturing – often taking the time to fully explain what they wanted from me and the legislative process as a whole. This experience has taught me a lot about myself and truly exceeded all of my expectations. In the end, I don't see myself working to pass legislation because that isn't where my interests lie. Conversely, after working with Shannan, Tom's Press Secretary, I could see myself working within that field. I enjoyed working with the press and creating reliable news. Taken as a whole, this internship made me both more and less excited about working within politics. In any case, I believe the experiences, knowledge, and skills attained throughout this quarter are invaluable for they will help me wherever I end up.