Washington DC Internships

An interview with Tom Schinckel

Every summer, students from Flinders travel to Washington, D.C. for two months to work in offices of members of the United States Congress. Tom Schinckel was one of this year’s interns, and he was kind enough to talk to The Jurist about his time in the US.

So – is it good to be back home?
Well, it’s always good to be back in Adelaide, but I really miss DC and the friends I made while I was over there.

Tell us a little bit about the Washington Internship Program.
We intern in the office of a member of the House of Representatives or a US Senator. As well as working in the office on a variety of things, we also begin producing a research paper which is our assessment for the program.

Where did you guys work, and what was the work like?
I worked for Lynn Westmoreland, a Republican member of the House of Representatives from Georgia. Two of the other Flinders interns were in Republican House Offices as well, two were with House Democrats, and the remaining two worked for a Democratic Senator.

The member basically has complete control over who he or she hires and how the office is run, and obviously members from different states and parties have different legislative priorities, which mean we all had different experiences. A House of Representatives office generally has about 8 to 12 staffers, plus up to four interns. In my office, we had 8 staffers and a full complement of interns.

An intern’s main job is to help out with the grunt work in the office – opening mail, answering phones, greeting visitors, and running errands. If you’re unlucky, you get stuck doing this stuff all day, every day. But thankfully we pretty much all got to ditch the letter-openers at one point or another and do some research, draft some letters and other interesting things.

So how did our little decidedly non-sandstone University end up in that prestigious position?
We have the (awesome) head of the American Studies Department, Don de Bats, to thank for coming up with the program 11 years ago. They sent 3 interns in 2000 – this year there were 7 of us working on the Hill!

So – in summary, lots of work, no pay. Any perks to the intern gig?
Of course! First, of course, is your ID badge – which gives you unhindered 7-day access to the Capitol Complex, an easier ride through the security checkpoints to get into the Capitol, and best of all, access to the ‘Members and Staff’ line at the cafeteria. There are very few parts of the Capitol which are offlimits to you, mainly the actual chambers of the House and Senate. It’s pretty cool to wander around on the weekends, going through all the ‘Authorized Personnel Only’ doors to the envy of the tourists.

The other perk is that many of the sites in DC – the White House, the Pentagon and others – require you to book tours through a Congressional Office. This makes it tricky for foreigners to get, but a piece of cake for us. So we saw the (limited) parts of the White House and Pentagon tourist can see. But while the Pentagon and White House tours are open to the (US) public, the Dome Tour, where you climb up to the top of the Capitol Building and get an amazing view of Washington DC, isn’t. Until this year, you used to actually have a Congressman or Senator with you – considering the fact that often members of Congress will find themselves quadruple booked, this can be a bit tricky! Now you need only take a senior staffer with you, which makes things a lot easier, and in the end all of the Flinders guys got to do the Dome Tour.

Companies, associations and organizations are always dead keen to get Members of Congress and staffers and hassle them about their interests, so every night there’s at least one reception going on around the place. Free food and drink, but you run the risk of having a lobbyist talk to you about fertilizer for an hour.

And finally – Georgia is the home of Coca-Cola, so we got free Cokes (and all the other delicious drinks...
Coke makes! Very useful when negotiating dishwashing duties and bartering with other offices!

What was the highlight of the trip?
Giving a speech on behalf of the Flinders Interns at the Australian Embassy in front of the Ambassador, Kim Beazley, was definitely an honor. None of the previous intern groups had managed to get a Member of Congress to the Internship Program Reception at the Embassy – we managed to get two!

The guys in my office hooked me up with some really cool stuff, including shooting a silenced MP5 (Second Amendment, baby!) and going to Lockheed Martin’s headquarters and flying their F-22 and F-35 simulators (just call me the Iceman).

But the highlight of the trip was on my very last day in the US. I was in the House for the very last time, turning in my ID badge and saying my goodbyes, when, while walking through the parking garage, I ran into Allen West – a freshman congressman from Florida, one of the heroes of the Tea Party and one of the first black Republican Congressmen in a long time. I figured it was my last day, and with his current popularity he might be President someday, so I explained who I was and asked for a photo with him. His response: ‘Sure – as long as we can do the Aussie Aussie Aussie thing.’ So we shared a boisterous Aussie chant in the basement of the Rayburn House Office Building.

Cool – so, say I want to get on this intern guff – how do I do it?
You need to be an American Studies major to apply. You can do this in Arts or International Studies, but not in Law on its own. You need to take some prerequisite topics about American Politics as well. You obviously need good grades and to be mature enough to handle the job. The program is highly regarded by the Australian Embassy for the goodwill that it fosters with Congress, so they don’t want to send people who aren’t up to scratch.

But definitely give it a shot – it was the best time of my life!