

Workforce Development Council Final Report

Proposal #29677

Doc #284008

Award accepted 04/20/21;

Doc ID #284721;

Award ID #013605

*University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Political Interns
Summer Executive Internship Program*

September 15, 2021

Overview

With the generous financial support of the State of Hawai‘i Workforce Development Council (WDC), the UH Mānoa Political Internship program was able to offer full-time government internships, with scholarships, to eight UH Mānoa students. The students worked approximately 40 hours per week during the summer session, from May 24 to August 13. Each student was awarded a scholarship to cover 9 credits of summer tuition for the program’s required coursework.

The Mānoa Political Internship program typically cannot grant internship scholarships to graduate students due to funding constraints, but graduate students were able to participate in these summer internships given that funding was provided by the WDC. Internships are regularly offered during the fall and spring semesters of the academic year, which made the summer internships a unique opportunity.

Internships are valuable experiences for students, both academically and professionally. Through internships, students are able to apply what they have learned in their coursework, as well as develop practical skills that make them more qualified candidates for future jobs. Students who participate in internships while in college are more prepared to enter the workforce upon graduating. Internships also give students the opportunity to test the waters and see whether a certain career field is a good fit for them, which can help inform their next steps.

The Summer 2021 Mānoa Political Interns have documented their professional growth in numerous forms. Their weekly journal entries, final papers, and post-internship debriefing statements all serve as evidence of their professional development over the course of their internships.

Post-Internship Debriefing

The post-internship debriefing meeting was held on August 17, 2021. The goal of the debriefing was to hear the students' perspectives in order to understand how the internships benefitted them academically and professionally. Allicyn Tasaka, the WDC Executive Director, was in attendance. The students were asked to reflect on (1) something unexpected they learned during their internship, (2) what was most enjoyable about the work, (3) how the internship affected their professional development, and (4) how the internship affected their future academic/career goals.

Debriefing General Themes

- During the debriefing, many students discussed the benefits of networking and making professional connections as interns.
- All of the students talked about how their internship experiences supplemented their academic pursuits, and often exposed them to things they would not have learned in their coursework.
- Several of the students decided to go to law school based on their internship experiences. All of the students re-evaluated their future career goals and considered the influence of their internships on their future paths.
- For some of the students, their internship was also their first experience working in a professional office setting. For most of the students, this was their first experience working in a high-level political/government office. All of the students were challenged to develop new skills that will be applicable to their future career endeavors and make them more competitive candidates, regardless of the career fields they decide to enter.

Debriefing Individual Student Reflections

- College of Social Sciences student placed in the Governor's Office: This student emphasized that she felt her work as an intern was very meaningful, and she enjoyed being in public service. Reflecting on her professional growth, she noted that she had developed new skills as an intern, including conducting meetings, asking insightful questions, organizing and planning, and communicating with constituents. As a result of the internship, she decided to pursue law school and is currently studying for the LSAT.

- Public Health and Social Work student placed in the Lieutenant Governor's Office: This student had a unique opportunity to work in an influential office, doing substantive work during a global public health crisis. She noted that she felt welcomed in the Lieutenant Governor's Office and had a very enjoyable experience.
- School of Architecture student placed in the Prosecutor's Office: For this student, working in a professional environment/office setting was valuable because it was a completely new experience. She enjoyed gaining insight into highly publicized cases and getting a unique perspective on the prosecutorial process.
- Graduate Social Science student placed in the Prosecutor's Office: This student really took advantage of her internship as an opportunity to decide on her next career steps. Ultimately, the internship solidified her decision to pursue law school. Going into the internship, she was more interested in becoming a public defender, but now feels that she can do more meaningful work as a prosecutor. She was able to seek career advice from Honolulu Prosecutor Steve Alm.
- Literature and Humanities student placed in the Public Defender's Office: This student went into the internship with an open mind, and decided to pursue law school as a result of the positive experience he had and the substantive work he was assigned.
- Undergraduate Social Science student placed in the Public Defender's Office: This student saw a lot of value in being able to work directly with lawyers and other legal professionals. After being able to assist in their work and gain insight into the legal process, this student is planning to pursue law school.
- Graduate Pacific and Asian Studies student placed in the Office of Senator Karl Rhoads: This student had opportunities to take on advanced work responsibilities, including leading a town hall meeting when Senator Rhoads was unavailable. He refined his professional skills through responding to and doing research on behalf of constituents. He even developed an interest in becoming a state legislator in the future.
- Graduate Social Sciences student placed in the Office of Senator Dela Cruz: This student admittedly learned a lot about the Senate Committee on Ways and Means and funding for Capital Improvement Projects that she would not have been exposed to in her coursework. She expressed interest in working in a similar office full-time after graduating. She also recently accepted a new position with a UH telehealth program.

Weekly Journal Entries

The weekly journal provides a window into the intern's experience from week to week. The observations are often items the intern would not have seen in any other role, either as a student, or as a regular employee. One goal of the journal is to learn what students were doing as their "regular" assignments. It also brings the intern to focus on problem solving—each journal should tell us about some problem the student faced and resolved—or failed to resolve! These journal excerpts are presented without attribution, in no particular order.

Notable Tasks/Projects

- Assisted the Director of Communications in creating a diagram of the transmission of the original COVID-19 strain and the Delta variant.
- Assembled district court reference binders for the incoming attorneys.
- Participated in a bill brainstorming session for the upcoming legislative session.
- Researched and developed a "...portfolio of the construction of the Mililani AgTech Park, which has been an ongoing project for the past decade."
- Assisted an attorney with jury selection for an upcoming trial.
- Conducted legal research—typically a task for law students.
- Redacted information from medical reports, reviewed BWC footage, and prepared witness lists and discovery for trial.
- Fielded COVID-19 related calls from constituents and directed them to the appropriate information/resources.

Reflections

- One student reflected on her professional development, writing: "Since I have emphasized building professional relationships, I feel that my teamwork skills and ability to work with others has been greatly enhanced during my time working as an intern..."
- One student noted that his perspective on career opportunities had changed as a result of the internship; he explained he would rather be "...working to uphold people's rights and assist them in their time of struggle, rather than working to generate money for a company."

- After being assigned a more advanced legal research task, a student reflected how great it felt “...to know that the attorneys are giving me opportunities and trust me enough to do important work.”
- A student who attended a neighborhood board meeting noted that “...this meeting was a great way to not only be intimately involved but also understand the pressures that comes with being an authoritative representative.”
- One student summed up the challenges and benefits of being a full-time intern: “I couldn’t have asked for a more rewarding experience this summer. It was difficult to work 40+ hours plus have class and a regular job, but I realize now that it was excellent preparation for law school...”

Final Paper Insights

The students' final papers are a culmination of their professional experiences and academic interests. Based on the offices to which they were assigned and the tasks they completed as interns, the students demonstrated their professional and academic growth by critically analyzing relevant public policy/legislative topics that spoke to their career interests.

Graduate Social Sciences student

- This student reflected on how Hawai'i's criminal justice system could better handle cases of domestic violence, after being assigned to the Domestic Violence Unit in the Prosecutor's Office.
- Being able to attend jury trials informed her paper arguments by helping her to identify areas for potential improvement. She wrote: "I have located several areas in need of changes, which include police procedural and behavioral training, jurisdictional issues for custodial interference cases, and an overhaul of community outreach."
- While working at the Public Defender's Office, she saw firsthand how homeless individuals are often penalized by the criminal justice system, becoming repeat offenders of nonviolent offenses. She wrote: "The criminalization of homelessness continually perpetuates people's time on the streets and the cycle in and out of jail."

Graduate Pacific and Asian Studies student

- This student's final paper demonstrated an understanding of how bills are created and passed by the Hawai'i State Legislature. The student also reflected on the differences between proactive and reactionary legislation.
- He wrote: "In Hawaii, the state legislators on both the House and Senate are actively listening to the concerns and inquiries of their constituents and the general public at large on potential issues that they can tackle immediately and other issues that will become relevant in the near and distant future."

Graduate Social Sciences student

- This student’s final paper focused on the funding process for Capital Improvement Projects, which she worked on as an intern for the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means.
- Her paper explained how local legislators work with community stakeholders on project funding and development, as well as the challenges and difficulties that can occur.
- She wrote: “The continued investment of federal funds and federal grants to Capital Improvement Projects across the State of Hawaii is imperative to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy a heightened quality of life in their home state of Hawaii.”

Undergraduate student, School of Architecture

- This student chose to write her paper about the need for safety training for prosecutors and interns, after spending her summer at the Prosecutor’s Office. Her paper showed an understanding of why the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA) matters for workers, especially in the current political climate.
- She wrote: “The discussions around safety measures both inside and out of the workplace should continue to be an open conversation, especially for government employees.”

Undergraduate Social Sciences student

- This student’s paper explained the significance of having an eviction moratorium in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the work of various community organizations provided support for renters. She observed that many Hawai’i renters facing eviction work in industries that suffered during the pandemic, specifically retail and hospitality.
- She wrote: “The most common jobs in Hawaii are those in the restaurant and hospitality industry... The impact that COVID-19 had on the workforce in Hawaii shed light on the fact that the state needs higher quality jobs.”

Conclusion

These summer internships in executive offices in the State of Hawai‘i provided unique opportunities for students in the last stages of their formal coursework to identify critical and rewarding jobs in the operation of our democratic government. In some cases, students who had speculated about attending law school have now found genuine attraction to jobs in prosecution or public defense. Students who had a general interest in learning about government operations came to think of career paths that might lead to a meaningful legislative career. Students who had in the past touched policy issues only from reference works learned to interact with the communities affected by particular policies, and have developed empathy. This has been particularly valuable for graduate students—for whom the university does not have any other scholarship internship opportunities.

We believe, given the student outcomes, that this internship created most successful engagement of our students with government operations, and brought their policy interests to bear on problems of delivery. We would be pleased to run this program again next summer.