

**Article: “The 2005-2006 Congressional Fellows: The Three Roles of the CFP Fellow”**

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# The 2005–2006 Congressional Fellows: The Three Roles of the CFP Fellow

Stephen J. Ceccoli, *APSA Congressional Fellow*

On November 7, 2005, APSA Executive Director Michael Brintnall welcomed the 2005–2006 class of APSA Congressional Fellowship Program (CFP) Fellows. In his opening remarks to 31 Fellows, Brintnall articulated three primary roles of the APSA congressional Fellows. First, he noted that following the five-week intensive orientation, APSA Fellows would become full-time Capitol Hill staff members. In this capacity Fellows are typically expected to demonstrate loyalty and dedication to advancing the issues of importance of the Senator or Representative in whose office they serve. The second role involves joining the distinguished fraternity of approximately 2,000 others in the program's history. This role requires current Fellows to recognize the program's rich and storied history and to take steps to advance the interests of the program. Third, APSA fellows are to be active learners. The CFP is an experiential fellowship, based on the participant-observer model. Now that the midpoint of the fellowship year is approaching, it seems appropriate to use the remainder of this essay to briefly reflect on these three roles. In doing so, I am reminded of the ancient Chinese proverb—"I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand." Undoubtedly, the CFP provides a firsthand opportunity to learn about the first branch of government by doing.

## CFP Fellow as Full-time Staff Member

During the conclusion of the orientation session, and with the assistance of Program Director Jeff Biggs and Program Assistant Veronica Jones, Fellows set up individual interviews with a variety of House and Senate offices. One true advantage of this independent approach to finding placement on the Hill is that the Fellow can essentially choose the member with which they'd like to work. By no means is this a simple decision; one needs

to choose between a competing combination of factors, including whether to work in the House or Senate, majority or minority, personal or committee staff, and geographic familiarity. The interview process is an important learning experience in itself and an opportunity to witness how different offices operate. Some Fellows in the current class gained a very broad overview of the inner workings of Congress by interviewing in nearly 20 offices.

Once a Fellow accepts a position, he or she becomes a full-time staff member and the typical 9–6 workday begins. Most days on the Hill are anything but typical, though. Since most offices are familiar with CFP Fellows, there is a level of high expectation about what role the fellow will play within the office. Other than perhaps a brief session with the office manager and the computer systems administrator and a quick conversation with the Member, the Fellow is immediately thrust into the operation of the office. One first impression involves the size of the staff, with House staffs ranging from 6–10 while Senate offices may consist of 25–75 staffers. The relative youth of the staff is also apparent (even as a 30-something assistant professor, it was somewhat humbling to begin the fellowship as one of the elder statesmen of the office). However, while relatively young in the aggregate, the typical staff member is also extremely bright, exceptionally hard-working, and deeply engaged in what they do for a living. Many Fellows are impressed with the staff's level of substantive and procedural knowledge, the passion that underscores their engagement, and the depth of their personal commitment to the elected Member. As Jeff Biggs pointed out during orientation, "People on the Hill breathe a different sort of oxygen than most political scientists do." This certainly rings true; even with an advanced degree in political science, most CFP Fellows quickly discover that there is still much to learn about the policy process.

As is probably true of most Fellows (though less so in the House), each Fellow will likely work closely with at least one press officer or legislative assistant (or L.A.) who handles the Fellow's particular issue area of interest. (Occasionally,

Fellows work with a staffer about to go on maternity leave and then assume the primary responsibilities of the staffer until they return from leave.) Working with a press officer or an L.A. can be a great learning experience in itself, since they typically possess vast amounts of policy expertise and institutional memory. Coming from a political science department, one could easily substitute typical departmental discussions about the presidency or international relations with conversations about tax, defense, budget, and welfare policies with the staffers in a Hill office.

On a daily basis, the Fellow's time as staff member is divided in several ways. Since there are so many issues of interest to the office, conducting background research is essential. Spending time to simply read, study, and learn about the issues is an important way to get started. Fellows are also frequently engaged in writing memos to either the Member or the senior staff. Though there are many types, such memos typically include preparation for upcoming hearings or policy information regarding future or existing bills that the Member may have an interest in supporting. Third, the relatively frequent meetings with constituents and constituent groups can be a highly educational experience. The arrival of spring brings "March Madness," in which large numbers of constituents who may be in town as part of a conference trek to the Hill to advance their individual causes. Some of these meetings will include the Member (referred to as a "Say Hello"), but most include the L.A. who handles the issue. In addition to constituent meetings, other meetings may involve the committee staff, the caucus staff, lobbyists, or the legislative staff within the office. Such meetings provide an opportunity to exchange substantive information and, in the cases of office and caucus meetings, procedural strategy. Finally, the typical Fellow also spends considerable time attending various briefings on and off the Hill. There are a surprisingly large number of such opportunities, which in some ways resemble brown bag lunches on campus, and these talks greatly add to the intellectual atmosphere of the fellowship.

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## **CFP Fellow as CFP Fellow**

From the beginning, it is a pleasure to get to know the other Fellows in your class. Each class spends the first six weeks together during orientation. This year's class includes five political scientists, four journalists, five foreign affairs Fellows (from the State Department), four federal executive Fellows (representing the NRC, CIA, and SSA), four senior Fulbright scholars (from Chile, China, Jordan, and Morocco), seven Robert Wood Johnson Fellows, and two German Marshall Fund scholars. Once the assignments start, Fellows typically meet for an informal, weekly lunch in one of the House or Senate cafeterias. In addition, the Friday afternoon Wilson Seminar Series affords an opportunity to meet and hear the insights of Hill professionals, many of whom are former CFP Fellows. For instance, hearing House Parliamentarian John Sullivan speak to the group from the House floor and later hearing from the directors of the various House Press Galleries were quite illuminating in learning about the operation of the institution. Speaking of former Fellows (whom Jeff Biggs has previously described as "the bedrock of the program"), they play a tremendous role not only in establishing the legacy of the program, but also in shaping its future. Using an unofficial count, a few dozen former Fellows spoke during orientation and several more are slated to appear during upcoming Wilson seminars. Overall, the roster of former Fellows is quite distinguished and it is not uncommon to encounter them as newsmakers on the Hill and throughout Washington.

Being a Fellow also entails getting to know some of the APSA staff and becoming familiar with the resources at the New Hampshire Avenue office. As readers of this journal are well aware, Jeff Biggs, a 1984–1985 Fellow, is the director of the fellowship. However, Jeff is much more than the director. As one former Fellow once conveyed in her year-end review of the fellowship, "Jeff Biggs is the Congressional Fellowship Program!" While Jeff is far too modest to acknowledge this characterization and is quick to give due credit to the roughly 2,000 former Fellows for their contributions to the program, in his unique way he breathes an indelible heart and soul into the program on a daily basis. As any Fellow—past or present—would attest, the program would not be where it is today without Jeff's numerous and invaluable contributions. Jeff is ably assisted by Program Assistant Veronica Jones who helps coordinate the logistics of the program and should someday probably be designated as an honorary Fellow. In sum, this second role of being a CFP Fellow entails membership in a larger group enterprise where 30 other current and nearly 2,000 former Fellows continue to advance the program. Also, each is uniquely bound by their respect for the significance of the APSA coffee mug.

## **CFP Fellow as Active Learner**

Finally, it's not hard to be an active learner when you live in Washington and spend most of your day working in a House or Senate office building. Washington offers unlimited cultural, educational,

and leisure activities and has plenty of think tanks and universities to feed the appetite of the active learner. In addition to these daily opportunities, about a dozen of this year's Fellows attended the president's State of the Union address and many more have received VIP tours of the White House, Pentagon, CIA, and other places of power around town. Yet, the CFP also affords Fellows the unique opportunity to learn beyond the confines of Washington. For instance, the current class of Fellows is now preparing to host a dozen Canadian parliamentary interns who will spend a week in Washington later this spring. The Canadian visitors will experience an intensive week that will include seminars on a variety of facets of American politics and tours of various government agencies. In exchange, our Canadian counterparts will host a group of CFP Fellows in Ottawa during the summer and offer a similar program of activities. In addition to the Ottawa visit, this year's CFP class will also participate in individual district trips with their Members. Such trips usually involve the Fellow planning and working with the staff to carry out an event back in their member's home. Some members' offices combine the Fellow's district visit with the annual staff retreat. In either case, the district visit provides a unique opportunity to shadow the member in a context outside of Washington (and would surely make Richard Fenno proud). Throughout all three roles, CFP fellows are learning by doing, and enjoying the experience immensely.