

Substantive International-Oriented Internships in Washington, DC:
Civic Engagement at the Highest Levels of International Relations

by

Eugene D. Schmiel
Director for Academic Programs

Washington Internship Institute
<http://www.wiidc.org>

Substantive International-Oriented Internships in Washington, DC: Civic Engagement at the Highest Levels of International Relations

by

Eugene D. Schmiel

Director for Academic Programs, Washington Internship Institute (WII)

Abstract and Introduction

Traditional experiential/active learning programs, such as case studies, simulations, debates, study abroad, etc., are a major component of Political Science curricula. Active Learning programs have proven successful in teaching students about the complexities of civic engagement and politics, both domestic and international, and preparing them for a lifetime of civic engagement as professionals. However, the international elements of these curricula tend to be spotty because the range of international matters in the campus area are usually limited. On the other hand, a carefully-planned and supervised internship in Washington, DC gives students both a practical understanding of international relations and concrete experience in civic engagement in the world's most powerful and the nation's most international city. International internships on the same basis can also be very beneficial if they contain experiential, professional elements.

The Washington Internship Institute (WII), through its unique "Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars" program, ensures that students have substantive internships, e.g. at foreign embassies, the State Department, or international organizations such as Amnesty International where they have significant responsibilities. As a result, they not only observe the functioning of civil and international society, they are engaged in it and act as agents of change and improvement of society and/or public policy. This in turn helps their transition from "campus to career" as professionals. The interns are directly engaged in civic activities, are far more aware and knowledgeable, and thus become better-informed citizens.

Examples of the kind of the in-depth involvement include:

- An intern at the State Department's Western Hemisphere bureau was part of the presidential delegation to the APEC conference in Santiago, Chile;
- Students at several embassies, where they were the only resident speakers of American English, screened, edited, and finalized all public documents.

As part of the program, students also take a class focused on foreign policy, during which they meet policymakers at all levels for in-depth briefings and discussions. The class visits foreign policy agencies and international organizations, including the World Bank/IMF, Department of State, and the National Security Council, for in-depth, off-the-record briefings by senior officials. This experience provides opportunities to "personalize" public policy, learn how policy is made and implemented, question those in power, and potentially have an impact on policy.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the students are given careful guidance from the time they apply until they complete the program. Senior staff advise them on placement choices, and in a weekly experiential learning class they learn the skills of the professional, which they apply the remainder of the week. Senior staff also keep in touch with site supervisors, visit the interns on-site, and in every way ensure that the experience is a worthwhile one.

In sum, a carefully-planned and supervised internship experience in Washington or elsewhere is a *sine qua non* for civic engagement at the highest levels of the international public policy process.

Students can earn up to a full semester of academic credit from their home college or university. Many students who have participated are now doing graduate work at Washington's premier schools such as SAIS and Georgetown; several have passed the Foreign Service examination, two have entered the foreign service; and others are engaged in development, NGO, or international business employment. **End of Abstract and Introduction.**

Civic Engagement in International Relations

University students who desire to succeed as leaders in the age of globalization will need to be prepared for significant international challenges. This is especially true for those majoring in fields with an international focus, where linking the theory and practice of politics, international relations, and international business requires both knowledge about and experience with other cultures, peoples, languages, and societies. Further, in an era of globalization, when sharp distinctions between "foreign" and "domestic" are no longer applicable, future leaders must understand the growing inter-connections of their own and other cultures.

Institutions of higher learning meet this challenge of preparing students for civic engagement in part through experiential/active learning programs, e.g. case studies, simulations, debates, etc., as well as study abroad, in their curricula. These methods have proven eminently successful in bringing home to students the complexities of international politics and diplomacy as well as the importance of language usage, cross-cultural communication, and the motivations of differing nations and peoples. All of these provide a solid foundation for professional success.

This paper will focus on the civic engagement-oriented objectives of international-oriented programs, and then how they are met and augmented by the Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars program. There follows a broader description of the program and administrative details.

Objectives

The **core objectives of civic engagement in an international context are:**

- **1) to immerse the student in a "foreign culture"** to the maximum extent possible
- **2) to require the student to engage in cross-cultural communication**, and, where appropriate, provide an opportunity to **use a foreign language and learn new idioms** while avoiding cultural faux pas;
- **3) to illustrate to the student the importance of respecting the views of the "foreigner"**; and
- **4) to require the student to examine and understand his own culture and nation better** by studying and dealing with citizens of another nation and their perspectives on his nation.
- **5) to become a knowledgeable citizen and potential leader.**

The Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars Program's International-Oriented Civic Engagement

The Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars program fulfills, in a unique way, the traditional objectives of active learning in international-oriented programs, while adding the civic-engagement experience of working at a professional level in international affairs in the U.S.'s most cosmopolitan city. The presence there of major international institutions such as the World Bank

and IMF, as well as the preeminence of the U.S. in world politics, are additional unique elements of this "" program

- **1) Immersion in a "foreign culture"**

We tell all the Embassy Scholars that when interning in embassies, they will quickly realize that they are in an entirely-foreign atmosphere. It is an international experience without leaving the U.S.A. The flag outside the building, the pictures of the president of the nation in every room, the foreign language being spoken by the staff, the incoming and outgoing communications in the other language, and the simple fact that everyone else is non-American can be both fascinating and intimidating

However, those concerns are quickly overcome because, almost uniformly, students are welcomed with open arms by diplomats trained to be cross-cultural communicators and by the entire embassy staff. That, plus the counseling which students are given by WII about making a strong effort to accommodate themselves to the new situation, makes for a smooth transition in most cases. Further, WII senior staff screen all potential internship sites to make sure they understand their role in helping the students become civically-engaged professionals. By the middle of the semester, the students are considered members of the staff. Thus, students who intern at embassies ranging from Canada and Croatia to Papua New Guinea and Peru report feelings of identity and "being at home abroad" at their embassies. They are by then performing essential tasks, including, often, screening all outgoing public documents since they are likely to be the only native English speakers on the staff.

One student who interned at the embassy of Mexico and then studied in Mexico said that the latter experience "would not have been nearly as valuable educationally without study abroad in DC. The internship provided the basis from which to compare, contrast, and analyze, whereas, arriving in Mexico without that experience would have made the latter largely observational." She added, "stepping inside a diplomatic mission actually means entering that country's sovereign territory. The cultural shift is indicated by some immediate signs in artwork and language, but the subtler and telling cultural influences can only be observed by lengthy stay and interaction. The student intern has a multitude of analytical experiences, from the different conceptions of deadlines and office politics to, (my personal favorite), the blatant disregard of 'no smoking' signs. It was truly a holistic experience, one which made me comprehend much more fully the Mexican way of life and how the two nations differ."

- **2) Engage in cross-cultural communication and use/enhance a foreign language**

In the program students are briefed before beginning an internship on these factors so that they are better prepared to immerse themselves in the culture of the other nation's embassy. Students frequently note that even if they speak the language of the embassy, they are also picking up a vast new vocabulary, one of diplomacy and international relations, which is entirely different from anything they had experienced previously. Also, even when students intern at embassies where they do not speak the language, e.g. Georgia and Jordan, they make a great effort to learn as many words of that language as possible. Further, all students realize that learning the "body language" of the other culture is also critical to their success.

Throughout the experience, there is a constant cross-cultural interaction because both "sides" are learning from one another. As one student who interned at the embassy of Bolivia said, when advising future students about how to make the experience fruitful, "definitely bring your lunch and eat with everyone at work. You will learn what's really going on in the Embassy there, as everyone jokes, complains, and bonds. And you will get to know the people there much faster than while working, although everyone is very friendly all of the time." The fact that that student did so entirely in Spanish made the experience even more beneficial.

Another student who interned at the embassy of Peru noted, "I had numerous conversations in Spanish to the effect of 'that would never happen in Peru like it does here,' which may have been positive or negative observations, depending on the time and subject." He added, in a comment which would not apply in the "normal" study abroad situation, "I believe it was just as interesting for me to see how another culture adapts to living in ours, especially with my previous knowledge of that particular culture."

- **3) Respecting and understanding the views of the "foreigner."**

Throughout the program we stress to students that they must remain open-minded about a nation or its policies, while avoiding "snap judgments." That theme is a key one in the international relations class, where students learn about the views of many nations and organizations from one another. Our objective is to avoid a situation where students are so welcomed and fully-integrated into the embassy staff that their empathy turns into sympathy and then into advocacy.

In the overwhelming majority of cases this is not a problem, and students absorb the culture and viewpoints of the embassy staff while remaining open-minded. Whether they work with Croatians, Uruguayans, Lithuanians, or Australians, the students realize throughout that they are not "of" the foreign nation, except temporarily. Even as they work in the interest of the other nation, e.g. in the commercial section helping attract foreign investment, in the press office writing press releases explaining national policy, or in the cultural office extolling the artistic contributions of the foreign nationals, the students remain "outsiders" in most senses. On the other hand, they inevitably come to an enhanced understanding of and respect for the other nation and its foreign culture to a degree not achievable in any other way.

A unique example which provided understanding of an extraordinary kind came for a student interning at the embassy of Jordan on September 11, 2001. Following the terrible events of that day, that morning he answered the phone and heard anonymous callers making death threats against Arabs in general and the embassy in particular. In an instant he realized that he and his embassy hosts had been caught up directly in a national and international trauma. Even though he had enjoyed the internship to that point and had been treated well, the embassy staff worked feverishly to both protect him and assure him that they bore him no ill will and hoped that he would not leave. While ultimately all concerned agreed that it would be best if he changed his placement, the student experienced how both his nation and the representatives of Jordan had reacted at a time of international stress. His understanding of the both the US and the Arab world in an age of terrorism was dramatically enhanced, and he saw for himself that there remained ample ground for mutual understanding and concern.

- **4) Examining and Understanding One's Own Culture Better**

It is often said that a person living in another culture will reduce their ethnocentricity by the simple fact of learning that other people have differing viewpoints, cultures, and perspectives on issues. The latter may range from what time to have lunch to whether socialized medicine is an appropriate national policy. Further, American students in particular may come to understand that while they view the United States as a moral and positive international actor, other nations and their leaders do not always have the same opinion.

The experiences of one student who interned at the embassy of Cyprus illustrate the point. She was present, at the end of her term, for the final meeting of the departing ambassador with the embassy staff. She had had a successful experience in the embassy's press section, writing press releases, contributing to the embassy newsletter, and helping out with cultural affairs. She was the only American citizen on the staff, and she had truly immersed herself in the culture and policy of that nation. Thus she was startled when the Ambassador's remarks included not only criticism of U.S. policy, but also a glance in her direction on each occasion. While the experience was unpleasant in the short term, she came to realize that in the Ambassador's eyes she represented the United States. That in turn forced her to consider how despite her good relations

with the embassy staff, there were much broader issues at work which affected the embassy's and the ambassador's perceptions of the United States. Her discussion of this incident with her classmates soon afterward was a powerful learning experience for all of our students.

Another student who worked in the Mexican embassy said, "following and analyzing US policy while working in a non-US office not only granted me a finer understanding of global interdependence, but, by prompting a critical view of that policy, made me a better world citizen. I now feel more equipped to take a critical view of international policy."

- **5) Civic Engagement and Professional Experience**

While study abroad and similar international-oriented programs rarely involve professional, career-oriented experience, this core element of the Embassy Scholars program makes it distinctive. Through agreements with the embassies and foreign policy agencies, every Embassy Scholar is given substantive responsibilities as well as facilities to do the job. They are, in fact, given status similar to that of an entry-level "junior officer". In addition to the examples noted above, a student interning in the State Department arranged for high-level U.S.-Japanese talks and acted as rapporteur for the meetings. Another at the U.S. Trade Representative engaged in negotiations on trade agreements related to agricultural products; many students have helped embassies prepared for presidential visits and had the opportunity for substantive meetings with the visiting presidents; one student helped set up and implement micro-credit programs for women's development programs in Africa and Asia, etc.

This kind of professional experience makes students seeking employment in international affairs or applying to graduate or law schools far more competitive since they have already proven themselves. For example, while SAIS (Johns Hopkins' School for Advanced International Studies) rarely grants admission to students immediately after receiving their undergraduate degrees, two former "Embassy Scholars" were accepted soon after interning, respectively, in the State Department and Washington's UN office. More recently, a student interning at Amnesty International was offered a permanent position there after only ten weeks "on the job."

More generally, participants are well-prepared for leadership in the civic community. At a very early age they have had unique experiences and are prepared for a leap ahead of their peers. They understand the world, both foreign and domestic, and their new cosmopolitanism prepares them for long-term civic engagement and civic leadership.

General Information about the Program: Distinctive and Academic Elements

What makes the Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars program distinctive are two core, value-added elements:

- individualized supervision and mentoring of each student by a practitioner/professor every step of the way, from the initial program application through the completion of the program, and
- assurance of significant professional-level, international affairs responsibilities and "study-abroad-type, civic engagement experiences" in each internship.

During the first weeks of the internship period in their Experiential Learning class, students formulate a "learning plan" outlining their responsibilities and objectives for the semester. This document, critiqued and guided by WII senior staff, is then signed by the student and the supervisor, ensuring both that the responsibilities will be substantive and that there should be no misunderstandings between student and supervisor. WII staff visit internship sites to underline the commitment to support of the students and the achievement of their professional objectives.

One day per week students take a rigorous academic course in the practice of international policy taught by an experienced diplomat and an experiential learning class focused on professional

and career development. The courses underline the linkage between international theory and practice, while also providing weekly opportunities for WII faculty to monitor progress and provide guidance and advice.

The program includes internationally-oriented social events where students network with senior government officials from many nations, international businessmen, and leaders of the international financial institutions. Each semester a senior State Department official, recently Director General of the Foreign Service Ambassador George Staples and Ambassador to Russia William Burns, speaks to the students at a private lunch.

Application and Placement

Qualified applicants for the “Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars” internship program must have a 3.0 GPA and some international experience. This can include fluency in at least one language other than English, foreign travel, and/or international affairs course work. In the application process, students provide transcripts, letters of recommendation, and essays outlining their academic and professional goals. Once selected, the mentoring process begins. Each student is counseled individually by WII faculty and staff about the opportunities available in their chosen fields, including which would be most suitable and beneficial.

Students can select from among dozens of organizations with which WII has agreements to accept Embassy scholars, including the Department of State, Department of Treasury, U.S. Trade Representative, and UN offices; over 20 embassies, including Canada, Guatemala, Croatia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Mexico; and many other agencies, including the American Foreign Service Association, the Brookings Institution, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). After lengthy discussions and consideration, each student chooses the two or three best available options. They then have telephone interviews with potential supervisors and choose where to intern. This process gives them significant responsibility for ensuring both that they have made a valid choice and that they will take full advantage of the opportunity.

Number of Participants and Long-Term Benefits

Each semester approximately 15-20 students are chosen for the program. This relatively small number further underlines and ensures that the objective of personal, individualized attention to each student can be achieved. Of this number, typically, approximately half intern at embassies, one-fourth at government agencies, and one-fourth at agencies ranging from think tanks to development groups to congressional offices where significant work on foreign affairs-related committees is ensured. To date, some 250 students have participated during the seventeen semesters of the program’s existence.

Upon completion of the program, students are able to use their unique experiences as a springboard to either further study or careers in international affairs. WII faculty keep in close touch with Embassy Scholars after their participation in the program to help them advance in their careers. Many are now attending law school or doing graduate work at Washington’s premier international relations schools such as SAIS and Georgetown; several have passed the Department of State’s Foreign Service examination – two have joined the Department of State Foreign Service; and others are engaged in development, NGO, or international business employment. Each semester the former students living in Washington return for a session with the new students to advise them on professional and education pursuits after the program.

Administrative Information

WII works with faculty who want a structured, supervised, academic creditworthy internship experience in Washington for their students interested in international affairs. WII staff assume the role of distance faculty and administrators, supervising all elements of the students’ semester to ensure the schools’ academic and experiential goals are met. Through formal or informal

arrangements with their universities, the students can earn up to a full semester of academic credit. WII has formal agreements with many schools to provide these services, and is open to additional arrangements. WII staff members keep in close touch with the students' faculty advisers on campus to ensure coordination in achievement of relevant academic goals. Further, as noted above, the students are carefully monitored throughout the semester by both WII staff and worksite supervisors to make sure that they have a quality, substantive professional experience worthy of that academic credit.

The Embassy and Diplomatic Scholars program is for U.S. students and legal residents. However, international students can be included in the program at the discretion of WII administrators if there are places available.

The application deadlines are late November for the spring semester and early June for the fall semester, but early applications are encouraged. Applications and additional information regarding credits, housing, etc. are available on the WII web-site, www.wiidc.org. Several foundations and businesses interested in supporting education in international relations, including the Una Chapman Cox Foundation and the Boeing Company, have provided funding for full tuition merit-based scholarships.