Dean's Column: UNLV Law Students Making Tracks in Carson City

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As any lawyer knows, law school is mostly about absorbing, applying and critiquing the law, and gaining the analytical and practical skills for law practice. Few courses engage students directly in lawmaking, the Legislature’s task, even though that is at the heart of what lawyers and judges do. Indeed, lawmaking is often dismissed as a messy project, not a noble pursuit: “Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made.”

Not true at UNLV, where our law students learn the craft of lawmaking from the best in the business. When the 2015 Legislative Session kicked off in February, 14 UNLV law students in the Legislative Externship Program were on the ground in Carson City, learning the legislative process firsthand.

This immersive experience enables students to absorb the legislative process with all its characters, twists and turns. Although the role of each placement in the legislative process differs, students can expect to research public policy issues and legislative history, track bills, participate in strategy sessions, draft proposed legislation, attend committee meetings and floor hearings, and interact with members of the Nevada Legislature.

The Legislative Externship is one of the many experiential learning opportunities in northern Nevada, where students can spend an entire semester earning credit through participating in externship placements and taking courses.

Diverse Placements Offer Unique Perspectives

For the 2015 Legislative Session, the program was expanded to include more students in more placements than ever before. In past sessions, students have externed at the Legislative Counsel Bureau, the Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada and several private lobbying firms.

This session, for the first time, UNLV placed four students in Governor Brian Sandoval’s office. Casey Stiteler, a 3L student from Reno, is thrilled to be working with the governor’s staff. “I immediately had the opportunity to put the skills I learned in class into practice, while under the guidance of very skilled and supportive professionals,” Casey reported, after his first week on the job. “It is safe to say this will be one of the
most important experiences in my
law school career.”

A student-driven selection
process ensures that each student
has an experience that fits well with
their interests and career goals.
Bailey Bortolin, a Public Interest
Fellow who was named the Pro
Bono Student of the Year in 2014
by Legal Aid Center of Southern
Nevada, wanted to advocate on
related issues in Carson City,
following in the footsteps of
former Assembly Speaker Barbara
Buckley. Brian Vasek, who
completed the Juvenile Justice
Clinic in the fall, was interested
in lobbying for criminal justice
reform. Working with John Sasser
at Washoe Legal Services and
Clark County Public Defender Phil
Kohn, the law school established
new legislative placements through
these longstanding community
partners.

Integrating Experience
into the Classroom

Though the students are
immersed in their placements,
they get together for two related
courses. Dean Daniel Hamilton
and Interim Externship Director
Tera Hodge co-teach an externship
seminar focusing on professional
development and reflection.

Veteran lobbyists Sam
McMullen of Porter Gordon Silver
and Erin McMullen of R&R
Partners teach Legislative Policy in
Carson City. The father-daughter
team has supervised UNLV externs
for the past four sessions. This
year they created an innovative
course that simulates a private
government affairs law firm, in
which students serve mock-clients.
Students learn about the Nevada
legislative process in real-time,
and hone their skills through a
series of exercises requiring
them to develop a legislative
strategy, draft and present bills,
plan for hearings, meetings and
deadlines, and explore the ethical
rules for lawyers, legislators
and lobbyists. The course adds a
layer of structure and instruction
to the work students do at their
placements.

Lasting Inspiration

Wiser and more confident,
some students catch the political
bug. For Lucy Flores (JD ’10),
the legislative externship was a
stepping-stone on her pathway to
a political career. “This experience
introduced me to the legislative
process,” Flores explained,
“and inspired me to run for the
Assembly, representing District
28: the very same community
where I grew up.”

Omar Saucedo (JD ’13) and
Silvia Villanueva (JD ’14) were
legislative externs during the
2013 biennial session and, fresh
out of law school, each chose to
pursue a career in government
affairs. Saucedo is External Affairs
Coordinator at Nevada System of
Higher Education and Villanueva
recently joined Griffin Rowe, LLP,
a lobbying firm.

“The Carson City externship
truly was a unique experience,”
said Saucedo. It was also one that
proved decisive in his choice of
career. Knowing the process and
understanding the politics are
key skills. But, most importantly,
said, “The relationships you
develop during the 120 days you
are in session are invaluable.”
Such skills can only be learned
through living and experiencing
life outside of the classroom.

2015 Legislative
Externship Placements:

Clark County Public Defenders
Brian Vasek

Fennemore Craig Jones Vargas*
Jose Martin

Governor Sandoval
Jennifer Odell
Alexander Quagge
Casey Stiteler
Ashleigh Wise

Legislative Counsel Bureau*
Edward Wynder

Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus*
Gil Lopez

Porter Gordon Silver*
Connor Cain
Thomas Stewart
Chase Whittemore

Snell & Wilmer*
Jennifer Lanahan
Adam Wynott

Washoe Legal Services
Bailey Bortolin

*2015 Legislative Externship
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Though this, or a variant, is often misattributed
to Otto Von Bismarck, it can reportedly be traced
to lawyer-poet John Godfrey Saxe in The Daily
Cleveland Herald, Mar. 29, 1869. See Fred R.
Shapiro, “Quote … Misquote,” On Language, NY
Times, July 1, 2008.

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