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2012

## **Interning with the Tennessee General Assembly: My Experience**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Turner, Thomas K., "Interning with the Tennessee General Assembly: My Experience" (2012). *Baker Scholar Projects*.  
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4-26-12

*Interning with the Tennessee General Assembly: My Experience*

Thomas K. Turner

Howard Baker Center for Public Policy

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For the second session of the 107<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, I was chosen to serve Senator Bill Ketron. Senator Ketron is the Republican Caucus Chairman and represents the 13<sup>th</sup> district which is composed of Lincoln, Marshal, Muary and part of Rutherford counties. Our office was blessed with two interns, one being provided by MTSU, a school within Sen. Ketron's district, and myself as his intern for his committee chairmanship. Unlike other committee chairs within the TN Senate, the Republican Caucus Chair has different roles, serving Senate Republicans and their caucus primarily. Many of duties for the caucus chairman are private and not the same as standing committee members who conduct all business openly in accordance to state laws. As one would assume, Sen. Ketron's role as caucus chairman revolved communicating and organizing the members of the Republican members for a unified and comprehensive legislative agenda.

Each internship is different and Tennessee State Legislative Internship Program is no different. Unlike positions on the federal level, we are not entering full time offices who find assignments for us to complete to supplement their own work. While we did help with the staff's work, the interns are paid employees who are fully utilized and come with their own set of responsibilities.

During the first week of orientation, most of the interns were still unaware of their placements. This was the time that intern's resumes were examined and each was sorted to fill needed skills for the various offices. I was fortunate enough to, as were most, be placed in an office that not only needed my acquired skill set up to that point but also appreciated what I had to offer. My writing background and photography skills from my work with the *Daily Beacon* came into great use. Our

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office houses the Senate Republican Press Secretary who I was able to work closely with. On any given day, I would be asked to write press releases, proofread letters and columns from members for publication and take photos when needed. One of the most important roles of the press secretary is to not only present information to the members and public, but to do so in a way that is coherent and factually correct. Under tight deadlines, any extra help provided by my co-intern and myself was essential and greatly appreciated. Little things such as taking photos of members and their constituents were also a key component to the office of the press secretary. Many times, the secretary was unable to spend hours waiting in the floor of the Senate in hopes of catching a great candid shot or waiting for distinguished guests to be introduced. It was my job to take photos of specific events that quickly transformed into documenting things of note whether or not they were specifically requested. This initiative displayed not only helped to specialize my role but also gain the trust of the press secretary to complete each task proficiently. This role only enhanced my time, getting to attend closed meeting and private functions that wanted photographs. Working with the press secretary allows a degree of free roam and I was able to take full advantage of the access and opportunities that came along.

The other bulk of my work revolved around the legislative issues of Sen. Ketrone. I was able to work with his legislative assistant, Michelle Yearwood, who is held in the highest regard among her peers. Not knowing her reputation initially, I was quickly alerted to her knowledge and strong character after only a short while. Micki, as she is affectionately known, serves as the senator's research and policy

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analyst. She is tasked with working with Senator Ketron on all bills he plans on sponsoring and debating with during each session. For many offices, including mine, it is the research analyst who serves the representatives most directly.

Research analysts are given to offices of leadership and I was privileged to work with one of the most well known and respected in the Tennessee legislature.

I was delegated by Micki to help on whatever was needed. Daily activities ranged from summarizing bills, prepare talking points and research. Micki also took the time to assign myself and the other intern ongoing projects that were to be tackled this session individually. I was able to not only help gather supporting evidence for two bills in particular, but sit in on meetings and really serve as a team member for individual pieces of sponsored legislation. The two bills I was able to work with most closely involved cyber-bullying and the laws and restrictions governing minors working on farms. It was an honor to be given so much responsibility and though I only played a small role, it was a great feeling to see hard work pay off in the form of the bills' passage.

It only took a short time before the office staff was able to get to know myself and the other intern in an effort to assign us tasks that fully utilized our skills. Prior experience was rarely applicable to individual assignments but the totality of skills possessed allowed myself to quickly learn what needed to be done and make myself an invaluable part of the team. Not every assignment was glamorous but I can say with full confidence that each task was essential and my time and talents never felt wasted.

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As with every job, there will be things you like and dislike. For this internship, I can honestly say that the “likes” far outnumbered those experiences with not so fond memories. The only task that I was given and disliked centered on graduation certificates for graduating high school seniors. Sen. Ketron had thousands of who in his district seniors were graduating this year and each was given a certificate that was adorned with a seal and ribbon. It was my job to affix the ribbons and seals to each certificated and then sort by school. This task was not hard or complicated, just very time consuming and tedious. Luckily, the staff had great foresight and really encouraged me to get started early, spreading out the work and having them completed without a rush. I am grateful for that advice and had very few days that were entirely consumed by graduation certificates. As much as it was not fun to make each certificate, I thought it was a special way of recognizing each graduating high school student. Other than graduation certificates, a task that everyone equally dislikes, my complaints are limited. I must note that whenever I was upset with how things ran in my office or something I truly dreaded doing, I was able to look at my fellow interns and realize it was not that bad. The grass being always greener is true. Each intern had assignments and tasks that we all coveted. I can truly say that every part of the internship was not perfect but my position, my office, and my opportunities had no comparison and I would not trade roles for anything.

The things that I enjoyed most about the internship cannot easily be compiled but I will try. Each day at the capitol was different. You never knew whom you would meet or what task would be before you. The notion of the unknown

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made each day exciting and provided the drive to wake up early and be at work on time. It was a pleasure to meet various residents from across the state of Tennessee. Some issues brought before us seemed more important than others but at the heart of it, each issue was important to the individual constituents and that had to be realized. The amount of human interaction was much needed and really helped me see what difference the legislators were actually making in the lives of Tennesseans. Being able to make a short and easy phone call could mean a huge difference in someone's life. Having the ability to make a real impact was the absolute best part of the internship. There are very few jobs when you can walk away daily knowing you helped a fellow citizen in a concrete and meaningful way.

Other highlights of the internship can be found within the internship program itself. Donna Morgan, the internship coordinator, went out of her way to really provide the intern class with unparalleled experiences. Aside from the fieldtrips to a maximum security prison, the governor's mansion and Tennessee Supreme Court, we were treated to an array of speakers at our weekly meetings. The speakers ranged from Supreme Court Justice Cornelia Clark to Secretary of State Tre Hargett. No matter who came in spoke to us, each had a different lesson to offer and really made themselves available to any questions we had. The guest speakers were from all walks of government and private service. I feel the breadth of guests allowed us, as college students, a chance to pick their brains and give some direction for our future careers. The human interaction element to this internship proved to be the best part. Whether it was helping constituents or learning from distinguished

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public servants, I was constantly interacting with people and enjoying my favorite part of the internship with the Tennessee General Assembly.

When reflecting on what was learned from the internship, it is not one particular thing that stands out but the totality of experiences. I can say without a doubt that I have been able to learn more about Tennessee government in four months as an intern than four years of classroom teaching. I know that people cannot stress the importance of hands on learning enough and nor should they. Being at the capitol and witnessing the process for oneself is the best way to not only learn but also gain a real appreciation of the process and commitment of each person.

When I first became an intern, I entered with knowledge of the legislative process only from what I had learned in school. Having the ability to be apart of that process taught me something that can only be attained from actual experience. Many times, people see politics as a nasty game and become jaded just from what is on the news. While I cannot say that every interaction at the state legislature is free of politics, it is not the norm. It is clear from the attitudes and actions of the legislators that they are here for the purpose of serving their constituents. Serving one's constituents is not accomplished through extreme partisanship. The amount of interaction and respect for each other and the process as a whole was a true learning experience. Even though some personalities may clash, it is the notion that each has been elected and deserves each other's respect that has remained present in my mind. The legislature can be looked at as a family, having members few like but at the end of the day, they are all still related and there is no changing that. (Not



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until the next election cycle at least). While they may disagree on the floor of each chamber, it is the interactions out of session that stand out, displaying the intimate and personal relationship each legislature has with the other. The amount of cooperation needed to do anything in the legislature is not only a good thing but helps cultivate relationships in an attempt to serve the people of Tennessee.

Book learning really does a good job of laying out the basic principles of the legislature and how things operate on the broader scale. I was completely taken aback to find that for every action of the legislature, hundreds of small components need to be in place. The idea of proposing legislation and then voting was very simple and overlooks the support staff's role in crafting legislation. Though the minute processes involved were not well publicized or fully understood by myself, none have presented themselves as frivolous or unnecessary. Each person from the legal department to the bill clerks is vital to the legislative process. Again, it was the amount of detail and manpower that goes into pretty much anything in the capitol that was the biggest eye opening experience.

One of my main assignments and daily tasks centered on answering the phone for the office. Though not exciting sounding on the onset, it was actually a great experience. I was able to listen to constituent concerns and help when I could. The office phone and email are two great ways to keep a pulse on constituent opinions. Voters call in whenever an issue of great significance is before them. One of the issues that garnered the most calls was the Tennessee Excellence, Accountability and Management (TEAM) Act that was passed this year. Though most of the calls were in opposition to the bill's passage, it was clear that this was a

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huge issue on the minds of many Tennesseans. The TEAM Act, when signed into law by the governor, was said to provide a fair and accountable method of employing and retaining public servants. The bill, championed by the Republican majorities in both chambers, sought to address the apparent inequities and divisive practices that were present in state civil service employment. According to Governor Bill Haslam, “The TEAM Act aims to establish a system that will attract, select, retain and promote the best applicants and employees based on performance and equal opportunities, and free from coercive political influences, and to provide technically competent employees to render impartial service to the public at all times.” The bill’s reforms aimed at future generations, citing that nearly forty percent of current civil service employees will be eligible for retirement in the next five years. This possible retirement surge will create a huge opening and applicants will be judged on quality and competence as opposed to seniority. “State government’s role is to provide services that Tennesseans aren’t able to get on their own, and I believe it is my job to make sure we’re providing them in the most customer-focused, efficient and effective way,” Gov. Haslam said. Governor Haslam and those in support of the bill felt that this would be the most effective way to provide Tennesseans with the best and most qualified employees for the future. Those who were against the bill’s passage felt that this bill would politicize the hiring process of state employees and give employers the right to dismiss individuals at will. With the new changes, people felt that the protective measure to combat against cronyism and patronage would be reinstated, throwing seniority and other civil service protections to the wayside. A large provision of the bill provided performance based reviews to determine

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placement as opposed to the seniority system currently in place that gives much flexibility to those whose departments have been downsized or removed. In the end, state employees took the changes the hardest and were ultimately the “losers” in this scenario, seeing the changes as not offering enough protections. The “winners” are those who championed the bill and I will go even further and say all Tennesseans. After seeing the effort and diligence put into this reform, it is clear that Gov. Haslam was focusing on the future and not shortsighted personal gains.

The issue proved paramount for Gov. Haslam during this session. This law effectively will give hiring manager more leeway in employing the best people, firing those who are ineffective and give raises to those who are deserving. Tennessee deserves the best workers and those in control should not have their hands tied from civil service laws created in the 1930’s.

When asked to summarize my short time in Nashville and give an evaluation of my internship experience as a whole, many things come to mind. Luckily, it is those fondest memories that stand out the most. This internship embodies the principles of real world experience and the exact reason why out of the classroom experiences are essential to a well-rounded education. As an intern, I know that I did not make history, I am confident however that I made history possible. Our role was small but essential and fully utilized. Tennessee, not having a full time legislature, relies heavily on the influx of one hundred extra workers during session. In some cases, the extra intern doubled the staff of individual office. The benefits received during this internship were not exclusively granted to interns. Having young students working side by side with the legislators proved to have incalculable value. Students involved in the legislative process

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served as a constant reminder that the decisions and laws passed by the members would affect future generations. It is the very interns and younger residents of Tennessee who will be most affected most and serve as an ever present reminder of legislator's impact on the future generations.

There is always something the each wishes they had known before entering this internship. I wish that I had exposed to the fact that members of the General Assembly are not special people above the rest; in fact they are our neighbors and fellow citizens following the call of public service. I took too much time viewing the members in reverence instead of engaging them as fellow citizens and learning from their experiences. I would tell future interns to work hard but also take the time to get to know the members who come from all over the state. The members come from all walks of life and have so much to offer in the way of experience. Engage the members and do not be afraid. It makes sense that a politician would naturally be easy to talk to and in fact, wants to be talked to. The close proximity in which we work together should be taken advantage of, gleaning all that is to be had.

Internships are not confined strictly to the office. So many great opportunities arise from internships in and out of the workplace. Future interns should embrace their fellow interns and live up the semester to the fullest. So much of the internship that is enjoyable comes from the other interns and staff. Again, legislative employees are from all over the state of Tennessee and offer unique perspectives on common issues. Start early in building friendships. It is important to always keep work first while still remaining cognizant that the people you interact with are the ones who truly offer the greatest enjoyment. We were given the advice that some come to make friends, and

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others come to get future jobs; however, the two are not mutually exclusive. Learning to balance the social aspect and work duties not only enhances your time in Nashville but also arms you with important skills for future employment. In the end, each office is different and no two experiences are the same. I was extremely lucky to be placed in an office that was not only highly qualified and adept at their jobs but also worked well with each other. I was given responsibility that I could handle, allowed to find to my place and become a true member of the team.