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David Zlotnick's Post

Earning Academic Credits On the Job in D.C.

Posted by David Zlotnick on 04/27/2015 at 04:29 PM



RWU Law's D.C. Semester-in-Practice Program

provides an ideal opportunity for RWU Law students who are considering working in Washington D.C. after graduation to explore and plan for their future – by offering an entire semester spent earning on-the-job academic credits. The program immerses students in one of the most exciting, diversified and still-growing legal markets in the world. They earn academic credit while training full-time in a government, non-profit or trade-association setting.

The students themselves are the program's biggest fans. "I have thoroughly enjoyed experiencing life as a legal professional in the nation's capital," said 2L Kyla Pecchia, who was placed in Senator Sheldon Whitehouse's Office as a Legal Fellow on the Senate Committee on the Judiciary. "The out-of-classroom experience has been invaluable, and I am confident that the skills will be transferable to my work in Rhode Island."

Army First Lieutenant Michael J. Smitsy, also a 3L, was placed with the Maritime Administration Office of Chief Counsel. He said the program was "the summation of my legal education. As a law student with a maritime focus, having the opportunity to implement the knowledge I acquired at school on a full-time basis, with an agency relevant to my specialty, has been an exceptional experience."

"The Semester in Practice program allowed me to finish my tenure in law school by putting my legal education to work in a field that I want to pursue professionally and in a city that I have grown to appreciate," added 3L Christopher Puig, who was placed with The Federalist Society for Law & Public Policy Studies National Office. "It's also been a great way to begin the networking process. I hope that everyone can take advantage of the program in the future."

Participating students earn 12 clinical externship credits while training in their placement, plus an additional two graded credits for a two-hour weekly seminar. The focus of the weekly seminar is two-fold:

Initially, students role-play skills that are critical to navigating entry into the legal profession, such as learning how to request and incorporate feedback from supervisors. As RWU Law's Professor of Experiential Education, I also help students create a professional development plan and networking plan for the semester to lay the foundation for each student's first few years of practice, whether in Washington or elsewhere.

Second, the seminar examines problem-solving as a lawyer in Washington. Drawing on my longstanding roots in the area, I select guest speakers who provide examples of how D.C. legal practice must include not just traditional lawyering skills such as litigation, but also politics, policy, and public relations considerations. Guest speakers present a specific issue they faced in their career and walk the class through the scenario from initiation to conclusion and then lessons learned.

This semester, students heard from the former General Counsel of the FBI during 9/11, the Vice-President of the leading international "civil society" public interest group, and the perils of hostage negotiations in the Middle East from a lawyer whose practice consists of assisting both foreign and domestic NGO's with their corporate, tax, and in this instance, personnel management and insurance needs. Students have the opportunity to network with established RWU Law alums both at a reception and during a dedicated alumni panel, where RWU Law graduates share practical, firsthand advice on breaking into the D.C. legal market.

Over the past ten years, Washington, D.C. has transformed into a vibrant, diverse and youthful city with scores of new restaurant, bike lanes and entertainment options. We try to sample some of the cultural and social opportunities D.C. has to offer. It's a great place to live and to put a legal education to work, and the Semester in Practice is a great way to start.