



ENGAGING DEMOCRACY CAPSTONE

Winter and Spring 2009
Political Science Division
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One of the most pressing problems in American politics today is that the public feels increasingly distant from elected leaders. To many reformers, the health of the nation's democracy can only improve by getting more young people involved in politics. The Engaging Democracy capstone addresses this problem by having students assist Oregon legislators during the 2009 legislative session in Salem, where they will help handle the broad range of responsibilities placed on legislative staff. During classroom times, students will learn about the position of legislatures in American politics and the character of Oregon politics. As a final project, the students will work together on a web-based guide to the Legislative Assembly. The work in the capitol will be arranged around each individual student's schedule. Carpooling should be available. It is likely we will have some funds to offset travel costs.

Learning Objectives

More than anything else, the primary learning objectives are to make students more understanding of the nature of representative democracy and more engaged in our political system. As far as cognitive learning, the objectives of this class are to make students familiar with:

- The structure, procedures, and functions of state legislatures, especially the Oregon Legislative Assembly;
- The importance of particular actors in the legislative process, including individual citizens, legislative leaders, the governor, political parties, and interest groups;

- The demands and pressures put on elected officials;
- The role of staff in the legislature;
- The environment in legislative offices;
- Key forces that shape Oregon politics today.

The capstone is also meant to give students hands-on experience working for an elected official, to enable students to think more critically about politics, and to get students to work together on a joint project that is meant to improve public understanding of the Legislative Assembly.

Getting Instructor Approval

To register for this class, you have to have my approval. The reason I require approval is that you will be representing the Political Science Division and the university while you are interning in the legislature. Since this is such an important position, I need to be comfortable that you will do a good job. If a student acts in an unprofessional manner in the internship, it will cause problems for the internship program and make it difficult for other students to intern in the legislature.

In general, I would like you to provide me with a resume, a brief letter of recommendation, and an unofficial copy of your transcripts. In some circumstances I may waive some or all of these requirements. However, it is always helpful to have these items in my files so I can talk intelligently about you if a legislator or an aide calls me up.

The Internship Experience

Each student in the class will be asked to work in the state capitol for at least one day a week during the winter and spring quarters. If you want to work more than that, it is possible that I will make additional credits available through the Political Science Division. In general, I would like all students to work with a member of the House or Senate. I may allow some students to work in other types of positions in the capitol, though I would prefer you work in a legislator's office.

Once you have been accepted by a legislator as an intern, I need a statement from your supervisor acknowledging that you are interning and outlining your duties. Often students write these statements themselves and then ask their supervisor to sign them. You also need to provide me with the name of your supervisor and

his/her phone number. I will distribute a form that can be used to submit this information. The form can also be accessed on line at <http://www.web.pdx.edu/~hprc/FormA.pdf>.

As an intern, you are likely to be asked to handle all the traditional duties of a legislative staff person, including answering phone calls, filing information, doing constituency service, tracking legislation, and conducting research. The legislator may ask you to do other activities as well, including monitoring particular committees, helping organize town hall meetings, or working on a newsletter. It is always interesting if you get the opportunity to trail your legislator through the course of a legislative day. The internship is particularly valuable, however, if you can attach yourself to some substantive issue before the legislature. I don't want you to just be answering the phone and filing newspaper articles. If that happens, you need to assert yourself. Ask the legislator if you can work on a special project, such as conducting research or keeping track of a major bill.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that you are there to help the legislator. Don't just sit and wait to be told what to do. Try to figure out ways you can be helpful and dive in.

Finding an Internship

After the November election, I will be working with individual legislators, staff members, and the party caucuses to find internship opportunities. If you do not have any idea for whom you would like to work, I will talk with you about your interests and then give you a lead on where to apply. It will then be your responsibility to contact the lead to apply for the internship. In most cases, the process is just like applying for a job: after you contact the lead, you will be asked to send a resume and references. If all looks okay, you will be asked in for an interview. Occasionally, the first lead doesn't work out. If so, I will redirect you elsewhere. In a few cases, I may have to go to bat for you (especially if you are trying to get hired by a legislative leader), but usually it isn't necessary. Most legislators want interns and they will be eager to hear from you.

If you do have an idea for where to apply, don't hesitate to approach the legislator's office on your own without clearing it with me. Just call up the legislators office, let them know you are a PSU student and would like to intern with them. Then ask them how to apply. All I ask is that you let me know where you are applying, so I have good records on who is applying where.

If you are able to set up your internship prior to the winter quarter, it will make the beginning of the quarter go more smoothly. However, there is ample time after the quarter begins to secure an internship.

Travel to Salem

In years past, we have had some money available to help reimburse students for travel on the days they commute to Salem. I am currently working to find money again this year. I am optimistic that we will have some. I encourage everyone to try to carpool whenever possible to conserve gas and our limited funds. Carpooling also gives you a chance to share experiences with other students in the class. Travel reimbursement forms are available in my office.

If you do not drive, it should not be a problem. We are likely to have at least one carpool going down to Salem every day, and probably more than that. If there isn't a regular carpool, I should be able to help you find a ride from another student.

Required Texts

I have asked the PSU bookstore to order two books for students in this class:

Richard A. Clucas, Brent Steel, and Mark Henkels. *Oregon Politics and Government: Progressives versus Conservative Populists*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005.

Alan Rosenthal, *Engines of Democracy: Politics and Policymaking in State Legislatures*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2008.

You should try to read both of these books early in the course. They will provide valuable perspective on your internship work.

Course Meetings and Special Dates

The scheduled course meeting time is on Fridays from 2 to 4 p.m. The legislature rarely meets on Fridays, so this is a good time for all of us to get together. At the beginning of the winter quarter, we will probably meet frequently to see how the internships are going, to allow you to exchange information with each other, and to plan the final project. I will be bringing in guest speakers who should be able

to help answer some of your questions about interning in the capitol. I will probably also give a few introductory lectures so that I know you are up to speed on legislative politics and Oregon government. Once everyone is settled in their internships and we have good direction on the final project, we will meet less often or in smaller groups.

In addition to the regular course meetings, we are likely to have some special meeting dates. I will probably hold a least one meeting in Salem. Also, the interns are likely to be invited to the Alumni Association's annual training session for PSU Advocates.

Final Product

The final product for this capstone course is the development of a web-based guide to the Oregon legislature. The guide will be modeled after a variety of resources that are available on Congress, including the National Journal's *Almanac of American Politics*, Congressional Quarterly's *Politics in America*, and Project Vote Smart's on-line guide to elected officials. The guide will provide political background on each legislator, a description of each legislative district, and some relevant statistical information, such as interest group report cards, past election results, partisan registration figures, district population demographics, and economic measures.

In addition to these traditional resources, I envision the web page being modeled after many political blogs, so that there is a place on the web site where the students in the capstone can share their experiences of working in the legislature and where the readers can contribute their knowledge. There will also be links to other web sites.

During the beginning of the quarter, we will work out what to include on the web site and how the workload will be distributed. It is likely that I will structure the assignments like a newspaper, with editors, writers, and a production team. I thought this might make for a more efficient way to get the product completed. Plus I thought having titles would give you something to put on your resume.

Course Grades

Course grades will be based on two criteria: (1) Part of the grade will be based on the student's performance in the internship. At the end of the quarter, I will talk with the intern's supervisor about the intern's performance. These reports are

taken as recommendations. I will decide the final performance grade. (2) The second factor used to determine a grade is the student's work on the final project.

Additional Rules, Caveats, and Concerns

Information on the Political Science Division's internship program is available through the division Internship Program Guide. The guide is available on line at <http://www.web.pdx.edu/~hprc/Intern%20guide.pdf>. The rules and recommendations spelled out in the guide will apply to the students in this course, with the exception of the course number. Students in this course will be signing up as a capstone, rather than PS 404.

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