

Grigs Peterson  
Congressional Intern  
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### Working on Capitol Hill

This summer I worked as a congressional intern for the Honorable Congressman Jeff Duncan. Working in his office gave me the opportunity to learn a great deal about current legislation and general politics. On a daily basis I spoke with constituents over the phone about their opinions on current legislation, sorted through mail sent in by constituents about the state issues in South Carolina, as well as issues that affect our entire country, and I was trained to provide tours of the U.S. Capitol building to constituents who visited the district during the summer. Each task that I dealt with on a day-to-day basis provided me with a unique learning opportunity that helped me enhance my skills with people, and made it exciting to keep up with current U.S. and foreign politics.

As I did many of my tasks and other objectives this summer it was hard not to notice what was going on in Washington while I was there. Over the past three months the United States government has made or attempted to make many rather important and volatile political decisions for our country. Beginning with the attempted passing of Obama's proposed Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which divided democrats and republicans in the Senate and the House, and this was soon followed by the Supreme Court's decision to allow same sex marriage. The events this summer have and will have a major impact on our economy and our country's moral values. I learned and dealt with many of these issues every day working on Capitol Hill.

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Dealing with constituents on a daily basis was one of the largest tasks I had as an intern. As much of the world knows, this summer the state of South Carolina experienced more negative publicity than any other state in America. The tragedy in Charleston where nine lives were taken by the hand of a mad man made national news. Being in a South Carolina office naturally made me follow the story very closely. Needless to say the entire office was very emotional at times. The tragedy in Charleston also led to a smaller issue that caused national outcry in the U.S. After the shooting the removal of the confederate flag from the South Carolina state house became the most popular story in the news. As an intern I was required to answer phones, emails, and letters about the confederate flag.

The phone was constantly ringing during the summer, especially when congress was voting on a bill or they were simply in session, but the week the confederate flag came down was one of the busiest. Some days we had to eat lunch at our desks in order to answer the amount of phone calls that came in. We received phone calls, letters, and emails from all over the country about the confederate flag. Many wanting to keep it up, but many more demanding it be burned. It was my job to explain to the people that the confederate flag at the state house was a state issue and was not to be decided by U.S. Congress. Also that although Congressman Duncan did represent South Carolina, he was not the congressman voted for in the district of Charleston, he also had no authority to take it down or leave it up. Each letter, email, and phone call had to be answered, that was office policy. No matter how much somebody yelled or said something inappropriate, I was there to answer. Through this experience I learned the value of patience, conversation, and restraint. Despite it being the

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busiest weeks of work it was also one of the fastest issues to go away. The flag was taken down and work turned back to normal.

Another of my daily tasks was to give tours of the United States Capitol. The U.S. Capitol is one of the most beautiful pieces of architecture in the world. I was expected to take large groups of people and show them statues, artwork, architecture, and to know the entire history of the Capitol. Taking large groups through the building was a great way to practice public speaking while also learning about the history of the capitol building myself. I found that I was actually quite good at speaking in public, and answering questions that sometimes threw me off guard. I enjoyed giving tours greatly, but there were many other aspects of my job that I enjoyed as well.

One of the highlights I had while working for Congressman Duncan was being able to shadow him for an entire day. I attended one of the many meetings in his office as well as a hearing about foreign and economic relations with Colombia. Congressman Duncan was the subcommittee chairman for the hearing and is a key decision maker in the matter that is still under evaluation. As an economic major with a minor in Spanish the hearing was incredibly interesting for me. I was able to learn about Columbia's progress over the past ten years, and how it has strengthened relations with the U.S. over the past fifty years, but the matter at hand had to deal with U.S. aid in Columbia to help with relations with a national terror organization called the FARC. The meeting was informative and relevant to my studies with Latin America and my background in economic development.

Shadowing Congressman Duncan was also a great way to learn exactly what a

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congressman does while he or she is in office. They belong to committees and they have meetings with constituents and organizations about passing legislation. It made me look onto possibilities of the future. I believe the hardest part about being a congressman is the pressure you receive from all fronts about what to vote for and against. No matter what they do somebody is going to be upset with how they handled any situation. That is an important lesson for everybody in this world. No matter what decisions you make you will not be able to please everybody; the important thing in congress to do is, let yourself do what you believe is right and what your constituents believe is right. A great example was when Obama's trade Bill came to a vote. Many republicans were pressuring Congressman Duncan to vote for it while his constituents wanted him to vote against it. He himself did not like the idea of the trade bill and so he went against the majority of his peers and voted against it. It was hard for him to do this because many of his friends and colleagues were not happy with him. Through Congressman Duncan I learned a great deal about how to handle oneself in a situation like that. He was a great leader and teacher throughout my summer.

My experience this summer taught me a great deal about our government. Whether it was knowing the insides and outs of the U.S. Capitol building, or answering phone calls, emails, or letters for constituents, everything about Washington was informative. I loved being in the action all of the time. Having the news on everyday and hearing issues that they were discussing, then answering a phone about that exact same issue gave me a sense of knowledge that I felt not many people had. Despite being an intern whose duties sometimes included but were not limited to: sorting mail, making coffee, and giving tours of the capitol, I was able to learn a great deal about what is currently going on in our country today. Although Sewanee is

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not always active with current events I hope to continue to keep up with them throughout the year. That is what I feel is the best way to start a career in politics. Keeping up with current events in the world, knowing where you stand on issues, and knowing where your representative stands on those issues. This can help you become part of team Duncan. I have had many internships over my college career and I found that my congressional internship was the most team-oriented, and intriguing internship I have been a part of, and I truly cherished the experience.