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A Capitol Idea

Aggies learn policymaking process firsthand

by Helen White

Great opportunities to get hands-on experience in work you love don't come along every day.

That's why Genna Meisner applied for the Texas A&M University Agricultural and Natural Resources Policy (ANRP) Internship Program during her sophomore year. The agribusiness major from Knoxville, Tennessee, was chosen to spend her spring semester in 2006 working for the Office of the House Committee on Agriculture in Washington, D.C., performing a whirlwind of duties from routine office tasks to legislative research for the 2007 Farm Bill.

She gained work experience, college credit, networking opportunities and memories to last a lifetime. Her e-mails to friends back in Aggieland give glimpses of adventures both exhilarating and mundane: visiting museums, writing a legislative history of a bill, touring national monuments, attending press conferences, walking in the snow, sitting in on a briefing on NAFTA and the Canada-U.S. trade dispute on lumber, meeting other interns from around the

country, writing a summary on the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement—and opening mail.

To be selected for the program, Meisner completed a rigorous application process that includes an essay and professional résumé; a screening interview with a faculty panel, and two final panel interviews with congressional staff, constituents, commodity groups and more faculty.

"To be selected so early in my college career opened my eyes that what I am learning at A&M can be applied to public policy and have a profound effect on the real world," says Meisner.

The need for interns with a background in agricultural policy was the catalyst for starting the program. In 1990, U.S. Rep. Greg Laughlin of Texas contacted Dr. Ron Knutson with the Agricultural and Food Policy Center at A&M for recommendations for an intern with knowledge of agricultural and natural resource issues to help in his office. Since then, more than 500 Texas A&M students have been selected to serve as

interns for state and national congressional offices and agriculture-related agencies such as the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, USDA or the Texas Department of Agriculture. ANRP interns serve year-round in Congress and every other year during the Texas legislative session. They are considered first-rate by the offices where they work.

"One of the things I have always enjoyed about the A&M program is we could count on very high-quality applicants with agriculture in their background," says Mike Dunlap, legislative assistant with the House Committee on Agriculture in Washington, D.C.

U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards of Texas has hosted an intern from the ANRP Program for the past 15 years.

"As an Aggie, I am proud to have hosted an ANRP intern every year since 1991 and will continue to do so because I believe it is important for students to come to Washington, learn about their democracy, and return home to make a positive difference in their communi-

ties," says Edwards. "There is no doubt that many of the Texas A&M students who come to Washington will become the leaders of tomorrow, and it is a privilege to support them and help them gain valuable experience."

U.S. Rep. Henry Bonilla of Texas, former chair of the Agriculture Subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations, is another longtime supporter of the program.

"Aggies clearly have an ingrained sense of civic responsibility and a deep sense of patriotism," says Bonilla. "These qualities, combined with the high caliber of students Texas A&M University produces each year, provide a level of interns who possess the intelligence, professionalism and ambition lawmakers require to keep a congressional office on track."

ANRP is one of the few agriculturally focused public policy internship programs in the nation, says Cady Auckerman, program director and former intern. Interns are outstanding students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, majoring in a variety of fields, such as animal science, genetics, agricultural economics, agribusiness and agricultural development.

"Our interns get the opportunity to learn about public policy on a wide variety of issues as they relate to their majors, interests and potential career goals—from farm policy to genetics to nutrition or many other issues concerning the food and fiber sector," says Auckerman. "Many interns use the experience they gain to seek careers in public policy immediately upon graduating, while others go on to graduate or law school."

"No matter what the students' ultimate career goals may be, a semester in Washington or Austin broadens their horizons, gives them professional work experience and provides valuable networking opportunities."

Students typically earn six or more hours of academic credit by completing papers, work portfolios and special projects relating to the skills and knowledge they gain during their internships. The majority of congressional internships are unpaid, how-

ever, all participating offices pay their ANRP interns a small monthly stipend. They receive a program scholarship of up to \$2,500 to offset living expenses for the semester and a minimum salary of \$500 a month from the congressional or agency office where they work. The ANRP program provides housing for D.C. interns.

Before leaving for Capitol Hill or Austin, students complete an intensive internship training on living and working in a legislative environment. Josh Maxwell '02, a former intern who now serves as a professional staffer for the House Committee on Agriculture in Washington, says this training was invaluable.

"The great thing about the program is that they put you in a position to succeed," Maxwell says. "They brief you on the proper ways to be an intern and what to expect so that when you get up here, it's not a shock. They put you in a real-life situation of how you're going to work and how the job is really going to be."

In Washington, students live in housing provided by Texas A&M. Auckerman stays in close contact with the interns during the semester to counsel them and help ensure a good experience. A network of supporters—including an on-site residential adviser, former ANRP interns, the National Capitol A&M Club, the Texas State Society and many others—are ready and willing to help.

Congressional interns are also mentored by former Aggie interns. More than 50 alumni currently work in Washington and at least 15 alumni of the program work as staff members in the Texas Legislature.

In the office of the House Committee on Agriculture, Meissner worked with Maxwell, who, during his internship, worked on the 2002 Farm Bill. Now, he has gone all-around, having helped craft the 2007 Farm Bill. Hering worked as an intern, he helped Meissner understand what her role would be—long hours setting up hearings, attending meetings, taking notes, doing research, and helping write some of the legislation, in addition to general office support.

PHOTOS TOP: ANRP interns Gena Meissner (far right) with Joshua Maxwell and Whitney Verrett, former interns who now work in Washington, D.C.

ABOVE: Spring 2006 ANRP interns, Texas A&M Agriculture administrators and other program supporters on the steps of the U.S. Capitol.

Besides the Farm Bill, Meisner says she researched other policy issues such as international trade, environmental issues, nutrition, and "a forestry bill on emergency recovery and research."

Back on campus for her junior year, Meisner continues to seek out opportunities and plan ahead. Her behind-the-scenes look at policy and politics as a congressional intern gave her new career directions and a greater appreciation for "how the real world works and how things get done."

"I'd really like to work with international trade policy, whether with the USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service, a foreign affairs interest group or even back with the Committee on Agriculture on Capitol Hill," Meisner says.

Like Meisner, many interns find that a career in public policy is just what they were looking for. When Allison Scott '02 graduated with a degree in floriculture, she had no plans to work in government. But, uncertain about her career plans, she applied for an internship to learn about the legislature and what opportunities might be available. She worked for State Rep. Brad Swinford and "is now chief of staff for his office."

"I loved the job and the people," says Scott. "I don't see myself leaving this career soon. No matter what I end up doing, I will always be involved in public policy—voting, volunteering and being involved in community issues." Scott hasn't left behind her love of floriculture either. She finds time to work as an event floral designer on nights and weekends.

Whitney Verett '05 knew after her internship that she wanted to return to Washington and work in the area of agricultural policy. After an extensive job search, she found out about an opening in the office of U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama. "Congressman Rogers is on the Committee on Agriculture and I thought it would be a good opportunity, so I sent in my résumé," Verett says. "They liked my ag background and hired me to do their ag work."

Like Maxwell, Verett worked on the 2007 Farm Bill. Her job responsibilities gave her an even greater appreciation for the ANRP Internship Program. "You see how important good interns are and how vital they are to an office," Verett says. "If you have a good intern, it

makes it a lot easier for the staff to do their jobs, knowing they can depend on somebody."

Walt Smith '97 completed his internship while working on his master's degree in agricultural development. "When I got here in '98, Texas was in a severe drought, and the U.S. Congress passed a drought-disaster package for agricultural producers," says Smith. "It really affected me because I knew that package was going to have a direct effect on people back home where I grew up. It really mattered to agriculture and to the local economies there, and that made me aware of what could be done in D.C. and what effects the policy had."

Smith, formerly an appropriations associate with the House Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee in Washington (now with the National Rural Water Association and the Texas Rural Water Association), credits the ANRP internship for shaping not only his career, but also that of many others in D.C. "I interned for Chet Edwards and worked for Larry Combest on the House Committee on Agriculture," says Smith. "I've worked four years for Henry Bonilla, chairman of the House Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee; the Bush administration; and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. In every one of those jobs, I've worked with at least one person who went through the A&M internship program. I could rattle off 10 to 15 people I know who went through the internship and decided not only to stay in Washington, but also are active in farm policy, in agriculture and on Capitol Hill. They all went through the program, enjoyed it, and learned that they could make a difference and had a passion for public service."

To make these experiences possible, all intern scholarships are raised through the generosity of private donors as well as businesses and commodity groups. The Texas Farm Bureau has

been one of the program's longest-running and largest annual supporters. Blue Bell Creameries, Texas Poultry Federation and Ag Workers Mutual also provide vital annual scholarship support. In addition, many groups such as the Plains Cotton Growers, Texas Grain and Feed Association, South Texas Cotton and Grain Association, and the College of Agriculture Development Council have started endowments to assist students.

Jim Prewitt owns wholesale nurseries in Houston, San Antonio, Austin, Fort Worth and Dallas. But before his career in landscaping and nursery businesses, he worked for four years during the 1960s for U.S. Rep. John Dowdy of



Former Congressman Henry Bonilla (center), a longtime ANRP supporter, with Aggie members of his staff in the fall of 2006. Pictured (left to right) are Steve Dutton '94, political science; Sheryl Beretta, '95, elementary education (graduated from Bartlesville Wakarusa College); Brittany Eck '00, political science; Wisk Smith '97, agricultural science, and '99, Master's of Agriculture in agricultural development with an emphasis in agricultural and public policy; Chance YaoWiskie '08, agricultural leadership and development.

Texas in Washington, D.C. Prewitt says that because of his experience in Washington, he has been involved in the political process his entire adult life. That's why he supports the ANRP Internship Program.

"I want to expose top students to the inner workings of government," says Prewitt. "I'm not trying to encourage them to go into politics. But, regardless of what career they choose, they will be

engaged politically because of participating in the process of how policy is formed and legislation is enacted."

Prewitt believes so strongly in the ANRP Internship Program that he and his wife, Paula, created an endowment, contributing \$50,000, which was matched by the College of Agriculture Development Council for a total of \$100,000.

"But we need probably \$3 million," Prewitt says. "I wish more businesses would step up. There is no better way to promote the program than through the students who have been in it. I have a folder of letters I have received, and it is astounding how the students articulate their thoughts and express their grati-

tude for the experience."

Prewitt says the following excerpt is typical of the letters he receives, and this is why he considers it "such a privilege" to support this program:

"My name is Katie Barrows, and I graduated in August [2005] from Texas A&M with a Bachelor of Science in Nutritional Science. Last fall [2006] I completed my congressional internship in the office of Representative Steve Pearce of New Mexico's second district. I cannot begin to thank you for the selfless donation you made that allowed me to participate in such a once-in-a-lifetime experience. . . . Public health policy and legislation concerning children's health is still a great interest of mine,

and once I complete my formal training I have hopes of returning to Washington D.C. . . . Thank you again for your support of such a magnificent program and for the donation you made that helped one Aggie live out her dream. It is my hope that one day I may be able to repay this favor and that I will have the chance to help another young student have the time of her life in our nation's capital."

For more information about being an ANRP intern or how to support the program through a scholarship, go to <http://agintern.tamu.edu> or contact Cady Averkerman '00, program director, at cadyj@tamu.edu or (979) 458-1346.

Where Are They Now? More Alumni Success Stories

Yes Bailey, Agriculture, Food and Trade Lobbyist, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., Washington, D.C. (intern, fall 2002). "The ANRP Internship experience in Rep. [Charles] Stenholm's office changed my life. I fully expected to return home after the internship, but life on Capitol Hill grabbed me and I stayed on as a full-time staffer. My Texas A&M education, the internship and the many great people I met through both, prepared me well for the job I now have."

Natalie Elder, Staff Assistant, U.S. Rep. Artur Davis of Alabama, Washington, D.C. (intern, fall 2004). "I moved to D.C. 10 days after I graduated from A&M. I began my professional career in Congressman Artur Davis' office as the staff assistant in February 2005 and began working on my Master's of Science in Administration degree in the spring of 2006. It all began with my participation in the ANRP Internship Program."

Keith Franks, Legislative Assistant for Agriculture, Trade, and Small Business Issues, U.S. Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, Washington, D.C. (intern, spring 2003). "The internship was an inspiring experience that allowed me to see that no matter the color of your stripes or what your ideals, much like on Kyle Field, Washington requires teamwork to move ahead."

Amy Hansen, Legislative Associate, The Sheridan Group, Washington, D.C. (intern, spring 2006). "Through the internship, I made contacts and found the job of my dreams advocating for children and public health issues. I feel so fortunate that I was chosen for the internship program, and I know it is one of the reasons for my success today."

Suzie Loonam, Law Clerk, Hon. Brian L. Owsley, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, (intern, Washington, D.C., spring 2002, and Austin, spring 2003). "While completing two ANRP internships, I discovered my passion for law and public policy. I was able to work at the Texas Capitol throughout law school, and the experience provided a solid foundation for a career in public policy and law."

Caroline Anderson Rydell, Director, Congressional Relations, American Farm Bureau Federation, Washington, D.C. (intern, summer 1991). "After my internship with [U.S. Rep.] Bill Sarpalius [of Texas], I was offered full-time employment in his office in D.C. From there I became a legislative assistant focusing on agricultural issues, then staff director for the General Farm Commodities Subcommittee, and now I am a director of congressional relations, still working on behalf of U.S. farmers and ranchers."

Christine Marie Sequenzia, Agriculture Legislative Assistant, U.S. Rep. Pete Sessions of Texas, Washington, D.C. (intern, spring 2004). "The ANRP Internship Program opened my eyes to a world I may have never considered. I became enchanted with the diligent and influential work executed by the members of Congress, senators and their staff."

Sarah Whiting, Legislative Correspondent, U.S. Rep. Michael T. McCaul of Texas, Washington, D.C. (intern, spring 2006). "My experience as an intern allowed me to identify an area that I wanted to work in, and it has placed me in a job that provides the knowledge, experience, contacts and position to be an effective advocate both now and in the future."