

Reflections on the Washington Semester

By Sue Bricker

Photos by Alan Florkowski '75

Help Wanted (Male or Female)—Ten or 11 hours per day. Some routine clerical work. May fetch the boss' lunch every now and then. No pay.

As a job description this advertisement probably would get few takers.

But it's not a job description, exactly. Rather, it's a tongue-in-cheek outline of a special educational opportunity that has lured and amply rewarded dozens of UR undergraduates over the past 10 years or so.

The opportunity is the University's Washington Semester, a unique work-and-learn program in the nation's capital for UR juniors.

"The original idea of the program was that legislators could use the tal-

ents of our students, and our students could use the work situation to learn about politics—if it was done on a full-time basis," said Richard Fenno, Don Alonzo Watson Professor of Political Science and Washington Semester adviser. "And that's just the way it has worked out—a beneficial, two-way exchange. Maybe we should call it a three-way exchange, since the returning students surely enrich the life of the campus community."

Fenno, who keeps in close touch with the students during their four- or five-month sojourn, is a nationally known authority on government affairs. And the amount of work indi-

cated in the "Help Wanted" ad doesn't surprise him. "The students are told to expect to work their heads off morning, noon, and night, seven days a week," he said, "because that's what Washington is like."

Like most of the students who have gone through the program in the past, however, the undergraduates enrolled in this spring's program report that the educational advantages clearly outweigh the long hours. In fact, some of the more trivial duties—such as fetching the boss' lunch—can actually lead to special opportunities, they say.

UR junior Ken Berman chats with Congressman Robert Drinan outside the Capitol.



Take the case of Ken Berman, who recently finished an internship in the office of Massachusetts Congressman Robert Drinan. Berman found that sometimes the most mundane tasks had the greatest rewards.

"I would get his (Drinan's) lunch one or two times a week," said Berman. "When I brought it to him he would have me sit down and talk for about half an hour." Drinan would question Berman about his work or they would discuss Drinan's position on current issues.

This opportunity for a UR junior to chat with a Congressman is precisely what the program is all about—and it was student initiative, said Fenno, which got it started. In 1968, undergraduate Robert Sachs met Charles Goodell, then Senator from New York State, during a speaking engagement on campus. Sachs decided he wanted to work for Goodell in Washington for a semester. The political science department and the College

of Arts and Science agreed that with appropriate faculty guidance Sachs could earn academic credit for the project, and off he went.

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Since 1968, the Washington Semester has been a regular program, with a small group of students each

Answering mail from constituents is one of many responsibilities UR undergraduates accept during their Washington Semester. Here, Amy Wachs and Congressman William Cohen discuss a letter from a voter.

year working as full-time interns for the Congressmen or Senators of their choice. They receive a semester's academic credit.

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The seven students who have recently completed the 1977 program agree that, at first, interns are likely to do a lot of clerical work, but legislative responsibilities are added as the regular staff members get to know their abilities. They write

speeches, press releases, memoranda, testimony for hearings, and often deal with other office staffs, executive branch officials, and lobbyists.

Students write statements that find their way into the Congressional

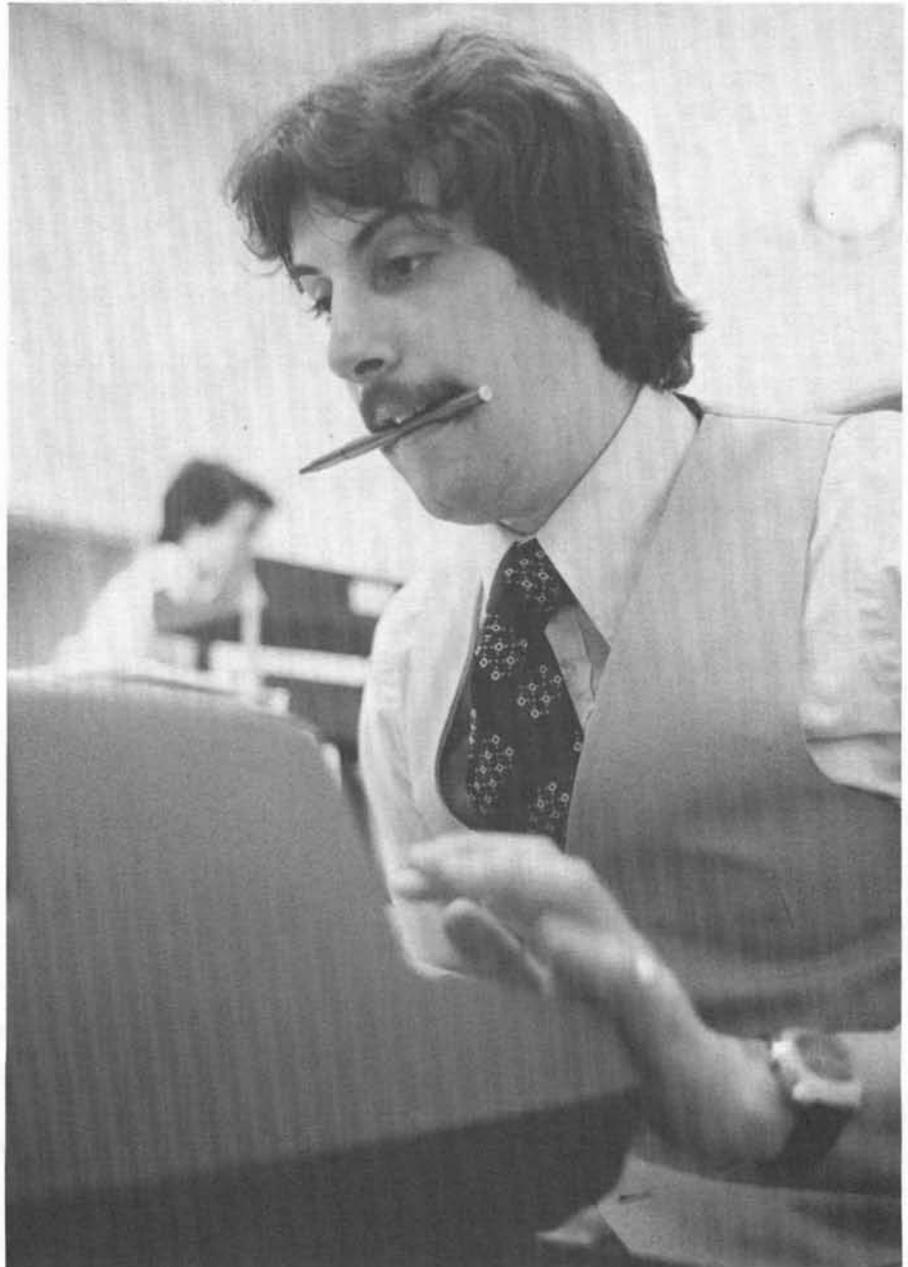
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Record, they do research on major legislation, and they even make recommendations to "their" Congressman on how they should vote on particular bills.

"You develop an area of expertise," said Berman, explaining why a college student might be competent to advise a Congressman. "The final decision on how to vote is based on a number of factors, including staff recommendations."

Berman's "area of expertise" was in air travel. A long-term project on which he assisted throughout the internship was a bill requiring emergency medical supplies on long-distance flights. Working with a legislative assistant, he did research and wrote testimony for Drinan to deliver to the Health Subcommittee of the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee. He also wrote statements on human rights, energy, and foreign relations for Drinan to enter into the Congressional Record.

Berman also found out that "full time" meant just that. His official working hours were 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but more often his days began at 8:45 a.m. and ended at 7:00 p.m. That was his personal choice. "I often logged 10- to 11-hour days," he said, "because the more I did, the more interesting things they gave me to do. I came here expecting

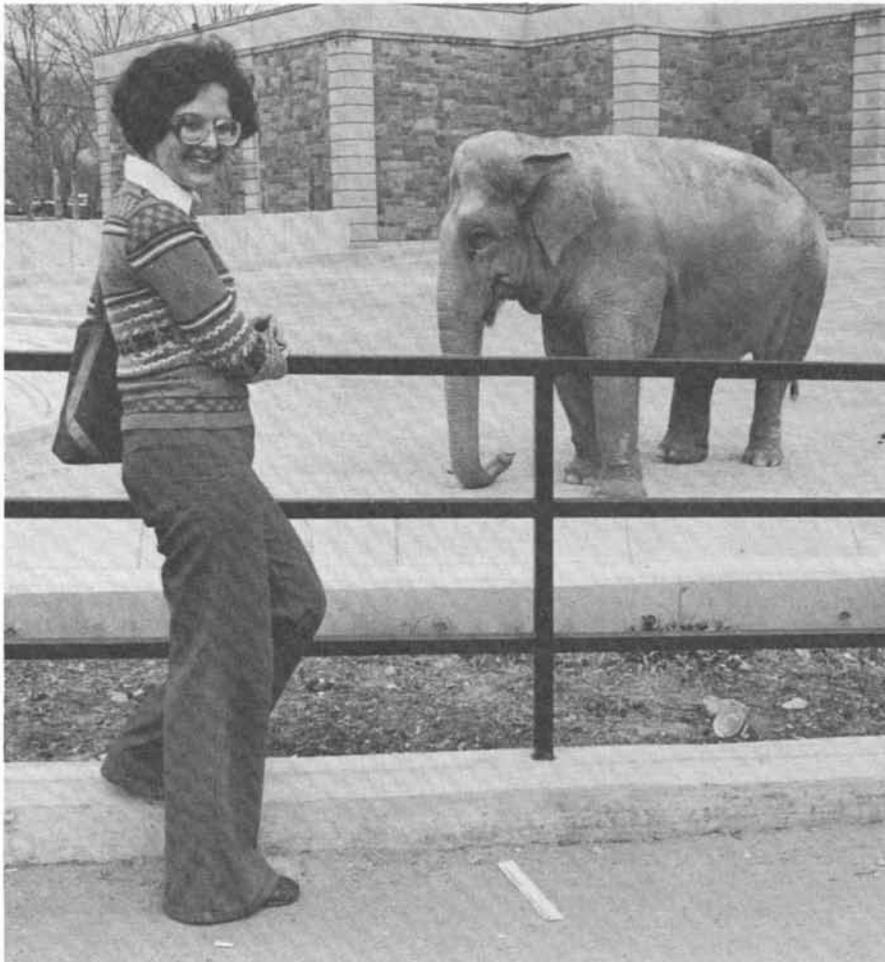


to put in a full day and then go out in the evening, but I was too exhausted for that. I'd come home and collapse."

Boredom, however, was no prob-

lem. "I didn't have the time," he said with a laugh.

For all their efforts, what did the students learn?



"I found out how a Congressional office really operates," said Amy Wachs, who was on the staff of Congressman William Cohen of Maine, "and how Congress and the government function." She also learned about a different part of the country: a resident of Ohio, she tackled problems faced by people living in Maine. (One requirement of the program is that students may not be placed in the offices of their own Representatives or Senators.)

It's fair to say that UR interns learn from every experience they have in Washington, according to Fenno. "If we choose well, the students we turn loose in Congress are students who regard every form of behavior they observe as something to be puzzled over and explained and who regard every idle moment as an opportunity wasted.

"There are benefits on the personal side, too—a broadened cultural perspective, a feeling of personal independence, a developed sense of purpose in their lives," he added.

The students agree. "It was fantastic to be in Washington," said Miss Wachs. "The city is so exciting. And for political science majors, especially, it's so valuable to be here."

Berman cites another benefit: the opportunity to attend receptions as Drinan's representative and to meet government people in an informal setting.

Since the UR program began, about 75 students have interned for Representatives and Senators from about 25 states. Of the approximately 20 applicants each year, only about 10 (or fewer) are chosen. All participants to date have been A students, said Fenno.

Those who are accepted find jobs on their own, although Fenno is available to offer advice. Amy Wachs' experience is typical. She applied to 10

Berman catches a ride on the Capitol Hill subway with Congressman Drinan and Congressman William Moorhead; (below) Amy Wachs poses with a staunch Republican at Washington's National Zoological Park.

Congressmen after studying their voting records, the Congressional Record, and other information. Four offered her an internship. She then went to Washington for interviews and accepted Congressman Cohen's offer.

"I often logged 10- to 11-hour days, because the more I did, the more interesting things they gave me to do."

Legislators ranging from Bella Abzug to James Buckley have offered positions to UR's interns, but the center of gravity, Fenno, said, has remained "heavily liberal, Democratic, and in the House of Representatives." Berman and Miss Wachs worked for New England legislators this spring; Preston Halperin and Randy Hardock for New York State Congressmen; Lori Kohen, Barbara Fishman, and Richard Gordon for Representatives from Iowa, Oklahoma, and Michigan, respectively.

Over the years, problems have been few and minor. Fenno said a small number of students have found they lacked the personal qualities necessary for the program to be successful for them. The prospect of readjustment bothers some students when they think about returning to the campus for their senior year.

Fenno and the interns call the program a success. "It gives the students a chance, in a formative period of their lives, to try on politics for size," said Fenno, "and to think of themselves as future public leaders." Many of them, he believes, will remain active in politics and will help run the public affairs of this country. ■

