

California Assembly's Chief Clerk Internship Program



L – R: R. Brian Kidney (Chief Clerk, retired), E. Dotson Wilson (Chief Clerk), and Brian Ebbert
PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSSELL COLLINS STIGER

by R. Brian Kidney (Chief Clerk, retired)

Mr. Kidney's 28-year career in the clerk's office included service as Chief Clerk from 1987 until his retirement in 1991. During his tenure as Chief Clerk, he launched a successful paid internship program that has proven to be cost effective and productive. Moreover, this program now provides the Legislature with an annual pool of highly trained and vetted intern alumni.

In 1988, I was contacted by Mickey Barlow, the internship coordinator at the University of California at Davis. Mickey told me she had a freshman college student pestering her for an internship at the Capitol – not just any internship, but a *paid* one. I informed her that there

were no such undergraduate interns in the legislature. Accordingly, the student was informed that no paid internships existed, and thanks for inquiring. (I'll return to this student later in this article.)

The idea of paid internships in the Capitol was not a new idea – as it relates to *graduate* students. The Assembly Fellowship program is a graduate level paid internship that has been around since 1957. But the idea of a paid undergraduate program stirred my interest. Mentoring youth has always appealed to me, and since there was a definite need for seasonal help in my office, I aggressively pursued the implementation of the college level internship plan. There were definitely some issues that had to be considered in creating this program. I was the newly elected Chief Clerk with over 20 years of legislative experience, so I recognized the benefits – and potential dangers – of augmenting my staff with young college students. The obvious benefit for the institution was clear: inexpensive labor and a refreshing seasonal influx of energetic, innovative minds. The possible dangers were many, including:

- ▶ immature or incompetent interns delivering shoddy work product;
- ▶ veteran career staff might feel threatened by bright and eager interns learning how to perform some of their duties;
- ▶ the amount of time necessary to properly train and manage interns each year would create a burden on managers; and
- ▶ keeping the interns busy during lulls in the

legislative calendar could be a challenge.

All of these issues would work themselves out in the long run. The most important element I had to consider was creating a real, *working* internship, not just “runner” or “gopher” positions. Like most legislative clerk offices in the nation, there was no room for waste, errors, or incompetence in my organization, so I decided to place one intern in each area of my office under the direct supervision of the manager in that area: the Assembly Desk, the Amending Office, Floor Analysis, and Engrossing and Enrolling.

I determined that these interns would also need to work full time hours, the reasoning: in California’s Capitol, unpaid, part-time college interns are generally scattered throughout Member offices and work 20 hours a week for just a few months. These part-time interns often do not benefit from working as members of a “team” because they are simply not in the office long enough each day to gain knowledge or significant responsibilities. Their limited work schedule tends to restrict their work to basic office duties and constituent correspondence. My interns would need to do *more* than basic office work. They would have to introduce, amend, track, engross, and enroll legislation. Moreover, my interns would have to: (1) work enough hours to meaningfully contribute to the office’s daily work product; (2) the internship would have to span enough months to allow interns time to learn the legislative process and the cyclical nature of the legislative calendar; and (3) the salary would have to be substantial enough to instill a “pride of duty” to the institution.

I determined that to meet these goals, interns would need to work Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and work for approximately 6 months (Spring through the end of Summer). A fair wage of \$1,500 per month was established. The intern with the most Member contact would

be the student working in the Chamber (the Desk). I had the Desk internship begin in February so that s/he could ease into the job and also participate in the introduction of bills. The other three interns were brought on during Spring Recess so that they could obtain training in amending and proofreading before the legislature reconvened.

Given the nature of the intern duties, I needed top notch candidates to choose from. After all, these interns would likely interact with key staff and legislators, and they would also be exposed to confidential conversations and documents. To take advantage of the proximity of the two major college campuses to the Capitol, I sought to open the program to University of California, Davis (UCD) and California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). The respective intern coordinators of each campus, Mickey Barlow and Dr. Jean Torcom, were enthusiastic about the opportunity that this would provide to their students. Because of the number of hours interns would be working, each campus was willing to grant enough college credit to the students to allow them to fulfill minimum enrollment requirements. It was determined that juniors and seniors of all majors would be the best candidates for these intern positions. To earn college course credit, students would be required to attend seminars at their campus and write a paper. In those initial years, each campus coordinator pre-screened applicants and sent their recommendations for interviews to me.

In 1989, the first intern class began work: Darnell Cooley (Floor Analysis), Brian Hogan (Assembly Desk), Nancy Tronas (Engrossing and Enrolling), and Chris Walker (Amending). These interns provided our office with much needed support during hectic session days. I also instituted a Guest Speaker Program on most Fridays. Guests included legislators, lobbyists, media, and key legislative personnel.

This is one of the favorite components of the program for most students. There were virtually no problems encountered during this first year, and the interns were a welcome addition to my staff for those six months.

At the conclusion of the internship, I hired Nancy Tronas for a full-time position in Engrossing and Enrolling. Chris Walker became a lobbyist, and Brian Hogan went into banking. The late Darnell Cooley would eventually become a senior assistant in the Speaker's Office. In 1990, the freshman who had initially inquired about obtaining a paid internship two years prior was finally able to apply for the internship. As one of my last acts as Chief Clerk before I retired, I offered that student the internship he sought for so long. His name: Brian Ebbert. 19 years later, Mr. Ebbert is now Assistant Chief Clerk, and is overseeing the internship program today.

My successor, E. Dotson Wilson (a former Assembly Fellow) was elected Chief Clerk in 1992. Over the ensuing years, Mr. Wilson has expanded the program to include an additional intern. There are now five paid positions paying \$1,750 per month: Assembly Desk, Assembly Floor Analysis, Engrossing and Enrolling, and two Amending interns. Representatives of the Chief Clerk's office now hold informational

meetings on campuses to recruit candidates and also to make it clear to students that this is a full-time, rigorous, working internship. A hiring panel consisting of the Chief Clerk and other managers now conduct interviews each Fall, to sift through the dozens of applications.

The graduates of this internship program can be found throughout California government, often in key positions, for example: Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's Deputy Chief of Staff is Michael Proso (former Engrossing and Enrolling intern) and the Legislative Director of the League of California Cities is Dan Carrigg (former Amending intern). Perhaps more importantly, this program has served to create a vetted pool of potential employees for the legislature. Several legislative offices have intern alumni serving as legislative aides and consultants. Serving as a testament to the success of this intern program, the Assembly Chief Clerk and Secretary of the Senate currently employ nine former Chief Clerk interns, pictured in the photograph below.

Editor's note: Since Mr. Kidney's retirement in 1991, he has stayed active in various civic groups and has also served as a lobbyist. Additionally, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs has sent him to several emerging democracies across the globe, to consult with parliaments in the development of their legislative and constitutional institutions.



L – R: Jaci Delight (Assembly History Clerk); Neva Parker (Senate History Clerk); Mathew Burns (Senate Amending); Tim Morland (Assembly Reading Clerk); Brian Ebbert (Assistant Chief Clerk, Assembly); Bernadette McNulty (Chief Assistant Secretary, Senate); Russell Tomas (Assembly File Clerk); Xochitl Rodriguez (Assistant File Clerk, Assembly), and Jocelyn Aquino (Senate Engrossing and Enrolling).

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