

AMERICA'S CAPITAL AS THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Washington, DC, has been the site of a course offered by the Department of Housing and Consumer Economics, University of Georgia, since 1991. This article describes the development of the off-site course, course mechanics, examples of activities, and considerations for faculty who may wish to develop a similar course. Student comments about the course have been positive, reinforcing the advantages of providing students with first-hand experiences of housing and consumer economics issues.

Introduction

The inspiration for this course began in the late 1980s when Drs. Carol Meeks and Anne Sweaney designed a tour course entitled "New Towns and Planned Communities in Georgia." During the two-week course, the students and instructors toured the state of Georgia and visited Savannah (the first planned community), Peachtree City (a New Town), and various planned communities in Atlanta. Instruction before the trip included problem solving activities and extensive study of the places and concepts the class members were going to experience. This instruction took place on campus. Then, using two university vans, the entire class was transported to the various locations in the state where off-site instruction took place. The course evaluations were so positive that the instructors decided to expand the off-site course idea, and the following year designed an off-site course using the U.S. capital as the classroom.

Building on the work of Dr. Tom Garman (at that time a faculty member at Virginia Tech), who had conducted a very successful "Consumer Policy in Action" course in Washington, DC, Drs. Meeks and Sweaney created the first "Housing and Consumer Policy in Action" course in 1991 (Sweaney, Meeks, Garman, & Zhu, 1996). Since 1991, the Washington, DC, course has been offered during seven school years.

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The off-site course has evolved over the past 12 years. At first the class traveled by coach to the nation's capital and used the coach to visit each of the organizations and agencies during the visit. Currently each student makes his or her own travel arrangements to meet in Washington, DC, at a designated time. Travel during the week is by Metro and taxicabs. These adjustments have been made to provide students a more business-related travel experience. The course is offered every other year, alternating with international experiences in Mexico and London, England. Offering only one off-site course per year helps to ensure that each course is filled to capacity. The course ranges in length from seven to ten days with four to five days of on-campus pre- and post- classroom instruction.

Planning the off-site course begins with a discussion of the key issues and hot topics of the year. Examples of issues studied in the past are predatory lending, housing finance, and energy deregulation. Care is taken to enhance the course content that the students have learned while being enrolled in the courses taught on campus.

Course Mechanics

There are four major objectives of the course:

- Identify major functions and “hot topics” of government regulatory agencies, advocacy groups, and businesses in the area of housing and consumer economics.
- Increase knowledge and understanding of public policy related to housing and consumer economics issues.
- Understand and experience how a bill becomes a law.
- Develop and strengthen professional behaviors and attitudes.

Grading for the course consists of the following:

Exam before students begin tour of Washington, DC	200
On time, looking good (10 points/day)	60
Questions asked at agencies (10 points/day)	60
Professional attitude	60
Team building exercise	50
Exploring Washington, DC	100
Take-home final exam	200
Thank you letters	70
<u>Total points for undergraduate students</u>	<u>800</u>

Graduate students are required to complete the above assignments in addition to one of the following activities.

1. Write a review paper on a topic related to a housing or consumer economics policy that the student would like to learn more about.
2. Develop a learning module on a housing or consumer economics policy issue that could be used in courses taught as part of regular classroom instruction.

Three to four days of classroom instruction takes place before the group travels to Washington, DC, to provide the students with adequate background so they will be able to more fully understand the issues and concepts they will encounter during the site visits. The analysis of public policy is a central theme of the entire experience. A number of policy analysis procedures are used to guide the students through this process (Patton & Sawicki, 1993; Weimer & Vining, 1999).

Research related to the issues and site visits is conducted. Examples of questions students answer about each of the agencies/organizations they will visit are as follows:

- Who are they? What is the function/mission of this agency/organization?
- Who is the head of this agency/organization?
- Why is this agency/organization important?
- What are three current “hot topics” at this agency/organization?
- What are some recent consumer protection or advocacy activities conducted by this agency/organization?
- What are two or three questions you would like to ask the speakers when we visit this agency/organization?

During the classroom instruction sessions ground rules are shared. At this time the requirements of the course are explained, and the point distribution of each of the activities on the syllabus is highlighted. All of the materials are available for the students via WebCT. The web sites for the agencies and organizations are also available on WebCT so that the students can do their research from there.

We have found that the pre-preparation portion of the course is essential for smooth facilitation of the course. The Washington, DC, portion of the course moves very quickly and there is little time for housekeeping matters. During the trip the students are completely immersed in the learning experience which integrates course content and activities related to concepts they learned in their classes on campus.

Examples of Activities

The majority of agencies and organizations visited in the capital go beyond the call of duty to host the class. They often prepare interactive activities as part of their presentations. Two years ago the presenters at the AARP designed a social marketing exercise for the class focusing on predatory lending. Working with the Atlanta AARP in the Fall of 2001 another housing class continued the marketing program by distributing predatory lending leaflets to neighborhoods in Athens,

Georgia, that were at high risk of this activity. The class conducted demographic research on the neighborhoods and actually talked with elderly residents about how to be aware of and avoid predatory lending.

An example of an activity planned by Dan Rumelt from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for the course in May 2003 is as follows. The program will consist of about an hour and 15 minutes of presentations and discussion, followed by an interactive rulemaking session. The interactive session will condense several years of rulemaking into a maximum of 45 minutes. The students will be conducting a mock rulemaking on driver use of cell phones in cars. In advance six individuals will be designated, three who will serve as commissioners, one who will represent the FCC staff, one who will represent industry, and one who will represent consumer/public interest groups.

Mr. Rumelt will prepare briefing materials and instructions for each student. The students will make two to three minute presentations to the commissioners based on the materials they receive prior to visiting the FCC. The commissioners will comment on what they hear and ask questions about the presentations. Time permitting, the rest of the class can comment and ask questions about the proceeding (representing public input). Then, the commissioners will vote for one of four ballot options presented to them. They may need to deliberate in order to arrive at a majority decision. Commissioners will need to explain the rationale for their votes. All of the students will review the materials in advance so they can begin the session knowing their positions and have some time to think about their presentations. The objectives of the interactive session are to create an understanding of how different positions and perspectives are presented and reflected in government decision-making and how the policy-making process affects us in our everyday lives.

Where Do We Stay?

To keep the program fee affordable, housing has been secured at local universities. Lodging is available either single- or double-occupancy and is much more affordable than most hotel accommodations. The facilities and locations vary, and each has advantages and limitations. Catholic University has suite-type units as well as traditional dorm rooms. It is located near a Metro stop and offers very secure housing with magnetic key access to the gated campus and individual dormitories. One advantage of Catholic University is that there is a possibility to have the students housed on a single floor of a one small dormitory, which also has a large television room on the floor where group meetings can be held.

George Washington University (GWU) also offers suite-type units and is located near a Metro stop. GWU is more centrally located so that travel time is not as long going to and from the various appointments. The university also has exercise

facilities that are available for our students, and there is a variety of dining options within walking distance. Another plus for GWU is that the hospital is nearby.

American University is located in a very nice residential area and offers traditional dorm rooms. The Metro stop is farther away from other lodging options, but there is a shuttle that runs to the Metro station on a regular basis. There are numerous fast food options on campus. American University is a dry campus and security is at a high level. Laundry and kitchen facilities are available on each floor of the dorms.

Where Have We Visited?

Drawing ideas from professional colleagues and friends we have made over the past 20 years or so, we have been fortunate to be able to offer students experiences that few are able to share. Following is a partial list of the organizations and places visited over the years:

- Federal Reserve Bank Board Room; chance to sit around Greenspan's table
- Fannie Mae Trading Room and Community Programs Department
- National Home Builders Research Center, with visits to test houses
- Security and Exchange Commission
- Consumer Product Safety Commission
- AARP, including a social marketing activity on predatory lending
- Federal Trade Commission
- Federal Communications Commission
- Freddie Mac
- The World Bank
- The Capitol, with lunch in the Members Dining Room
- Department of Housing and Urban Development, Policy Development and Research
- U.S. Department of Agriculture
- Manufactured Housing Institute
- Federal Housing Finance Board
- Housing Assistance Council
- National Building Museum
- American Express

What to Consider if You Want to Develop an Off-Site Study Course

- Begin early as the course will require careful planning and attention to detail.
- Gain support of your administration.
- Check with the legal affairs department at your university. There will be contracts to sign, and you will need their support to guide you through the legal documents. The university may require students to sign a waiver of liability form and have proof of insurance.
- Identify a theme and focus on content that enhances the specific curriculum.
- Draw on the expertise of your professional associations; they will be more than happy to assist with local arrangements and will offer ideas of experiences for the students.
- Develop a budget. The student program fee will probably need to cover the expenses of the course unless you have a sponsor.
- Create a recruiting plan. The first time the course is offered it may be more difficult to fill the class than the following years. Once you have a successful experience word of mouth will be your best advertisement.
- Locate alumni from your department who are living and working in the area, and include them in the program. This will provide the students employment ideas and reinforce the fact that people from the department have become gainfully employed in exciting occupations. Alumni enjoy meeting current students and are usually eager to share their professional experiences with the students and give career advice.
- Plan classroom instruction on campus for students before they leave campus and after they return from the tour for a debriefing. Before the trip, necessary background information needs to be provided. Afterward, a debriefing and sharing of experiences will benefit the students.

What Do Students Think about the Experience?

After each course the students are asked to reflect on what they have learned and in general comment on the experience. Following are some of the students' comments about their most memorable experiences.

"My most memorable experiences included my opportunities to network, interview, and receive great advice. In addition, our group was so diverse and we had a great chance to know each other."

Chantal Desplanque, Consumer Economics

"I enjoyed meeting the Congressmen and seeing first-hand how things operate. It was an unbelievable time."

Kelly Garges, Housing

“My most memorable experience was the Day at the Capitol. Meeting the Senators and Congressmen [sic] opened my eyes to how our country began and now operates. It was fun to eat at the Members Dining Room.”

Lindsay Johnson, Child and Family Development

“I liked going to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) the most. The Federal Reserve Bank and the SEC were the most interesting.”

Candler Willson, Housing

“Have an open mind before you go to DC. The things that you will experience will touch you deeply.”

Ezra Williams, Child and Family Development

“My most memorable learning experience came from the World Bank because it is a powerful source of relief for poverty throughout the world.”

Donald Stewart, Housing

After years of offering off-site courses, we have had some time to evaluate some of the benefits associated with the experience. The most authentic assessments of the course are the comments we have received from students five or more years after they completed the course, and when they have had time to reflect on its content. Here is a sample of the comments provided by students over the years highlighting benefits of the course.

- Meeting professionals in the field
- Clarifying pro- and con-positions on current issues
- Recognizing that affecting change in the real world takes time
- Offering the opportunity to add realism to the knowledge and information gained during the student’s college years
- Finding employment ideas and opportunities not previously aware of without the course
- Adding value on the resume, showing that the student has taken advantage of learning opportunities beyond the classroom

Summary

After planning, teaching, and evaluating the “Housing and Consumer Policy in Action” course we often ask ourselves: “Is it worth all of the work?” Every time our final answer has been “yes” and we begin planning the course for the next time. The course has given a lot of visibility for our undergraduate and graduate programs. The agencies and organizations visited think of our programs when they have a research project to conduct or a position to fill. On the off years when

the course is not offered, we often field the question: “Are you bringing our class to DC this year?” In the final evaluation, is offering an off-site course worth the time and effort? Michael Johnson, a senior majoring in housing and a member of the class during the summer of 2001, gave the real reason we continue to offer the course when he said, “I learned to open my eyes to new things.” If anyone is interested in learning more about our course we will be happy to share our materials with you.

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