New York-Washington Trip Opens Students’ Eyes to What Is Possible

By Tom Martin, Executive-in-Residence, Department of Communication

On Monday, March 3, as the College of Charleston 2014 Spring Break began, the weather in our nation’s capitol was something less than spring like. As students awoke that morning, a moderate snow was falling in Washington, the government had already shut down, schools were closed, taxi service was sporadic and it looked as if most businesses would join the crowd and close for the day.

Yet a hardy group of ten College of Charleston Communication majors had other ideas. As the faculty member in charge of organizing the trip and accompanying the students for the week, I was pessimistic about our chances of completing that day’s scheduled site visits. I had just arrived myself via Amtrak and found that moving around the city was challenging to say the least. Without taxi service I had taken the Metro to a station fairly close to my hotel and then trudged through the snow the last half mile.

I started checking with our hosts for the day and some of the students and it soon became clear that the students who had been able to make it to the District were eager to brave the weather and make the visits happen. Thankfully, we were able to re-arrange the schedule, adjust some of the speakers to cover people who couldn’t make it in from the frozen suburbs and carry on. By noon we had the day’s schedule in place and we were gathered in the conference room of FleishmanHillard, one of the world’s largest global communications firms. The day was on.

This is the sixth year that the Department of Communication has organized a student trip of this nature. The first one, in 2008, was to Atlanta via three 15-passenger vans. More than 40 students participated in that first trip, visiting locations such as UPS, The Home Depot, Ketchum and FleishmanHillard. The response to that trip was so positive that we organized subsequent trips to Washington, New York, and the Upstate. In all more than 150 students have participated in these trips and for many the results have been truly life-changing. Many students who went on the trips are now living and working in the communications field in New York, Washington and Atlanta.
One of the keys to the effectiveness of the trips is the active participation of the department’s Advisory Council. This group of 40 leaders in the profession has been active in the Department of Communication since 2003, visiting campus twice a year, serving as mentors and role models and organizing student forums on campus. For the student trips Council members serve as hosts, opening up their agencies and corporate departments to the students, hosting breakfasts, lunches and receptions, and utilizing members of their teams to present to the students.

On the most recent trip a total of 18 students visited corporate communication departments at companies such as IBM, ThomsonReuters and Time, Inc. The trip also included presentations at leading agencies, such as Ketchum, Edelman, Landor and FleishmanHillard. In Washington the group met with Mike McCurry, who served as Press Secretary to President Bill Clinton, and Greg Schneider, who worked in the White House under President Jimmy Carter. Both McCurry and Schneider are long-time members of the Advisory Council and helped develop the idea for the Bully Pulpit series on Presidential Communications that the department has hosted since the Presidential election of 2008.

While in Washington, the group also spent time on Capitol Hill, meeting with the communications and legislative staff of Senator Lindsay Graham. They also toured the Washington bureau of CNN where they met CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer and visited the sets for the Situation Room and The Lead with Jake Tapper.

During the week, the students also participated in two receptions with CoFC Department of Communication alumni and Advisory Council members in both Washington and New York. At these receptions the students were able to hear firsthand how the alumni had gotten their starts in these potentially intimidating markets. By sharing their stories, the alumni were able to reassure the current students that anything was possible. They shared excellent advice on networking, preparing for interviews, and gaining relevant experience through quality internships.

The students’ reactions to the events are best summed up in their own words. I received many thank you notes from students commenting on the impact of the week on their lives. A few of their comments stand out:

“All of the sites that we visited really opened my eyes to new careers and paths in the field of communications. It was such a privilege to meet such driven and inspiring
people who really are passionate about their careers, as well as helping us CofC students."

"After visiting so many great firms this week and hearing from the best of the best in the communications world; they have inspired me to give it a shot and see how I like it. The people at these firms all said that communication skills lend themselves to anything from journalism to branding to editorial, and that people are transient in communications and move from PR to journalism or vice versa. I want to take advantage of everything I am learning in the CofC Communication department so by trying out PR after being inspired from this trip, I believe I will be doing just that."

"I truly learned a lot and took home more knowledge than I had before. I cannot thank you enough for allowing me to be a part of this wonderful opportunity. I can't say enough how phenomenal of an experience this was for me, and I look forward to attending again in the future!"

These are just a sampling of the sentiments I have heard from the students. These trips have truly made a difference in their lives and the full impact will only be felt as time goes on and their experience level grows. They will never forget the experience, and neither will I.