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Institute Sponsors Latino Legislative Civic Education Day

On April 4th 2017, the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute sponsored Latino Legislative Civic Education Day at the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield. The event offered 18 students from Southern Illinois University Carbondale the opportunity to visit the Illinois Statehouse to meet House and Senate lawmakers including members of the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus and representatives from various branches of state government to learn about internship opportunities at the Capitol.

“It was a terrific experience for our students,” said Vincent Sadowski, a social work graduate intern at the Institute who helped organize the day’s activities. “Seeing first-hand the way the students were inspired by the visit made all the hard work that went into planning the event very worthwhile. The feedback we received from our group was overwhelmingly positive and after spending many hours at the Capitol, they still wanted to stay even longer to meet with lawmakers.”

Students had the opportunity for question and answer sessions with Senator Iris Martinez of Chicago (Majority Caucus Whip), Senator Martin Sandoval of Chicago (Legislative Latino Caucus Co-Chair), Senator Omar Aquino of Chicago, Representative Elizabeth Hernandez of Cicero, Representative Cynthia Soto of Chicago, Representative Linda Chapa LaVia of Aurora, Representative Will Davis of Homewood, Representative Fred Crespo of Hoffman Estates (Legislative Latino Caucus Co-Chair), Representative Art Turner, Jr. of Chicago, and Representative Sara Wojcicki Jimenez of Leland Grove. The students also met and were publicly recognized from the Senate floor by Senator Paul Schimpf of Waterloo and by Representative Terri Bryant of Murphysboro from the House floor.

“Visiting Springfield for the first time and having as much access as we did, completely took me by surprise,” said Oneida Vargas, a sophomore majoring in political science with a pre-law focus from Chicago. “Walking through the building and sitting in both the Senate and House chambers, allowed me to picture myself working there -- it gave me a different perspective on public policy and being in Springfield.”

Karla Rosado, a junior majoring in International Studies from Pleasant View, Tennessee, agreed: “The discussions we had with lawmakers were very inspiring to me because a lot of them were

just normal citizens who decided they wanted to make a difference for their communities through public service. I was also very encouraged by hearing Spanish spoken in the Capitol really affected me because that is a part of my culture that I do not often get to use.”

Students learned about what the life of an intern at the Capitol entails and how beneficial the experience can be from the panel “Student Life as an Intern” comprised of current and past interns from the Paul Simon Institute, including Travis Washington and Ryan Gougis, and lobbyist Gabe Lopez, who has years of experience working with interns at the capitol. Students also gleaned insights into internship and career possibilities in Springfield through the panel discussion “Governmental Action and the Impact on Diverse Communities.” Panelists included Nelson Aguiar, associate director for Adult Education and Family Literacy, Illinois Community College Board; Nicola Cortez, legislative liaison, Illinois Department of Transportation; Derek Cantu, lieutenant governor policy analyst, former Dunn fellow; Hector Villagrana, legislative liaison, Health & Family Services. The group also met with former Institute student employees and interns in a gathering hosted by Steve Brown, press secretary to House Speaker Michael J. Madigan and an SIU alumnus.

The event was hosted by the Institute, the Center for Undergraduate Research & Creative Activities, and the Latino/Hispanic Resources Council at SIU to generate interest in the Institute’s Latino Heritage Legislative Internship Program that provides at least one student the opportunity for a paid internship working with members of the Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus in Springfield during the spring session of the General Assembly.

“Nothing convinces students like seeing with your own eyes, and getting direct access to legislators makes the whole process more real, more concrete, and the great response we got from our legislators really raised their interest,” said Linda Baker, university professor at the Institute.