

Data Analysis to Press Releases

Lauren Webster, Intern 2016, Central Washington University

I am an economics major at Central Washington University. At its root, economics is the study of the “efficient allocation of scarce resources.” For my major I intensively study things like supply and demand and market structures, and how to solve complex problems with Excel. Basically, I study things that I can’t talk to my family or friends about because it will bore them to death.

What most people don’t know is that I get the tremendous privilege to pull a veil back to reveal how the economy really works. There is so much to be studied. There are so many misconceptions about the economy, what economics is, and what helps the economy and what hurts it. In my classes we end up talking about public policy all the time. We talk about how policy is implemented, what data would benefit the policymakers, and sometimes how we as economists could help.

When my advisor told me about the Washington Legislative Internship, I knew it would be a great opportunity to see what all my economics knowledge could do in a place where so much policy is made. I was thrilled to be accepted. And I wondered...will I be assigned to a Senator’s office? To a group of Representatives? The answer was neither. I was assigned to work with the communications staff in the Senate Majority Coalition Caucus. I wasn’t assigned to one Senator, or Representative, I was assigned, in a collective kind of way, to the 26 Senators who make up the MCC. I wasn’t sure what to expect. Would I get to work on drafting policy? Would I be applying even an ounce of all my hard work studying economics into my ten weeks of interning for the Legislature? The answer, again, was something different. In a very good sort of way.

Like a good economist, I have always thought it is all about the data. We can’t implement anything without data. We can’t survive without data. And because economics is about data, then economics is clearly the most important major in the world. Why would you choose to study anything else? There is always tension between social science majors and the other majors, but we all tend to forget about one thing: how to effectively communicate. This sounds so easy because we communicate every day in one form or another...but from

working with the amazing communications staff here, I can tell you it is not. It is truly an art.

My economist's attention to detail has helped me with writing dozens of press releases about the young people who come here to serve as pages for the Senate. It has helped me draft resolutions that have been passed by the Senate, and handle other writing projects. In economics you don't just see the explicit costs of something, you see the implicit. The same goes for everything else. There is never just a yes or no answer. There are so many differing opinions here in the Legislature, and it can all come down to one line in a newspaper editorial, or a speech on the Senate floor, to set people off. One wrong word and people go into a frenzy. Or pick the right word and people are engaged. My economist's ability to see something from dozens of angles has allowed me to better observe how a communications staff balances their day to day responsibilities.

You can have all the data in the world, the best statistics, big fancy graphs, but if you can't communicate your findings, what good is it? Without the MCC communications staff, fewer people would know how important the work is here at the Capitol, who it impacts, and why they should care in the first place. At Central we work in teams to split up work and get the best data analysis possible. We all see the implicit in different ways. And that dynamic is what causes the analysis to be so complete. I have observed throughout my internship that the staff here applies the same dynamic way of thinking. Legislators spend so much of their time making policy that so it falls to others – including me -- to effectively communicate their thoughts or ideas. A single writer might put on five different hats to write for five different senators or representatives, who serve different parts of our state. The public information officers have to think of all the implicit ramifications of phrasing something a certain way. It is the same way an economist must think of all the implicit ramifications of proposing policy suggestions.

I use data to show why you should care. Thanks to this internship I can also effectively communicate why that data should make you care.