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Focus on D.C.

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Focus on D.C.

RILEY INSTITUTE PROGRAM GIVES TEACHERS FIRSTHAND LOOK AT NATION'S CAPITAL

Tours of the White House and the Supreme Court. A visit to the Capitol. Meetings with representatives, press secretaries, congressional aides. Trips to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Smithsonian Institute, the American History Museum and more.

For 10 teachers of government from South Carolina, this was Washington, D.C., up close and personal.

Selected from a large pool of applicants to be the first participants in a program to be sponsored each year by Furman's Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership, they spent two weeks in July immersed in the study of American government and politics. After a week at Furman, where they attended classes and seminars and built group camaraderie, they traveled on to Washington, where their mission was to absorb the sights, sounds and inside stories of the national government.

And everything was free. The Riley Institute picked up the tab as part of its public service efforts.

Program coordinator Elizabeth Smith of the political science faculty says that the Summer Institute gives teachers an opportunity to update their knowledge of American government, political trends, foreign policy and international affairs. They learn about innovative teaching approaches (such as parliamentary simulations and mock trials), share lesson plans, and observe the national government firsthand. For Kristin Whitley Owens '92, a teacher at Byrnes High in Duncan, the trip meant "actually seeing what you talk about when you teach your courses."

The centerpiece of the program was the week in Washington. Accompanied by two Furman professors and an administrative assistant, the teachers toured the White House and the Supreme Court. They also tried to tour the Capitol, only to find parts of it blocked off because President Bush had decided it was a good day to lobby Congress about the patients' bill of rights. Despite the president's poor timing, the group was still able to observe the House of Representatives in session and briefly watch a committee hearing.

One of the trip's highlights was a chance to meet with three members of the South Carolina delegation — Reps. Jim Clyburn, Jim DeMint and John Spratt — and the chief of staff from Sen. Ernest F.



The first class in the Summer Teachers Institute for South Carolina teachers of government. Kneeling, from left: Chris Burkett, Dutch Fork High, Irmo; Garrett Walker '99, Gregg Middle, Summerville. Standing, from left: Don Gordon, Furman; Kristin Whitley Owens '92, Byrnes High, Duncan; Bobby Behr '78, Summerville High; Rob Walter, The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars; Cynthia Capers, Summerville High; Laura Graham, Springfield Elementary, Charleston; Carol Asalon, Furman; Elizabeth Abramson, Camden High; Glenda Hucks, Aynor High; Mike Burgess, Spring Valley High, Columbia; Harriet Herndon, Marlboro County High, Bennettsville; Danielle Vinson, Furman.

Hollings' office. In these sessions, the teachers asked about such issues as education reform and Social Security, and learned more about what influences their representatives' votes. According to Owens, it was "eye-opening" to see how difficult it can be to influence policy.

Bobby Behr '78 of Summerville High used the meeting to do a little lobbying. Fulfilling a promise to his students, he delivered to Senator Hollings' office a petition against removing vending machines from the public schools. The students planned to publish the senator's response in their school paper.

The teachers also met with several individuals who work behind the scenes, including a staff member from the House Education and Workforce Committee, a representative of the Republican National Committee, and a congressional press secretary. Said Chris Burkett of Dutch Fork High in Irmo, "I knew the job descriptions of these people, but now I've heard their real world experiences and have stories I can take back to my classes."

Another goal of the Summer Teachers

Institute is to connect teachers to resources they can use in their classes. To that end, they met with representatives of the College Board, the Smithsonian Institute and C-SPAN. They also took advantage of the city's many cultural offerings by visiting such sites as the Holocaust museum, the Newseum (which focuses on the media) and the American History Museum.

At the beginning of the two-week program, Glenda Hucks, who teaches at Aynor High near Myrtle Beach, said she wanted to bring Washington back to her students in rural South Carolina, many of whom have not traveled outside the state. At the end, Hucks and her colleagues were ready to return to their classes with renewed enthusiasm and creative ideas to help make the study of government more real and interesting to their students.

— Danielle Vinson '89

The author, a professor of political science, accompanied the group to Washington with departmental colleague Don Gordon and staff member Carol Asalon.