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HOWARD STUDENTS FIND CAPITOL HILL NEEDS MORE MINORITIES

By Henry Duval

Few Americans ever get an inside view of the legislative drama that unfolds on Capitol Hill in shaping national policy. Oran Alston, a Howard University sophomore, is an exception.

While interning recently on the staff of Sen. Alan J. Dixon, D-Ill., he found that the legislative cast -- even when working on issues affecting minorities -- includes only a few minorities.

During a Senate staff briefing in November on the Civil Rights Commission controversy, he noticed that not more than eight blacks and two Hispanics, out of an estimated 65 persons, attended the meeting. And all of the blacks weren't even Senate staffers, he recalls, pointing out that some represented the NAACP and the National Urban League.

"The presence just wasn't there. Only a few of us are working on issues that affect us the most, such as the Civil Rights Commission issue," Alston concludes.

The 19-year-old student majoring in computer-based information systems also witnessed "tons of negative mail" that poured into Sen. Dixon's office opposing legislation making Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday. "There was very little positive mail coming in. I was getting worried."

So Alston took the initiative to inform the folks back home in Waukegan, Ill., of the "power of the pen" -- the importance of letting legislators know one's opinion on issues -- to drum up support.

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Alston is one of a number of students from the predominantly black Howard University in Washington working on Capitol Hill and gaining political insight on how national policy is formulated.

"We're in a position in Washington, D.C., to make change," says Marilyn Johnson, a legislative analyst with the university's federal affairs office who has also worked on Capitol Hill. "There are very few minorities working on the Hill. And most who do, work in the offices of the members of the Congressional Black or Hispanic caucuses," she says.

"Generally, you've got to know someone on the Hill, have experience, or be involved in politics on the state or local level, which minorities don't generally do," she stresses. "We are usually recipients of the policies rather than the formulators of national policy."

When Danny Sims, a 21-year-old Howard senior, began working last spring on the staff of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., he noticed that he was the only black intern of 30 interns on Kennedy's staff. The others, he says, were primarily from the senator's home district, or from Harvard, Yale or Stanford, and came from upper middle class and well-to-do families.

The Atlanta native, who had previously worked as an intern with Rep. Wyche Fowler Jr., D-Ga., interned for two semesters and helped pave the way for other Howard students to work on Kennedy's staff.

The political science student, who has his sights on law school, hopes his experience will satisfy his immediate goal of working as a legislative or research assistant on Capitol Hill when he graduates in May. "There's so much happening on the Hill -- on various issues

"I think it has made a difference majoring in political science in Washington as far as my career goes," says Sims, who has also worked as an intern in the Washington office of Ohio Gov. Richard Celeste. "Who knows? I might seek a seat in Congress one day!"

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"Danny has a lot of enthusiasm for and interest in helping the black community and society in general," says Andrea Young, a legislative assistant on Sen. Kennedy's staff, and daughter of Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young. But whether a student-intern aspires to be a political insider or not, Young notes that the "real value of the internships" is that they help make students civic-minded adults.

Many Howard students working on Capitol Hill get there through the university's political science internship program, says Dr. George Jenkins, program coordinator, acknowledging that some students make their own connections. "We're planning to send nine more students on the Hill this semester," he says, adding to some eight who are already there.

The political science program offers internships for academic credit in government agencies, non-profit community service organizations as well as Congress. The university's public administration program also places students on the Hill and in other agencies.

M. Arnita Hannon, senior legislative assistant to Rep. Parren J. Mitchell, D-Md., completed Howard's graduate program in public administration in 1981 and stresses that it's important for minorities seeking internships or employment on Capitol Hill "to network." And it's up to those already working in Congress to look out for minorities seeking positions.

The former president of the Congressional Black Associates, a group of black congressional staffers, points out that an initiative has been taken in the House that may lead to further opportunities for minorities on the Hill. She notes that 80 House members have signed an agreement -- the House Fair Employment Practices Agreement -- to be held accountable for discrimination based on race, sex, marital status or handicap. "I applaud it. I'm glad to see it. I think it's a good effort," she says, emphasizing that there are no equal employment opportunity regulations governing Congress.

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Ralph B. Everett, Democratic chief counsel and staff director of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, says the nation's voters can have a great say on employment opportunities in Congress by electing representatives who will be sensitive to their needs. "The voters can serve as the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) of Congress. That's why it's important for minorities to participate in the political process as Rev. Jesse Jackson has been preaching around the country," says the first black Senate staff director.

Most interns answer constituent mail, attend and monitor legislative committee hearings, do legislative research and generally assist legislative staffs, including running errands. Some become paid congressional staffers.

One Howard student, Russell George, 20, is now working as a part-time clerk in Sen. Robert Dole's office. "It has always been a dream of mine to work on the Hill," says the junior majoring in political science.

"Russell George first walked into my office some 2½ years ago as a lifelong Democrat but expressing an eagerness to see what we Republicans had to offer," says the Republican senator from Kansas. "Well, he still works for me so I guess he likes it. Russell is a loyal worker who brings a youthful enthusiasm to the job, and that's something you can never get enough of on Capitol Hill

"I have always said the Republican party needs to do a better job in reaching out to all segments of American society," Dole points out, noting that George, Georgetown University's basketball All-America Patrick Ewing and author Alex Haley's nephew, David Haley, among other minorities, have worked on his staff.

Another Howard student, journalism senior Joseph Perkins, is working part-time with Rep. William Clay, D-Mo., writing speeches, editing a book and ghost-writing a weekly newspaper column. "I hope I am making a member (of Congress) more effective in what he's doing. By virtue of that, I'm making a small contribution," says Perkins, who was crowned the nation's top collegiate journalist in editorial writing last year by the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi.

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Sheila Smith, a recent graduate of Howard who worked as an intern on the staff of Rep. Jim Moody, D-Wis., has returned to her native Milwaukee and will serve as a part-time field representative in Moody's district office. "I would like to get involved in local politics in Milwaukee. That has always been my aim," declares the political science graduate planning to enroll in law school.

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