

# Public Service's Eye-Opening Effect

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I approached my first local government internship seeking to learn hard, nitty-gritty research skills. I wanted to learn “how the sausage is made,” and to be certain, a colleague hit me with this cliché within three days of my start. The work that goes into making the proverbial sausage however is highly formative for someone at an early point in their career. There's red tape to slash, regulations to research, and each step teaches both specific technical knowledge, as well as transferrable organizational and management skills, among a host of other highly valuable traits.

Frankly, I didn't see this summer internship dictating my next career paths. I found myself looking 15 steps ahead, and I didn't expect work in sustainability policy to be all that relevant for me, though my work with Albemarle County came to be highly formative. Much of my career experience up to this point had involved organizations that were topically interesting to me, though I found that as I rounded out my undergraduate career, I was afraid that I had set myself up poorly to approach my next career goals post-grad. I hope to apply to law school and find myself a career involving civil rights law, and so I was finding that my experiences working in sustainability projects and organizations had left me feeling ill-prepared. However, I was intrigued by this internship as a potential bridge into working in the public sector, as work in, or adjacent to, the public sector could well be in my future. However working in local government forced me to confront head-on the ways that climate action affected citizens, and coming out of this internship I feel that I have a broader understanding of the solutions and implications for climate change.

My supervisor frequently tasked me with researching and synthesizing wide-ranging information into digestible formats, to be understood and applied to the development of a climate action plan for Albemarle County. One of the aspects of working in local government that I did not anticipate was that I would go on to pay quite a bit of attention to what *other* counties and cities were doing, in order to inform our own model. I recall from high school civics, learning about the expectation of “laboratories of democracy” in the American federal system. Albeit not a direct translation, this felt to me like a very real application of this concept- one locality looking to others across the country to see what worked, what didn’t work, what was on the horizon, and what the cutting edge might look like. In this, I have felt a realization of the lessons of years of civics and American history courses, almost as though I’ve found an applicable use (ha...ha...ha) for my American Studies degree!

Working in local government as well taught me a great deal about the intersectionality of the issues we were dealing with. While I did not foresee this internship ushering in a long-term career for me, I quickly was confronted with the ways that my interests in civil rights interacted with my interests in sustainability and climate change mitigation. When the City of Charlottesville adopted a carbon neutrality target this summer, several organizations dedicated to the protection of vulnerable populations gave support. In reading the Charlottesville report, considering its implications on the developing Albemarle plan, I remember being confronted by organizations whose jobs I had considered applying post-grad, and with that, I came to terms with how overlapping my interests were. I understood on an abstract level that climate change would affect vulnerable populations first, and that there could hypothetically be a career in addressing these issues together, though it was my hands-on experience with my local government internship which forced me to realize just how much overlap there truly was in my experiences and interests.

I expected to learn about how the sausage was made, and to dip my feet into the frustrations and rewards of public service, though I did not expect for this internship to teach me so much about my own interests. The hands-on, independent work that I was given through this internship has helped to shape my next career steps, and has empowered me to incorporate my interests in sustainability with my interests in social justice.