

# From Student to Staffer

A Dickinsonian's Guide to Capitol Hill



Summer 2019

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## An Introduction to Networking

Transitioning into a new job is a tremendous undertaking. For many of our peers, whether they're students or current professionals entering a new career field, roadmaps exist and application processes are well known. Their burdens are daunting, but not overwhelming. This is not so with Capitol Hill. If the path to most careers is akin to hopping in a car and heading to a nearby town, the journey to the Hill is a cross country trek with few signs to guide you on the way.

This document will serve as the beginnings of your guide to attaining Hill internships and, ultimately, employment if that is the path you so choose. While this guide does not guarantee of a job, it will provide you with the basic fundamentals required to navigate Capitol Hill.

This guide is an accumulation of lessons learned both individually and anecdotally through the experiences of others. I had dozens of informational coffee meetings, several interviews, and I landed a job in an office I had no direct connection to because of my network. Going from Maryland native, to Dickinson student, to working for an Idaho Senator did not happen by accident.

'Networking' is a term that is often used, but is rarely defined. By the end of this guide, you will understand the foundation of how to create, expand, and utilize your network. Having a quality network is critical to success on Capitol Hill. Washington, DC is the biggest small town in America and you should think about it as one big game of Six Degrees of Separation. This idea will guide your entire internship or job search as your entire goal should be to find people who can help you, usually by getting someone they know to help you.

Why? Understand what happens when offices have a position open. When they post a job publicly on websites like Tom Manatos or Brad Traverse, they get flooded with resumes and cover letters. The only way to distinguish your resume is to get your resume to the 'top of the stack'. **An office will do that only when they get your resume from enough people they know and trust to consider your resume.**

How are you going to find people who will forward your resume? The informational interview. Also known as a "coffee" (even when coffee's not involved). It is a conversation with someone, often referred by someone else, but it also serves as an intelligence gathering exercise. The people you have coffees with will form your network.

Your network will not get you an interview, but it will get you considered for an interview. It is up to you for your qualifications to meet the requirements of the position and to do well enough on the interview to get hired.

Your network, then, serves as your validators. This is the foundation of networking on the Hill and you must do everything in your power to find those validators and impress them enough for them to send your resume to the people they know.

A caveat: many jobs are not posted. The key, then, is to impress enough people that they will forward you jobs that are not out in the open. You can then activate your network and have

them flood that office with your resume. This informs the three goals of an informational interview.

1. Acquisition of information that will help you in your job search or as a staffer.
2. Impress the target enough that they will at least send your resume on and potentially cue you in on job postings
3. Referrals

Everything you do in an informational interview should be oriented towards achieving one or more of these three outputs. This guide will inform you on how to ‘network’ and how networking will ultimately make or break getting your foot in the door on the Hill.

## **Understanding Staffer Mindset and the Keys to a Successful Coffee**

If you've gotten someone to sit down with you, you've just passed your first barrier. Now, it's time for the coffee. Understanding the staffer mindset, ingraining good habits in conducting those coffees, and remembering the three goals of networking will all serve you well here.

### The Staffer Mindset

When you're sitting down with someone, remember that they're already inclined to help you. They've taken time out of their busy day to help you. That's why the timeliness, the preparation, the quality of the questions and conversation are so important. You never want someone to go from being positively inclined to being disinclined to help you. By virtue of them sitting down to talk, you're already most of the way there. You just need to cover the rest of that small distance.

Your goal should be to cultivate, quality relationships with people you meet for coffee. When you sit down with someone, they're merely a contact. They've sat down with you. It is now your job to build rapport and develop the relationship with those staffers. A quality relationship means a staffer who you can go to for questions, who will forward your resume, cue you in on jobs, and who will help and guide you along the entire process. They're your sounding boards and potential mentors.

### The Ten Tips for a Successful Coffee

1. Confirm the day of that they're not too busy to sit down. Staffers are busy- give them the out of meeting with you later.
2. Show up early (five minutes, no more; staffers are notorious for being late to meetings and don't want to feel rushed), show up well dressed, know who you're talking to. For example, if they're a Chief of State of a member, know what committees that member's on and where they're from.
3. Ask good questions and be interested in what they're actually saying. Successful staffers combine book smarts, curiosity, and excellent interpersonal skills. If your target doesn't pick up on these traits, they're not going to push you ahead.
4. Don't take too much of their time. 30 minutes max, more if you get the vibe that they have time (usually during recess).
5. Don't hesitate to tell them what you want. Vagueness can kill you here. Pick a side- D or R. Know what issues you're interested in. Know what positions you're aiming for. Know how they can help you.
6. Be respectful, polite, and listen.
7. Take notes during the interview and have the notebook out beforehand; it shows you're prepared and paying attention.

8. Always get a referral, possibly two. This should follow from the discussion.
9. Follow up the day of thanking them for the sit down.
10. Keep them in the loop.

It's worth restating the three goals of an informational interview here:

- Acquisition of information that will help you in your job search or as a staffer.
- Impressing the staffer enough that they will at least send your resume on and potentially cue you in on job postings.
- Getting you referrals who will extend your network.

## **Extending Your Network and Keeping Them in the Loop**

### The Referral

The first step in extending your network is the referral. The referral extends your network so that you can increase coverage of potential openings or depth of resume referrals. At the end of that informational interview, get that referral. In the thank you email, ask them to introduce you. If they don't write an introduction- staffers are incredibly busy after all- use their name. They gave you the referral for a reason.<sup>1</sup>

### Maintaining Your Network

As you go through this process and get referrals, you're going to build a lot of names and contacts. Keep an informational interview log. List the name of your contact, who referred you to them, who they referred you to, a few biographical details, their position and what office they're in. And most importantly of all, use it to keep track of when you update them

A common complaint of Hill staffers is that they sit down for these coffees and then they never hear from that individual. If they think you forgot them, are they going to send you a job opening? Forward your resume? No.

Schedule an hour or two every other week or so, ideally on a week day, and send your entire network an update, letting them know that you're still looking.

This may seem excessive, so when you can, use events as excuses to write people in lieu of a regularly scheduled email that simply updates them. When you get an interview, write them. When you find a new internship, write them. It makes the check-in less awkward on your part. If you have a question about something, within reason, and think you established a good enough rapport, ask them and update them.

More importantly, it keeps you fresh in their minds so that when they see job postings, they send it your way and makes them remember who you are so that when you ask that they forward your resume, they know who is writing.

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<sup>1</sup> See page 13 for email templates.

## **Job Hunting, Resumes, and Cover Letters**

As you build your network, you should be job hunting. Tom Manatos Jobs and Brad Traverse are both subscription services that charge about \$5 a month each. Their jobs usually overlap on the Hill but not always. Check these every day. Sign up for other resume banks. But as soon as you see a job posting, drop everything to apply to that job. These accounts often stop checking their inboxes after a few hours because they're so overwhelmed with resumes. And then activate your network.

### Activating the Network

If you've found out that there's a job posting that you want to get considered for, your network now matters. First, tailor your resume for the job and send an email to everyone who could have a connection to that office and ask that they send your resume over there. If it's a House job, anyone who's worked on the House or with people in the House. If a Senate job, the same.

While it may seem repetitive, this is where your networking pays off. Because those offices will then get your resume from a million places and they will say to themselves, "hey, this guy comes pretty well regarded", and they'll bring you in for an interview. I got my resume forwarded several times to the office I'm in now. Six months later, it's still remarked upon.

Maintain that habit of being straight forward in the subject line. State the office and position in the subject line and ask that your resume get forwarded.

### Email Template:

Subject: Senator Smith LC Resume Forward

Hi Ryan,

Thanks for the coffee in December. I really appreciated your insight and learning from your experiences on the Hill.

I recently applied for a Defense LC position in Senator Goldman's office. If you know anyone in the office, would you be open to passing my resume on to them?

Thanks,

John

### Resumes and Cover Letters:

Resumes and cover letters should be tailored for the job position. Echo words in the job posting in your cover letter and resume. If it's asking for someone who's needs to write



constituent mail and works well under pressure, talk about where you worked under pressure and where you've had to write constituent mail in the cover letter.

Always highlight legislative experience and connect to the issue areas you'll be dealing with or the state/district of the member you'll be working for.

Never go over a page and always send your resumes and cover letters in PDF form; it looks more professional

When sending a cover letter, write it and proof read it. In particular, if you've written this cover letter off of an old one, make sure you've scrubbed all vestiges of the previous cover letter from the latest version. Finally, print it, sign it in blue ink, scan, and save it. Blue ink pops on paper surrounded by black type.

File names: Be explicit and specific. Lead with your first and last name.

Cover letter: John Smith\_Cover Letter\_Sen goldman LC.pdf

Resume: John Smith\_Resume\_Sen Goldman\_LC.pdf

This helps you remember when you save and reuse these files for future job postings and it helps the office you're sending it to find your resume and cover letter quickly. It also helps your network identify your resume.

When you've done that, send your network that email asking for the resume forward and attach the resume. Hopefully that office will get bombarded by your resume, your qualifications will match, and they'll bring you in for an interview.

## **Business Cards and the Elevator Speech**

### Receiving Business Cards

Business cards are keys. A common mistake amongst job seekers is that getting a business card is effective networking. Wrong. Getting a business card is the first step in successful networking. A key that never unlocks a door is a worthless key. When you meet someone at a reception who offers you a business card, they're giving you permission to contact them. Use it. And use it quickly. Reach out the next day and even if you can't meet right away, say it was great meeting them and that you'd love to get coffee sometime.

### Conversation and the Elevator Speech

If you don't know how to do it already, you're going to have to learn how to talk to anyone. You want to practice all the time because many, if not most, of the people on Capitol Hill are extroverts. If you don't like interacting with people, you're going into the wrong profession.

Practice talking to people; delivering an elevator speech and getting coffees with staffers are perishable skills and must be practiced regularly. When you sit down for those coffees and you're compelling and charming, that staffer is going to be that much more likely to help you.

When you're talking to anyone, you need to have your elevator speech down. In essence, you are describing yourself to a new person in under 90 seconds. Find the format that's most comfortable to you and be able to drop it, in various lengths, in any situation you come across. You want to identify and highlight what makes you most compelling and what makes that person want to keep talking to you.

## The Internship

Whether or not you're a college senior or a professional transitioning from another field, you may have to make a hard decision, whether or not you want to intern. If you're transitioning to the Hill, in effect, you are starting your path from the bottom again. This can be a jarring transition. If you're too old, that internship may actually hurt you. But if you are in your early to late twenties, I would recommend it.

Why? Because Hill experience matters. Almost everyone here started as an intern. So, if you think you can afford it, take one. On your off days, consider additional jobs to supplement your small intern income.

Beyond the Hill experience, the internship is valuable for a few reasons. First, it teaches you the culture of an office. As an intern, you're a fresh private at boot camp. You won't be expected to know anything. Impressing your office matters because the staff will vouch and fight for you when you apply for positions.

It's also important to note that the office you sent your application to may call your office for a recommendation. You do not want your office to give you a lukewarm recommendation. You want them to say you were an exceptional intern. Your reputation and the relationships you make during your internship are currency that can be exchanged later for job referrals and resume forwards.

The question then becomes, how do you impress as an intern? Here are a few tips:

**Always show up early.** Work hard. Be responsive to the Staff Assistant and the Legislative/Comms Staff. Show an interest in people- without bothering them, ask them about their work. Learn the processes, learn the issues, learn the office, and learn the people.

Try to fill the gaps- if you notice the paper running low repeatedly, institute a check so that you check the paper every morning. Volunteer. If the office has a breakfast on Friday, tidy up afterwards. Be open to and execute any task that will move the office's mission forward. Small, seemingly meaningless tasks routinely get noticed and is what separates good interns from great interns.

Most importantly, be excellent! Complete every single task to completion and to/beyond the standard. No task should be beneath you. You need to do everything in your power to be successful.

You should expect excellence from yourself. If you do whatever you can do to make the team successful, then you're going to be successful as an intern. Indeed, the staff will think of you as one of the best interns they've ever had.

How are you going to figure out if you're doing a great job? Ask for feedback every few weeks from your supervisor. You want to know if you rub people the wrong way, you want to know if you've had recurring mistakes, and what your faults are. Take that feedback, internalize it, and improve.

After you've established yourself in the office, you've corrected any deficiencies you may have had in your work, you've made positive impressions, sit down with the staff for coffees and use them to extend your network.

## **Email, Cover Letter, and Resume Templates**

### Cold Introduction

**Subject:**

Dickinson Alumnus Coffee

**Body:**

Good Morning XXXX,

I hope this finds you well! My name is John Smith. I'm currently (interning at XXXX/seeking an internship at XXXX/thinking about working) on the Hill. I (graduated/will graduate) from Dickinson in 20XX and if you're around over the next week or two, I would love to grab a coffee and talk about your time in D.C.

My calendar is flexible, please let me know what works for you. Thank you!

Best,

John Smith

### Referred Introduction

**Subject:**

Rob Black (Agriculture Committee) Suggested That I Email You

**Body:**

Bob,

My name is John Smith. I'm currently interning part time on Capitol Hill and I'm looking to come up here full time, ideally focused on Animal Welfare issues.

I sat down with Rob Black last week and he suggested that I reach out to you, as he thought you might have some valuable insights.

I know Congress is in recess next week- would you have time to meet with me on Monday or Wednesday? Those days are best for me as I don't intern then.

Best,

John Smith

Reception Email Request for Informational Interview

**Subject:**

John Smith Animal Welfare Reception Follow Up

**Body:**

Tim,

My name is John Smith. We met at the Animal Welfare Reception last night and chatted briefly. I wanted to follow up from our discussion and ask if you have time to sit down in the next couple weeks to chat. I don't intern on Mondays and Wednesdays so those days are typically best for me. Thanks a lot,

John

Resume Forward

**Subject:**

Senator Goldman LC Resume Forward

**Body:**

Nick,

Thanks for the feedback on my Senator Sagai application questions. I really appreciated your insight.

On a related note, I applied for another Animal Welfare LC position and just found out it was for Senator Goldman's office. If you know anyone in the office, could you pass my resume to them?

Thanks,

John

## John Smith

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[Address] | [Telephone] | [Email]

December 8, 2015

Dear Senator-Elect XXXX,

I believe I am uniquely qualified to assist you in your work to better the state of XXXX, due to of my combination of Congressional and educational experiences. I am excited at the prospect of joining your staff because I believe in your mission of XXXX and feel that I can aid you in your mission.

During my time an intern with Congressman Mike Simpson, I built a strong capability in legislative research, the committee process, and of the Senate's legislative procedure. My duties included working on Department of Defense small business policy, veterans' entrepreneurship, government contracting, and cybersecurity. I am confident that my experience on the Committee on Small Business will be an asset to any small business in the state of XXXX that may require aid, as they progress through their entrepreneurial journey.

Through my studies at Dickinson College, I have learned critical oral and written communication skills that will allow me to communicate your policy goals to diverse constituencies and industry stakeholders alike. This unique educational experience will provide your office with a viewpoint from which to analyze issues and communicate that analysis to the required parties. I have no doubt that my educational experiences will advance your mission in the United States Senate.

I look forward to discussing how both my congressional and educational experiences can contribute to your mission to improve the lives of all XXXX.

Very Respectfully,

John Smith

## John Smith

Address

Email / Phone

### WORK EXPERIENCE

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*Officer Candidate*, United States Army, Maryland National Guard, Aberdeen, MD (Summer 2016-Present)

- Awarded Association of the United States Army Honor Award for excellence in Basic Combat Training.
- Graduated second in a class on 186 from Basic Combat Training.
- Selected to attend Officer Candidate School beginning in Summer 2017.

*Intern*, Office of Congressman Mike Simpson of Idaho's 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District, Washington D.C. (Winter 2015-Present)

- Assist staff in researching legislative topics related to the House of Representatives Energy and Water Development Appropriations Subcommittee and author Bill Status letters to constituents on those topics.
- Attend weekly committee meetings and prepared briefs while monitoring floor action on multiple bills.
- Manage constituent correspondence through the Fireside21 system, gave Capital tours, and assisted with the daily operations of the office.

*Legislative Intern*, Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania, Michael J. Stack, Harrisburg, PA (Fall 2015)

- Assisted the Lieutenant Governor and his office to advance his legislative goals in the Pennsylvania State Senate.
- Expanded and streamlined the Lieutenant Governor's social media presence by formalizing strategy, consolidating channels, and increased Instagram following by 98% within four weeks.
- Attended Senate committee and Board of Pardons meetings, authored briefs and speeches, and addressed constituent concerns.

*Resident Assistant*, Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth, Los Angeles, CA & Carlisle, PA (Summer 2015, 2016)

- Ensured safety and well being of students on the campuses of Loyola Marymount University and Dickinson College.
- Created a community experience whereby students felt inspired to succeed socially and academically by employing and honing emotional intelligence skills such as conflict resolution and teamwork through organized conversation between staff and students in high-pressure situations.

*Sales and Marketing Intern*, Tessemae's All Natural, Annapolis, MD (Summers 2013, 2014)

- Increased sales and brand recognition of Tessemae's All Natural, an organic salad dressing consumer products company, throughout the Mid-Atlantic region by demonstrating products at Costco, Whole Foods, and Safeway grocery stores.
- Created company-wide schedules that determined optimal locations for the most promising sales.
- Aggregated sales records and created weekly reports on sales in the Mid-Atlantic region.

### EDUCATION

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Dickinson College, *Carlisle, PA – Class of 2016*  
Bachelor of Arts, *Political Science*

### LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT EXPERIENCE

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Varsity Baseball Player, Dickinson College Red Devils, Carlisle, PA (Fall 2012- Fall 2016)

- Pitcher for the Red Devils averaging fifty hours per week in practice, training, and recovery work.
- Leader of offseason conditioning and training program.
- Member of most successful team in program history (2014).

Student Athletic Trainer, Dickinson College Athletics Department, Carlisle PA (Fall 2012- Spring 2016)

- Aided certified athletic trainers with preparing student-athletes for practices and games averaging twenty hours per week.
- Assisted in communication between athletes, coaches, and staff to ensure high levels of athlete performance.

Weekly contributor for school paper, *The Dickinsonian*, Carlisle, PA (Spring 2013- Fall 2015)

- Wrote articles on national political coverage as well as updates on Dickinson Athletics.
- Contributed consistently on a bi-monthly basis under the pressure of deadlines.

### SKILLS

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FireSide21, Microsoft Office, research, constituent correspondence, problem-solving, leadership