All social-work students want to change the world for the better, but learning how to do that requires training and experience, says Carroll Phelps, instructor and internship coordinator for The University of Alabama School of Social Work.

For the past 35 years, the University has offered students pursuing social work master’s degrees a nationally unique opportunity to gain and practice skills in a place that teems with both social-service organizations and institutions shaping policies that affect their clients: Washington, D.C.

Since 1980, more than 500 students have worked full time for four months each spring at more than 300 Washington, D.C., metro area that offers a structured internship program in the nation’s capital. In addition to exposing students to direct-service organizations and public-policy and advocacy implementation, the program includes a leadership component that trains students to integrate all aspects of professional behavior into practice.

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The graduate-student partnership with Walter Reed National Military Medical Center was so successful that when the medical center’s social work department decided to launch a program for undergraduates, it wanted the first ones to be UA students, Phelps says. Stephen Bromberek, commander of Walter Reed’s social work department, approached Phelps with the idea in February 2014. “They said to us, ‘Your students are just so well prepared,’” Phelps says. “We’re honored to have been chosen.”

Phelps began the program with assistance from Javonda Williams, assistant professor and Bachelor of Social Work Program chair, and Debra Nelson-Gardell, associate professor of social work.

Working with Clients

Both the BSW and MSW D.C. programs use a rotational model. Students work directly with clients – in two different areas of their partner agencies – and often assist with administration and policy/advocacy tasks. “It is very important to us for students to have a variety of experiences,” Phelps says.

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M. Moore, a 2011 graduate of the master’s program, with one of her clients at Iona Senior Services, where Moore interned and took a permanent job after graduation.

"The closings had a huge effect on our clients," English says. "For example, an apartment renter who is personally by the battlefield might need to make changes to his policy. Not having staff on site puts additional stress on families, English says.

She and others at Wounded Warrior created a proposal to put on-site offices in military treatment facilities back in the budget and presented it to several legislators.

Phelps says her goal for the future of the Washington, D.C., internship is to expand it while maintaining rigorous training standards. Teaching students to be leaders in their field and to understand all aspects of practice and policy and advocacy implementation is imperative, she says.

"In this day and age, social workers are called upon to do more with less," Phelps says. "They have to know how to meet the needs of clients as well as take care of themselves.

"I really do think it’s working," she continues, noting that many former students have quickly risen to supervisory positions, and a number of them have become CEOs at organizations including Voices for Alabama’s Children and Children’s Specialized Hospital.

Holden says the Washington internship opened her eyes to an entirely different world. “It changed my life,” she says. “I was able to learn from my clients and was challenged by working with clients who came from completely different backgrounds and cultures than myself.”

After her internship, Holden got a job at Community Connection, the largest nonprofit mental health agency in Washington, D.C., and remained in the city for two years. “It broadened my horizons,” she says.

To learn more about the Washington, D.C., internship programs or the application processes, contact Carroll Phelps at cphelps@uaw.edu or 205-348-5571.

2014 Undergraduate students (back row) with U.S. Rep. Terri Sewell, D-Ala., and instructor Carroll Phelps. Each student shared with Sewell research into how a policy or piece of legislation would affect his or her clients. Rep. Sewell discussed the nuances of the policies with them.

Courses and Advocacy

Both undergraduate and graduate students take two courses while in Washington. All four courses are related to students’ internships.

SW 490 Field Education and SW 595 Field Education II are attached to the internships. SW 443 Seminar in Generalist Practice and SW 490 Seminar in Advanced Practice with Business create a foundation content with their field experience.

Students meet with members of legislative, judicial and executive branches. Students meet with members of Congress, attend Supreme Court oral arguments and meet with a justice’s law clerk and discuss policy implementation with executive-branch representatives. They also tour the Holocaust Museum with a survivor and “Holocaust trauma is very experiential and hands-on,” Phelps says. “Students are given the opportunity to do things that cannot be done outside of D.C.”

In addition, students identify a policy or piece of legislation important to their clients, research action on it in Congress and then talk with members of Congress and executive-branch staff about specifics of the bill or policy and how it will affect their clients. Phelps travels to Washington to work with students bi-monthly during the group and spring seminars, teaching SW 443 and SW 501 and meeting with supervisors and students to ensure student success.

Miller says the field seminar course taught her more about the documentation process and things to assess for during client encounters on behalf of clients, and then provided specific knowledge on social theories and intervention techniques that I was able to apply to my patient interactions,” she says.

In SW 443, students discuss positive and negative developments in their field placements, Warren says. “We would tell individual experiences and issues we were having and help each other work through them as a group,” she says. “We also did exercises with ethical dilemmas that assisted each of us in knowing what to do in the future.”

Undergraduates also visit institutions where policies affecting their clients are born and interact with speakers from policy and advocacy agencies. “We got to see firsthand how decisions are made in Congress and how policy implemented in the executive branch through the Veterans Administration impacts us as citizens and our work at Walter Reed,” says Shankitta Brown, a senior majoring in social work.

Graduate students are paired with staff members at the National Association of Social Workers and attempt to get specific legislation signed into law. Students do research on the bills and give policy-fact-sheet presentations to NASW governmental and policy staff members. Students then contact lawmakers in person and via phone and email.

One student, placed at Iona Senior Services, thought she learned to advocate on behalf of clients they needed as they aged, Phelps says. The student helped write a brief given to the City Council of the District of Columbia and made a presentation before the Council, which approved the legislation.

When English was working at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, budget cuts resulted in the closing of programs or the application processes, contact Carroll Phelps at cphelps@uaw.edu or 205-348-5571.

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