Social Work Students Obtain Hands-on Experience at Lobby Day

Derek B. Brown, Sacred Heart University
Student Shauna Santos-Dempsey practices lobbying with Senator Ed Gomes and State Representatives Cristin McCarthy Vahey (133rd District) and Hilda Santiago (84th District) on Lobby Day at the State Capitol.

Sacred Heart University’s Social Work Club sponsored 29 Sacred Heart students and faculty on a trip to Hartford at the end of October for Lobby Day—a statewide event that serves to educate social workers on the lobbying process. Hosted by the National Association of Social Workers – Connecticut Chapter (NASW – CT), Lobby Day was attended by some 200 students, faculty and social work professionals.

Steven Karp, LMSW, the executive director of NASW – CT, welcomed the group and spoke on social workers’ involvement in political work.

Representatives from Gallo & Robinson, LLC, a lobbying firm, presented on the basics of lobbying and advocacy. Additional topics included committee process, legislative process and the state budget.

Attendees also heard from legislators themselves, such as Cristin McCarthy Vahey, state representative for Fairfield and a social worker, on how best to engage in advocacy. At the end of the day, attendees were able to actually practice lobbying skills with legislators.

“Social Work Lobby Day was an incredible experience for students and practitioners alike,” said Shauna Santos-Dempsey ’17. “As a student, it was especially exciting to have the opportunity to
practice both lobbying and public speaking skills with current legislators in the presence of peers. Receiving encouragement and feedback from classmates, students of other universities, social workers, lobbyists and legislators was a learning experience unlike any other. I would compare Lobby Day to an introductory practicum setting that grants participants a glimpse of the inner workings of our government.”

Derek Brian Brown and Maura Rhodes, social work professors at Sacred Heart, accompanied the students on the trip. “While students learn about social welfare issues and our societal responses in the classroom, I believe an equally valuable learning experience is engaging in social work practice methods, including lobbying,” Brown said. “I’m thrilled that the students were able to obtain hands-on experience with lobbying and exposure to our legislators. I had some students who did not know about this practice area before, who mentioned to me after the event that they wanted to be lobbyists in the future!”

“It is crucial for our social work students to understand the importance of social policy and how it impacts client systems. Having an experience like Lobby Day can build enthusiasm and passion for advocating on behalf of vulnerable populations to work towards social justice,” added Professor Bronwyn Cross-Denny, program director for Sacred Heart’s social work program.