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June 2009 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Samantha Harvell, Ph.D.

2008-2009 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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As we move swiftly into the fourth quarter of the fellowship year, I look back in amazement at the past nine months. So much has changed since I began my daily walk up the Hill and this year as a Congressional Fellow has far exceeded my high expectations. I have learned more, experienced more, and accomplished more than I thought possible.

Starting the fellowship during a campaign year, especially a year as significant as this one, provided a unique glimpse into life in the legislative branch. When I arrived in Senator Bingaman's office on October 1, one could almost hear an echo in the halls of the Hart Building. The following day, the Senate adjourned for a recess that seemed to last until after the New Year holiday. Practically, this meant that members and many of their staff returned home to campaign on behalf of hopeful candidates. For me, it provided an opportunity to ease into my new role and time to read up on key issues, learn about Senate procedure, and get to know fellow staff in my office and the committee. Once January arrived, I quickly realized what a luxury that was as

staff and visitors swarmed Capitol Hill, seemingly coming out of nowhere. Lines at the coffee shop got longer, meetings started multiplying, and we buckled down and got to work.

My placement in Senator Bingaman's office has been an excellent fit and I have had an opportunity to work on a number of exciting initiatives. Senator Bingaman is a senior member of the Help, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and has long been a champion of education reform. My focus in the office has been on education and child and family policy issues and for four months, I had the opportunity to function fully as a legislative assistant and handle the entire portfolio. During that time, the Senate passed three key pieces of legislation with which I was actively involved. For each of these bills, I was responsible for tracking the legislation, negotiating amendments and providing voting recommendations for my boss. I also gained an in-depth understanding of the appropriations process as I processed all constituent requests for education funding. Legislatively, I worked with advocacy groups and fellow staff to update and reintroduce two bills, and have worked on new legislation as well. Generally, these pieces of legislation concern education technology, length of the school day, school reform, drop out prevention, student loan program reform, and common academic standards across states. I have spent considerable time meeting with national advocates and New Mexico constituents and have learned a great deal about the state and how policies affect its citizens. In all of these endeavors, my background in child and adolescent development and the skills I developed as a scientist have allowed me to contribute a unique perspective to the legislative process and function effectively as a Senate staffer.

At the end of August, I will leave the fellowship with a deeper understanding and much greater appreciation for the legislative microcosm. I have heard people say that survival on the Hill requires a little bit of knowledge about a number of different topics. In contrast, what I have found is that staff know a lot of information about a lot of different things and the best staff also know what they don't know and how to access it quickly. I have the greatest admiration for the individuals who dedicate their time to this public work and also for the legislative process. There is a beauty in the process that I truly believe you can only experience by working here.