Over this past summer, I had the opportunity to intern in the Wisconsin State Capitol. I split my time between the office of State Representative Samantha Kerkman and the office of State Senator Van Wanggaard, which offered invaluable insight into not only the legislative process, but also how the duties of the Assembly and Senate differ. In the Kerkman office I spent the majority of my time with staffers Tammy and Eric. They taught me the ins and outs of the Assembly, from adding to our constituent database to creating legislative citations to honor outstanding achievements from our district. Because the 61st Assembly District represents approximately 54,000 constituents, less staff are needed than for the larger Senate districts. As a result, I got to know Tammy and Eric quite well over the course of my internship. In contrast, State Senator Van Wanggaard represents the 21st Senate district, which consists of 163,000 residents. Understandably, the office handles many more questions, requests, and feedback and needs more staffers to accommodate this. I worked with Scott, Val, Michelle, Bree, and Paxton in the Wanggaard office.

Because the size of the Assembly and Senate districts varied, my responsibilities did as well. I found the Assembly office to be more attuned to local, smaller concerns. While the Senate office still addressed some similar requests, it seemed that Representative Kerkman had a closer relationship with many of her constituents than Senator Wanggaard. For example, a historical flood hit the district in mid-July, sending the area into a state of emergency and forcing many residents out of their homes. Our office talked daily with constituents and helped them as best we could. Representative Kerkman was not in the office
often during that time, because she was in the affected areas helping with bottled water
distribution and other necessary rebuilding tasks. In the Assembly office, my responsibilities
generally consisted of database work, sending congratulatory letters to our constituents,
addressing local concerns, and creating legislative citations to honor Eagle Scouts and other
community members that completed significant achievements.

I was given more responsibilities in the Senate office, likely because there was simply
more that needed to be done. Daily, we would receive dozens of emails from constituents
voicing their opinions about a variety of topics, from broad topics like marijuana legalization
to complex bills and environmental concerns related to the new Foxconn development
coming to the district. For each email received, I was responsible for writing a letter
explaining the Senator’s stance on the issue, some background information to clarify any
misconceptions, and if applicable, if Senator Wanggaard was cosponsoring any related bills
or involved in anything currently that could affect the issue. I really enjoyed writing these
letters because not only did they force me to completely understand each issue, I could better
appreciate why our constituents held the political beliefs they did. Whether it was because of
personal experience with the issue or even misinformation, it was interesting to me to see
why people cared. Most importantly, I could see the political process unfold right before my
eyes. The Senator’s job is to represent his constituents, and it was mostly through
constituents contacting our office that we could understand how to best serve the interests of
the 21st Senate district.

Other responsibilities of mine in the Senate office included casework for constituents
who had specific state or federal issues, and this is where most of our collaboration with
other office and agencies came in. One example was a man from our district who needed
assistance reactivating his business with the Wisconsin Department of Financial Institutions (DFI). To help him, I contacted our legislative liaison for the DFI and obtained specific instructions for filing an annual report for his business. In another case, a constituent needed to resolve a bank levy that occurred because of a recent move and some miscommunication. I contacted the IRS on his behalf and the issue was soon taken care of. Finally, some collaboration between our office and other was not for constituents, but rather for our office to have access to necessary information. In one instance, I contacted our legislative liaison in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to request a report of sewage dumping into Lake Michigan that had occurred as a result of the flooding in the area. I had not realized before interning in the Capitol how important interconnectedness was. Through working with other offices in the Capitol Building and across the state, the Wanggaard office can more easily and effectively serve its constituents.

As far as takeaways, I have many. One of the most important is that relationships are incredibly important and quality communication is one of the best ways to strengthen those relationships. The majority of my time in both offices was spent working with other people, whether that be with constituents or the staffers working in either of the offices. I now have a better appreciation for the importance of staying calm and accommodating when working with someone who has opposing views, and staying open to other possibilities even when I am set in my personal beliefs. Additionally, these internships were my first experience in an office setting and I was expected to take on more responsibilities than I had expected when I applied for the job. While it seemed to be a lot at first, I found that goal setting helped me to meet and exceed expectations of my work. Even though this was different than anything I had done before, I was able to use past experiences to do my work to the best of my ability.
Some tips that I have for future legislative interns or a related position would be to not be afraid to ask for more responsibility. Although I found many things very intimidating when I first arrived to the Capitol, I soon realized that I could handle more than I thought and nearly everyone was willing to help me do well, if I asked. Also, asking for feedback and criticism was valuable for me. The criticism was sometimes hard to take, but I always did better the next time I had a similar task to do. One more thing that I found helpful to remember was that I was an intern and nobody expected me to be perfect. Once I took that pressure off myself, I could focus on doing my best work. Overall, interning in the Wisconsin State Capitol was a great experience and I would recommend it to anyone who’s interested in the political process or just wants to try something new.