Students Seeking Financial Aid Increases Bring Voices and Presence to Capitol Hill

By Jason Hollander

An enthusiastic group of student lobbyists on an annual trip from Columbia, Barnard and Cornell filled the office of Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), CC’69, occupying every couch and chair available. Undaunted by the formal surroundings, they told personal stories of financial struggle and pleaded for the need to increase federal funding in higher education. The veteran representative nodded as he listened to them and then shared his frustrations.

“I let me tell you, when I went to college, I didn’t come out owing $100 thousand. I don’t know how kids do it today,” said Nadler, who noted that his own son is beginning the process of applying to schools.

The students then submitted a list of proposals to Nadler asking for increases in Pell Grants, Perkins Loans, Federal Work-Study and Graduate Assistance, among others. Nadler studied the sheet and again nodded his head.

“Well, I support all of these,” he assured them. “You don’t have to worry about me. If it only were that easy with every official the students met on April 9. While many promised to do whatever their education, the real test will come this summer when President Bush’s proposal for level-funding most grants will be voted on in the house and senate. Though Bush doesn’t propose any reductions to higher education grants, the cost of inflation will make the lack of increases feel like a loss.

That’s why after a long day of classes more than 60 Columbia, Barnard and Cornell students braved a pouring rain and heavy traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike to get to Washington, D.C. by night. Early the next morning, they would canvass Capitol Hill, splitting into nine teams and conducting more than 50 meetings in the offices of various senators and congressmen.

“The budget this year is a tight one and there is great concern among students,” said Ellen S. Smith, left, assistant director of Government Relations, who has sponsored the trip for the past eight years. “It is important for legislators to see those who receive the financial aid they vote on and understand what a difference it will make to these students and their friends if they do not continue to get it.

“I wish to extend to Benjamin Tarver our most profound sympathy,” read Smith as she handed out trip packets were handed out by trip organizer Susan Long, assistant director of Government Relations, and students were offered advice on how to be most effective when meeting with legislators from the various congressional and senatorial offices. Speakers urged them to be assertive, yet respectful, when championing the cause for grant increases. A skit was even performed to highlight the best way to act towards the staff members they would meet.

Smith led one group into the first meeting of the day at the office of Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) in the Russell Senate Office Building, where they were awed by dozens of personal photos on the walls featuring John F. Kennedy (senior and junior), Jackie Onassis, and other famous members of the family.

They were soon greeted by Jane Oates, Kennedy’s education advisor, who listened to their stories, agreed with the requested grant increases and stressed the importance of taking the trip for the past two years. “It is important for lawmakers to see those who benefit from their policies. Without you making your voice heard, I don’t know how change will come to higher education.”

Congressman Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) speaks to Columbia, Barnard and Cornell students on the Capitol building steps after their day of lobbying more than 50 senators and congressmen.

The seminar will be co-taught by Jackie Koppell, a Cornell freshman, and Naomi Weinberg, director of the SIPA’s U.N. Studies Program, and was designed in affiliation with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR).

SIPA Offers New U.N. Summer Peacekeeping Training Seminar

Columbia University Nations Studies Program, part of the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), will offer a two-week peacekeeping seminar this summer that will include sessions with participants from peacekeeping missions around the globe.

The seminar will be conducted on the Columbia campus, with a portion of the sessions spent at United Nations Headquarters. Participating SIPA students will receive three credits for participating in the course, which is open to Columbia students from the first floor lounge of the administrative building.

The seminar will be co-taught by Naomi Weinberg, director of the SIPA U.N. Studies Program, and John Hirsch, assistant professor of the International Peace Academy.

For more information, please visit the summer seminars website at http://www.sipa.columbia.edu/func/summerpast.html or contact contact.issunides@columbia.edu.