Washington Semester Program offers vast experiences outside the College campus.

BY TRACI CROCKETT ’01

Katie Haugen ’12 went to Washington, D.C. through the Lutheran college Washington Semester Program to get to know the policy-making side of law while trying to decide whether she wanted to attend law school and what she might do with a law degree.

Tucker McDonald ’11 deferred December graduation plans to attend classes in D.C. while interning for a congressman through the program and recycling anything he could about international politics.

Kayla Stevers ’12 decided on a whim to apply for the program and enjoyed working on cases with law enforcement and social workers while interning at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

These students and three others took part in this spring’s Washington Semester Program. Founded in 1986 by Roanoke and two other Lutheran colleges, the program offers students unmatched experiences in the nation’s capital. They live and study while experiencing firsthand Washington, D.C. — where activities of global importance are happening all around them.

Participants enroll in two courses taught by professors from area universities while completing internships with government offices, non-profit organizations or businesses in the D.C. area. Wednesdays are reserved for special events such as listening in on Supreme Court cases or taking in a performance at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. A full-time staff oversees the program on behalf of its member institutions, which now number 13.

Haugen, who interned with Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.), said she considers Washington Semester an important experience that will help map her future. “College is like a bubble. This is the safest way to get out of your bubble,” she said. “It’s a great time to work on building your contacts and to get to know people.”

A junior studying political science and history at Roanoke, Haugen enjoyed corresponding with constituents and preparing briefings for Senator Franken. “I feel like we’re really involved,” Haugen said.

The senator agrees. “Without the hard work of Katie and our other interns, my office wouldn’t be able to function like it does,” Franken said. “An internship in Washington, D.C. is a great way to start a career in politics. Many of the people who work for me in the Senate started out as interns and worked their way up.”

McDonald, an international relations major, wants to work in international politics and has a particular interest in the Middle East. While interning with Rep. Jason Altman (D-Pa.), he took Arabic and studied upon government relations and political consulting in D.C. Before his semester in Washington, McDonald interned with Refuge and Immigration Services in Roanoke. “These are very rewarding experiences. It’s great to feel like you’re helping people,” he said.

Two weeks before the application deadline, Stevers decided to pursue a semester in Washington. With the help of Alyssa Wehr, Lutheran College Washington Semester’s director of internships, Stevers got a position at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, where she worked on Amber Alerts and was a part of Team Adam, a rapid response program that deploys local law enforcement and other resources when children are reported missing. “The people there are great. They were willing to help me do anything,” Stevers said.

Midway through the semester, Stevers was asked to work as a case assistant. She received an assignment to work with police and social workers in tracking information and updating files on behalf of a particular missing child. “I absolutely loved it,” said Stevers, who hopes to work in law enforcement herself when she graduates.

Dr. Todd Peppers of Roanoke’s public affairs department is one of the Washington Semester Program’s biggest proponents. Peppers, who is the campus coordinator for Roanoke, also sits on the program’s board of directors. He sees the chance for Roanoke students to spend a semester in D.C. as one of the biggest advantages they have. “It’s a transformative experience for the students,” he said. “They have the opportunity to see in motion what they’ve learned in class.”

“If we took a little bit of Roanoke College and put it up in Washington, D.C.,” Amanda Pickens ’08 agrees that the Washington Semester Program gives Roanoke students an edge. Pickens, like many students, was encouraged to participate by Peppers, who was her advisor. She interned for Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham from her home state of South Carolina and is now the top student in her class at the University of South Carolina’s School of Law.

Washington Semester “allowed me to combine my love of public policy, government and law while interacting with the nation’s top leaders. Through my internship, I was able to meet almost every U.S. senator, including Senators McCain and Clinton,” Pickens said.

Students taking part in the Washington Semester Program are generally juniors and seniors, often those looking for government experience. This past semester, however, two sophomores from Roanoke participated: Margaret Anderson, a political science major from Madison, Va., interned for Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.). Olivia League, from Millerville, Md., wasn’t far from home when she interned at the D.C.-based National Criminal Justice Association. Junior Meghan Sigurdson chose work in the private sector, at weddzilla.com, a wedding planning website.

Roanoke’s students are gaining firsthand knowledge while representing the College in the most politically influential city in the world. Roanoke’s involvement in the Washington Semester Program is paving the way for Maroons to go far, whether for a semester, a career or a lifetime.

For more information about how the Washington Semester Program is working at Roanoke College, visit http://tinyurl.com/3eyzvn8.