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A Nanny State Assault on Internship Programs

The trouble with the Labor Department's one-size-fits-all agenda.

Terry Michael | April 14, 2010

As if I didn't have enough to worry about raising money for my non-profit college journalism education program in this lousy economy, the nanny state is now threatening my Politics & Journalism Semester with one-size-fits-all regulations written for the blue collar employment era.

Twenty-one years ago, I founded, and still run, a semester-in-Washington effort to teach real world politics (maybe an oxymoron) to college journalists who want to be political reporters. In spring and fall classes of 16 weeks each, I give my dozen students a twice-weekly seminar series featuring top political practitioners and political journalists. The rest of the week, they work in news bureaus as interns, usually unpaid. Few of them receive college credit, and many have already graduated. I guarantee each a \$3000 living expense stipend if they aren't paid, and don't charge any tuition or fees. Generally, my "graduates" have nothing but praise for the experience, reflected in hundreds of them making personal donations to our 501(c)(3) non-profit, which has a budget of about \$250,000 per year.

As an educational entrepreneur, what I have built is now threatened by an Obama Labor Department bureaucrat who wants to crack down on employers who don't pay interns, using rule-making powers that date to a Supreme Court decision from the 1940s that is mostly applicable to blue collar apprenticeships, and hasn't been updated since.

As reported by *The New York Times*, M. Patricia Smith, now Labor's top law enforcement official and previously New York's labor commissioner, is using her left-liberal imagination to conjure up a 21st century version of 19th century sweat shops that exploit young slave labor.

One of my regular news bureaus pays its intern from my program several times the minimum wage. Several other participating organizations have paid the minimum wage. Most donate at least \$3000 to my non-profit to fund the stipends. Some give as much as twice that amount, to help with other program costs. And a few contribute nothing at all, and I have to pick up the stipend expense from other donors. In all, about a fourth to a third of my quarter-million dollar budget comes from the news organizations that host my students and give them useful work to do.

In other words, there is no one size that fits the situation for each student. I have had to cobble together funding to allow lower and middle income students to take advantage of this opportunity, which they are not only willing, but eager, to do. If

Smith gets her way, I will now have to shoehorn my program into her restrictive concept of the public good.

Ms. Smith: Why don't you leave your hands off my program and hundreds like it, and let students decide whether or not they are being exploited? No employer or program like mine is forcing any 20-something to apply to, or accept, an internship.

How will the federal government's apparatchik mind justify this additional assault on individual liberty and choice? Well, consider this paragraph from *The Times* story: "Kathryn Edwards, a researcher at the Economic Policy Institute [EPI] and co-author of a new study on internships, told of a female intern who brought a sexual harassment complaint that was dismissed because the intern was not an employee." Yes, they'll tout the biggest, scariest, most anti-feminist anecdotal horror story they can conjure up. EPI, by the way, is a labor union-funded think tank.

In a perfect world, it would be great if all interns were paid. But in a perfect world, M. Patricia Smith's job wouldn't exist. Her Wikipedia biography indicates she has spent her "entire career in public service." It comes as no surprise that she has never held a real-economy job. Please, Ms. Smith, go find something worthwhile to do with your taxpayer-paid time, and let me and my students and the benefactors who fund our program decide what is best for us.

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