

PLEN: Women, Law, and Legal Advocacy

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Alyssa Huang recently received funding to attend Public Leadership Education Network (PLEN)'s seminar in [Women, Law, and Legal Advocacy](#).

Alyssa majors in Political Economy – Economics and Public Policy and Environmental Studies, and is interested in a career in environmental law. Read about her experience below:

Candidly, this was the most inspiring and important weekend of my undergraduate career. I cannot thank Newcomb College Institute enough for enabling me to travel to Washington D.C. and participating in the PLEN seminar – Women, Law, and Legal Advocacy. This weekend was saturated with informational career and issue panels, career skills workshops, exposure to the various aspects of careers in Law in the public and private sector, and so much more. Aside from all of the amazing educational opportunities, the relationships I formed with the other young women in the conference are invaluable to my future in law. I know the ambitious, intelligent, and impressive women I met at this conference will be my future coworkers and allies.

From the start of the seminar, we were immediately immersed in a networking workshop (arguably the most important part of beginning and maintaining a legal career). Previously, I thought my networking capabilities were fairly mature however, I was able to learn tips and tricks to expand the effectiveness of my future networking opportunities. Following this workshop, our keynote speaker – Krish Vignarajah, Former Democratic Candidate for Governor of Maryland; Former Policy Director to First Lady Michelle Obama at The White House – was boundlessly impressive and relatable! Ms. Vignarajah was so pleasant to talk to as a woman in the middle of her political career, I was able to ask her an informational question at the end of her speech. I asked “How did your former position as a consultant for McKinsey influence our compromise on the Michelle Obama nutrition campaign (as you may know the main objective of the First Lady’s campaign was shaped by funders like General Mills to shift the focus from nutrition to activity)” and her response was that “Like many things in politics and public policy one cannot be absolutist especially when it comes to funding large projects.” It was interesting to hear the perspective of someone so close to the campaign.

Later we heard a panel on a varied introduction to careers in law and public policy. This small taste of incredibly varied ideological perspectives was very entertaining. Later into the evening we heard from a panel of very accomplished public policy organizers, administrative directors, attorneys, and researchers. These different areas converged on the common theme of voting rights. It was a very thorough historical overview and debate of current and recent events affecting voting rights in America. The panel was made up of: Valerie Jackson, Senior Advisor to the Management Committee and Firmwide Director of Diversity & Inclusion, K&L Gates; Carolyn DeWitt, President and Executive Director, Rock the Vote; Liz Howard,

Counsel, Brennan Center for Justice; Sabrina Khan, Senior Staff Attorney, Advancement Project; and Charlotte Taylor, Former SCOTUS clerk and current Partner in appellate law at Jones Day. Even though it had been an incredibly long and exhausting day, I was completely star struck when I approach Ms. Charlotte Taylor as being a SCOTUS clerk is my highest aspiration in my legal career. We were able to talk more about her wild trajectory to her role at the SCOTUS and the tactful moves she made to be the high-powered partner she is today.

The next day felt like something out of a dream. We went to the Supreme Court of the United States to meet privately with ten female clerks to a variety of justices (including recently appointed Justice Kavanaugh). I was so incredibly amazed by this invaluable experience. After the panel disbanded we broke up into small groups of 5 to each clerk and I got to have a deep personal conversation with a Yale Law Graduate, Sotomayor Clerk, and amazing woman Rachel. She was so attentive to our concerns and she offered sage advice on life, careers, and feminism. After the meeting, we were given a tour of the courthouse. This definitely fulfilled my wildest 7th grade dreams when my infatuation with the Supreme Court was the highest. Later that day, the awe-inspiring experiences continued. We went to the executive offices on Capitol Hill and we got to speak to congressional staff executives. After an unexpected breakout session on cybersecurity law and policy, I was able to talk with two very powerful women who ultimately gave me their cards and vowed to help me get as far along as they could. That was so amazing and unexpected, and I honestly have much better job prospects post-college because of this interaction.

The last day was bittersweet as the full conference was incredibly mentally draining, but we, as a cohort of 50 girls from extremely dislike universities, had come to bond and would soon need to part ways. We started early in the morning with a policy simulation for various interest groups coalition building. This exercise was created with the ultimate goal of our assigned interest groups to converge on a bill proposal for a congresswoman on criminal justice reform. I was elected the CEO of the Innocence Project in the group I was assigned to, and I spoke publicly on the mission and direction of my group members. Unfortunately (or fortunately) our group was the only one to not join the coalition of various ideological groups that made a strong push for the legalization of marijuana. I insisted we stay true to our mission of reforming criminal sentencing procedures as our groups main focus was freeing the innocent serving life without parole or on death row. Our group advocated for the reform of the system through shifting away from faulty forensic practices and

racially prejudiced system incarceration. We ultimately created and presented our bill as we felt we could not adequately compromise on our mission with provisions in the dominant bill. My effectiveness and leadership capabilities were certainly tried in this exercise as for the majority of the three-hour simulation, I was on the moral and informational defensive. I was really proud of our outcome and I learned so much about myself as a speaker and possible future advocacy.

Later there were more informational panels on salary negotiation (highly pertinent to seniors) and careers in law and policy by: Parnia Zahedi , Law Clerk, Senate Judiciary Committee in the Office of Senator Dianne Feinstein; 2L, Georgetown University Law Center; PLEN Alumna: Harini Kidambi, Corporate Associate, Morrison & Foerster LLP; Nicole Hutchinson, Attorney Advisor, U.S. Secret Service, PLEN Alumna; Andrea Johnson , Senior Counsel for State Policy, National Women's Law Center. Another star studded panel that really affirmed my federal judicial system leanings. I was very pleasantly surprised by the strength of Tulane alumna at the PLEN seminar. There was a total of 4 former Tulanians I met throughout the weekend and I am extremely proud and honored to continue the tradition. Thank you so much, for this amazing opportunity, it changed my life.

Does this sound like something you might be interested in? Tulane undergraduate students can apply to [NCI for funding](#) to attend PLEN conferences. Email Anna Mahoney at amhone4@tulane.edu for more information.

Responses have been lightly edited for length and clarity.