First, my professors taught me to ‘think like a lawyer,’ ” says Jake Howlett, JD ’02. “Then, in my third year, I basically got to be a lawyer—on Capitol Hill!”

Now an associate with Bodman Longley & Dahling LLP in his native Michigan, Howlett is not exaggerating. As one of 24 students selected from twice as many applicants for the School of Law’s Congressional and Administrative Law Clinic in Washington, D.C., Howlett clocked 40-hour weeks and then some. He interned with the Governmental Affairs Committee’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired by Senator Carl Levin, head of the Senate Armed Services Committee and the senator from Howlett’s home state. Howlett worked on the national gas-price investigation, researching antitrust issues, collusion, and price gouging. He also staffed an early hearing on establishing the Office of Homeland Security as a cabinet-level position. “In the hearing room, I was the only person sitting behind the senator! It was a little intimidating—but it was a great experience!”

Over the past 25 years, almost 500 second-semester 3Ls have acquired similarly impressive hands-on training through the School’s Congressional and Administrative Law Clinic.

Learning among Lawyers
The students learn primarily by doing—and what they accomplish is considerable. A student who works in the Department of Justice, for instance, might interview potential witnesses, help prepare draft briefs, prepare depositions and questions, and do legal research and writing about pending cases and potential legislation. Or a student who works for a congressional committee member might pursue constitutional and other issues, help draft bills, and help write floor statements.

Ivan Poullaos, JD ’02, of Harare, Zimbabwe, agrees: “In law school we talked about legislative intent, but through the clinic I had a direct sense of the myriad reasons a statute may read as it does.” Poullaos, who is now an associate with Winston & Strawn in Chicago, clerked for Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “Seeing things happen in front of my eyes gave me new understanding. I needed to know about the legislative and executive branches of government to be an effective lawyer.”

“Seeing things happen in front of my eyes gave me new understanding. I needed to know about the legislative and executive branches of government to be an effective lawyer.”

Ivan Poullaos
This learning takes place in illustrious company. “The people I worked with were brilliant, capable, and highly professional,” says Poullaos. During his clinic, he tackled judicial nomination issues and met with congressional staff about Senator Leahy’s bill to close loopholes in the immigration laws to make perpetrators of human rights atrocities deportable. Poullaos notes, “I had studied immigration law at school and was pleasantly surprised that I was able to contribute quite a bit!”

“Working with the government is the greatest legal graduate program going,” Bernstein says.

Susanna Woodbury, JD ’02, agrees: “We had an inside view of what many of the best of the best do.” Woodbury, who plans to work for the Missouri state government in Jefferson City, spent her clinic semester in the appellate section of the Department of Justice’s Criminal Division. “The exposure to legal thinking and writing at that level was an invaluable experience that could only be had through the clinic.”

Guidance from a Washington Insider and a Legal Ethicist

To ensure that clinic students get the maximum benefit from this extraordinary educational setting, mentoring is built into the program. Every two weeks, students review goals and office assignments with clinic director Kaplan. A resident of the Washington, D.C., area, Kaplan has worked in Washington for 12 years and has extensive congressional and agency contacts.

Kaplan describes her responsibilities simply: “I try to help students have the richest experience possible in these very coveted positions. I assign papers, keep everyone motivated, and encourage them to use me as a foil to ask questions they might not otherwise ask on the job.”

To further enhance—and illumine—the Washington practicum, there is a three-hour companion course, The Ethics of Lawyering in Government. Led by Professor Kathleen Clark, former clerk for Judge Harold H. Greene, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, and past counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee, this course focuses on the intersection of politics and the law.

Each class involves a theme, assigned reading, and a notable speaker who fields questions. Front and center have been such prominent speakers as Kenneth Starr and Webster Hubbell, the investigator and one of the investigators in the Whitewater probe of then-President and First Lady Clinton.

“Battles between the Executive and Legislative Branches over Information,” one of the timely class topics in 2002, featured as guests Stanley Brand, former general counsel to the United States House of Representatives, and Charles Cooper, defense lawyer for Governor Jeb Bush in the case involving Florida’s law prohibiting voting by former felons.

Clinic students also write about ethics issues at work. “The entire class was an eye-opener,” says Woodbury. “Now we’re all aware of the rules governing legal ethics and constantly ask ourselves: ‘Is this how I should comport myself? Is this how things should be?’ ”

Most Likely to Succeed

The clinic experience provides a definite edge in the job market. If the goal is to work on Capitol Hill or in a federal agency, “getting a job can be difficult, so having worked in Washington makes a big difference,” Kaplan says. When a position opened recently in an office of the Senate Government Affairs Committee, for example, the staff knew about Emily Kirk Holt, JD ’01, a Washington University student who had worked on the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2001, and hired her.

“Others who have left to take jobs they previously accepted elsewhere now have a new network of experienced people in D.C. to contact if they decide to return,” Kaplan says.

Howlett sums up the value of the clinic experience simply: “I can’t understand why everyone doesn’t apply.”