Shaping the immigration debate:
The CIPA Domestic Capstone Experience

By Hunter Gradie '12

The immigration debate has become a topic of heated conversation on Capitol Hill, in state and local government, as well as in corner coffee shops and living rooms across the country.

During spring semester 2011, students in Laurie Miller’s Domestic Capstone course were given the opportunity to contribute to this conversation in a meaningful way, by creating and building upon immigration and visa research.

The Capstone class completed a comprehensive analysis of the US Department of Immigration's H-Visa program. The “H” series of visas allows citizens of a foreign country to live and work in the US temporarily in order to fill positions left vacant due to labor shortages. The Capstone project, which was proposed and developed by first-year CIPA Fellow Hunter Gradie, was carried out by sixteen graduate students from CIPA, ILR and CRP. They worked with their client, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), to develop targeted recommendations to improve this complicated visa program.

The AFL-CIO asked Miller’s class to focus on three different H-Visas: H-1B, H-2A and H-2B. The class divided themselves into three groups, each one dedicated to studying and analyzing one of these three H-Visa types. Teams gathered information and data from industry experts. Over the course of the semester, each group developed a professional consulting report to present to the AFL-CIO.

Because of the nature of the project, students worked within their small groups, as well as with the entire consulting team of 16 to coordinate, research, write, and produce the reports, as well as to develop their client presentations. Client representatives made one site visit to Cornell to meet with teams. The groups conducted
additional phone and web meetings with the client. In March, Capstone representatives traveled to Washington, DC to present preliminary findings to a panel of labor leaders and immigration experts.

Students also presented their final deliverable as part of a panel, Temporary Immigrant Workers: Realities and Reforms. Guest panelists included Ron Hira, an associate professor of public policy at the Rochester Institute of Technology and an expert on outsourcing, immigration and research; and Mary Jo Dudley, the Director of the Cornell Farmworker Program and a faculty member in the Department of Development Sociology. The panel, held in Ithaca April 29, gave students a chance to present their findings to the general public while fielding questions from Congressional staff from US Rep Hinchey’s office, community leaders and fellow panelists.

"Presenting our research and recommendations was a fantastic experience. It was thrilling to engage with peers and experts in such an important public policy debate," says Kevin Triskett ’11.

Melissa Yee, a second year CIPA Fellow, led the H-1B team which looked at high-skilled worker visas and how to best address industry labor shortage. "Working on a client-focused consultancy allowed for me to bring together different professional skill sets that I learned while at CIPA," she says. "My team and I were able to move beyond the classroom and apply our skills to a current issue in the immigration conversation."

The final deliverable was published as a single document and distributed to clients and other experts in the field of immigration including union leaders, members of think tanks, related non-profits, and academics interested in the immigration debate. The hope is that this report will provide both business leaders and labor leaders with well-crafted research and analysis, allowing them to negotiate with Members of Congress from a position of strength.

Research Recommendations

Students working on the H-1B visa studied a variety of different solutions for producing market caps. They also analyzed recent policy changes and proposals made by Congress and the Executive branch. Their research ultimately produced three major recommendations:

- Expansion of the investigative and enforcement role at the US Department of Labor (DOL).
- Creation of a pilot program to test two distinct auction systems and how they would operate in practice.
- The creation of a tri-department data clearinghouse to formalize information-sharing across the DOL, DHS and DOS.

The H-2A visa group completed an analysis of program shortcomings and possible solutions. In addition, they studied the FLOC-North Carolina Growers Association Agreement as a possible model for the country. They concluded that FLOC represented a unique situation and would be difficult to replicate nationally. Instead, they offered the following recommendations:

- A comprehensive state-by-state analysis of FLOC-NCGA to identify possible pieces of the agreement that could be implemented in different states.
- Implementation of firm regulations for intermediaries who hire and contract work.
- Regulation allowing workers to move freely from employer to employer.
- Creation of a bi-partisan research organization.

The H-2B group delved into the expansive, complex and often incomplete data sets that make up the filing process of H-2B visas. Their exhaustive research and analysis resulted in four major recommendations:

- Creation of H-2B visa oversight committee to eliminate abuses and strengthen the application process.
- Implementation of new guidelines enabling H-2B worker mobility and tracking systems to prevent workers from overstaying.
- Modification to the H-2B program to ensure that the program only employs temporary specialty labor when needed.
- Reassessment of program caps to reflect the actual annual economic and labor market conditions in the US.

The report was recently printed and has been distributed to union leaders, immigration experts at think tanks and non-profits, and academics interested in the immigration debate. “It is a valuable resource for these and others interested in succinct analyses of the H-visa programs and recommendations for improvement,” says Miller. “Students hope that other stakeholders involved in the current debates regarding immigration will use the report when making decisions regarding the future of H-visa programs.”

Six CIPA Fellows Chosen as 2011 PMF Finalists

Six second-year CIPA Fellows were named Presidential Management Fellowship (PMF) Finalists in March. These six Fellows represent six of the eight students, total, who were named PMF Finalists at Cornell this year.

CIPA finalists include:
- Saptarshi Basu
- Amanda Edelman
- Justin Gordon
- Christine Hadekel
- Lisa Ng
- Tiffany Reeser

The PMF Program is a flagship federal leadership development program, designed to develop a cadre of potential government leaders. Individuals who are selected as Finalists are eligible for a two-year PMF appointment by a Federal Agency.

During their two-years, PMF Finalists receive 160 hours of formal classroom training on topics related to leadership, management, and policy. They also receive one four-to-six month developmental assignment and have the potential for accelerated promotions. At the end of the program, a certificate of completion permits immediate appointment to a position in the competitive or excepted service.