in interdependence, the concept that if one person fails to do their job, the group suffers, a belief informed by his fifteen-year military career with the National Guard. Stirling expected the interns to demonstrate personal accountability, face-tact client interaction, and even proper phone etiquette, skills the internship program tested daily. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively was also stressed. The interns and office staff met weekly to discuss important topics, including professional responsibility issues and current events. Each student was required to lead a group discussion on a topic of legal or social significance, ranging from the status of women in combat roles to the ethical dilemmas inherent in artificial intelligence.

"Having to articulate an opinion or a view-point on the spot during discussions is good training for a legal career," says Darius Dehghan, a 2L at UC Berkeley School of Law. "The discussions train us to be coherent even when there is not a lot of time to reflect.

Not only does the program foster critical thinking and leadership, it also allowed the civilians among the group to gain insight into the military lifestyle. (Three of the interns were veterans themselves.) This exposure ultimately helped the civilian students to better understand the unique legal issues veterans face. "My summer at VLII has been an eye-opening experience," said Sarah Lee, a 3L at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. "One of the most valuable things I have learned here is that our veterans are hardworking, committed individuals who do not want a handout. They seek our assistance while not wanting to 'burden' us. Their concern about putting us out is heartwarming, if ultimately misplaced."

The learning opportunities for the interns extended far beyond VLII’s office. Students also immersed themselves in the Orange County legal community with intern-organized field trips to local nonprofits, firms, courts, and Orange County Bar Association events. "One of our goals is to build future leaders in both the legal field and in our communities," Higley observed. "We want to help shape attorneys who know how to work with others, make ethical decisions, and give back to their communities.

Many students were eager to continue their work with veterans after the summer ended. Karol, for instance, the UC Irvine Law 2L, decided to continue interning for VLII in the fall semester. He was initially introduced to the VLII’s work by Antoinette Banks, VLII’s President and Co-Founder, who runs a veterans legal clinic at UCI. "The most satisfying aspect of interning at VLII is being able to work directly with clients in desperate need of assistance—and telling them they don’t have to pay a cent for our services," Karol said. "As a law student, the breadth of legal work I get to do here is something I’d be hard-pressed to find somewhere else.”

Stirling has high hopes for the future of the VLII summer internship program. "The VLII interns showcase a level of public service and engagement that is exciting to see in the next generation of lawyers. The program’s emphasis on character-building and community relationships could, in many respects, serve as a model for other internship programs across the country.

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