



THE VISION OF VERNON SYKES

DURING PART OF HIS LONG CAREER AS A POLITICIAN AND PROFESSOR, VERNON SYKES DIRECTED A PROGRAM AT KENT STATE THAT EDUCATED STUDENTS ABOUT THE ROLE STATE GOVERNMENT PLAYS IN THEIR LIVES—AND OFTEN SPARKED THEIR PARTICIPATION IN IT.

By Jillian Kramer, BA '06

Spend even five minutes with state Sen. Vernon Sykes (D-Akron) and you'll probably come away knowing more about how state government works and the significant role it plays in your life.

"In order for people to get the very best government, a government that works for them, they have to understand it," Sykes says. "Government is so mystical to a lot of people that they refuse to engage in it. They say, 'Politics has nothing to do with me.' But that's not true at all."

Sykes, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Kent State, brought that philosophy to bear as the inaugural director of Kent State's Columbus Program in State Issues. Since 2001, the semester-long intensive program has aimed to open students' eyes to the workings of state government—even if, Sykes says, those students thought they had no place in it.

The program paused in 2020 amid the pandemic, and Sykes stepped down as director after 19 years in June 2020. The university is seeking a new director and plans to restart the program in fall 2022.

With more than 30 years in politics, Sykes considers himself a trustee: someone who will do what is in the best interest of his constituents, even if some decisions are unpopular. And the more people know about how decisions are made, he says, the better they can see how the process affects them and where they might find a place in it.

That's where the Columbus Program, as it is known, comes in. The program has welcomed about 24 students each fall to Ohio's capital to explore state government in three ways: via classes, through on-site briefings (with elected state officials, state agencies, lobbying firms, think tanks and nonprofit policy/advocacy organizations) and in individualized internships that exposed students to the facets of state government.

Each Monday and Tuesday morning, students gathered in a hearing room of the Ohio Statehouse for class. Ohio Rep. Jamie Callender (R-Concord)—an adjunct professor at Kent State for more than 12 years, whom Sykes brought in as an instructor—would teach government theory. Sykes, often listening in the back of the room, would sometimes debate a point or introduce a different perspective—intentionally exposing the students to the complicated relationship between Republicans and Democrats and the role of partisan politics in developing and implementing public policy.

In the afternoons, students visited dozens of state agencies with Sykes, from the Governor's office to the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio to state prisons, speaking with the people who plan, administer and operate governance at the state level. Internships, which Sykes helped arrange, took up the rest of the students' weekdays.

By 2019, 367 students had completed the Columbus Program in State Issues.

Launching the program gave Sykes the chance to shape it with a simple but important goal: "I wanted to make sure that the students would understand and appreciate the significant role that state government plays in all of our lives," he says. It has a hand in everything from issuing business licenses to entrepreneurs to funding school, prison and healthcare

systems. Given that, he says, everyone "should be exposed to the big actors—to the stakeholders, the administrators, the planners" in their home state—even those who don't plan to work in government.

Still, Sykes believes that revealing government's inner workings encourages citizens to participate, says Sykes' youngest daughter, state Rep. and House Minority Leader Emilia Sykes (D-Akron), BA '08, who participated in the Columbus Program in 2006. So, "it's not really shocking that he would have gone to great lengths to put together a program like this," she says. "It's just another way he's encouraging participation."

As he spoke in classes across Kent State's eight campuses to recruit for the Columbus Program, Sykes often heard students lament that they had no place in a government-focused experience because they weren't political science majors. "They would just shut off and think, this is not for me," he says. But he was "able to spark their interest" in the program by showing how they could tailor participation to each student's interests.

The internships were Sykes' chance to convince students they had a place in the program. He would ask them what they wanted to do and where they might want to intern to find the best match, says Kathleen Loughry, administrative assistant for the Columbus Program since 2004. "We would sometimes research what was available, but they would have to submit their résumés and schedule interviews."

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—Vernon Sykes, PhD

A fashion merchandising major could benefit from the experience, Sykes reasoned, by learning how corporate taxes and regulations affect retailers, so he helped secure an internship in the government relations department at the corporate headquarters of what was then known as Limited Brands. A journalism major could gain valuable reporting and government experience with an internship at the *Columbus Dispatch*. And an accounting major could just as easily crunch numbers at the state auditor's office as at an accounting firm.

The internships were often life-changing for the students, says Loughry, who helped the students navigate the program from start to finish. "Maybe when they went in, they didn't know what they wanted to do," she says. But "sometimes when they left, they were completely committed to another direction because of what they saw and what they experienced over their internship."

SYKES' CAUCUS

Access—including access to state government and to career opportunities—is important to Sykes. And that comes as no surprise to anyone who knows his story.

Though Sykes has served for more years in various political offices than most of his students have been alive—three years as an Akron City Council member, 26 years in the Ohio House of Representatives, and now in his fifth year in the Ohio Senate—he did not always believe that such opportunities would be available to him.

“When you’ve been poor, and you’re a minority Black male from the inner city, and you start to see some of the challenges you face—sometimes you get a little discouraged,” he says.

Sykes was one of five children raised in Akron by a single mother who needed welfare to make ends meet. As a pre-teen, Sykes thought the way to improve his circumstances—and put a little money in his pocket—was working as a paper boy for the *Akron Beacon Journal*. But his mother saw things differently. She wanted Sykes to participate in the U.S. Department of Education’s Upward Bound program, which gives low-income students a better chance at attending college.

“My mother sat down with me and cried,” Sykes recalls. “She said that she didn’t have money to help me go to college. She didn’t go to college. She went to beauty school. And she doesn’t know that much about this program. But she knows that if I go . . . I’m going to have a better life. So, I begrudgingly went to the program, and it was one of the best things that happened to me.”

He took college-level classes. He flew for the first time. He attended a live play. In other words, Sykes got to do and see things he never had before. “They brought me to an environment and just gave me the experience.”

And that is, after all, what he wanted to do for his students through the Columbus Program: to give them the chance to do and see things they never had before, and help them learn how they, too, can make a difference.

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—Lubna Najjar, BA ’08

Through the Columbus Program, founder and director Vernon Sykes, PhD, helped 367 students realize the impact that state government has on their lives. During orientation, he would gather that year’s cohort and say, “You are now The Caucus”—a group of people meeting to support a movement—and the students would elect the leadership for their cohort.

“Many of them have stayed close,” says Kathleen Loughry, the program’s administrative assistant. “To this day, they will come to events we have. They are more than willing to promote the program.”

Here, four members of The Caucus look back on their experience with the Columbus Program and how it helped shape what they are doing today.



MATAR GUEYE, BS ’11

Matar Gueye and his Columbus Program classmates had a nickname for Sykes: A Cool Breeze.

While the 2010 cohort chose the phrase because of Sykes’ stylish attire and “shiny car,” Gueye says, the moniker held another meaning for him. In Sykes, Gueye saw a man who could do it all: “It blew my mind that he was a state legislator *and* a professor.”

Gueye decided he wanted to be like that. Today he is the digital campaigns manager of BlueGreen Alliance—a nonprofit coalition of labor unions and environmental groups pushing for a cleaner environment and a clean, thriving economy. He balances managing multiple social media campaigns with crafting communications that go directly to legislators. On a recent day, Gueye helped draft a “Build Back Better” fact sheet sent to U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer’s office, urging the politician to support investing in the manufacturing of clean vehicles and energy.

It’s a busy, demanding job. But Gueye says Sykes and the Columbus Program prepared him for it.

In the program, Gueye learned everything from how to send a professional cold email—a skill he used in President Barack Obama’s 2012 reelection campaign—to the power of networking. He was so engrossed in the program, he says, that he got straight A’s for the first time in his Kent State career. And that was no small feat: “Nothing gets past Vernon Sykes,” Gueye laughs now. “He didn’t give anyone any breaks. He held everyone to account.”



MADISON LISOTTO WHALEN, BA ’11

You could say Madison Lisotto Whalen owes her career path to the Columbus Program. *She* certainly says it.

Whalen is a partner at CHW Advisors in Columbus, a full-service government and political affairs firm that helps clients navigate the regulatory and political landscape. She co-owns the firm with Matthew Carle and Melissa Hoeffel. Whalen interned for Hoeffel, an attorney, during the Columbus Program. And she credits Sykes for the placement. After exploring Whalen’s interest in law during a pre-program interview, he introduced her to Hoeffel and set her internship in motion.

“It’s kind of amazing that, 11 years later, I’m still working with her,” says Whalen, who graduated from Capital University Law School in 2015. “And it was thanks to that connection that he [Sykes] made when I was explaining what my interests were.”

It’s also thanks, in part, to a Columbus Program lesson that Whalen took to heart as she met government officials, lobbyists and stakeholders. Sykes “talked a lot about how far you can go with connections and, if you need a job, that you’re often going to get it through a connection,” she says. “You hear that a lot when you’re an undergrad, but in the program, you could actually see it come to life.”

At CHW Advisors, Whalen focuses on lobbying the state legislature, a career she learned about in the Columbus Program. “The Columbus Program teaches you about state government and lobbying, and how to work with legislators, and that’s exactly what my firm does,” she says. “I was very influenced by the program; it changed the trajectory of my whole career path.”



LUBNA NAJJAR, BA ’08

Politics may seem far removed from fashion, but for Columbus Program graduate Lubna Najjar, working within government helped her launch a successful fashion label, which she has since sold, and later, her Columbus-based women’s fashion business development firm, IL Moda.

Her fashion label’s biggest customers, Najjar says, were the legislative aides, lobbyists and attorneys she met through the Columbus Program. Today, when IL Moda hosts industry mixers, city council members and the mayor often attend.

As Najjar says, the business succeeds in Columbus in part because of her government work.

The Columbus Program launched Najjar into a series of government jobs—including legislative aide in the Ohio State House of Representatives and policy analyst for the Ohio Board of Regents—that ultimately helped her corporate career take off. And it all began with an internship at Homeland Security that wasn’t sufficiently challenging—and a life lesson from Sykes.

When Najjar told Sykes she was not challenged enough by her internship, he suggested she volunteer with the Ohio Democratic Party. There, she canvassed for the reelection campaign of then-Columbus Mayor Michael B. Coleman. She gained a mentor in the mayor, and new insight.

“One of the most valuable things we learned from Dr. Sykes is that life will continue to evolve—that you should focus on the moment you’re in but also know that it can change for the better,” she says. “If you’re not happy in this exact moment, there are people who will help you.”



DESMOND BRYANT, BA ’11

After attending a class at the Kent Campus that allowed him to explore the ins-and-outs of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Desmond Bryant knew he had to go into politics. And then he ran into his friend, Emilia Sykes, in Bowman Hall.

He told her about his newfound interest. She told him about the Columbus Program. “The rest,” he says, “is history.”

Bryant entered the program, where he scored an internship with the governor’s (Gov. Strickland) administration. There he learned more about “who lobbyists are and what it is that they do,” he says. “And that’s kind of what sparked everything.”

Today, Bryant is the vice president of government relations at the Columbus Chamber of Commerce, where he lobbies and advocates for small and large businesses throughout Central Ohio. He also works as a government affairs consultant for Thomas Ingram Law Group.

While his work is nuanced, Bryant, who earned a master’s degree in education policy and administration from the University of Dayton in 2012, sums things up this way: “I build and cultivate relationships and partnerships with elected officials to work to influence policy.”

Knowing what that is worth, though, is something he can trace back to the Columbus Program and Vernon Sykes.

Sykes was excellent at “drawing out greatness from within us,” Bryant says. “Some folks have it in them, but they don’t know how to express it or how to carry themselves in a room. Dr. Sykes was able to help me with knowing my worth. He would say to me, ‘You’re in this program for a reason, so carry yourself in that way. Work the room. Meet as many people as you can. And tell people what you want to do and what you want to become, because folks will help you do it.’” ⚡