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Senator Smith writes about the Wisconsin Senate Scholar Program and the importance of participating in our democracy.

MADISON - In the Wisconsin State Senate there is a program for high school juniors and seniors to learn more about how your Wisconsin State Senate operates. It's called the Wisconsin Senate Scholars Program. It is designed for students who want to learn what goes on in their government and in the Capitol building.

Senate Scholars spend an entire week learning and participating in all facets of the legislative process. They meet with their Senator and staff, legislative support agencies, the press, lobbyists, representatives, the executive branch, the judicial branch, as well as many others who work within state government. Scholars can even be on the Senate floor while the senate is in session. The week's activities culminate in a mock legislative hearing at which Senate Scholars provide and obtain testimony and then hold an executive session to vote a bill out of committee.

Admission to the program is highly competitive and limited to 33 academically exceptional high school juniors and seniors from around Wisconsin. Expectations are high as Senate Scholars must have outstanding academic qualifications and experiences that demonstrate an ability to perform tasks with a high degree of responsibility.

Government and Civic Engagement

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
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It's fun to meet these future leaders as they work the Senate floor and attend hearings. And it is especially fun when one of the scholars comes from my own district. Last week Perry Kotz, a senior at River Falls, was among the scholars I had the honor of meeting. Perry must have impressed his fellow scholars as well since they chose him to be Committee Chair in the mock hearing they held.



Learning how government works firsthand is a valuable experience and I'm confident it makes an impression that leads to a lifetime of civic engagement for most who have the opportunity to participate. I would encourage all our young women and men to find ways to become engaged. Whether it be on their student council or volunteering for local civic groups and campaigns.

It's always inspiring when teenagers petition their school board, city council, or county board on issues that affect their own life experience. The work of our government impacts everyone's life. It is never too early or late to learn how it works and participate in democracy.

Spending an entire week in Madison at the State Capitol is truly a unique opportunity, but there are so many ways people can engage locally. First and foremost is voting – this is our fundamental right and responsibility to choose who represents our communities. Some candidates are active community members who may run for office locally, for the state or even the federal government. This is truly an incredible opportunity and builds a stronger government with individuals ready to serve with diverse viewpoints and experiences.

I've been asked how I decided to run for office numerous times. It's hard not to get carried away with a long story, but it started with one issue that sparked my interest in a life of service. I was a late bloomer. It wasn't until my children started school and I became engaged as a Parent Teacher Organization (PTA) member. From there, my interest in the public service

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continued to grow.

There are scores of individuals like me whose “long stories” began with working on a local issue that matters most to them. Eventually as you gain experience, people will notice and they will ask you to lead. Resist the temptation to say, “no,” or, “I’m too busy.” Eventually a life of service grounded with a single step becomes a full sprint.

There are countless pathways for participating in our government. I encourage everyone to keep exploring new opportunities to serve in your community. Someday when you’re asked how you started, you will say: “It’s a long story.”

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.