

Unger Program Spring 2015 Study Visit

The Unger Program at the Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs was originally founded in 2002 as the Unger International Program for Local Government Leadership with the mission to catalyze an educational bridge between the Levin College and the University of Rijeka. The program was a collaborative effort of the Levin College to respond to the consulting, training, research and educational needs of local government leaders in emerging democracies. The program worked with university faculties and local government leaders in emerging democracies to develop and implement academic and continuing education programs in public management for future and incumbent officials and managers in local governments and non-government organizations. Today, the program serves to support and foster economic and community development through collaborative research and educational exchanges.

In March of 2015, The Unger Program hosted Dražen Hoffmann from GONG, an NGO working in the fields of democratization and good governance from Zagreb, Croatia.

Following his visit to Ohio, where he spent time with the Levin College's Columbus Seminar Program and professional meetings and visits in Cleveland, Dražen summarized his experience. He shared the following with the program.

It is hard to believe that it has already been two months since my stay in Ohio, which included attending the Columbus Seminar and a study visit to Cleveland, courtesy of the Levin College of Urban Affairs and the Unger Foundation. But now that impressions have settled thoroughly and with the weight of domestic politics pressing down on the everyday activities of my organization, it might actually be a good time to reflect on my time spent in the U.S., where I had the luxury of keeping the big picture in mind.

In hindsight, it was all an illuminative experience – in a very visual and experiential sense – serving to drive home the fact that well-informed public policies enhance lives, empower communities and rely on innovation to continue doing so in the future.

My first thoughts on the Columbus Seminar were how much I wished that this sort of program had been available to me back when I was a student (apart from the Croatian Parliament Volunteering Program - incidentally, I would end up working at the exact organization that had established it years prior).



The opportunity to get acquainted (and involved, through simulations) with the work of public bodies is an invaluable experience that no amount of classroom work could replace. But not less importantly, political decision-making is an incredibly fascinating process and the interplay between rational debate, political culture and institutional politics is something that should truly be witnessed by all civically-minded citizens, and students that hope for careers in public affairs especially.

However, the week in Cleveland is really what it was all about. From the Greater Cleveland Food Bank to Lakefront Metroparks to sessions at Levin College to the tour of the University Circle area and the concept of anchor institutions, not to mention all the knowledge my hosts were eager to share with me, it was almost too much to take in all at once.



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Although the differences in context are substantial, my visit demonstrated the overall effects of an academic institution doing truly applicative work, embedded in a community that supports its efforts and stands to gain a lot in return. Urban policy might seem like a cutting-edge interdisciplinary field by Croatian standards, but it only makes sense that city development would make use of systematic knowledge to solve social and economic problems. It was inspiring to see the impact of ideas and people coming from the Levin College benefiting the City and driving it to develop into a great place to live.

Since my organization is involved in good governance and has invested a recognizable effort over the course of 18 years to bring standards of openness of public bodies in Croatia up to standards (and is continuing to do so), sunlight legislation was what I was most interested in, at least initially. But the scope of the subjects covered ended up being much more than that. When put together, they served to confirm that, when good practices are in place and make an integral part of governance processes on all levels, producing beneficial results is made easier. As we love to remind in our advocacy work, transparency and public accountability is to be perceived as an investment, not as a cost to be paid. We hope that will prove to be our small contribution to building flourishing communities, not unlike Cleveland.

I would like to thank everyone who has taken the efforts to make my stay worthwhile, especially The Honorable Patrick Sweeney, Professor Larry Keller and Dean Ned Hill. But special acknowledgements are in order to Alan Unger and Levin College's Molly Schnoke, for making it all possible and going beyond the call of duty so that I could be everywhere and see everything during my stay. Meeting you was a privilege.



Dražen Hoffmann is an analyst at GONG. Gong is a civil society organization focused on enhancing democratic processes and institutions as well as developing democratic political culture and encouraging active and responsible participation of citizens in political processes, particularly in decision-making processes related to good governance of public and collective property, protection and promotion of the rule of law, human rights and solidarity.

Gong was founded in 1997 as an initiative of citizens organized to monitor elections, but by today has widened the methodology to conducting research and analysis, education, information sharing and public advocacy.