

# Concluding and Celebrating 20 Years of the Sorensen Fellowship: Reflections from the Director

Marci McPhee



My few inches of column space here began as a report (boring even to me as I wrote it), and ended up as a love letter. "Privilege" doesn't begin to describe my feelings of walking alongside 121 remarkable individuals on their often-pivotal yearlong journeys, as I have overseen the Sorensen Fellowship program from the start.

With this anthology, the Ethics Center concludes the Sorensen Fellowship, capping off 20 years of supporting incredibly talented, dedicated Brandeis undergraduates in ethics-related summer internships in the U.S. and abroad.

Each year I began meeting with many of these remarkable individuals in October. They optimistically but nervously asked for coaching on their applications for the Sorensen Fellowship, seeking the opportunity to explore a particular passion, address a troubling injustice, or test a potential career path.

I then met with the Fellows in the spring as a cohort of (usually) six, carefully selected for their individual potential and accomplishments, but also for what they contributed to the group, with each cohort having its own personality and dynamic. I helped them get ready, intellectually and logistically, for a summer internship that may be around the corner or around the world. In addition, each Fellow took a spring course which they selected as a part of their

academic preparation. And then they headed out....

All summer I read their updates and fielded phone calls as Fellows processed often mind-bending experiences. The most common observation was something like, "You don't get what you think you're going to get." I listened as students figured out how to mop up after naïve missteps, always emerging stronger and wiser; how to endure another day of incessant marriage proposals from strangers and even professional colleagues in developing countries; and celebrated with them their hard-won breakthroughs. I listened in as students challenged and refined their worldviews, and contributed with energy and sensitivity to organizations doing good work.

In many other programs, students have stretching, challenging, and complex experiences like these – and then wrap up the internship, write a report, and move on. But Sorensen Fellows did more. In the fall, they devoted an entire course to reflection as they integrated the spring academic learning with the summer praxis, unpacked experiences in light of academic frameworks alongside their peers, reflected deeply on assumptions and followed threads of thought, sometimes unnoticed at the time.

Having listened in on their experiences in real time over the summer, I was fascinated to see how Fellows shaped and processed

them, probing deeper for insights that only come with effort and intellectual work. (This publication includes some of their work from that course.) Many thanks to fall course instructors Jim Mandrell, Dan Terris, Mitra Shavarini, Cynthia Cohen, Leigh Swigart and Patricia Chu. Special thanks to Barbara Strauss and David J. Weinstein and for their phenomenal support of the Fellows throughout the Sorensen Fellowship experience over the years.

One might think that after the Fellows and the Center spent an entire year in each other's back pockets, everyone would move on. Instead, we have been delighted that many Fellows remain connected with us, sharing ongoing choices and changes. We are "trench buddies," having gone through an intense year together, understanding what it meant in ways few others could.

"In a certain way, the Fellowship informs everything I do," remarked one alumnus. "Look at us," said another. "We're all becoming these really accomplished people who are building and doing meaningful things in the world! Can you believe it?" "Yes!" I replied. "We knew you had it in you."

The Sorensen Fellowship has been a signature program of the Ethics Center since the very beginning of the Center itself in 1998. As Center Director Dan Terris recounted in a video about the Center's history, "The first thing we did was to create

a program with undergraduates [later named the Sorensen Fellowship], partly to show our commitment to young people, and partly because it's an investment in the future."

As undergraduate interns, 121 Sorensen Fellows worked with remarkable individuals and organizations on six continents on a wide variety of issues, laying the groundwork for careers and lives that are attentive to social justice and foster richer, more ethical public life. In the 20 years of the Fellowship, the Ethics Center's investment has paid off in ways we could never have anticipated.

We are immeasurably proud of our Sorensen Fellowship alumni. They will always be a part of the Ethics Center family. Through their lives and work, the impact of the Sorensen Fellowship will continue to be felt for decades to come.

Guiding and supporting these remarkable individuals – and learning from them along the way – has been more than a privilege: it has been a life highlight and an honor.

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*Sorensen Fellowship Director*  
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*To read the writing of Sorensen Fellows from 1998 to today, or to read more about the conclusion of the program, visit [go.brandeis.edu/sorensen](http://go.brandeis.edu/sorensen).*

## Sorensen Fellowship Program

The Sorensen Fellowship Program of the International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life honors Theodore C. Sorensen (1928-2010) for his lifelong commitment to public service and for his 10 years as Founding Chair of the Center's International Advisory Board. Ted Sorensen was policy advisor, legal counsel and speechwriter to President John F. Kennedy. In 2008 he wrote, "We shall listen, not lecture; learn, not threaten. We will enhance our safety by earning the respect of others and showing respect for them. In short, our foreign policy will rest on the traditional American values of restraint and empathy, not on military might." In focusing their internships and their writing on themes of empathy, respect and trust, the Fellows pay fitting tribute to the public servant for whom the Sorensen Fellowship is named.



**Ted Sorensen with President Kennedy**