



A self-confessed political junkie, Rutgers senior Jim Kline lives and breathes politics and policy. During the recent transformation of undergraduate education at Rutgers–New Brunswick, Kline was a lively advocate for students, ensuring their voices were heard in the debate. Once the transformation got the go-ahead, Kline played a key role in an overhaul of student government. "We all came together as student leaders united under one theme—to make the student voice here at Rutgers stronger," says Kline, who was later elected chair of the new Rutgers University Student Assembly.

But Kline hasn't limited his involvement in politics and policy to student advocacy. Over the past several years, he's gained an up-close view of policymaking as an intern for the offices (or campaigns) of New Jersey's top elected officials—Governor Jon Corzine, Senator Frank Lautenberg, and Senator Robert Menendez. And the result? Plenty of real-world know-how to complement his studies as a double major in political science and planning and public policy. Working on the Menendez campaign for the United States Senate, in particular, was an eye-opener. "I learned just how important campaigns are," says Kline. "On TV, it looks so different than actually being in the crew, helping set up events, talking to candidates, and dealing with the raw emotions that come with all of these great policy ideas. Everyone I met was driven by passion, not by power."

And passion—for education, for social justice—is what's behind Kline's next move. Though Kline, who is from Runnemede, New Jersey, expects to enter the political arena at some point, his immediate plans will take him to New Orleans, where he will be teaching social studies through Teach for America. His father is a maintenance worker in his former high school, his mother is a school cafeteria worker, and his sister is a special education teacher. "Education is in my blood," says Kline.

What was it like to help reinvent student government, and then to lead the organization?

I will probably never have another opportunity like that in my life—to start an organization from scratch. After taking classes in conflict resolution and negotiation, I thought I had it all understood, but then I applied that knowledge to a real situation and grew immensely from that.

You obviously have a strong connection to Rutgers. What's special about the place?

The personal relationships I formed with professors and students here will stay with me for the rest of my life. In 40 or 50 years, I will still have those connections. Rutgers is such an incredibly diverse place. I know that's a cliché, but because of Rutgers' size, and because of Rutgers' location in New Jersey, we are able to have a student body that isn't homogenous, that doesn't believe just one thing—and that is critical in having a healthy discussion. My political education would not have been the same at any other school.

So you see Rutgers' size as a real plus for students?

You learn independence here at Rutgers. You learn self-reflection. Freshman year, you get a lot of mentoring and a lot of help from advisers, but after that you sort of have to chart your own course. Opportunities abound—everything from research to advising to extracurricular activities—and you have to seek out those opportunities. That process of seeking things out for yourself, and learning about things, teaches you so much about the world.

You've had opportunities to extend your education beyond the campus, too. Were there any highlights from working on the campaign of United States Senator Robert Menendez?

The campaign was a high-paced, energetic experience. I remember there was a Bill Clinton fundraiser event that started at 8 o'clock at night, and we were there at four in the morning with the Secret Service, setting up. We had to build the stage. We had to put the flags up. We had to make sure everything from the bottles of water to the outfits of the people going on stage were perfect. That experience—the real fine detail of setting up an event—really taught me a lot of great lessons.

How has Rutgers' diversity enriched your college experience?

Everything from conversations in the dorms late at night to conversations at student organization meetings lends to your education and makes you a richer person. Coming from a small high school into an environment like this, I can't even begin to describe how I've changed.

For additional information, contact RU-info at 732-932-info (4636) or colonelhenry.rutgers.edu.

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Last Updated: 04/10/2008



Rutgers student government leader Jim Kline

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