When newer lawmakers gathered in Colorado Springs from October 3-6, 2011 for the 12th Western Legislative Academy, veteran WLA faculty member and Boise State University political science professor Gary Moncrief gave participants a lesson on the history of state legislatures.

From the reapportionment revolution in the 1960s to the modernization movement of the 1970s to the growing careerism of the 1980s to the growing use of the initiative in the 1990s, Moncrief looked at the positive and negative changes over the last five decades. On the plus side, legislatures have become more representative, better staffed and more equal to the executive branch. On the down side, legislatures have become limited by the use of initiatives and by term limits in several Western states.

In the new millennium, Moncrief cites heightened partisanship and fiscal stress as characteristics of state legislatures. Sessions have lengthened and workload has increased. A 1996 survey of veteran legislators found that lawmakers themselves perceived that: re-election is a higher priority than earlier in their careers, campaigning against the legislature happens more frequently, case work has increased and news coverage has become more confrontational.

Moncrief also touched on negative public perceptions of state legislatures. He said the culprits are the media, the public, the education system and legislators themselves. The legislative system itself creates an environment of short-term versus long-term perspectives. The geographically-based nature of the American district system gives rise to more narrow outlooks. And growing partisanship results from a period when the two parties are very competitive nationally and in many states.

In addition to Moncrief’s class on “50 Years of Legislative Change,” state legislators at the Academy worked with national experts in communications, ethics, civility, negotiations, time management and governance. A highlight was the half-day spent at the U.S. Air Force Academy engaged in team building.

The Western Legislative Academy is a product of the Council of State Governments-WEST. Since its creation in 2000, 451 Western state legislators have graduated from the WLA. Many alumni have gone on to leadership positions in their chambers, in statewide offices and in Congress.

The 2012 Western Legislative Academy will take place November 13-16. Applications from legislators in their first four years of TOTAL service are due April 30. For more information, call 916-553-4423 or visit www.csgwest.org.
Married to a Southerner (a broadcast meteorologist named Jeff), Benitez-Thompson likes to bake with recipes gleaned from that perennial magazine favorite, Southern Living. At interview time, Benitez-Thompson was wrestling with a glue-like molasses ingredient brought back from Arkansas by her husband.

Family life is important to Benitez-Thompson, and with her first session behind her, she’s learned to set better boundaries between her personal, professional and legislative lives. When she’s not at home with her family or at the legislature, she specializes in working with end-of-life patients. She says being a social worker definitely helped prepare her to be a legislator since 80 percent of what happens earlier getting to know fellow lawmakers across the aisle. And she noted: “Wake up every morning and eat a piece of humble pie. During the campaign, people will tell you how great you are, but you’re going to make mistakes and that’s the best way to grow.”

Past presidents of the Western Legislative Academy are: Wyoming Senator Drew Perkins (10), New Mexico Senator John Sapien (09), Arizona Representative Steve Farley (08), New Mexico Representative Thomas Garcia (07), Idaho Representative Rich Willa (06), former Nevada Assembly member Heidi Gansert (05), former New Mexico Representative Jose Campos (04), Nevada Assembly member Kelvin Atkinson (03), Montana Senator Jim Keane (02), Alaska Senator Lesli McGuire (01) and Nevada Senator Barbara Cegavske (00).

Special appreciation goes to the El Pomar Foundation and Penrose House for their ongoing investment in the WLA. The Foundation's ongoing investment in the WLA helps newer Western legislators acquire the skills and networks to be more effective policy makers. The campus environment created by the Penrose House provides a place where participants can step away from their busy lives and immerse themselves in intensive skill building classes. El Pomar fellows serve as independent evaluators of the WLA and are an unbiased resource for course corrections in the curriculum.

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Profile of the 2011 WLA Class President: Nevada Assemblywoman Benitez-Thompson

It was Thanksgiving week when CSG-WEST called to interview Nevada freshman Assemblywoman Teresa Benitez-Thompson. Session was over, and making gingerbread cookies with her young children Lillian and Elijah was at the top of her list.

Assemblywoman Jan Evans and then working for Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm.

Benitez-Thompson holds a bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of Nevada, Reno and a master’s degree in social work from the University of Michigan. Both degrees were financed in part by beauty pageant scholarships. In 2002 she was Miss Nevada, and in 2003 she was third runner up to Miss America. While proud of these accomplishments, Benitez-Thompson doesn’t wish to be known as a former beauty queen. She finds that people are sometimes surprised when she doesn’t fit the stereotype.

Speaker Pro Tempore Debbie Smith describes Benitez-Thompson as “one of this session’s most outstanding freshmen legislators.” Benitez-Thompson is known by colleagues as someone who is well spoken and compassionate, as someone who is very organized and does her homework before staking out major positions.

When asked what advice she would offer new legislators coming after her, Benitez-Thompson said she wishes she had started earlier getting to know fellow lawmakers across the aisle. And she noted: “Wake up every morning and eat a piece of humble pie. During the campaign, people will tell you how great you are, but you’re going to make mistakes and that’s the best way to grow.”

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Designs on Time President Pam Vaccaro taught lawmakers the basics of focus management as they juggle increasing demands on their legislative, professional and personal lives.

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