Imagine it’s your first day on the job. Your new boss (like second from the top on the org chart boss) stops by to introduce himself. He asks a few questions about your education and past jobs and listens intently as you respond. He then asks about your family. You tell him your mom is a teacher and he tells you to give her a call right then and there. He’s the boss—and you’re (nervously) curious—so you do and hand him your phone. He speaks to her for several minutes, sharing praise and pleasantries. He ends the call, offers his help should you need it and moves on. Well, that was pretty fantastic.

Now, imagine that org chart is the Executive branch of the United States government and your new boss is Vice President Joe Biden.

Yep, that happened to Jamie Lyons ’07 (WHIT/NEW) thanks, in part, to her tie to Syracuse University and the Martin J. Whitman School of Management—the kind of tie that unbinds you... opens doors to people, places and opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible. She never dreamed her office would be a stone’s throw from the West Wing of the White House. She and her mom often talk about how different her life would be if she hadn’t chosen Syracuse University.

Lyons grew up in Philadelphia. Her mom, a fifth grade teacher, raised her three daughters to value education and hard work. Lyons aspired to be a broadcast journalist. When it came time to choose a college and a major, her mom—with a propensity for practicality—urged her daughter to consider a complimentary degree that could give her options beyond anchoring the nightly news.

The Whitman dual program with the S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communications met both of their criteria. “I was interested in being a broadcaster, but I recognized that management skills would transfer to a number of other careers,” shares Lyons. Early acceptance into the joint program and a generous scholarship package made the decision easy.

She settled on public relations and...
marketing management as her respective majors at Newhouse and Whitman. Fortuitously, Lyons’ work-study placement was in the dean’s office at Whitman. Tom Foley, executive associate dean, and Barbara Buske, executive director of administrative operations, provided a haven of support for the next four years.

Before the start of her junior year, Foley and Buske suggested Lyons consider the international relations semester in Washington, D.C., offered through the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. “Tom and Barb really got to know me and my interests. I would not have found out about this opportunity were it not for them,” continues Lyons. “One of the great things about Whitman is the consideration of students’ individual goals and the willingness of faculty and staff to make connections on their behalf.”

Through the Maxwell program, 15 to 20 students spend a semester in D.C. where they work during the day and take evening classes at SU’s Greenburg House. There, Lyons spent her days fundraising for a center-left senator and think tank run by a Syracuse alumnus.

“It wasn’t an international relations major like most of the folks in the program,” she explains. “I was out of my comfort zone, but I had the foundation to do well. The building blocks of management are the building blocks of everything else in life—team work, planning, self-discipline and time management.”

Foley was right about Lyons being well suited for the international relations program. She decided to spend the following semester abroad at SU’s London campus. And just after removing her mortarboard at the SU convocation, she headed back to D.C. where she spent the next four years working at the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC).

After a year in federal government relations for Bristol-Myers Squibb, she decided to pursue a master’s in global politics. And just like her decision to attend SU, the choice of the London School of Economics (LSE) came easily. “I truly valued my experiences studying abroad in London. Being afforded the opportunity to learn with and debate amongst talented classmates from Qatar, Columbia and everywhere in between was incredibly enlightening and challenging,” shares Lyons.

Lyons recalls the application of her Whitman education during her time at LSE. “Statistics classes were the bane of my existence at Whitman,” she says. “But I used those skills at LSE to aggregate data for my dissertation. The ease with which I could work with numbers surprised me.”

Her classmates had backgrounds in the humanities, politics and international relations. Whitman had provided Lyons with a different approach to problem solving.

“I would think through scenarios more practically than theoretically, considering feasibility, timetables and resources needed to get things done. Theory is important, but theory alone isn’t going to take you from A to B,” she adds.

After LSE, Lyons went back to D.C. and to Bristol-Myers. A year later, she was offered a position by her former DLC boss who was now the chief of staff for the Vice President—also a Syracuse alumnus. This was yet another tie to SU that afforded Lyons an opportunity she has happily seized since May 2013.

“It’s incredible. Growing up in Philly with my mom and sisters, I never envisioned myself here...working for the Vice President, his hardworking and selfless staff and his genuine, sincere and big-hearted family,” Lyons shares.

She manages the logistics of the very busy 85-person office. “I keep going back to this idea of what you learn at Whitman translates to any job—decision making, synergy, presentation skills. If you are really good at these things, you can make a significant impact within any organization.”

She spends much of her time prioritizing, planning and preparing forecasts for the VP and his chief of staff. “Whitman professors stress the importance of having a plan. You can’t just say we want ‘X’ in three months,” explains Lyons. “I’m able to look at the here and now and figure out how to achieve the intended result in the allotted time.”

And Lyons points to specific classes (including consumer behavior and marketing) that she utilizes to perform daily duties—most importantly the proper tailoring of messages to achieve the desired perception or outcome.

She feels strongly that Whitman gave her the foundation of skills to be successful in this job and the ties to the people who have given her the chance. “It is incredible to think of how my connection to SU has helped me to where I am today.”

And Lyons says the long hours everyone puts in pale in comparison to the experience of watching meaningful change taking place. “This is ground zero for ideas. I get to witness the process as they percolate up the chain from a thought, to a law and everything in between. At the end of the day, I have the honor of working for a man who has been championing ideas for families like mine his entire adult life.”