Internship Program is a Win-Win for U.Va. Students, Host Organizations

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For college students looking to gain a competitive edge in the job market, finding a part-time job or internship can be a challenge, especially for those taking a full load of course work or wanting to study abroad. At the University of Virginia, however, the option for students to intern in their chosen field while going to class or studying overseas doesn’t have to be a trade-off.

With more than 1,000 internship placements, a new intern-abroad program, a growing range of choices for students and a new scholarship, the University Internship Program is offering more options than ever for third- and fourth-year U.Va. students.

The University Internship Program is an interdisciplinary program that combines an academic seminar with field internship experience supporting a student’s personal, academic and career-related goals. Since its beginning in 1976, the program has placed more than 7,500 U.Va. interns in public- and private-sector organizations in the Charlottesville area. The program is primarily for students in the College of Arts & Sciences, but it is available for all undergraduates at U.Va.

Students enrolled in the program receive four units of academic credit upon completing their internships.

“It’s not just about getting an internship. This is about professional and personal development,” program director Karen Farber said. “Internship sites are vetted to ensure they meet UIP’s requirements to offer U.Va. students a value-added, professional practice experience with a strong mentoring component to ensure that they are true internships.”

Many internship sites are U.Va.-based; interns can work in event planning at the John Paul Jones Arena or in health sciences at the Emily Couric Cancer Center. Others are located in the community, where interns can work for a variety of organizations like Merrill Lynch & Co., Virginia Eagle Distributing, Live Arts or the Piedmont Environmental Council.

Farber noted that the University Internship Program is working to offer more local choices for students studying liberal arts, pre-law, pre-med and financial services and wealth management. Internship sites are required to participate in an orientation program before accepting students, where sponsors learn the rules of true academic internships.

“They have to know how to mentor students,” Farber said. “They have to understand that this is a professional practice internship. We understand that there are clerical things that have to be done, but they are not the substance of the internship.”

Interns “really get stuck in,” said Jim Ellis, senior research director at the U.Va. Center for Survey Research, who supervises interns. “Editing reports, creating documents, working with databases, and then being able to see their work sometimes pop up in a newspaper article in the Daily Progress, or in a report that goes online with one of our clients.”

“They don’t come here to play on their computers,” said Bob Gibson, director of the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership, which has hosted interns for the past five years. “They come here to work. They do everything — they do lists, they do mailings, they collect information for us and put it together in usable form in events like our Gala, so they’ve been very helpful in a variety of projects.”

For the past 37 years, University interns have contributed more than 3 million hours of service to the workforce, locally and abroad.

The core internship program is a two-semester, academic-year program, which averages an enrollment of 320 students. The program also offers a summer session program, averaging 115 students, which can combine with an academic semester.

“As a U.Va. student, you do have more skills than you think you do,” said Elena Gardiner, a former former intern Kate Martin, who accepted a job offer from U.Va. Athletics this summer, says her internship experience helped prepare her for entering the workforce.

Students attend an academic-year internship orientation program.

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The University Internship Program is continuing its summer Dublin To-Go program and introducing its pilot Sydney To-Go program next summer. Through these options, students intern abroad for an organization of interest to them and take an academic seminar to complement the internship from a partnering institution.

In Dublin, the University Internship Program guarantees an internship placement and housing arrangements at University College Dublin for students enrolled in the program. Internships to suit nearly any major are available in more than 60 sites, including the Irish Parliament, the National Maternity Hospital, the Irish Arts Review and the Aviva sports stadium.

The program, which has hosted 113 students since its inception in 2007, has been "wildly successful," Farber said. Twenty-seven students are currently interning there.

In addition to its two formal international programs, the University Internship Program office helps arrange domestic summer "To-Go" internships in Washington or other U.S. cities, or other international internships.

Students interning during the summer work up to 17 hours per week, while those interning during the academic year work 10 hours per week. All program participants take an "Organizational Behavior" seminar taught through the Department of Sociology in the College of Arts & Sciences.

"The seminar is there to help student discuss, understand, reflect and process what they're going through," Farber said. "If you don't know something about communication theory, you're not going to understand how to process conflict that happens in the office. Bridging theory and practice -- that's what we do."

Although internships are not expected to lead to a job offer, many have.

After interning for the U.Va. Department of Athletics during her fourth year, Kate Martin received a job offer to work as assistant director of event management.

"A position opened up in our unit, and throughout the year I had gradually picked up more administrative tasks, especially in helping out with track and field in the spring, which was more management-based," she said. "I did well, got the chance to interview for the position, and I started here full-time in June."

The University Internship Program office begins recruiting students in the late fall, with a heavy emphasis in the spring before the mid-March deadline.

However, students interested in interning during the academic year can apply on a wait-listed basis. Program directors will contact wait-listed applicants through Aug. 23 as internship opportunities become available.

Organizations interested in becoming a professional practice internship site can apply online at the UIP website or contact Karen Farber at 434-982-5552 or kfarber@virginia.edu.

-- by Lauren Jones

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