

TIMES LEDGER

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Expose yourself to externships

BY ERIKA PRAFDER

So, you've logged in a couple of college externships under your belt - and even managed to negotiate decent wages each time for your time and efforts. Prospective employers are sure to value all of the new computer, negotiating and communication skills you've picked up along your way.

But if you're looking to differentiate yourself - to find another way to wow hiring prospects - consider committing yourself to an externship or two.

The key difference between these experiential learning opportuni-

ties and internships is that rather than being predominantly self-centered in nature, externships are typically voluntary, do-good or give-back types of experiences and are often completed within non-profit-type settings.

"Many students are first exposed to community service at the high school level. Now, they're increasingly expected to continue such work at the college level," said Rob Franek, vice president and publisher for "The Princeton Review."

Unlike internships, which usually take place over an entire academic semester or summer hiatus, externships are shorter - generally lasting two

to four weeks and often during college vacation breaks.

Since most college curriculums don't require students to fulfill an externship, "What these experiences demonstrate to employers is that a student exists not only in their university, but as a team player to the outside community as well. What more attractive quality can there be?" Franek said.

While externships are largely unpaid, students often tie their experiences to their course work - and either receive college credit or use their experiences for graduate school application/essay material.

Beyond being a great resume-builder, there are



PATRICIA MONTANA

other hard benefits students derive from their charitable fieldwork.



St. John's University in Jamaica co-ordinates externships for its students.

For Marianne Recher, a third-year law school student at St. John's University, her externship was so intense and rewarding, she claims it was one of the best things she's done during her graduate school career.

This past fall semester, she and seven other students participated in the school's Street Law Externship Program, a new program designed to hone students' law skills.

The college partnered with Jamaica High School, aiming to teach its economically and socially disadvantaged seniors about their legal rights and responsibilities.

Twice a week, the St. John's law students followed lesson plans and team-taught an Intro To Law class that covered

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constitutional rights, how the state and federal court systems are organized, morality and the law and what one needs to do to be an informed citizen today.

"It was a real class for these kids – they were getting graded on it," said Recher.

"I was apprehensive at first. I'd never taught before," she said. "It was challenging to get up there and keep a class of 25 kids interested. I wanted them to connect with me, not feel as though I was teaching down to them."

Fortunately, the program was well-structured.

"Every teaching session is very relevant to students. We use examples like drug testing for student athletes, purse searches and metal detectors in schools," said Patricia Montana, associate professor of legal writing at St. Johns and the program's founder.

By the semester's end, "I'd learned how to simplify legal concepts, which is important for meeting with clients in the future," Recher said. "I learned more about the law. It's so much more real when we can give these kids information that's relevant to their lives."

For her time, Recher received three college credits, but the real payback will last for years to come, according to Montana.

"They truly enjoyed the experience of working with students from diverse backgrounds. It positively shaped their ability to be good lawyers," she said. "As opposed to learning about lawyering in books, they were given a window seat to the public's perception of lawyers in the legal system. Several of them also had an interest in education, and this experience solidified their desire to pursue it further."

The impact of hands-on work experiences with a social bent cannot be underestimated, said Sam Holleran.

Currently pursuing bachelor's degrees in both social/historical inquiry at Eugene Lang College and a bachelor of fine arts degree in Illustration at Parsons



Externships offer students to interact in the "real world."

(two of eight divisions at The New School), the busy student made time in July of 2005 to participate in a two-week summer externship program organized by Parsons.

"I wanted to do something involving design illustration with a social element," he said.

He jumped at the opportunity to join 10 fellow design students from New York and design students from the Dominican Republic in their homeland, where together they were assigned a design challenge that affected an entire community there.

"We were based in the southeast town of La Romana, which is off the beaten path. It's a cruise ship docking area and a short drive from a large resort vacation area. The town itself was a hardscrabble place – not dangerous, but not tourist-oriented," said Holleran.

The students' design brief was to try and create inviting ways for tourists who came to the surrounding areas to interact with the locals.

While the language barrier between Dominican and American students wasn't a real issue, the cultural

barriers were.

"Things the local students took for granted (a run-down fresh-fruit market, for example) were really quite beautiful," said Holleran. "We ended up lending fresh perspectives to each other."

The intense work period yielded some useful results, according to Holleran.

"We designed a booklet for the local government to distribute at the city's entrance and exit points. It included expressions and hints for working the transport system, how to hire a motorbike, facts about the indigenous produce and highlighted the professional baseball players that practice there, which fuels a culture and lifestyle all its own," he said.

Though much of their work was trial by fire, "everyone, including the town's mayor, was pleased with the outcome. Working with such constraints, we really saw a different side of the design process and the needs that any municipality needs to have filled. With an actual 'client,' we actually saw more of how things operate in the real world," Holleran said.

Another benefit of the program was that "our teachers weren't operating as hypothetical employers. They worked as our teammates and pulled all-nighters with us to finish the project. We developed a connection with them that you just can't get in the school environment," said Holleran.

While Holleran paid his own way to join this project (airfare, room and board), he said his financial responsibility amounted to less than paying for course credits at Parsons and that he would highly recommend the experience to up-and-coming classmen.

"We were essentially donating our work to this community. It reinforced my interest in socially conscious work and broadened my perspective," he said.

For more externship information and resources, check out:

- Habitat for Humanity, Alternativedbreaks.org
- "Colleges With a Conscience: 81 Great Schools with Outstanding Community Involvement," (Random House/Princeton Review, \$16.95).