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Solving the Debt Crisis

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Thousands of college students nationwide trying to gain work experience through internships, often low- or un-paid, face the prospect of accumulating debt paying for credit hours and living expenses away from campus or home.

Programs at schools across the country are easing students' financial stress by providing free room and stipends so they can get the much-needed internship experience without adding debt.

"Without the stipend, I would literally be detasseling corn all summer at a local farm 40 hours a week," said Holly Christian, of Brookville, Ohio, one of 12 University of Dayton students chosen for the University's new Statehouse Internship Program. Christian worked in Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Lundberg Stratton's office on Stratton's "Ohio Veterans Wraparound Project: Wrapping Our Arms Around Veterans."

The program, funded by the University of Dayton's College of Arts and Sciences dean's office, the political science department, honors program and government affairs, paid for the students' housing and added a stipend for living expenses.

"I would probably have been able to do it, but it would've be a tad difficult, particularly because the internship is unpaid. Having to spend lots of money with no source of income would have been a great burden for me," said Alisa Vidulich, of Morgantown, W.Va. "I would more than likely have had to find another opportunity in my hometown so I could live at home and find a job there." Vidulich worked with the Ohio House of Representatives in constituent relations.

Besides Christian and Vidulich, students worked in the offices of Ohio Gov. John Kasich, Ohio Attorney General Mike Dewine, Ohio Secretary of State Jon Husted, among others.

"We tried to take out the deal breakers, like living and travel expenses," Statehouse Internship Program Coordinator Eileen Austria said.

The program was born from a demand for more internships by University of Dayton political science students. Approximately 50 students applied for 12 spots in the Statehouse Internship Program.

"Our students consistently ask for more opportunities," said Jason Pierce, chair of the University's political science department. "Given the investment the students are making in their education, there's an important role for departments to play proactively creating internship programs."

Austria said the program also provides a basis for college students to stay in Ohio after graduation.

"If we want kids to stay in Ohio, we have to find ways to get them in the door (of internships at places like state government)," Austria said. "You have to give them a reason to stay in Ohio."

After one summer, the program and the students are turning heads. Austria has received inquiries from state representatives about why they didn't have a University of Dayton student placed with them.

"They want me to get in touch with them earlier next year so they can have a UD student," Austria said.

University of Dayton student Beth Joseph received a job offer from Speaker of the Ohio House William Batchelder, according to Austria. Stratton offered Christian an opportunity to return next year for a longer internship.

"Although we usually only take law student externs, I agreed to try a UD college extern, and am I ever glad I did," Stratton said about Christian. "She was able to take some projects, run with them, and enhance them beyond what I expected. We even shared the results on a proposed website with the Ohio Dept. of Veterans Affairs and they were equally impressed."

Dewine office intern David Stakes, who was doing construction work two summers ago, made a big impression — he was encouraged to apply for another extern program for law students when he goes to law school.

Mike Veselik, who worked with Ohio Sen. Chris Widener on the state budget process, even received a mention on the senate floor for his efforts.

In addition to the University of Dayton, the University of Akron has a similar program for statehouse interns, according to Austria.

Akron's Bliss Institute owns a house in Columbus where students live for free during their statehouse internships. Akron students, who also must show a financial need, also receive a stipend, according to acting internship coordinator Jenni Fitzgerald. Students from Cleveland State, Hiram, Malone, Miami and Heidelberg take part in Akron's program as guest students of Akron.

Outside Ohio, Hamilton College's Summer Internship Funding Program provides \$1,000 to \$6,000 for students showing a financial need. Former Iowa governor and current U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack established a fund for the program as a 60th birthday present to his wife, Christie, to honor her relationship with the college and her commitment to broadening students' education.

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