

High school students turn to internships to help plot future

Some officials, teens say experience leads to greater opportunities, insight into career paths

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This summer, teenagers will canvass in support of politicians, help nurses in hospitals or tweet as part of a company's social media effort. They're still in high school but they are working unpaid internships — sometimes even paying thousands of dollars to do so.

Once largely the province of college students, internships are becoming more common for high school students who are eager to flesh out college applications and get an insider's look into career tracks, some experts say.

"Part-time jobs have become scarcer and scarcer for high school students," said Alison Cooper Chisolm, CEO of Massachusetts-based Ivey College Consulting Inc. "The job at McDonald's is now being taken by an adult because the adult needs the work."

Instead, more high school students — at least the ones who can afford to work without pay — are looking for new ways to better themselves and their college prospects, said Chisolm, who worked for more than 10 years in secondary schools and university admissions before entering independent college admissions consulting.

"More and more kids, because of the economic climate, are thinking carefully about both college and the investment it represents, but also starting in the right place," she said.

The rise of the high school internship has been fueled by long-term factors, from the 2008 economic downturn to a more competitive college admissions process that accelerated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Chisolm said. In addition, more hands-on learning is taking place in high schools, while more companies, particularly in

engineering and technology, are offering internships to high school students as a form of long-term labor development, she said.

Ross Perlin, author of "Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy," said he has noticed more high school students taking internships.

"My impression was that it was ... (to build) up your profile, looking like a particular sort of person for your college application," Perlin said.

The phenomenon has yet to be thoroughly studied, said Perlin, who did not focus on high school students in his book. There does not appear to be official data tracking the matter.

But some who are familiar with the high school education system acknowledge more high school students are taking internships. A statement from Chicago Public Schools said there has been an "an upward trend," with 100 more CPS students expected to take part this year in the career and technical education summer internship program, which pays its interns.

Krista Paul, internship coordinator for Township High School District 214, northwest of Chicago, said the number of students applying for internships has tripled since five years ago.

She plans on placing about 50 students in six-week, 20-hour-per-week unpaid internships this summer. District 214 is the second-largest high school district in Illinois, covering Arlington Heights, Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove, Mount Prospect, Prospect Heights, Rolling Meadows, Wheeling and Des Plaines.

Paul places about 170 students from fall through summer out of about 6,000 juniors and seniors in her district, in fields ranging from culinary arts to manufacturing and law, she said. And more students have been taking on internships after school during the academic year, she said.

"When I interview them, I have to make sure they're not overcommitting," Paul said, citing rigorous course loads that pack student schedules.

Joe Lehnert, 19, of Arlington Heights, said that his internship last year at a local hospital through the District 214 program played "a huge part" in his decision to pursue a career in health care.

"Without this internship, I don't know if I'd ever have discovered that," said Lehnert, who graduated high school and is taking courses at Harper College in Palatine. "Working in a position in health care is such a commitment — timewise, moneywise, studywise. If you're not 100 percent sure it's right for you, it could be bad in the end."

Lehnert has three older siblings, ranging in age from 20 to 27, none of whom completed internships during high school, he said.

"I definitely think nowadays more kids are interested in this kind of stuff ... looking for ways to match themselves with a good career," Lehnert said. "Before, in my mind, internships were more for college, once you were getting ready for a job. But I like that it's being brought to the younger generation."

Lehnert said he was offered a nurse assistant position at the hospital where he interned — Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge — and started the job the day after he graduated high school. He plans on transferring to the University of Illinois at Chicago in the fall to pursue a major in neuroscience.

Lisa Dieckman, 18, a senior at Rolling Meadows High School, also used the District 214 program to peek into career possibilities. Every day after school she has been doing administrative work for a Rolling Meadows nonprofit that helps orphans in the developing world.

"What I'm doing at Warm Blankets is basically what I want to do after college," Dieckman said. "I've been able to see what my career will involve."