

Students craft their own internships to fit interests

By Anjali Athavaley | The Wall Street Journal
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Heather Day's ideal summer internship didn't exist. So she created it herself.

A junior at [Connecticut College](#) in [New London](#), Conn., Day wanted to combine her love for hip-hop music with her interest in helping children. After being unable to find a suitable program, she sent out cover letters and resumes to eight nonprofit art-education groups in New York, Washington and Atlanta, none of which had a formal internship program.

Art Start, a New York nonprofit that educates disadvantaged children about the arts, agreed to take her on as an intern this summer. In addition to planning a fund-raiser and creating a curriculum for the nonprofit's fall session of classes, she will be running a monthlong hip-hop workshop for children.

"Hip hop is a great way to relate to a lot of people," says Day, an American studies major with a minor in human development. Although the internship is unpaid, Connecticut College is giving Day, 20 years old, a \$3,000 stipend to help cover her living expenses.

With education growing more specialized, students are increasingly looking for internships that allow them to focus on their specific areas of study. When those opportunities aren't available, they are approaching companies and nonprofits to create their own internships, colleges and universities say.

The option "appeals to almost any liberal-arts student who isn't interested in going the business route because gaining experience in the field that you are interested in is challenging, often," says Beth Ricca, associate director of career services and director of internships and volunteer programs at Claremont McKenna College, a liberal-arts college in Claremont, Calif.

The trend comes at a time when employers are increasingly looking for new hires with internship experience. Often, a summer job can turn into a full-time one. Employers hired 47 percent of their interns from the class of 2006, up from 36 percent in 2000, according to a National Association of Colleges and Employers survey released in June. On average, 62 percent of college hires have had some internship experience in the past, according to the survey.

But convincing an employer to create an internship can be difficult -- especially for students with focused majors and interests. Stew Peckham, director of career development at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, says students often submit proposals

to employers stating goals and specific areas of interest. "If the student outlines that a bit, it could get them further along," he says.

While some students sit down with an employer and design a set of tasks, the internship often evolves on its own. Last summer, Ritika Puri, a 21-year-old junior and literature major at Claremont McKenna, wanted an internship related to social and economic development in India. She was particularly interested in exploring the relationship between socioeconomic status and access to education and health-care facilities. Rather than look for an established internship, "I was really interested in designing my own," says Puri.

Puri contacted Adharshila, an organization in New Delhi that assists about 400 residents in a local slum, through a family friend. She was hired to assess Adharshila's existing programs and help choose new initiatives for the organization. She went door-to-door to ask residents what services they needed the most. People said they wanted better access to health care and better tutoring services for children, she says. She obtained a \$500 donation, which she used to buy school supplies for 100 children. She also helped start a health center, which receives about 20 patients a day. "My role just sort of grew while on the job," she says.

The process of creating an internship comes with challenges, though. For instance, targeting employers willing to offer specialized internships can be tough. Frannie Noble, 22, a government major at Connecticut College, wanted to find a group that would allow her to research children's rights in Africa. She sent out 20 cover letters and resumes to nonprofits in Mali and Senegal. None responded. Then, she went to Mali during the spring semester last year as part of a study-abroad program and visited some of the groups in person, trying to spark their interest.

In April, the Coalition of African NGOs Working with Children invited her in for an interview and offered her a position for the summer. As part of her internship, she visited nonprofits to gather information about the biggest challenges to children's rights in Mali, including flaws in the education system, child trafficking and child labor. At the end of the internship, she submitted a research paper on her findings.

Finding funding can be difficult because it is far less likely these internships will pay. Some schools provide financial assistance, albeit to only a handful of students. [Johns Hopkins University](#) in Baltimore, Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., provide funding for select students doing unpaid internships. Individual grants are usually about \$2,000 but can range up to \$6,000, depending on the student's financial need.

Colleges that offer grants require students to submit proposals indicating what they hope to gain out of the internship and how it relates to their majors and career goals. The schools also help students design their programs and locate companies and groups.

While many of the internships involve nonprofits or small companies, some students

have pitched internships to larger employers -- even if their interests are unrelated to the company's core business. David Fine, who graduated last year from [Northwestern University](#) in [Evanston](#), Ill., with a degree in social policy, "was pretty dead-set" on creating an internship in corporate philanthropy the summer before his senior year. Fine, 23, proposed an internship to companies in the Bay Area -- such as Levi Strauss & Co., [Gap Inc.](#) and [Wells Fargo & Co.](#) -- that listed charitable initiatives on their Web sites. He told employers he wanted to learn how the private sector could address social issues.

He was hired at San Francisco natural-gas and electric utility company [Pacific Gas & Electric Co.](#), a subsidiary of [PG&E Corp.](#) His task was to restructure the company's employee-volunteer program. He also helped set up an internal site where employees could post volunteer opportunities and worked on a company initiative to help fund the creation of parks in the Bay Area. He submitted a research paper to his school at the end of the summer and received course credit for the internship.

Creating an internship tailored to his interests made him better equipped to find a full-time job in the same field, he says. Fine now works at the Center for Companies That Care, a Chicago nonprofit that helps businesses become socially responsible. "It helped me realize that this is a feasible interest to pursue and a feasible career field," he says.

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