

Summer Work Can Be a Launching Pad

Federal Internships Offer Experiences Beyond Filing and Phone Duties

By LILLY WHITEMAN
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If Shirley Murillo had settled for flipping burgers during her college summers, she probably would not be what she is today: a hurricane hunter at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration who flies straight into the earth's deadliest storms to collect life-saving information.

So what did Murillo do during her summers to catapult her career into the clouds? She interned in the federal Significant Opportunities in Atmospheric Research and Science (SOARS) program in Boulder, Colo. She worked shoulder-to-shoulder with leading scientists in state-of-the-art labs analyzing real-time data on hurricanes as they plowed across the United States — experiences that “helped me realize that hurricanes were my passion,” Murillo said.

The program, she said, also featured mentoring, networking with prominent scientists, and training in giving conference presentations that introduced her to the scientific culture. And because SOARS houses interns together in rent-free townhouses, pays generous stipends and covers travel costs, the program offers an all-expenses-paid, around-the-clock immersion that interns describe as the scientific community's version of MTV's “Real World.”

SOARS is just one of dozens of well-paying internship programs that are based in federal offices, labs, museums, courts and parks around the country. In preparation for a huge retirement wave, federal agencies are currently rolling out these entry-level programs almost as fast as Starbucks is opening new cafes.

Like SOARS, most new internship programs feature advanced training and substantive project work. “Interns aren't here to fetch coffee or Xerox,” said Raul Quintero, who spent a summer during his master's in public administration program interning at the Government Accountability Office, a watchdog agency. “We were given important projects, and we ran with them.”

His projects included attending congressional



BY MATT COLLINS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

To Land a Federal Internship

■ **Research your options early.** Applications for many programs are due months in advance. Plan your search accordingly.

■ **Find programs that suit you.** There are year-round programs, summer programs, programs targeting minorities and women, programs limited to undergraduates, and programs limited to grad students and recent grads. Salaries vary greatly. Find the right programs by searching agency Web sites, which are linked to www.firstgov.gov, and through www.students.gov.

■ **Craft impressive applications.** Emphasize relevant course work, research experience, extracurricular activities and high grades. Describe specific examples of your successes, and ask your references to do the same.

hearings on border controls and reporting on them to agency executives, and writing chapters of a published report on flood control policies.

Quintero compares internships such as his to rent-with-option-to-buy leases because they can help interns and the agency decide whether to seal long-term deals with one another. His summer job led to his admittance into the agency's two-year professional development program, which grooms staffers for advancement.

But even internships that don't segue into permanent jobs can provide pivotal credentials, said Tomas Rivas, who will soon complete a year-long internship at the National Gallery of Art. He interned there after earning a master's in fine arts “because it's the best place to learn about exhibit design.”

Now, he's confident that his experiences — which included single-handedly designing a house-sized, three-dimensional collage for the gallery's popular Dada exhibition — will help him land another job.

Another benefit of federal internships is their networking opportunities, said Scott Douglas, who completed the Health and Human Services Department's two-year Emerging Leaders Program. “I met people in many offices through the program's rotational assignments,” he said. “The contacts — that was where the program had its magic.”

Douglas is now a program analyst at the agency, and those contacts are still valuable. “If I haven't addressed an important issue before, one of my Emerging Leaders friends has. And I call them and get their take on it,” he said.

Similarly, Tamara Singleton, a SOARS alumna who is now a PhD student at the University of Maryland, still sometimes benefits from SOARS guidance, even though her internship ended in 2004. “SOARS offers an ongoing relationship. Those scientific conferences can be big and intimidating. So I might e-mail my presentation to my SOARS advisers beforehand to get their feedback on it,” she said.

If you want to become an intern, Singleton offers advice for writing successful applications: Study your target organization's Web site. Ask the program director how to contact previous interns, and interview those interns about their experiences. Then, convey in your application your program knowledge, enthusiasm, credentials and commitment to taking advantage of opportunities offered.