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Students Pay to Find Internships

By AP/ EMILY FREDRIX

MILWAUKEE — Claire Richardson knew this summer would cost her money. Whether she chose to take an unpaid internship, study abroad or stay at Southern Methodist University and take summer classes, she and her parents would have to pay.

So that's why she didn't mind spending thousands of dollars to land an internship, plus housing and food, for a summer in New York.

"When you look at it you're going to be paying money wherever you are or whatever you're doing," said Richardson, a 20-year-old sophomore who will intern this summer at brokerage Smith Barney.

Hunting for an internship takes time, and as more students realize their value, competition is getting fierce. A slew of businesses have popped up to help match students with internships, charging hundreds to thousands of dollars to help them write resumes, identify potential employers and find summer housing.

About three-fourths of all college students have had internships or some type of professional work experience by the time they graduate, said Phil Gardner, director of Michigan State's Collegiate Employment Research Institute. When he started following such trends 25 years ago, only 35 percent to 40 percent of college students interned.

"It's just one of those things you have to have before employers will even consider looking at your resume," he said.

But students shouldn't pay to find an internship, he said, because most universities have career centers where students can search for free.

"A student doesn't have to do that, in my opinion," Gardner said. "It just tells me that they're not going and using their resources."

Richardson said she — and her parents — didn't mind paying a company like University of Dreams to secure her internship. Because she was only in her sophomore year, she felt she faced more competition. She tried going to her career center, but most jobs were in Texas and Richardson wanted to go to New York.

University of Dreams uses its staff's personal contacts at 500 companies to get students internships with employers they couldn't otherwise get into, said CEO Eric Lochtefeld. For interns, that's better than sending in a resume and hoping, he said.

"Does any college student really, sincerely believe that their resume will stand out or get better consideration than an actual introduction would provide?" Lochtefeld said.

In four years, the company has placed 1,800 students in companies such as Paramount Pictures or MTV Networks, both divisions of Viacom Inc. It has slots this summer for 850 students, he said.

Students pay from \$6,499 to \$8,999 to have the company find them an eight-week summer internship, plus housing in dorms at universities, some meals, transportation to work and activities for a summer. Financial assistance, including loans, grants and full scholarships, is available.

An admissions team reviews applications and makes an offer. Students who are accepted pay a deposit of \$500 to \$1,000. Then they work with a placement agent, who finds a matching company. They're guaranteed an internship in the field of their choice or their money back.

Most of the internships are unpaid, but University of Dreams arranges for college credit through universities. Richardson figures she'll get between one and two credits for her summer in New York.

Other companies, like Fast Track Internships, don't let the companies know they're helping students. In less than a year, the Dallas-based company has placed 20 students in fields like broadcasting, consulting and advertising, said Steve Rodems, a former powdered soap salesman who started the company with a business partner.

"We go about it the same way we would if we were back at a corporation or an advertising agency marketing a product," said Rodems, of tweaking resumes and playing up students' strengths.

Fast Track works with students to identify companies that suit the students' goals but either don't have formal internship programs or don't advertise them, so competition will be less.

The company also writes and prints 100 to 300 copies of resumes and cover letters, addresses envelopes and even buys stamps before giving them to the student to sign, stuff and mail. Rodems said students typically receive five offers.

The price: \$799 if a student wants an unpaid internship and \$999 if they want a paid one, because those are often more difficult to get, he said. Both come with a two-offer guarantee.

Laura Kestner, director of Career Services at Marquette University in Milwaukee, said no one should pay to find an internship. Looking for an internship helps students develop skills, she said.

"We're advocates of teaching students lifelong job search skills, so there's no reason you should pay someone," she said.

But she is working with a firm that helps employers recruit interns, Chicago-based Brill Street and Co.

Employers tell Brill Street their needs for jobs ranging from a few weeks to 18 months, and the company finds and pays the students. Brill Street then bills the hiring company and collects a fee off that, said Nancy Lerner, who founded the company with her husband last year and was at a recent career fair at Marquette.

On a recent weeknight in Milwaukee, Marquette junior Heather Riehle took a break from studying and went to a career fair to look for a summer internship. She's had an internship with Wal-Mart Stores Inc. during breaks from school, but Riehle, a 20-year-old international business major from Wausau, Wis., wants to get as much experience as possible.

But she doesn't mind looking on her own.

"I think the whole point of looking is to find something that works for you," Riehle said.

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