Washington Internships: Planning Ahead for the Best Experience

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By Eugene J. Alpert, Ph.D.
Senior Vice President
The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars

Thinking of an internship in Washington, D.C.? There was a time when you really had to know someone to get a good internship in Washington. Before the Metrorail system was built, the only way to get around Washington was by bus (not always air conditioned), and housing options for interns were very limited. Washington was a sleepy town with “Southern efficiency and Northern charm,” as they used to say.

Today, Washington is a vibrant, bustling city where there are office buildings, apartments, restaurants at almost every Metrorail Station in the downtown area, making it very easy to get around to work and live in far-flung parts of the city. Every summer, Washington is “Intern City,” where perhaps as many as 40,000 or more interns descend upon the nation’s capital at some point to intern with government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and corporations seeking (mostly) free summer help. Washington has grown dependent upon interns, not only as a source of well-educated talent, but also as a future source of loyal, talented, future employees.

The ease of finding an internship on the internet or through the services of a nonprofit, educational organization, such as The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars (www.twc.edu), has resulted in much greater competition for the best placements. The task is to find the best and most worthwhile placements, especially ones that are worthy of academic credit. This helps mollify parents at least a little when you can tell your parents you are going to Washington for the summer to work for free, but, of course, gain valuable experience to land that first job.

So how can you prepare yourself and be more competitive for the best positions? Here are some bullet points:

1. Demonstrate that you have a good sense of purpose. Know what kind of internship you would like to have and why you would choose one placement over another. You often can do this by sending in a writing sample on a topic of interest to the agency or organization you are applying to.

2. Do your homework. Research not only your favored internship placements, but also those that involve work at different ends of the ideological or political spectrum. You might be surprised to find that your opinions on an issue may be a better match elsewhere.

3. Be prepared to ask good questions about the internship. Especially if you are arranging your placement long-distance and your only contact with the potential placement is by phone or e-mail,
have a list of questions handy to ask when you make contact. Be wary of placements that are vague about your responsibilities.

4. Seek a placement where you can be mentored. The “best internships have the best supervisors.” If you know you will be reporting to someone who will be willing to take the time to mentor you and make sure you have some excellent learning opportunities, then you will likely have a very worthwhile experience.

5. Make sure you have realistic expectations. The worst thing you can do to the internship site and to yourself is to expect to walk into, say, a congressional office and ask where your own office is. Expect a tray table and maybe you’ll be lucky to get something that looks like a desktop. Expect to start at the bottom and figure out how to make yourself valuable to the office by being humble, showing initiative and figuring out how to make your boss look good!

6. Never expect to use the “B” word. Never be “bored.” Each experience has sometime to teach you, whether it is the most exciting thing you have ever done or the slowest paced experience you have ever had. Figure out how to make the most of the experience by developing some good academic and professional learning goals in advance. Then ask lots of questions and do what you have to do to achieve your goals, even if it is on your own with little supervision. Maybe your supervisor will be so tired of your questions you will probably get some good work to do to stop all those irritating questions!

Have a great internship in Washington, D.C. It is one of the best things you can do for yourself and your career.

Eugene J. Alpert is senior vice president at The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. He has served as past president of the National Society for Experiential Education and has been involved with experiential education programs for college students for over 30 years.