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Student Internships Open Doors to Alumni Career Success

BY NADIA ALFADEL COLOMA
Emily Greenbaum (BUS ’16) lives in Chicago, but her career over the last four years has taken her to places where she never thought she’d have the opportunity to work. During one busy season, she traveled from Lisbon, Portugal, to Louisville, Kentucky, to Orange County, California, within a span of just three months. An event manager for Verde Events in Chicago, Greenbaum directs all aspects of event planning for clients around the world, from company meetings of 20 to conventions of 2,000 people.

“To think this all started with me submitting my résumé for an internship just four years ago,” she reflects. “I had never heard of Verde before interning there as a senior at DePaul, and I would have never been so confident about this being a career path for me if it weren’t for the other internships I had experienced prior to Verde.”

Approximately 60% of undergraduate students from the Class of 2018 reported completing at least one internship during their time at DePaul. In the business college, that number is 69%, according to data from the university’s Career Center. DePaul’s current strategic plan emphasizes the importance of increasing the number of students participating in internships. The aim is to have 85% of students complete an internship by 2025—an ambitious goal backed by the university’s unique experiential learning requirement for undergraduates.

Students can fulfill this requirement in a variety of ways—studying abroad, participating in service learning or working in leadership positions on campus—but an internship experience remains the most effective tool for career exploration, preparation and success. The ultimate goal: ensure students are equipped with the hands-on professional experiences they need to immediately contribute to and succeed in the workforce.

“Our business students in particular understand the importance of internships because there are career and internship courses built into the college’s curricula that don’t exist in the other programs,” says DePaul Career Center Assistant Vice President Karyn McCoy. “Internships are vital because they can help you expand your professional network, figure out what you do and don’t want to do, make connections between theory and practice, and even set you up for full-time employment. It’s a win for students and a win for organizations, who are constantly working to increase their internship to full-time conversion rate.”
Alumni Connect Business Interns to Careers

When you look outside the windows of the DePaul Center on the Loop Campus, you see the heart of Chicago’s downtown and business community. There are major companies at every turn, and more than 100,000 DePaul alumni living and working in the metro area. This easy access to the hub of the city and a vast alumni network allow DePaul students to take advantage of internships year-round, and not just during summer months.

Event manager Greenbaum, who studied hospitality leadership, did her first internship as a freshman. “The experience made me realize that marketing, my original major, was not for me,” she says. “When I switched my major, I spent a lot of time exploring the hospitality industry through internships. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, so I pursued as many opportunities as I could so I could decide.”

After six internships, Greenbaum found her niche in corporate events when she worked at Verde during the winter and spring of her senior year. She was offered a full-time job that spring, just before graduating.

The School of Hospitality Leadership requires its undergraduate majors to complete two internships in order to graduate. Students must also take the school’s internship course, which helps them make the most of their internship experience, and a career management course that covers topics like business etiquette, interviewing and résumé writing.

Internships are a crucial part of hospitality education at DePaul because the school works closely with industry professionals to find out what employers are seeking when they recruit graduates.

“Internships are a crucial part of hospitality education at DePaul because the school works closely with industry professionals to find out what employers are seeking when they recruit graduates. The curriculum is designed around those needs, which turn out to be a solid business foundation and hands-on experience. “In Chicago, we’re in a hospitality lab, so students can do internships anywhere,” says Shelley Gibbons, assistant director of student development at the School of Hospitality Leadership. “The industry is huge and spans the globe—you have hotels, restaurants, catering, travel, events—so we push students to do the things we are teaching them so they can understand the nature of the business and graduate with real experience.”

The school maintains close partnerships with employers to bring career-readiness programs to students year-round. From career and internship fairs to information sessions and speaker series, students receive regular exposure to the hospitality industry and are encouraged to engage with these opportunities.

Every week, for example, the school has brought in a different organization for an all-day event called “Branding Day,” which is an opportunity for companies to talk about their brand and get to know the students. Most importantly, it’s a chance for students to network, familiarize themselves with a variety of businesses and learn about job and internship opportunities.

“It’s a great way to meet people from different companies in the industry and learn about the various paths a hospitality career can take you,” shares Kenzie Mocogni (BUS ‘19), who works at Verde Events with Greenbaum. “I also appreciated being able to build confidence in my networking skills.”

Mocogni was a freshman in the School of Hospitality Leadership when she met Greenbaum, then a senior, in the student Event Management Club.

“I saw something of myself in her,” says Greenbaum. “We ended up developing a friendship and keeping in touch after I graduated.”

Mocogni appreciated the support. “It was fantastic to have someone a few years ahead of me give me guidance and perspective as I was navigating my career path,” Mocogni shares. “When I was preparing to graduate, she told me Verde was expanding their team, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to apply.”

Both Mocogni and Greenbaum currently serve as mentors in the school’s mentoring program, which pairs industry professionals to current students to help facilitate career connections.
Forging Business Connections Beyond Chicago

Another mentor in the business college is Michael Berger (BUS ’18), a graduate of the School of Accountancy & MIS and its Strobel Honors program for top accountancy students. When Berger was 14, he visited New York City for the first time with his family, and he remembers telling his mother, while looking up at the tall buildings, “I’m going to live here one day.”

Fast-forward to the present, and Berger is a senior audit assistant in the New York City headquarters of Deloitte, where he manages and performs audits for private equity and hedge fund clients. He got his foot in the door at Deloitte through an internship at the Chicago office during his junior year.

“I was a freshman when I realized how important networking is, especially in accounting,” Berger says. “I took the time to talk to my professors about career paths and opportunities, and listen to their insights and experiences. I even sought out DePaul’s Alumni Sharing Knowledge network.”

The summer of his sophomore year, Berger started a yearlong internship at a startup fitness company. “The hiring manager at the startup was a former Strobel Honors student from DePaul, so he had gone to the accounting department looking for interns.”

A year later, that same DePaul alumnus introduced Berger to a partner at Deloitte after Berger expressed his growing interest in audit. The connection led to an internship there, where he worked full time while taking the accounting internship course.

“The internship at Deloitte really solidified for me what I wanted to do,” Berger says. “I loved the work and what I was learning. It felt like technical training, while the internship course taught me a lot of soft skills and helped me understand what I was learning in the workplace through a wider lens. Doing both at the same time gave me the full experience of what it’s like to be a working professional in accounting.”

 Berger was offered a full-time position at Deloitte after completing his internship, and, staying true to his dream of living in New York City, he asked if he could transfer to an office on the East Coast. Today, Berger mentors accounting students at DePaul by phone and email, and even helped one of his mentees join the Deloitte audit team in New York.

“It feels very rewarding to help someone who’s in the position I was in just a few years ago,” he says. “I definitely plan to mentor DePaul students for as long as I can.”

Recently, Berger found another way to stay connected to DePaul by joining the university’s New York Alumni Chapter, which has around 2,500 members.

“What makes accounting at DePaul unique is definitely the pipeline,” says Brian Maj (LAS ’13, MBA ’16), senior program administrator at the School of Accountancy & MIS. “We partner heavily with industry professionals to bring educational opportunities to students, and then when students graduate, they are eager to give back as alumni in the same way.”

The School of Accountancy & MIS offers a variety of career resources and events that involve connecting students directly with employers. The weekly executive-in-residence program, for instance, allows students to meet with an accounting manager or executive for a one-on-one career conversation. The meetings are only 30 minutes long and are meant to be informal to encourage students to ask questions openly. “Many students use the time to get insight about different firms or what employers are looking for in an ideal candidate. And sometimes they even get internship leads,” Maj says. “Creating those touch points is critical to helping students build their networks and understand the industry, and their options within it, on a deeper level.”

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DePaul’s business college began engaging industry professionals to create internship opportunities for students more than 30 years ago, in the Department of Marketing.

“Back in the 1980s, I had so many marketing agencies coming to me asking if I could refer students to help them with their projects,” says Steve Kelly, associate professor of marketing and founder of DePaul’s marketing internship program. Kelly also helped kick-start the University Internship Program at DePaul’s Career Center, since his program in marketing was the only one at DePaul at that time.

“I realized that in order for students to secure jobs after graduating, they needed to get in the door first, while they were still students. Internships are the best way to do this,” he says.

Today, Kelly manages a robust internship program for marketing students that encompasses more than 900 employer connections. He also designed a marketing-specific internship course that teaches students to apply what they’re learning to their internships.

“One of my biggest takeaways from the course was really understanding what skills and strengths I was bringing to the table,” shares Crystal Hernandez (BUS ’18). “It made me reevaluate my skill sets, identify knowledge gaps and come up with an action plan to close those gaps.”

Hernandez interned at PepsiCo the summer following her junior year. She was sent to Arkansas to work on e-commerce projects pertaining to one of PepsiCo’s biggest clients, Walmart. “Being in a relatively smaller office in Arkansas allowed me to understand on a more intimate level PepsiCo’s brick-and-mortar business and how they play within the e-commerce space,” she explains. “It gave me a well-rounded background and foundation for my full-time work afterwards.”

By the time school started again in September, Hernandez had received a full-time offer from PepsiCo to work on the e-commerce team in New York. “It was reassuring to know that my hard work was noticed during my internship,” Hernandez says. “However, I had personal reasons for wanting to stay in Chicago, so I discussed my options with PepsiCo’s HR, and they worked with me to find an opportunity here in the city.”

Today, Hernandez is a category management analyst at PepsiCo in Chicago. She says she continues to lean on her alumni network for career advice and support.
To expand students’ internship and experiential learning opportunities, the business college’s 2024 strategic plan calls for strengthening the college’s connections to its alumni and the Chicago business community. Misty Johanson, dean of the Driehaus College of Business, says these links are essential for students to succeed in the business world, while also helping businesses succeed with DePaul talent. “Alumni have always played a vital role in paving a path for the next generation of DePaul business graduates,” Johanson says. “Whether serving as mentors, engaging with them on campus or hiring DePaul students as interns or full time after graduation, alumni are a great resource for making connections with organizations, both in and outside of Chicago.”

Leveraging Connections for Student Success

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