

Shepherd Poverty Alliance Summer Internships

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Purpose

- Helps students understand the social problem of poverty in society by immersing them in an impoverished community while they work full-time for a nonprofit organization.
- Enables students to integrate service with their education through a series of courses and service-learning experiences.
- Helps students understand how their roles as paid workers and citizens can make a positive difference for impoverished persons and communities.

Background

The Shepherd Alliance Summer Internship was designed as a service-learning component of the Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability at Washington & Lee University. The internship program started in the summer of 1998 and is supervised by agencies in the U.S. and Latin America.

How It Works

The Shepherd Poverty Alliance Summer Internship is administered by Washington & Lee in collaboration with Berea, Morehouse, and Spelman Colleges. The alliance offers students an opportunity to learn by placing them at agencies that work with the economically disadvantaged. Students live in the impoverished communities they serve.

Students are expected to become fully immersed in the community where they live for eight weeks by reading local news, speaking with neighbors, and observing what is happening around them. They attend evening meetings and gatherings. They volunteer for weekend work and special projects that will take them away from the service office.

The Shepherd Program's introductory course is interdisciplinary and begins with reading firsthand accounts of poverty from a variety of disciplines. Students then draw on these different perspectives to write essays addressing definitions and measurements of poverty, causes and effects of poverty, as well as remedies for poverty. The ultimate concern is how to augment human capabilities so that communities and individuals receiving aid eventually become agents for alleviating their own poverty.

The course is primarily designed to prepare students for their summer internship but also to inform them about poverty. The program begins with orientation and concludes with a conference in which the students report to each other what they have learned.

What Makes the Project Unique

The program both provides services to agencies and develops students' sense of civic responsibility. Applicants are able to participate in the selection of their placement so their service becomes a part of their education and is good preparation for their future career. Students choose an area of work in which they may have career aspirations: business, community organizing, law, education, health care, social work, and other fields.

Benefits

The combined effect of integrated curricular and co-curricular education has had a profound influence on students' understanding of their future vocation. Through this program they are more informed

about poverty and also come to understand and appreciate their roles as citizens and paid workers. Participants in this program also form friendships that may last for years. The annual Shepherd Alliance Newsletter, published by students, enables Alliance alumni to remain in contact and apprised of Alliance activities.

In 2002, forty-nine Shepherd Alliance interns were placed with twenty-seven agencies in urban and rural locations in the eastern U.S., ranging from Shreveport, Louisiana, to Cabin Creek, West Virginia, to Boston, Massachusetts. Students work full-time for eight weeks in June and July.

Nonprofit agencies are positioned to help the impoverished play a central part in their own futures, yet they lack sufficient resources to support the increased needs of existing populations affected by poverty. Higher education is a relatively untapped resource to partner with the nonprofit sector to help create a larger, more qualified work force. Students need formal opportunities to develop a habit of service to society in general and to local communities through service-learning partnerships.

Shepherd interns learn to cope with a new job, live in a new setting, and develop a new perspective on poverty. The knowledge and skills they gain often change their outlook on life. The friends they make among peers, supervisors, and those who seek to serve often bring joy they did not anticipate. Students who participate because they want to do good for others usually return from their summer exclaiming that they received more benefit from the poor than they were able to give to them.

Timeline

Fall/Winter

Washington & Lee students may take the introductory course, qualifying them for participation in the summer internship component. Washington & Lee students who have already participated in the summer internship component may choose to take an upper-level poverty research seminar in their junior or senior year. The upper-level course begins with student presentations and oral critiques and includes interdisciplinary readings on domestic and international poverty as well as a research paper on a specific topic.

Spring

Intern and supervisor meet to review the service-learning contract and discuss whether a participant is working toward desired goals or needing to change their focus.

Summer

Orientation for all participants is held. Students become acquainted and receive guidance to prepare them for their summer service. Activities conclude with a conference at Washington & Lee where interns report to each other on what they have learned and experienced during their summer.

Resources and Funding

Committed faculty/staff from the partner schools and agency supervisors

Washington & Lee

- The Corporate and Foundation Relations Department has helped to secure foundation funding for many students' participation costs. Students' participation in the Alliance has also been funded through a grant from Congress. In addition, Washington & Lee relies on agencies and friends to help in other ways, such as with housing and transportation.

How to Make It Grow

In 2003, six Bonner Scholars from institutions other than Berea, Morehouse, and Spelman were invited to participate in the Shepherd Alliance for the first time. While the number of students who participate in the program has been capped at fifty, Washington & Lee is always open to collaboration with other institutions or willing to help other consortiums of institutions create a similar internship experience.

Evidence of Success

This program builds participants' character and raises their awareness of their role as professionals and citizens. Those who have participated in the program have an understanding of poverty's causes and effects. They begin to understand the possible remedies from the perspectives of multiple academic disciplines. More importantly, their knowledge of and concern for these issues is displayed in informal conversations with fellow students as well as in papers and class discussions. They are also willing to talk to anyone, at great length and with surprising eloquence, about their summer internship experiences.