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Getting the Most Out of Your Summer Experiences

By Elizabeth LaScala



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represent their constituents, and obtained a deepened understanding of certain fundamentals that you would never learn in the classroom - like the fact that the office of the representative has to research and understand all the policies and programs that affect his constituents and represent all their interests, even when those policies and programs are not ones the representative himself may have supported.

Another one of my students took a job that included the somewhat mundane task of geographic data entry and compilation, keying numbers into a computer to identify and map the locations of motor vehicle crashes where the driver was driving under the influence (DUI). Since he was doing this work, he took it upon himself to learn the GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software he was using and consider how the data might be analyzed. His work was managed by project personnel and he became acquainted with the research goals of the scientists involved. In addition to his more mundane everyday tasks, he learned to work as part of a team, interact with

There are many rewards for high school students who put energy into finding a summer internship or landing a job. Aside from the obvious benefits of gaining some work experience before going to college and adding to college resumes, some positions can be very exciting and help you to explore possible career paths. Some positions are rather bland, but even when the tasks seem mundane, your experience doesn't have to be! Be a sponge. Learn as much as you can about the organization's structure and function. Watch and listen carefully to full-time paid staff. If you find work in a business environment, observe those who are in sales and responsible for generating revenue - you will learn some things about what it takes to make a business run efficiently and turn a profit. By osmosis and networking, you can learn quite a bit from employees in different departments about sales, financial reporting, legal and tax requirements, and management. If you find work in a manufacturing environment, you may be around individuals who are responsible for an end product. Seek to acquire an understanding about the steps and manufacturing processes involved in getting a product ready for market. If you work in a lab, your tasks may include sterilizing glass slides for culture. Watch out for unusual occurrences. What do the lab technicians do when a specimen is handled improperly or becomes contaminated? Stretch your experience and make it count.

Last summer, one of my students landed a position in a political representative's office - mostly she performed day-to-day word-processing, handled phone calls and responded to constituent inquiries in pretty standard ways. But she also learned how politicians communicate with and

management, see how projects are financed and managed, and, of course, picked up some software skills. As in any research position, if you have the chance to learn a computer program, see some part of the analyses or read a report with an interpretation of data you have helped to compile, it can be immensely rewarding as well as instructive. Fully engaged in his work environment, this student wound up helping to write up the study's findings on the effects of alcohol availability on DUI crashes - a paper now being peer reviewed for publication and he is named as a contributor.

Other tips that can help to maximize the value of your summer activities include keeping a journal of your experiences to help you recall interesting details that will give a boost to your college application essays, and updating and expanding your contact list to increase your networking potential. Whatever you do this summer, make the fullest use of each and every opportunity that comes your way.

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