“How Did You Score That Internship?”

By Tracy Buss

Gaining valuable real world experience, becoming more self-aware, and expanding their future employment prospects, many UWM students have embarked upon internships, paid and unpaid, here in the Milwaukee area and sometimes farther afield, even abroad. Global Studies B.A. degree students, for example, must complete 160 hours in a 3-credit internship at a location outside of the US in order to graduate. Even though students know about this requirement upon choosing to enroll as Global Studies majors, this requirement can be viewed as intimidating or frustrating, given that no students are “guaranteed” internship placements; it is the ultimate responsibility of the student to find her/his own internship. Perhaps the most common advising questions the Global Studies advisors receive are “What kind of internship should I look for?” and “How do I find an internship?” The answer to the “what” question varies depending upon the individual student’s Global Studies interests, choice of pre-professional track, completed coursework, foreign language ability, and future career goals.

Beginning this summer of 2011, the Global Studies program has asked students enrolled in the Global Studies 489: International Internship course to write a D2L posting describing their internship search process and providing advice for other Global Studies students who have yet to find their internships. Reading their postings reconfirms that while the paths to their internships were not always straight, and sometimes led to dead ends, there is some advice about searching for an internship that can viewed as “universal” and applicable to all internship searches. Here are a few tips on how to find the international internship that you may have never known existed!

Think Creatively

Since the main focus here is on the “how” and not the “what” of your internship, the initial assumption is that you already know what your ideal internship would look like; or at the very least, you have identified your desired field, e.g. government/foreign relations, marketing, non-profit management, etc. At this stage, the internet can be your friend, but also your enemy, since it’s easy to get distracted by companies offering to “set you up” with an internship placement, often for a hefty fee. While some students take the fee for service, third-party internship provider route, it is not usually the first option that is recommended (unless you are planning to intern in a country where you need the added assurance of someone to watch over you, or internships in that country are not a part of the culture, e.g. Japan).

Focus any online searches upon identifying organizations doing work that interests you, not upon looking for “postings.” Many organizations, non-profit and for-profit, are stretched to their limits and don’t have the time or funds to post open internships on their websites or search engines. You may be the first person to even propose interning at a particular organization so you should
consider the possibility that if you are offered an internship, you may end up writing your own job description.

If you are having a hard time envisioning the world of internship opportunities that are available to you, it may help to know where other students have interned. On the Center for International Education’s website (www.international.uwm.edu), we have posted a Google Map that pinpoints many Global 489 internship placements (note that this map is continually a work in progress).

**Be Diligent, Persistent, Patient, and Prompt**

Victor Buell (Global Communications), who interned at HarthTV in Toronto, summarizes his internship lessons learned:

Diligence and persistence are two things that I’ll lump into one thing I’ve learned during the internship searching process. The number of times I had to write different cover letters and curtail portfolios to certain firms required much diligence in doing so. However, in order to hit the ball, you have to swing the bat and in order to get this internship, I had to swing the bat, a lot. I also learned that casting a wide net is what it takes to land an ideal position. I weaved a wide net by taking an interdisciplinary approach to my learning.

Particularly when searching for an internship overseas, you will find it necessary to take regular deep breaths and remind yourself that different cultures have widely varying conceptions of time. A timely response to an email sent to a contact in the US may be two days; to a potential internship employer overseas, it could be a month or more. As Melisa Hodzic (Global Communications), who eventually landed an internship at the English-language Turkish newspaper Today’s Zaman, can attest: “Patience is another important skill to have. Many countries around the world won’t reply until the last minute. That is something that I got nervous about but that is just the process and the way their culture is. Just make sure to keep in touch with them.”

**Build and Expand Your Network**

Your internship network may be already in place, or may need to be built from the ground up. Some students have found internships through fellow students, as was the case for Kayla Sweeney (Global Security):

I was placed with AMIDEAST, after a former student from UWM recommended me to the country director for Tunisia. This was in the pre-revolution period, and Tunisia had in fact been next on my list for places I wanted to live/work. AMIDEAST is an organization with offices
throughout North Africa and the Middle East that offers English language training, workshops, and programming and helps improve relations between the US and the Middle East & North Africa (MENA).

You may have to refresh your relationships, as Brittany Delahanty (Global Management) did to find her internship with the Town Office of Saponara, Italy: “My first step was getting in touch with the family that hosted me during my junior year of high school and explaining to them my eagerness to do an internship in their region. They gladly gave me names of businesses that I could contact and set me off to a great start.”

While some students go the traditional social networking route, and perhaps reach out to contacts through Facebook or LinkedIn, Kirsten Joranlien (Global Security) thought outside the box and remembered a friend she had met through “Couch Surfing”:

I am involved in an internet community for travelers called Couch Surfing, which allows people to find willing hosts to stay with while they are traveling…I used the site to find hosts a few times while traveling in Spain, and now I am a host to travelers coming through Milwaukee. I had a guy named Yan stay at my house for 5 days last fall while he was traveling through, and he told me about some of his experiences. He had spent some time living on Ometepe Island in Nicaragua, living and working with a couple small organizations there. I remembered the photos he showed me, and his descriptions of the places, so I sent him a message asking if he might know of an organization I could intern with. He asked me questions about what I was looking for and sent me links to a few organization websites that are based on the island. I read through each one and picked Totoco as the one that fit my interests and schedule best. I found out who to contact from the Totoco Development Center blog, and when I contacted her, she told me that Yan had mentioned me to her already. Since the organization is very small, and run by a small group of people, I did not have to submit a CV or fill out an application.

If one of your contacts helps you find an internship, you should follow up with a thank you. Promptly email to let your contact know that you have secured an internship with her/his help, and consider giving a thank you gift as a token of your appreciation when you return home.

**Hone Your Communication Skills**

Throughout the internship process, it is important to professionalize and personalize your written and verbal communication skills. Draft a somewhat standard email that you can use as your “cover letter” that accompanies your attached resume, and adapt it for different organizations so
that it doesn’t sound “canned.” If you have visited an organization’s website and read about projects that really inspire you, mention this in your email.

There are many resources online to help you create a CV (curriculum vitae) or resume that fits the standard format for the country where you wish to intern; one such resource is About.com. In addition, take advantage of resources here on campus to make certain that your resume, especially if in a foreign language, is free of any errors; consider asking your language instructor for this favor.

Also practice your “elevator speech,” a short paragraph about your skills and interests, in English and the foreign language you may use in your internship. Interviewing can be nerve-wracking, even in your native language, so anticipate that you may stumble upon your words even more if you haven’t practiced your “elevator speech” and answers to typical interview questions beforehand.

**Remind Yourself to Be Flexible**

Jon Hennum (Global Management) gets straight to the point when he shares his thoughts on how important it is to be flexible in your internship search, and future placement:

> Preconceived notions of grandeur (i.e. "saving the world") must be thrown out the proverbial window. Potential interns must be able to adapt to potential opportunities in the global marketplace, which requires both mental and physical flexibility. This means the intern has to be willing to reside and work in a diverse environment, one that may be culturally uncomfortable (i.e. stressing the brain and digestive system) and requiring the development of new skills, behaviors, and identity.

Keep in mind that not all internship placements are ideal, and you may not learn the lessons you had expected. An internship may lead you away from what you had thought was your dream career; for example, one recent graduate had always wanted to work at the United Nations, but after interning there for a semester, she decided that she did not like dealing with the many layers of bureaucracy in such a large organization.

**Stay Confident**

If you are feeling doubtful about your ability to find an internship, heed the words of Sameera Hassan, an International Studies student who obtained an internship at the American Embassy in London, applying through the US Department of State’s very competitive internship program: “Concerned with the competition, I almost missed this amazing opportunity by not applying because I doubted my ability to be selected. This has taught me that I can do anything I set out to
do as long as I remain motivated and do my absolute best.” Don’t assume that you won’t get the internship before you have even applied. Even if your “dream internship” doesn’t come through, you will have gained valuable experience going through the application process. It’s also possible that your dreams will shift, and you will come to recognize that any internship that helps you learn more about yourself and your career goals will only add to your confidence when it comes time to enter the post-graduation world of work.