

# "Starting at the Top": Executive High School Internships

SHARLENE P. HIRSCH\*

OVER 2,000 juniors and seniors from 27 cities in 16 states are "starting at the top" this year. They are serving as special assistants to distinguished leaders in government, business, law, the arts, health, education, communications, and other exciting fields through the Executive High School Internships program. Venturing forth into the complex world of management and organizations, with full-time sabbaticals from all regular studies for a semester, Executive Interns are treated as adults, with access to high-level conferences, confidential information, and other mature situations. They are expected to assume increasingly responsible professional-level tasks, which might include anything from doing research and making follow-up telephone calls on behalf of the sponsoring agency to developing policy recommendations that will be treated seriously by executives and their staffs.

San Antonio intern Mary Ann Pompa helped prepare a legal brief on reapportionment for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund that is now part of a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Her ambition: to be a civil rights lawyer.

At the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Sharon

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*A special cooperative project is directed toward "dejuvenilizing" high school programs. Early results seem to bear out the promise of this effort toward more meaningful youth education.*

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Thierry, a Compton (California) senior, assisted in organizing summer youth concerts, drafting press releases, and compiling data on job prospects in the arts for the 1980's.

Brian Leverich spent his last high school semester in Denver as assistant to Colorado's Governor Vanderhoff. He attended staff meetings, handled constituents' complaints, and performed at a level of competence which the governor characterized as "equivalent to a \$25,000-a-year staff person."

Executive Interns are not paid, however. One of their rewards is a full semester of academic credit in both required and elective school subjects. Besides working with their sponsors, the interns also attend weekly seminars on administration, prepare daily logs to record and analyze what they are learning, and present a project to their high

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schools at the close of the term to share their knowledge and insights with classmates and teachers.

## What Do Interns Learn?

What do interns learn in the program? "Greater appreciation of what executives go through to accomplish something," according to Suzi Bailey of Birmingham, who interned with Superintendent of Schools Wilmer S. Cody.

"I learned the importance of getting along with people," reports Gaynell Wise, New York City intern to Deputy Mental Health Commissioner June Christmas. "In schools they teach you that all the answers are in books, but out in the world you learn that people make the difference, and you have to know how to deal with them."

Begun in New York in 1971 as a joint undertaking of the city's Human Resources Administration and board of education, the program concept has proliferated rapidly to school districts around the country, with technical assistance supported by foundation grants. Individual districts operate their own programs but are linked together in a research and development network called Executive High School Internships of America, which has its headquarters in New York City. Its distinguished advisory board includes former U.S. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, Denver Superintendent of Schools Louis J. Kishkunas, Senators Jacob K. Javits and Walter F. Mondale, and the chief state school officers of New York and Maryland.

School systems wishing to start programs contact the National Office, which agrees to underwrite technical assistance expenses if the district agrees to pay the expenses of a full-time coordinator to develop the program, release students from all classes for an entire semester, and award academic credit in regular school subjects.

The growing popularity of this idea can be attributed to the wide variety of educational needs and goals that it serves.

Specifically:

- *Career Orientation and Exploration:*

Many students utilize the Executive Internship as an opportunity to explore possible career interest. Melanie Damron of Dallas decided she did not want to follow in her attorney father's footsteps after interning with Judge R. T. Scales. Others move closer toward a career field as a result of the program. Executive Interns also gain a broad feel for the organizational environment where, according to management specialist Peter F. Drucker, 8 out of every 10 young people can expect to spend their working lives.

- *Alternative Education:* The Executive Internship responds to the desire of relatively mature, responsible, flexible, and inquisitive young people for a chance to test out their skills in an adult world-of-work setting. There, depending on their placement, they can broaden their substantive knowledge in a variety of fields, such as government, sociology, economics, and even biology or computer science.

Teachers also find the program model a refreshing alternative because of the co-



Reuben Sierra, a San Antonio, Texas, high school student who wants one day to be a U.S. Senator is writing a booklet for constituents telling them what each office in the Bexar County courthouse does.



Craig Matsuda, a senior at East High School in Denver, wants to be a journalist and is an intern at a suburban newspaper, the Sentinel.



Carol Watanabe, a high school senior in Sacramento, who wants to be a journalist, is an intern at the local Chamber of Commerce where she is writing articles for the Chamber publication.



Photos courtesy of the author

Sharon Thierry, a Compton, California, high school student who wants a career in communications is an intern with the Los Angeles Philharmonic helping to arrange concerts for young people.

ordinator position which is central to the program's success. This new type of job casts a teacher in the role of broker or facilitator between classroom abstractions and the practical concerns of sponsors in the community.

"We cannot possibly have all the answers, but we can help students, sponsors, and school people to understand one another's worlds more fully," explains Frederick (Maryland) coordinator Betty Floyd. Coordinators are responsible for the total gamut of the program operations, including sponsor selection, intern placement, seminar development, log review, and constant monitoring to check the educational quality of the field experiences.

● *Education of the Gifted and Talented:* Rather than using IQ scores or grades, the Executive Internships program screens students on the basis of individual qualities. These include stability, independence, openness, perseverance, and a strong interest in the placements available. Final pairings are based on mutual choices expressed by sponsors and students. Thus, Executive Interns may have a variety of grade point averages, but they should all be able to function successfully in the experience.

● *Intergenerational Communication:* Juxtaposing executives and high school-age youth in tutorial situations helps to break down age segregation patterns that too often prevent different generations from relating to one another. Sponsors express enthusiasm that the interns question what they are doing. "It's a way for me to experience being eighteen again and also to rethink what I am doing," said one executive recently. The experience also helps adolescents gain greater appreciation for their parents' daily problems in work situations.

Various fringe benefits commonly accrue to program participants. More than 80 colleges and universities around the country have accepted Executive Interns, and institutions such as MIT, Boston University, and the University of Denver have made a special effort to recruit them. Many sponsors write strong letters of recommendation to admis-

sions and scholarships committees and also arrange summer employment for other interns.

The internship also has its glamorous moments. Interns frequently enjoy regular business lunches with their sponsors, meet well-known leaders and celebrities, and even travel, on occasion.

Benefits of the program accrue to the entire school system, as well as the individual students. Denver Mayor Walter McNichols commented that the Executive Internships program has brought that city's board of education and municipal government structure closer than ever before. In New Orleans, Dallas, Tampa, and Sacramento, the chamber of commerce is also heavily involved, variously providing office space for coordinators, internship placements, and exposure of the program to the broader business community.

The real test of the program, however, is the actual impact it can have on students' lives, both now and in the future. Long-range factors have yet to be measured, but there is already feedback on short-range effects that can be achieved.

Sacramento coordinator Sandra Verlinde recalls an instance of such change: "I remember one student with poor school attendance, low grade average, and generally lackadaisical attitude who interned with the editor of a local newspaper. He went out with reporters, wrote his own stories, and had to take a lot of criticism about his work. This made him realize that he still had a lot to learn, and his spelling, grammar, and whole attitude improved."

Perhaps the most important aspect of the whole program to Executive Interns is the fact that they are treated as adults and given significant responsibility. This they see as the main advantage of the program over school.

Palm Beach County Schools Superintendent Joseph Carroll agrees. He views the program as a promising beginning toward what he calls "dejuvenilizing" high school programs. "We delay until much too late participation by adolescents in adult society and this must be changed." □

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