



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Volume 22
Issue 4 *Winter 2013-2014*

Article 4

2013

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Recommended Citation

Hill, Kim (2013) "Linking In," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 22: Iss. 4, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol22/iss4/4>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Linking

Illinois Wesleyan connects students and alumni through internships.

By KIM HILL



Now living in L.A., Rachel Paturi '13 (above) used IWU connections to land both an internship and job in the competitive film industry. (Photo by Amy Young)

For most of her life, Rachel Paturi's dream was to work in the film industry. For a business major from a liberal arts school in central Illinois, however, connections to Tinseltown's rich and powerful seemed as likely as snow covering the iconic Hollywood Sign.

But as IWU Student Senate president, Paturi '13 had learned a thing or two about making things happen. Paturi's frequent consultations with Hart Career Center Director Warren Kistner '83 led to an introduction to Brian Udovich '98, co-owner of Rough and Tumble Films in Los Angeles.

"It just so happened Brian was looking for interns when I contacted him (in late spring), we had an interview on the spot, he decided to take a chance on me and I was in L.A. two weeks later," says Paturi.

As an intern with Rough and Tumble, Paturi read scripts and discussed their merits with Udovich. She also assisted with re-shooting scenes for the Udovich-produced film *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, which won the Audience Award at the American Film Institute Fest this fall.

The internship confirmed Paturi's long-held dream to work in film. Udovich's business partner helped connect her to the finance department at Stun Creative, an L.A. ad agency and production company, where she now works.

Paturi is one of many young alumni who launched careers in this still-shaky economy with one common bullet point on their resumes: an internship .

While IWU student interns have gained work experience and insight into potential careers for decades, the importance of connecting a college education to future employment has magnified as graduates nationwide struggle to enter a labor force that has been shedding jobs, not creating them.

Countless Titans point to their internships as defining experiences that helped them beat the economic odds to find the jobs of their dreams: from the accounting major who not only survived but thrived during tax season at a Chicago accounting firm, to the theatre major whose dream of bright lights wasn't diminished with the realities of shoestring budgets or 14-hour days.

Laurie Diekhoff, the Hart Career Center's internship coordinator, says most students have clearly received the message on the importance of internships. From 2008 to 2013, the number of internships among Wesleyan students increased 34 percent. Many now view internships as a requirement, not an option, says Diekhoff. "Students are not only interning earlier in their college careers but are often completing multiple internships by the time they graduate," she adds.

Campus connections pay it forward

Faculty often assist Career Center staff in locating internships for students. Another critical source for assistance comes from alumni. Some examples:

- Through the Career Center, accounting major Katarina Jastrab '14 found her internship at the U.S. Securities & Exchange Commission Chicago Regional Office, where the manager was Scott Hlavacek '82.
- The Great River Shakespeare Festival (GRSF) in Winona, Minn., is well known to School of Theatre Arts students because IWU Costume Shop Supervisor Jeanne Oost worked at GRSF for several years, connecting many theatre students with summer internships at the company.
- Evan Baker '11 told Assistant Professor of Physics Bruno deHarak that interns were needed in Baker's mechanical engineering lab at Northwestern University. Brian Sorich '14, a student in Wesleyan's pre-engineering 3-2 program, eventually interned in the lab for two summers.
- Robert Randick '10 used the professional networking site LinkedIn to connect with fellow Theta Chi fraternity brothers living in Chicago. Randick essentially cold-called Theta Chis, several who were more than happy to share career insights over coffee and conversation.

"Working through our loyal alumni is a wonderful resource for opening doors to organizations that might not necessarily recruit at a smaller school like IWU," explains Kistner. "These are alumni who already value an Illinois Wesleyan education, and who will ensure that our students' resumes get proper consideration, as well as consider IWU for internship and employer opportunities within their organizations."

One of those alumni is Katie (Simpkins) Cummins '05, who made sure Illinois Wesleyan was on the short list of schools when her company restarted its internship program last year. Cummins has strong views on the value of internships from both sides of the desk: she's a former intern who is now director of human resources at The Horton Group, one of the nation's largest privately held insurance brokers.

Cummins sees a direct link between her junior-year internship at Bloomington-based Afni Inc. and her current job. "It was my first experience in HR," she says of her Afni internship, which was suggested by then-internship coordinator Ann Harding (who now heads the University's Alumni Relations office).



*HR director and former intern Katie Cummins '05 helped kickstart the internship program at her company.
(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

"My whole HR career started with that internship," says Cummins, who joined Afni full time after graduation. "Had I not had it, who knows if HR would have been the field I would have gone into?"

Real world, real work

Securing an internship, of course, is only half the battle. Students must execute to be of value to an organization. Employers who have supervised IWU interns report those students bring a high level of professionalism and leadership skills as well as an ability to articulate their suggestions and findings through written communication. Students, in turn, relish the chance to test their liberal arts skills in a job setting.

At The Horton Group, Michael Heaton '14 learned to use the company's prospect database this past summer to develop a more comprehensive view of existing prospects. Heaton also worked with the marketing department to gather insights in suggesting social media and advertising options to target prospects.



***Patrick Nevels '14 interned at Amazon.com.
(Photo by Marc Featherly)***

While Heaton was helping The Horton Group bring in new business, computer science major Patrick Nevels '14 was aiding online giant Amazon.com get products to their customers. In his first real-world software development project for Amazon's Disc-on-Demand team, Nevels helped vendors like Warner Bros. and MTV reach a wider audience for their DVD and CD orders. Former interns Kate Siebels '13 and Ammar Malik '13 showed him the ropes at Amazon; they now work for the company full time in Seattle.

Students wanting experience in the public and nonprofit sectors have also found plenty of opportunities. For his fall internship in Scotland, Michael Kistner '15 had a front-row seat on history as the government prepares for a national referendum to determine if it will declare independence from the United Kingdom in 2014. Kistner (a cousin to Career Center Director Warren Kistner) worked for the Minister of Public Health as part of his study-abroad program at the University of Edinburgh.

“Because I worked for a minister, I literally had a desk only a few feet away from the First Minister of Scotland (who heads the Scottish government),” says Kistner, who is a double major in political science and English writing. “I heard stories from people who have been members of the Scottish National Party since the 1970s, when they were a tiny minority party and independence seemed like a far-off dream.”

Sylvia Rusin, a double major in sociology and Hispanic studies, was selected to intern at the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) in Chicago. Among her first assignments was to identify a school for a pilot project to train teachers and counselors on mental-health issues facing undocumented students in dealing with the hopelessness and frustration related to their immigration status.

Rusin said most of the school administrators she contacted had interest in the project, but wanted background literature to read and share with their staffs. “The problem was, there literally wasn't any existent literature on the mental-health aspect,” says Rusin, who graduated in 2013. “I created a resource guide to improve school administrators' understanding of the daily life of undocumented youth.” Her guide was so well received that she was invited to present her research at the national conference of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese.



Interning abroad in Scotland wasn't all work for Michael Kistner '15, who had time for sightseeing in the mountains.

Benefits package

The ability to look at problems from fresh perspectives is another example of the liberal arts advantage, as noted in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article praising liberal arts degrees for enabling graduates to adapt to rapidly changing labor markets.



*Beth Tudeen '97 discusses opportunities at Caterpillar Inc.
(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

Surveys of employers show they want interns and employees who can think critically, communicate clearly, solve complex problems, work collaboratively and adapt easily to change.

Liberal arts students also are broadly educated across a range of disciplines, which came in handy for Rachel Paturi during her L.A. internship. “Because of my Human Anatomy and Physiology class, I was able to tell a director exactly what was happening to the internal organs when an actor got punched in the stomach,” she says. “I was hired for two more production-assistant jobs from that experience.”

From the perspective of employers like Doug Johnson, a liberal arts background means student interns will bring the necessary skills for conducting research and consolidating many different ideas. In his organization, he trusts IWU interns to apply their research skills and writing capabilities to prepare major grant proposals.

Critical-thinking skills gained by analyzing complex case study problems in his coursework helped Sijia Song '13 land a post-college job in the transaction advisory practice at Ernst & Young, according to the business administration graduate.

With employers increasingly using internships as a hiring pipeline for permanent, full-time positions — almost like a job interview that lasts 12 weeks — students are fully grasping the make-or-break importance of an internship experience. As Cummins notes: “It’s a very competitive marketplace, and if you want to have a leg up on the competition, you need to have a really strong internship background. I think it really is almost expected you should have at least one, if not more, internships to make the difference between a good candidate and a great candidate.”

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