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# Unpaid Work, but They Pay for Privilege

By GERRY SHIH

With paying jobs so hard to get in this weak market, a lot of college graduates would gladly settle for a nonpaying internship. But even then, they are competing with laid-off employees with far more experience.

So growing numbers of new graduates — or, more often, their parents — are paying thousands of dollars to services that help them land internships.

Call these unpaid internships that you pay for.

“It’s kind of crazy,” said David Gaston, director of the [University of Kansas](#) career center. “The demand for internships in the past 5, 10 years has opened up this huge market. At this point, all we can do is teach students to understand that they’re paying and to ask the right questions.”

Not that the parents are complaining. Andrew Topel’s parents paid \$8,000 this year to a service that helped their son, a junior at the University of Tampa, get a summer job as an assistant at Ford Models, a top agency in New York.

“It would’ve been awfully difficult” to get a job like that, said Andrew’s father, Avrim Topel, “without having a friend or knowing somebody with a personal contact.” Andrew completed the eight-week internship in July and was invited to return for another summer or to interview for a job after graduation.

Andrew’s parents used a company called the University of Dreams, the largest and most visible player in an industry that has boomed in recent years as internship experience has become a near-necessity on any competitive entry-level résumé.

The company says it saw a spike in interest this year due to the downturn, as the number of applicants surged above 9,000, 30 percent higher than in 2008. And unlike prior years, the company says, a significant number of its clients were recent graduates, rather than the usual college juniors.

The program advertises a guaranteed internship placement, eight weeks of summer housing, five meals a week, seminars and tours around New York City for \$7,999. It has a full-time staff of 45, and says it placed 1,600 student interns in 13 cities around the world this year, charging up to \$9,450 for a program in London and as little as \$5,499 in Costa Rica.

The money goes to the University of Dreams and the other middlemen like it. Officials at the company say they are able to wrangle hard-to-get internships for their clients because they have developed extensive working relationships with a variety of employers. They also have an aggressive staff who know who to call where. Their network of contacts, they say, is often as crucial as hard work in professional advancement.

“Students don’t have problems finding internships, students have problems getting internships,” Eric Normington, the company’s chief marketing officer, said by telephone from Hong Kong where he was overseeing the local program. “We can secure those exclusive positions.”

Employers say the middlemen save them time and hassle. “They make the search process a lot easier,” said Sarah Cirkiel, the chief executive of Pitch Control Public Relations, a small New York firm that started four years ago and has taken in 20 summer interns all from the University of Dreams. “I feel like they hand-select their interns for the specific agencies to make sure it’s the right fit. They just show up at our doorstep, ready to go.”

But many educators and students argue that while the programs bridge one gulf — between those who have degrees from prestigious colleges or family connections and those who do not — only to create a new one, between the students who have parents willing and able to buy their children better job prospects and those who do not.

“You’re going to increase that divide early, on families that understand that investment process and will pay and the families that don’t,” said Anthony Antonio, a professor of education at [Stanford University](#). “This is just ratcheting it up another notch, which is quite frightening.”

Julia McDonald, the career services director at [Florida State University](#), questioned the need for these programs. “The economy has had an impact, but there are more than enough internship opportunities out there still,” she said. “That’s like buying a luxury car.”

Other college advisers cautioned that while the desire to help is understandable, parents who pay for an internship program are depriving their children of the chance to develop job-seeking skills or to taste rejection before they have to fend for themselves.

The industry dismisses the criticism.

“Universities forget that they themselves are, in essence, businesses,” said C. Mason Gates, the president of [Internships.com](#), an online placement service. “Just because they’re doing it in a nonprofit fashion doesn’t mean that those of us doing it for profit are doing it incorrectly.”

The University of Dreams has several smaller competitors. One is the Washington Center, which places students at institutions like [Amnesty International](#) and the Canadian Embassy in Washington. The center is a nonprofit but charges summer participants a \$5,195 program fee on top of a \$60 application fee. If students choose to pay \$3,395 for 10 weeks of prearranged housing — and more than 90 percent do, the center said — the total comes to \$8,650.

Online start-ups that match students with internships have joined in, too, as have auction services that have sold internships worth thousands of dollars.

Francois Goffinet entered the University of Dreams program in 2007 as a student at the College of William & Mary, he said, because he wanted an internship at a top bank but those banks did not recruit at colleges like his. The University of Dreams advisers polished Francois’s résumé. They coached him on interviews and then helped him secure an internship at [UBS](#), which he then converted into a job offer.

“We wanted the biggest and the best,” Francois’s mother, Lynn Andrews, recalled. “No one had the direct route.”

*Gerry Shih is a summer intern at The Times. He is paid.*

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

**Correction: August 21, 2009**

An article on Aug. 9 about students who are paying services to help them land unpaid internships rendered the name of one student’s college incorrectly. It is the College of William & Mary, not William and Mary College.

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