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Securing a Last-Minute Internship

by Sarah Abruzzese

Summer is approaching, the term papers and exams are done -- and you don't have an internship.

Is it too late? Maybe not.

"I encourage students to look out for opportunities," said Marva Gumbs Jennings, the executive director of George Washington University's career center. The worst thing, she said, is to get discouraged and do nothing.

The perception that most internships are filled many months in advance may be wrong.

"A lot of companies wake up in the spring and say: 'Oh, we have a project, maybe we could get someone,' " said Janet Richert, the managing director of the Office of Career Management at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business. The school has received several internship postings over the past few weeks.

Her colleague, Peter Brown, the school's senior director for employer development, recommends that students look at smaller companies. He said those firms may offer a wider variety of experience than larger companies.

The Washington area is home to many opportunities due to the healthy economy, the war in Iraq and the requirement to comply with the financial rules of the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act, all of which have caused a lot of companies to seek business interns, Richert and Brown said.

Even in fields where jobs aren't as abundant, possibilities abound. "Great opportunities go to those who show initiative and optimism," said Mark Oldman, a co-founder and co-president of Vault Inc., a company that publishes a guide to top internships.

"Call programs, even programs that it seems like they filled the position," Oldman said. "Internship programs that seem unavailable sometimes become available. It is important not to write off internship opportunities."

He speaks from experience. "I myself, way back when, found an internship in the summer at MTV," he said. "I had not found an internship. I had been passed over at MTV. I was sitting at home watching MTV, and I called up MTV and it just so happened, the intern they had hired hadn't worked out."

Such last-minute opportunities involve jobs at places where prospective interns have fallen through or the intern need has grown, said Aimee Breslow, a senior administrator for the International Development Program at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

Would-be interns should not wait for announcements to come to them, she said. "There are a couple things they should do to be proactive." Look at Web sites; request informational interviews from alumni or people in the industry.

Also, check where the funding for a non-governmental organization comes from. If a foundation funds it, that group may fund similar organizations that have posts available.

More ideas from other experts : "Use the alumni associations," Oldman said. "Go to your career office or alumni office and look at people willing to be contacted in the industry that interests you and write them letters or drop them an e-mail and offer your services."

If you write 10 or 15 letters, he said, your information may wind up in the hands of someone who can help.

Be creative, Oldman said. "Think about creating an internship where none exist. . . . using your network to propose an ad hoc internship where none yet exists."

He suggested that people looking for internships go to industry-specific Web chats such as those on his company's site, <http://www.vault.com/> , and ask about opportunities.

Also, try your school's Web site; look at job boards for the companies and fields that interest you.

"You should work your network and the forgotten networks around you," Oldman said.

Francine Blume, who handles American University's internship program, said that even though it's late, you shouldn't forget the essentials. She recommends researching the company, having someone look at your résumé and practicing your job interview skills. (And don't forget a thank-you note!) And, because internship time is fast approaching, she said, "Don't take a week off to recover from exams."