Why Your College Student Should Be Thinking About Summer Internships in January

Right now your college student is likely enjoying their winter break, kicking back and spending some much-deserved time relaxing. And as important as that is for young adults to do, there are some other things they should be thinking about. Winter break is a great time to think ahead to summer internships. It may seem far away, but in reality deadlines and applications are just around the corner, depending on the internship and the company.

Why now?

To start, college is the time to learn, grow, and gain experiences that prepare students for their life and career. “You don’t get a job these days after college unless you’ve had one, if not two, internships. It’s mandatory,” says Jane Horrowitz, a career coach for young adults.

Companies are looking for interns now. “For most industries, now is the time that people are starting to look for their interns,” Horrowitz says. Some companies have application deadlines, others may have a less-formal process, but either way, January is really a great time to get organized and start planning.

Winter break is the first long break they have had since starting the school year. Students can use this time to update and polish the resume, practice interviewing, do research, and start applying if deadlines require them to do so. Relaxing and recuperating is definitely important, but so is thinking about next steps.

Where can my student look for internship opportunities?

If you feel like there are an overwhelming number of internship opportunities out there, you’re right. But there are many ways for your student to narrow them down and start finding opportunities that are a good fit. Here is how they can start.

Research companies
When thinking about potential internships, think about the companies themselves. “It’s always about what companies do I think I would want to work at,” Horowitz says. “Have a list; you know you can’t track 100 companies, but you can track 10-15 companies. You can go on their websites to get information about the internships.”

Think about company environment, structure, and mission. Shelley Moore, Director of Career Services at Penn College, says students should think about companies and career fields they could be in 5-10 years from now. “What do you see yourself doing? What are the opportunities out there for how you envision your day?” Moore says. “Research companies that seem to fit these ideas, with the ultimate goal of where you see yourself after graduation.”

College career center

Career services centers at colleges and universities can be really helpful in starting the process of searching for internships. Moore says career services are an extremely valuable resource for college students. Many schools have databases of internship opportunities, and they often have direct connections to companies and recruiting representatives. Career service counselors can often help with resumes, cover letters, and other important assets to the career and internship search. “It’s my job to help students figure out what their transferable skills are,” Moore says.

Alumni

“Your greatest professional resource is the alumni,” Horowitz says. People who graduated from your student’s school can be a huge help in making connections and getting a foot in the door. Horowitz says many schools have alumni relations departments that students can utilize to make connections. LinkedIn is also a great place to explore alumni networks. Students can search jobs and companies and see if there are any alumni from their school who currently or formerly worked there. Simply reaching out to these people is a great way to start building connections.

Networking

Building relationships is something your student will do throughout their career, and it starts early. College is the best time to build relationships with a wide range of people and ask for help. Learning as much as possible about different career fields and paths is extremely helpful in building future connections to jobs. “Informational interviews are key. People will always talk to you,” Horowitz says. “It’s not about asking for anything, it’s just about learning, learning, learning.”

EXPLORE
Interviewing 101
It doesn’t have to be formal, but rather an opportunity to talk with and learn from people with more experience in a given field. Dr. Shirag Shemmassian, a college admissions expert, suggests students email a manager or VP in a department they’re interested in, and send a pitch for an informal meeting. “You could say; ‘I’m a student, interested in X, would you be open to grabbing a coffee, my treat, so I can ask a few questions?’” Shemmassian says. “I wouldn’t ask directly in an email for an internship, but reach out and meet people and follow up and see where opportunities come.”

How does my student find the right internship?

The key is for them to worry less about finding the "right" internship, and more about the process of gaining experience and exploring options. “This is the point of the internship, to figure out where does my major fit, what careers can I pursue with my major?” Horowitz says. “Especially if you’re getting an internship between sophomore and junior year, that is the time to explore.”

Shemmassian says students should not be afraid to get their feet wet. “Do something in an area where you may be interested in and see what happens. I think it’s just as valuable to do something you don’t like, and to find out you don’t like it, as it is to find out you do like it,” Shemmassian says.

Internships help students figure out how to work in a professional environment, and what type of environment they enjoy working in. It’s about gaining skills and experience that can later be used in getting a job after graduation.

What should my student focus on when applying to internships?

Even internships can be really competitive. When applying to internships, they should focus on transferable skills. There are so many different kinds of jobs out there, and students can always find valuable skills to put on their resume.

Sometimes students do not understand or see the value in their experiences thus far. “Many freshman say they don’t have skills,” Moore says. “Any type of leadership opportunity, like student government in high school, organization, event planning, communication skills. Even if you were a lifeguard, you had to show responsibility, maybe even leadership.”

“Camp counselor, working at the Gap, being a barista; when you tear those jobs apart, what those jobs are about,” Horowitz says. “Customer service, handling different customers. Being empathetic for homesick kids. If you break down your jobs a little bit you’ll see a lot more than making coffee.”

Moore says the first step in applying is a great resume, where transferable skills stand out. “A good resume is something that has quantifiable information and specific
examples of skillsets, Moore says.

Students should highlight what they’ve learned in college courses, too. Literally it’s why you pay for a college education to take these classes, and ideally they are teaching you a skillset valuable to an employer out in the workforce, Moore says. Really evaluate what classes you took in fall; What did I learn? How can I turn that into a transferable skill to put on my resume?

How can I help my student?

Parents are a big support in career building for young adults, and internships are a critical step in that journey. But, it sometimes is difficult to know how much to help college students in this process. We actually talk with parents about career choices and supporting their students in being able to obtain some of these opportunities, Moore says. But it’s really a supportive role. You are not going to apply for a student, but constant communication with your student about what their career goals are and help them to narrow their focus.

Just being there for advice is the first step. I always encourage parents to let their kids know they are available to help with this stuff. Ask directly to the exact amount at which they’d like to have them involved, Shemmassian says. Sometimes kids don’t realize they have this option.

Not only do you know your kid best, but you have the perspective and experience in your own career to help guide them. Even if you don’t think you have the best advice when it comes to career building, you might be surprised by how much you can offer.

Ask questions and share your experiences. Talk about your first job and what you learned from it. Explain how you landed your current job. Share the positive and negative things about your work. Give them advice on networking and interviewing. Brainstorm options with them. You don’t have to bombard them, but you can shed some light on their experiences.

We all know that navigating jobs and careers is challenging, even as you get older. Keep in mind that your student is just starting this process. A little guidance and perspective from mom or dad can go a long way.

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