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**THE JOURNAL REPORT: SMALL BUSINESS**
**Young, Eager -- and Cheap**
*Interns can be well worth their low price*

 By **RAYMUND FLANDEZ**  
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Internships typically are associated with big companies. But small businesses can reap some of the biggest benefits.

Dawn Cherek, who owns a chain of hair salons in the Madison, Wis., area, was having trouble drawing student customers to her newest salon, just blocks from the University of Wisconsin campus. A friend suggested she contact the university to see whether there were any marketing majors who could hammer out a plan to lure those potential customers.

With the help of the university's career-services center, Ms. Cherek quickly posted a notice on the school's career-services Web site in March: "Progressive, Upscale Hair Salon Chain Looking For Two (2) Ambitious Marketing Student Partners to Create and Help Execute a Retail Business Marketing Plan." She labeled it as a "case study, part-time job opportunity" with pay of \$8 an hour for four weeks.

Ms. Cherek received two responses within a couple of weeks of posting the notice, and more have come in since. She expects the interns she hires not only to help her find customers on campus, but also to check out the local competition and find ways to burnish the store's image.


For small-business owners like Ms. Cherek, interns can be a cheap source of talent -- and an efficient way to evaluate potential future full-time employees. And while small firms sometimes find it hard to attract interns, it's getting easier, as many colleges help companies identify students who prefer small firms to larger ones.

"Often small businesses aren't aware of the fact that universities have students whose identified academic goal and career goal is to start working with small businesses," says Dennis Jorgensen, director of the Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**Back to College**

Career-services offices like the one at the University of Wisconsin operate on most college campuses, and most of those offices conduct career fairs where business owners can meet potential interns. School officials also often help employers craft their requests for help and direct them to the

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most likely candidates.

Some employers find that tapping their alma mater for interns works on several levels: In addition to finding qualified students, they get to support the school and maintain ties to their old campus.

Each year, Paul Gilbert, owner of Joy Realty Associates Inc. in Boston, visits the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus to interview internship candidates with some background in real estate. He selects one intern, who gets free lodging for the summer and is paid \$8,000. Mr. Gilbert puts the interns to work leasing apartments to the mostly college-age students trying to find housing in the Boston area. "It keeps me connected with the university," he says, "and it gives these students an opportunity to see these other parts of the country."

College interns can also be found through some groups that offer scholarships. For example, the Level Playing Field Institute in San Francisco provides scholarships for lower-income minority students to attend the University of California, Berkeley. The nonprofit group helps to match students, according to their career interests, with local employers offering summer internships.

College students can also be recruited abroad. The federal Summer Work/Travel program, supervised by the State Department, allows foreign college-age students with special visas to come to the U.S. to work during their college breaks. This program has been a big help for the hospitality industry, which has found it difficult in many cases to find local candidates for low-paying seasonal work.

For the past eight years, David O'Connor, general manager of a Best Western hotel in Big Sky, Mont., has hired student workers from all over the world for four-month jobs, such as doing housekeeping or busing tables. The hotel, located near two large ski resorts and Yellowstone National Park, needs extra help in the winter, spring and summer. Mr. O'Connor provides lodging for the foreign students and pays them \$7 to \$10 an hour.

"I don't know if we could be in business without it," Mr. O'Connor says of the program. Want ads posted locally draw little or no response, he says.

### **Regional Help**

Businesses can also take advantage of efforts to promote internships as a way to beef up local economies. The Pittsburgh-based Regional Internship Center of Southwestern Pennsylvania, for instance, has a centralized online system that connects some 750 employers with about 45 area colleges, creating some 1,600 internships. The reason for such an organized network? Brain drain.

Most students at area colleges go to other parts of the country upon graduation, says Erin Baker, the internship center's university-relations associate. "The thought was that by giving students internships here, it would retain the student population and develop the economy." The internship center is a project of two nonprofit organizations: the Coro Center for Civic Leadership and the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board. According to a 2004 study by the Coro Center, 40% of employers in southwestern Pennsylvania offered their interns full-time positions.

Paul Furiga, president and owner of public-relations agency WordWrite Communications in Wexford, Pa., says that with limited resources, he couldn't afford to send out campus recruiters to more than 40 colleges. "There's no way in heck that I can reach people that far away as a four-person firm," Mr. Furiga says.

Last summer, he hired an intern out of about 60 interested applicants generated by the internship center. He already has hired two interns for this summer.

Interns don't have to be college age. Some high schools also find internships for their students.

The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, a high school in Providence, R.I., matches its students with local businesses in their areas of interest. Students spend part of their school time at the business or organization, and the employer acts as a mentor to the student as he or she completes a project. The students get school credit for the work, but they don't get paid. The businesses get free help -- even an intern the following summer -- and a look at some prospects for future employment.

Marilyn Melendez, a Met senior, has been interning with Lucille Clothing in Providence since last fall, working with owner and designer Karen Beebe. Her final project for the internship: She had to design and create six outfits (she made 10 total) for a local spring fashion show, with the help of her mentor. The internship began with lessons about fabric, placing and cutting patterns, and sewing technique. Ms. Melendez then helped Ms. Beebe prepare for a fall fashion show, and also offered suggestions to Ms. Beebe about her application to appear on Bravo TV's "Project Runway."

Ms. Beebe says she's enjoyed having an extra pair of hands at work (Ms. Melendez even made a few jackets based on her mentor's designs) and teaching a young person the fashion industry's ins and outs. "I think that if you can be a positive role model for somebody at that age," she says, "that's the most rewarding part of it for me."

--Mr. Flandez is a staff reporter in The Wall Street Journal's New York bureau.

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