Internships Show how Lessons from Honors Function in the “Real World”

Jasmine Carlson (’15) and Lizzy Donnelly (’15) interned in Washington, D.C. in the summer of 2014.

From Salt Lake City to Washington, D.C., and from mathematics to public health, Honors students participate in a range of internship opportunities in varying fields. However, one thing appears to hold true across the board: these students’ experiences in the Honors program have contributed to success in their internships.

Senior Honors students Jasmine Carlson, Lizzy Donnelly, Shibl Gill, Megan Peters, and Greg Yerkes each did an internship during the last year. As a group, they identified reading, writing, communication, and critical and integrative thinking as the skills—learned primarily in the Honors program—that were most beneficial during their internships.

Jasmine, a political science major, did a summer internship with U.S. Senator John Tester of Montana in his office at Washington D.C. Her duties as an intern involved issues in two different fields—judiciary and banking—in which she had no prior experience but was still expected to read lengthy summaries and report her findings to the senator.

Jasmine said her ability to communicate her findings, in both verbal and written forms, was shaped by the skills she gained in the Honors program, and particularly in the fast-paced discussions in Honors seminars. She felt she was adequately prepared to handle the constant demand for quick, accurate communication better than any of the other student interns.

“I probably wrote twenty to thirty memos for him over the course of my internship that he took home and read,” she said. “Being able to translate, clearly and succinctly, all of what I was reading and hearing, and the different perspectives I was taking into account, into a memo that summarized everything relevant and important for him to know in a page was both challenging and something that I excelled at compared to the other interns.”

Lizzy, a public health major, did a three-month summer internship in Washington, D.C., as well, for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. During her time there, she gathered signatures on petitions and met with Utah Congressmen Chris Stewart and Jim Matheson, and Senator Hatch’s health legislative assistant to lobby for support on bills.

For Lizzy, the most valuable and transferrable skill she learned from the Honors program was the ability to listen well to others’ ideas. As an intern, she interacted frequently with many politicians, and needed to shrewdly pick out the information she wanted to use for her arguments when meeting with representatives. Because she was often competing with lobbyists from tobacco companies, she had to
carefully refute the arguments she knew they were making—all of which required attentive listening, active synthesis of multiple competing ideas, and clear communication.

Lizzy also said that the reading she did on American Cancer Society policies was easier for her because she had been challenged by the readings in Humanities and other Honors courses. Her writing abilities also stood out to the people she worked with: “I was complimented by my boss on my excellent writing skills.” She added, “That’s all Honors.”

Shibl, a mathematics major, was an intern at the state capitol in the Utah Division of Risk Management during spring semester last year. Shibl was the first intern the office had ever had, an opportunity brought to his attention by the Public Service Internship Program run by Roger Livingston. In his internship, Shibl applied his mathematical knowledge to streamline the office’s data systems, build models for data representation, and create a performance evaluation formula for

approach of Honors courses benefitted him as an intern, which he found surprising. He said it gave him “the ability to think of issues in a multi-faceted approach,” combining mathematical concepts with aspects of psychology and sociology for his major project of creating a performance evaluation formula for the department.

Megan, a marketing major, did an internship for Freestyle Marketing Group in downtown Salt Lake City during the summer. Like Jasmine and Lizzy, she emphasized that the writing skills she learned in Honors classes were particularly valuable for her internship.

“Pretty much everything I’ve done is writing,” she said. One of her jobs was to create a brand standard for one of the clients, which was “all words.”

Megan’s writing skills also helped her complete work faster. “Things usually have to go through the copy writer at our agency,” she said, “but whenever I’m working on something, I can just pass it on without having to go through the copy writer.”

Megan said that at Freestyle, there is usually a distinction between the “creatives” who generate the ideas and the account team that develops them, but she can do both. “Because I can write, I can do it a lot faster,” she said.

Megan said the skills she used in her internship go all the way back to Humanities, particularly the ability to be open to criticism.

Greg, an international business major, did a summer internship in the International Trade Resource Center in New Hampshire as part of the requirement for completing his degree. He said the critical thinking skills he learned in the Honors program were
intern,” he said. He explained that the combination of Professor Watkins’ economic theory and Professor Popich’s philosophical theory helped him “understand more comprehensively why things are the way they are, and I was able to apply what I learned about economics and international relations from those two different approaches to what I had been doing as an intern, and it really helped me do better in my role.”

The benefits of internships go both ways. After their internship experiences, Jasmine, Shibl, and Greg all said they were more invested in their classes. Jasmine said being exposed to the passion and excitement of experts in the many fields that converge in D.C. was “infectious.”

“My awareness of other people’s passion and subsequent excitement about class was greatly heightened,” she said. “I’m much more likely to participate or listen with a higher degree of excitement over what the professors are saying.”

Shibl said he had more appreciation for the interdisciplinary learning goals of the Honors program and even started working on them more after his internship. “Seeing it work in real life renewed my faith in this system, and I was able to more actively endorse those goals of the Honors program,” he said.

Greg also saw his passion for classes increase as a result of understanding how his classes could apply to the world beyond college. “I definitely see that what I’m learning in classes applies to the real world,” he remarked. “That gave me a new perspective on my classes. I’m specifically looking for ways that what I’m learning in class can apply to international trade, international relations, and business in general.”

All five students highly recommend that students pursue internships. According to Greg, doing an internship is “an essential part of developing your professional career and your professional life past Westminster.”

Shibl also recommends doing an internship to find direction in a prospective career. “I think everybody should do an internship while they’re in college – absolutely, no question about it,” he said. “It gives you a direction, gives you a heading, so you know where you’re going and what exactly you want to do.”

Lizzy pointed out that being in the Honors program often allows students to be more selective about the internship experiences they want to have, and she encourages Honors students to exercise that ability to choose internships and what they want from them. To this end, she said, “I would encourage people when choosing an internship to look for an opportunity that’s going to be educational as opposed to sitting at a desk and doing secretarial work. While that can be valuable for networking, I got the networking and I got to learn so much about health policy while I was in D.C.”

Finally, Jasmine and Greg both recommended pursuing as many internships as possible. “Do as many as you can in anything that might interest you,” Jasmine said. “The worst case scenario is that you find out that you don’t want to spend your life in that career field, and that’s fine. The best case scenario is you find your heart’s calling.”

By Jorie Page