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Addicted to Internships: How One College Student Just Said No to Service Jobs and Started Building a Career One Internship at a Time

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

As a college student struggling to make ends meet, would you have the courage to swear off typical college restaurant and retail jobs and commit yourself to career-boosting internships – even unpaid internships? Rising Manhattan College Julie Davis did – even after relocating from Florida to the far more expensive New York City.

Marketing major Davis, 21, aspires to enter the music business. With four internships under her belt, additional hands-on experience while in high school, and a budding not-for-profit college radio promotions entrepreneurial venture to her credit, Davis could be characterized as already being in the music business.

"I've wanted to work in music as far back as I can remember," Davis recalls. "I've always had a love of music, mostly stemming from the obsessions my family had. As I got older being part of the music became more ingrained in me." Davis notes that she can "effortlessly give a timeline of my life based on the music I was into and mixtapes I made at each period."

A native of Sunrise, FL, Davis began to truly get her feet wet in music at around age 15. "My brother decided he wanted to be a musician and start planning events, so I think I gained much of my interest in working in the industry from him pushing me to help with recordings and shows," Davis says. "From there I helped him set up a recording studio in my mom's house, and I started recording and managing my friends' bands. At that point I was doing anything and everything to keep working in entertainment – planning high-school concerts, working with night clubs, programming at [radio station] WKPX and so on."

WKPX is a non-commercial, educational radio station owned and operated by School Board of Broward County and located at Piper High School, which Davis attended. Her time there comprised a curricular activity in which she worked in various positions, some simultaneously for the full four years of high school – as musical director for a year, music librarian for a year, a programmer for two and a half year years, and a specialty show hostess/co-hostess for three and a half years. Davis worked almost full-time at the station during her senior year. After graduation and her time at WKPX, Davis started college at a small private university in a much less lively area of Florida. "It was severely depressing," Davis says, "to start college in the middle of nowhere and have nothing entertainment-related to do."

From the minute I started college, I was looking into internships, and there wasn't anything – except for Disney Radio – for me."

Davis decided she wanted to spend a summer in New York with her dad and try for something there. "Unfortunately, that didn't work out so well," Davis laments. "I had a few phone interviews, but it's hard to rely on a person you don't know physically exists – especially in entertainment. I couldn't land any jobs in New York for the summer."

So she refocused her efforts on Central Florida. "I wanted to explore all my entertainment options in the Orlando area. I had spent four years working in college/noncommercial radio, and I figured that a commercial station was a good place to round out my radio education."

After searching Cox Communication's job website for weeks, Davis spotted a posting for an unpaid radio-promotions internship at Power 95.3 FM WPYO. Her persistence nailed the internship for her. "I e-mailed my resume and cover letter twice and still didn't receive word," she recalls. "I sent it again and hunted down a name and number for the internship coordinator. When I called, and finally got an answer, he said he never received my resume, so I should send it again directly to him. I called back to ensure he got it, and he asked me to come in immediately for an interview. After that I had to call at least three times before they told me I was hired and another two before I had a start date. Davis interned there as a "Power Player" during the summer and fall of 2006 as she entered her sophomore year of college.

"Not only did I get the commercial radio-promotions position," Davis notes, "I was allowed to intern a few days in the sales department. Outside of commercial programming, I developed an understanding of most of the business operations of a typical commercial station. I definitely met my objectives there. The position was great at the start. It was mostly socializing at events and night clubs. I was the only person I knew that could get credit for partying."

But Davis says the novelty eventually wore off when the station became short-staffed. "I put all the effort I had into helping out here and there – working extra hours, helping in the office, staying late before big events," she recalls. "There were paid jobs available at the time, so we [interns] were being watched carefully. Even after all of the effort I put in, I was the only intern who didn't get hired. Every other intern was shocked, and even some of the staff, but that's how things worked. It wasn't the effort that meant anything, just random picks."

Needless to say, Davis would not recommend this internship to others. "Not to sound biased, but it wasn't a very realistic atmosphere," she says. "Working there meant showing off and believing you were a celebrity more than running a station effectively. Interns were mostly discriminated against instead of taught valuable lessons. We weren't allowed to sit in on meetings or do any meaningful work. The most I learned from that specific internship is how unprofessional commercial radio can be."

The experience did show Davis a direction into which she does not want to venture. "This position turned me off to the commercial-music industry," she notes. "Personally, I don't think it's a place for business-minded individuals with a serious passion for quality

music. I have a feeling the open-access setup through the Internet may change the structure of commercial music for the better, however. We'll see."

Despite the bitter taste left by the internship, Davis says she had at that point "developed an addiction to internships."

"I enjoyed working – even for free – and gaining the experience, but I think I liked putting the experience on my resume just as much," Davis says. "Internships are funny in that the more you can say you learned from the position, the more people are willing to give you a chance to learn at your next position. After working at Power, I swore off restaurant gigs and retail stores and decided internships were the only way to go. To expand my options I transferred to a school in New York, and now I spend the last few weeks of every semester looking for another position to challenge me. I mostly have tried to apply for internships I could stretch my experience to fit, but positions that I've never specifically been involved in. That way, I can hone the skills I've already developed while trying my hand in a whole new arena."

Before making the move to New York, Davis interned as a corporate marketing assistant at Citrix Systems, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, during the summer 2007. Davis found the paid Citrix internship through INROADS, a co-curricular job program that prepares minority students for professional positions. Davis says her job-search strategy was successful because "I took advantage of the programs available to me in this job search." Davis explains that she was also offered a position with The Recording Academy, which also hosts a college program, GRAMMY U. "It helps having a large group on your side," Davis says.

Citrix was Davis' first internship foray outside the music business. "At this point I was preparing myself for moving to New York, and I wanted a position with a well-known, major corporation. Having international experience with a large company turned out to be a great way to differentiate myself from other job candidates in a place as diverse as New York."

While Davis met her objective to attain international experience, many other interns there weren't as lucky. "Most of the Citrix interns worked with software development, so they didn't get much outside experience. Luckily, I was one of two corporate-level interns, so I worked daily with representatives from over 100 different countries," Davis says. "This was my first internship in which I was actively a part of the operations. I attended team meetings, I put in my opinion on company and team affairs, and my suggestions were taken seriously. The best part of the whole experience was being pushed to work with the other marketing teams. I was hired for Customer Marketing, which entailed work with case studies, event planning and CRM [Customer Relationship Management] systems, but I was also recruited for C-level projects with Second Life and company-wide initiatives. I was pushed to interview heads of various teams and start networking," she recalls.

Davis also participated in numerous programs and classes through Citrix. "We had a ton of internship luncheons, free days to go to skill-building classes, and a team outing for everything. Yep, all that extra socializing was torture – just kidding!"

Davis indicates that the Citrix experience provided an excellent building block for her life and career. "The family at Citrix, most of which I still keep in touch with, taught me incredible life lessons," she says. "In one summer I felt more comfortable taking chances and making the most of my college experience because of the stories they shared of moving around the world, starting families, and living life all while living comfortably. While the professional experience was priceless, I think this position contributed most to my life in relation to my career as opposed to my career alone."

In fact, Davis would not necessarily recommend the Citrix internship for others interested in the music business, but calls it "an internship better suited for someone looking for a hands-on corporate experience."

In the fall of 2007, Davis made her planned move to New York and enrolled in Manhattan College – but as usual, she was focused on her next career move. "My purpose for moving to New York was to get more industry experience. A major record label was an obvious choice. My main goal was to get my foot in the door and create a place for myself in music. She had applied for an internship at a label even before arriving in the city, having found a posting on entertainmentcareers.org. "Major record-label positions are hard to come by," Davis notes, "especially when moving to a new state. I applied for this internship about a week before I moved to New York, and I got a call back the day after I got there. Perfect timing." The position was as an unpaid international marketing intern at Island Def Jam Music Group, and Davis spent her fall 2007 semester there.

"Although I was only there for a semester, I worked with a great group in International Marketing," Davis recalls. "I even temped for the department's administrative assistant on a few occasions. I'm pretty sure that if I wanted to get in at Island Def Jam when I graduate, I could make a few calls and have some good references. It was great being in the label environment. For an office job, everything was incredibly casual. The team I worked on was very close-knit, so it made it easy to feel relaxed around everyone."

The casual atmosphere had its downside, "at least for the interns," Davis notes. "No one had any issues asking us to go on a coffee run or go pick up lunch. The worst aspect of the internship was the lack of accountability. There were four interns on our team, but we were each held accountable for the actions of one. The idea was that it promoted teamwork, but since half of us didn't see the other half all semester, it was hard to coordinate and nearly impossible to check each other's work."

Davis recommends this internship as "a great position for anyone looking to get started in the music industry." Davis also notes that Island Def Jam's internships "are a good way to figure out if working in commercial music is for you."

Already soured on commercial music by her experience in Orlando, Davis was still exploring. "Most of the interns I talked felt [commercial music] was a little too fake for them," Davis observes, "but almost all the full-time employees appreciated the opportunity to work in a such a fast-paced glamorous atmosphere."

Ultimately, though, Davis says the internship "turned me off to commercial music in general. I don't even listen to mainstream radio anymore! But it did show me that I'd

like to focus my attention on independent music and helping lesser-known artists make a name for themselves. Added bonus: I now know record label jobs don't pay squat for the amount of work you have to put in."

Davis' current internship represents her second venture outside the music business, but the choice of industry was not entirely by design. "I'll admit a large part of the search was to avoid working at a restaurant. Moving to a big, expensive city happens to cost a ton! My main objective, however, was to learn a thing or two about public relations and/or branding, the two areas of marketing I hadn't worked in at all. She found a paid internship at a public-relations agency through an e-mail blast to her college's business school sent out by the school's Career Services office.

"My previous internship with Island Def Jam pushed me to be more open to opportunities that weren't directly music-related," Davis says. "Being open to a different learning experience is what landed me in such a great place." Davis also notes that this openness to learning provides an instant answer to the frequently-asked interview question, "Why do you want to work here?"

Davis got the new learning experience she sought. "This internship was just what I needed to balance my marketing knowledge," she says. "It actually spurred my interest in media relations, which turned out to be a big part of my plans for the future. For someone looking to find where they fit in the marketing world, this is a great position. I get to work with event planning, I use Photoshop almost daily to come up with designs for clients, and I'm learning how much goes on in journalism and different industries our clients work in. It's a great place for well-rounded experience."

Davis' experiences at the firm were less satisfying during the spring 2008 semester than during the subsequent summer. "Somewhere along the line of this position, while I was working 20 hours a week during the school year, I got bored," Davis explains. "It was hard for everyone because we all wanted to give me more responsibility, but there just weren't enough hours in the week." In contrast, though, Davis says, "working full-time over the summer brought all sorts of new challenges. Recently, I've been meeting with clients, developing contact lists and putting together press materials for various client opportunities. The best part thus far came last week when I was asked to become a full-fledged team member for one of our client projects. It sounds lame, but involves pitching media contacts and developing relationships to ensure a smooth well-publicized launch of a new product. It's easily the biggest responsibility I've had at any internship."

In fact, Davis believes the internship "will be a great after-graduation bargaining chip. A few consecutive months in a professional environment with important responsibility doesn't seem like a simple 'I make coffee runs'" type of internship. I think I'll be able to sell my experience here as a first job."

In looking back at all her internships, Davis says that "surprisingly, my non-music related internships have been my favorites. It's so much easier to actively participate and learn without feeling alienated in non-entertainment jobs, mostly because the egos are much smaller."

Davis advises other students interested in doing internships: "Don't limit yourself, especially in business. If you have a preference for one field, such as marketing, explore as much of that field as you possibly can. Skillsets tend to overlap, but if you're perceptive, you'll learn a ton about who you are and where you fit in the mix."

Where has school been for Davis during her internship addiction? Asked to compare the learning she gained from internships with her classroom learning, Davis declares that "the two don't compare at all. I like to think of my classroom education as the first few steps on a long flight of stairs. Internships come right after. College is important for getting the basics and becoming well-rounded. Classes point you in the right direction and give you something to talk about when you get there. For me, that direction was toward internships. In each position I've held, I've gained more of an insight on the goings-on of actual offices, not just the group-project simulations you get in class.

"Internships shed light on the mysterious world of office politics, the role of experience and expectations, work etiquette, and so much more. I'm using my internship experience as footing for when I graduate and start working full-time. Most of my friends that have graduated already had a serious case of culture shock when they started working. I feel as though my experience will make it a much smoother transition."

That transition will likely include Davis' latest venture. While working at the public-relations agency and getting firsthand experience with PR, Davis says, "I felt like I was ready to start working toward one of my lifelong goals – starting a not-for-profit college-radio promotions and publicity company. After working at Island Def Jam and Power, I felt like my energy was much better spent using my college-radio experience and my publicity experience to help artists that have yet to become established by offering a low-to-no cost service. And so, I established BlockStar Promo.

"My main goal is getting quality music – music that means something to someone – heard while giving artists who are as passionate about music as I am a chance to shine," Davis says." The plan is to work with artists that have upcoming projects they'd like to share with the world, such as new albums, a major tour, etc. It's also giving me a chance to work on developing my web-design skills. I'd like to get a good site set up and create quality video presentations for media contacts as well as potential clients. I wanted to make a booklet, but I feel like this is much more economical and environmentally friendly. Right now I'm still working on spreading the word and getting established as a legal entity in New York, but I'm hoping to start consulting and promoting independent artists all over the country by the end of the year."

Although Julie Davis' internship addiction has yet to be tested with post-graduation career success, her experience demonstrates a number of lessons about internships:

- Students will generally obtain more career-propelling learning from internships related to their future paths than they would from working for money in the type of low-level service jobs in which college students often work.
- While it may take resourcefulness and persistence to obtain internships, they are quite possible to get with some effort.

- Even paid internships are attainable. But if you can't find a paid internship, remember Julie Davis. If she could manage in expensive New York City on an unpaid internship, maybe you can find a way to manage.
- Remaining open to internships a bit outside the realm of your immediate career plans will enable you to expand your skillset and your network.
- Employers increasingly hire experience, even in new grads, and the more internships you have, the more experience and accomplishments you have to list on your resume.
- With the right attitude – like Davis's – you can find silver linings even in disappointing internships.