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Crucial Unpaid Internships Increasingly Separate the Haves From the Have-Nots

By JENNIFER LEE (NYT)

WASHINGTON, Aug. 9 -- Susan Lim, a 20-year-old Georgetown University student, is working 89 hours a week this summer: two part-time jobs and an unpaid internship offered through the Public Policy and International Affairs Program.

Her schedule -- working for money as a clerical assistant and a summer school resident adviser and without pay as a researcher at the public policy program -- is a sharp contrast to that of her Georgetown classmates. Many of them have parents who support them through unpaid summer internships, or they have qualified for paid internships because of experience as unpaid interns during high school.

"I have to do the same things they do plus more to get to the same place," said Ms. Lim, whose mother and father each work two jobs, including running a Laundromat, to support a household of 14 people. But Ms. Lim says she has no choice on performing her summer juggling act, which includes taking a class at Georgetown, where she is studying at the School of Foreign Service. She believes she needs an internship to be competitive with her peers. "If you go and apply for a job and/or apply for graduate school and all you have are grades, the next person has the same grades or better and has done other things," she said.

The focus on internships as a tool for professional success has never been greater, according to Mark Oldman, co-author of "The Internship Bible" and co-founder of Vault Inc., a career counseling company. About 80 percent of graduating college seniors now have done a paid or unpaid internship, according to surveys by Vault, compared with about 60 percent a decade ago.

"The interest in internships is at a fever pitch," Mr. Oldman said. "It used to be that internships used to be a useful enhancement to one's résumé. Now it's universally perceived as an essential stepping stone to career success."

But as internships rise in importance as critical milestones along the path to success, questions are emerging about whether they are creating a class system that discriminates against students from less affluent families who have to turn down unpaid internships to earn money for college expenses.

"It's something that really makes me nuts," said Cokie Roberts, an ABC News correspondent who spoke out about the problem on Capitol Hill several weeks ago at a gathering of Congressional interns. "By setting up unpaid internship programs, it seems to me that without completely recognizing it, it sets up a system where you are making it ever more difficult for people who don't have economic advantages to catch up."

Dalton Conley, a sociology professor at New York University who has studied how people get ahead, said: "It moves the clock back when you need connections. It makes it doubly hard for social mobility and equal opportunity, because of the connections that it requires at an earlier age, the financial sacrifices and also the culture *savoir-faire*."

While half of internships nationwide are paid or have at least a small stipend, according to national surveys conducted by Vault, unpaid internships are concentrated in the most competitive fields, like politics, television and film.

"The more glamorous an internship, the less likely it is paid," Mr. Oldman said. "Washington in general has high-demand internships. In most cases they don't have to pay or they don't have to pay much."

The White House does not pay the hundred-plus interns who work there during the summer. The Supreme Court does not pay its undergraduate interns, who work 12 to 16 weeks, although in some cases it will give a \$1,000 scholarship. And a vast majority of Congressional offices do not pay the 4,000 summer interns who pass through Capitol Hill, though a few, mostly on the Senate side, provide a limited stipend. Congressional offices once each received \$3,000 to pay summer interns, but the money was eliminated by budget cuts in the 1990's.

And since Washington internships serve as a pipeline that brings policy makers into the nation's capital, some people fear that over the long term, internships will be another means, like the rising costs of college tuition, of squeezing voices from the working class and even the middle class out of high-level policy debates.

Adam King, 19, a student at Brown University who is an intern in a Senate office, said, "Dealing with the interns of our office, they were of a class that was extremely privileged." Mr. King got into a heated debate with fellow interns who disputed Michael Moore's portrayal of military recruitment in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the film "Fahrenheit 9/11."

"They don't understand the issues, that the Army recruits poor people; there are Army recruiting people who say, 'Don't go to college, travel around the world,'" said Mr. King, who is working on Capitol Hill through a program that provides a stipend and housing. "That combined with the fact that so many interns wind up back on the Hill makes me scared that these people could possibly be making policy without understanding where so many of their constituents are coming from."

In some cases, students who take the unpaid internships get financial help from their universities or other programs, like the Washington Center, a nonprofit organization that prepares college students for civic leadership.

But such programs always receive many more applications than they have available money. The University of Virginia student services center received 10 times as many applicants as it could give summer stipends to this year. "It was heartbreaking because I couldn't give one to every student who applied," said Carrie Rudder, the university's senior assistant director for student services. The stipends are modest at best, often at most \$2,000 or \$3,000, which is less than students can earn in basic summer jobs.

"This program, it's a pay cut," Mr. King said. He is receiving \$2,000, or \$250 a week, for his internship, part of which he sends home to support his mother. "I could make a lot more bartending or waiting tables or even in a supermarket," he said.

The high cost of housing in Washington helps widen the gap between the haves and have-nots in the internship world here.

Some interns are able to live at home and commute.

Others find creative solutions. Wes McKain, a 19-year-old intern on Capitol Hill, lived free in housing belonging to the Church of the Nazarene in Washington in exchange for helping with chores.

Mr. McKain, who is from Kansas City, was surprised by how expensive food is in Washington. He takes a one-hour bus ride to shop in Langley Park, Md., where he can buy a loaf of bread for 70 cents and a gallon of milk for \$2.95. "It's hard-core cheap," said Mr. McKain, whose father is a minister.