

## From High School Student to Employee: A Proposal for A Citywide Internship Program in San Antonio *By David Nikaido and Kanika Singh*

Nationally, people cannot find jobs and employers cannot find people with the necessary entry-level skills. According to a McKinsey study, only 43% of employers report that there are enough qualified entry-level candidates (2012). Jobs that pay well now require a higher range of employment skills than in the past. Projections suggest that jobs in promising growth sectors will increasingly require stronger analytical or communication skills as well as postsecondary education, training credentials or relevant experience (Holzer and Lerman 2009). In an increasingly competitive global economy characterized by rising demand for appropriate credentials, students need to prepare for the workforce in any way they can.

A city's future economic competitiveness and long-term success are directly tied to the quality and skills of its workforce (NLC 2010). Historically, a city's attraction was often based on its ability to offer cheap land and large pools of able -- if not necessarily skilled -- labor. In a global economy, however, cities around the world are able to rival the United States in terms of skills and price, especially as technology has advanced and the global flow of goods and services has increased allowing businesses increased mobility. Today, an able workforce is still an essential component of a city's attraction, but employers are looking for higher-skilled workers often with post-secondary education and specialized skills sets.

A city's homegrown economic competitiveness further draws on the skills and abilities of its workforce, who are the primary drivers of small businesses and entrepreneurial activity, while also often being the most invested in the city's success. Workforce development applies to all people in a city's talent pipeline, including high school students who are exploring their post-secondary options. Offering more options for high school students to pursue career and technical education or training can improve educational outcomes for the city as a whole and improve the quality of the workforce.

While some critics of vocational training programs suggest that encouraging marginal students to forgo college for vocational education perpetuates the structural inequalities created by income inequality and racial stereotyping, Sawhill and Owen (2013) show that gaps in academic performance between whites and African Americans have persisted and between rich and poor have grown despite a policy push towards more educational attainment for all. Unfortunately, the correlation between family background and college entry, persistence and graduation have been rising, suggesting that it is all the more important to help students -- especially low-income students and those who struggle academically in high school -- understand the different post-secondary paths available (Sawhill and Owen 2013). Creating an easy to-access citywide internship program would be a systematic and effective method of allowing high school students to explore different career options and understand where their passions lie.

### **INTERNSHIPS ADD VALUE TO STUDENT'S EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

President Obama called college an "economic imperative," and multiple reports have shown the high returns of a college education (see Carnevale, Jayasundera and Cheah 2012; Looney and Greenstone 2012; Barrow and Rouse 2005). While improving San Antonio's educational pipeline is crucial for the city's success, it is important to remember that a four-year degree immediately following high school is neither a magic bullet fix for the structural problems facing the U.S. economy nor an automatic path to the middle class. Brookings' Center on Children and Families 2012 policy brief "Should Everyone Go to College?" illustrates the importance of post-secondary training for everyone and argues that associate's degrees, technical and vocational certification programs, apprenticeships and worker training programs not only have merit but can also often

help young adults make the best choices for their strengths and interests at the end of high school. A citywide internship program will allow students to explore different career options as well as equip them with more information and experience before they embark onto higher education.

Internships can help students become aware of the different organizations in the world of work, build early professional experience and discover what they do and do not want to do career-wise. Further, internships can help students to understand the applications of academic learning in the real world and to build a network of people in fields that interest them, as well as fostering an interest in charting their short-term and long-term plans (IEDC 2007). The most commonly identified skills young people learn on the job include: time management, workplace interaction, project management, equipment operation, collecting and organizing information, leadership, computer technology, sales and customer service and teaching and instruction (Commonwealth Corporation 2011).

### **INTERNSHIPS HELP BUSINESSES, TOO**

While the benefits of partaking in a meaningful internship seem almost self-evident, internship programs can appear to be a tedious enterprise for businesses. The National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) 2009 Experiential Education Survey shows, however, that companies of all sizes can benefit greatly from a meaningful and well-structured internship program: 25.3% of employers' full-time, entry-level college hires came from their internship programs, and 67.7% of interns are offered full-time positions. Internship programs allow businesses to find future employees by providing a constant pipeline of bright and motivated young professionals. Further, companies have a window in which to test-drive the talent to see whether they fit within the company environment, while simultaneously offering an opportunity to train the employees so that they make fewer mistakes if offered full-time positions. Interns offer short-term support that frees up the time of higher-level employees, which can increase their productivity and allow them to devote more time to projects that require their expertise.

Interns offer a low-cost way to tackle back-burner projects, while also often being highly motivated and idealistic with novel perspectives, new ideas and specialized strengths and skills. In fact, the International Economic Development Council (2011) claims that, "the emerging pipeline may be the most enthusiastic group of all when it comes to learning new skills and applying them to the workforce. They can provide new ideas, strong computer-based technologies and bring a new form of energy and passion to the workplace. Economic developers can help develop the emerging pipeline's workplace competencies by nurturing a strong relationship between education and industry." Moreover, NACE's 2009 survey showed that also 40% of employers reported a higher five-year retention rate among employees they hired via their internship programs, suggesting that internship programs boost employee-retention rates. Finally, internship programs offer a way for businesses to give back to the community, support students and local education institutions, enhance their public image, and give young people starting their careers their first breaks (Workready Philadelphia).

### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS FOR THE CITY?**

A strong, highly skilled workforce is generally considered one of the most basic pillars of local economic development (NLC 2012). Cities around the nation are struggling with how to help unemployed individuals, especially in sectors and industries that have been hardest hit by the recent economic and sectoral downturns. Cities are also acknowledging that a skilled workforce is one of the strongest incentives for businesses to settle, stay, grow and prosper in a city where they are guaranteed a constant stream of talent in the pipeline.

Job opportunities exist in San Antonio, but connecting employees with employers is a struggle because of the skills gap. Internship are too short to provide all the necessary training for overcoming a skills gap, but they create a pathway for students to engage employers and increase their knowledge of what kinds of opportunities are available to them after graduation. Without this knowledge, students may feel unprepared for the workforce after graduation and may lose motivation to train for opportunities they aren't sure exist.

In San Antonio, there are over 97,000 youth between the ages of 16 to 25 who are not involved in the labor force or enrolled in school (ACS). Many have graduated from high school or earned a GED, some have not, but

none are able to find jobs. Unemployed and unable to grow their talents, disconnected youth are lost opportunities for the entire city. Re-engaging this young, disillusioned population is both costly and challenging. Strategies for engaging disconnected youth are being tackled by organizations such as the P16 Council of Greater Bexar County with their Opportunity Youth initiative. However, we believe that a high school internship program that provides opportunities for students before they become disconnected would serve as an effective intervention for this population.

### **WHAT WORKS: THE URBAN ALLIANCE MODEL**

A successful citywide high school internship program starts small, follows a strategic vision and scales what works. One such example is the Urban Alliance in Washington, D.C. Beginning with only a few seniors at a single high school in 1996, Urban Alliance has since grown into a citywide initiative that has reached over 12,000 students and has been replicated in three other metro areas: Baltimore, Chicago and Northern Virginia, the last of which will be launched this year. Students are employed part-time during the school year and work from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, they receive life-skills training and participate in job readiness workshops. During the summer, they work full-time and attend financial literacy workshops on Fridays. All internships are paid and students who perform well may receive raises if their employers approve.

Starting Small allows a program to master career training for its students and gives the program time to build trust with employers. This internship will be the first experience in the working world for many of its students. Interpersonal skills that are not taught in school are often basic requirements for succeeding in a job. Urban Alliance and many other high school internship programs integrate skills training as an essential piece of the program through workshops and professional development days. Employers expect their employees to have soft skills such as effective communication, time management, dress protocol and basic social grace and often find this to be one of the most valuable elements of a high school internship program. Urban Alliance recognized the importance of providing skills training and required students to complete a six-week long work skills boot camp prior to employment. Students displaying these skills impressed employers and paved the path for future interns as a high level of professionalism became expected from the students that Urban Alliance placed. By keeping the program small, Urban Alliance built credibility with their initial employers giving them a platform to reach out to new employers as the program expanded.

A strategic vision drives the growth of a program by ensuring that essential program operations are data-driven and sustainable. In the case of Urban Alliance, data-driven practices meant tracking student progress through career skills assessments, student surveys and employer surveys. Improvement could be measured and compared to the previous year's effort. Urban Alliance's public annual reports informed the community of their progress and kept them accountable to their funders and supporters. This practice ensures students a high-quality experience and drives Urban Alliance to be successful.

Internship programs that are funded through grants or foundations last only as long as the funding is available. Many programs grow or shrink each year depending on the funding they are able to find to pay interns. What sets programs like Urban Alliance apart is their program costs are covered by employers. In D.C., for example, Urban Alliance requests that job partners make a tax-deductible contribution for each intern in the amount of \$12,500 which covers salary, training and alumni support for the intern. In 2011-2012, these contributions covered 70% of the cost to run the program (Urban Alliance 2012). Since revenue increases with the number of intern positions, Urban Alliance will be able to survive financial burdens when other donors and supporters are unable to contribute.

New York's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) employed 52,255 interns in 2010, but in the last three years they have had to cut down to 29,416 interns once federal funding and private donations were limited (New York SYEP 2013). A similar fate befell San Antonio Neighborhood Youth Organization (SANYO), a summer employment program that ran from 1965 through 1994. Receiving more than \$25 million in federal grants during its tenure, SANYO was seen as one of the nation's greatest success stories in providing

opportunities for youth. At its peak, SANYO employed over 7,400 students. When federal funding ran out, however, the program was forced to close its doors. Depending on grants and donations for funding cannot ensure a sustainable program model. We recommend that a San Antonio high school internship program adopt the Urban Alliance revenue model by asking employers to cover the cost of paying interns.

Scaling an internship program heavily depends on strong leadership and a willingness to collaborate. In the last ten years, Urban Alliance has expanded into four different metro areas: Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Chicago and Northern Virginia. Since Urban Alliance started small, it built a program model that was scalable and replicable in new locations. By building trust with initial employers and using data-driven practices, providing proof of their program success gave them leverage to partner with new employers. Sealing the deal between partners, however, has heavily depended on the leadership of the Board of Directors and the collaborative efforts of the Urban Alliance staff. The Board's ability to network with job partners and seek out new opportunities for Urban Alliance allows the program staff to get their foot in the door. The Board must be committed to the vision of the program and actively seek to vouch for the program and its students. Otherwise, finding an opportunity to share the value of an internship program can be a difficult step, especially since employers may have their own conceptions on hiring high school students. A well-connected Board should be comprised of business leaders in high-demand areas, representatives of community-based organizations, school district official and civic leaders to ensure a diverse array of work environments for students.

Once in discussion, staff should seek out common ground between the vision of the program and the job partner's goals. An employer in a very technical, high-demand sector may find value in recruiting students who are both malleable and committed. Interns have a much higher retention rate than other job hires and training young first-time employees may be more cost-effective than hiring experts who typically require higher pay (NACE 2009). Scaling a program should be the last step in the process of starting a high school internship program, since ensuring program quality by starting small and following a strategic vision will give staff much higher credibility and value when reaching out to new job partners. Urban Alliance staff soon found that their outreach efforts got easier as job partners who had heard about the program model and success stories began initiating first meetings.

### **WHAT PROGRAMS EXIST IN SAN ANTONIO?**

Business involvement in education is not a new phenomenon, but it is becoming increasingly focused on results. Economic and workforce developers can improve the quality of the educational pipeline by helping local schools to collaborate with community leaders and business partners, so that students have a better grasp on the business skills that are needed for entry-level positions. Further, strong collaborations can help teachers understand how to communicate and prepare students for the demands of the knowledge economy. The following programs in San Antonio target high school students who are exploring their career options:

- Alamo Colleges' Alamo Academies aims to build on the potential of vocational training. The program aims to provide an avenue into the workforce or into more informed educational choices.
- St. Phillip's College Phoenix Program provides paths into the workforce or higher education
- COSA Municipal Court Internship Program
- Builders' Exchange of Texas P.A.C.E. (Pre-employment Architectural and Construction Exploration) Program
- CPS Energy Student Assistance for Education Internship Program
- Judson Independent School District Learning through Earning Summer Internship
- SAHA Summer Youth Employment Program – a part-time summer position (between June and August) with the San Antonio Housing Authority for applicants between the ages of 16 and 21. Eligible applicants must participate in SAHA's housing or Housing Choice Voucher program.
- Family Services Association's Youth Career Opportunity Program for 14 to 16 year olds

## A MODEL FOR SAN ANTONIO

With nearly 97,000 jobless and disconnected youth in San Antonio, creating a workforce pipeline that spans the gap between high school and career is not only necessary for our students, but for our city's future. We know that there are successful high school internship programs that bridge that gap. We recommend that San Antonio follow the example of Urban Alliance in Washington D.C. by creating a citywide high school internship program that starts small, follows a strategic vision and scales what works. In San Antonio, there are already many existing programs that are thriving and successful. We do not need to create a new program, but rather apply best practices to an already existing program that has struggled to scale and would like to embrace a new strategic vision. We suggest that finding a suitable program and collaborating with their leadership team to study the Urban Alliance model and adapt it to our city is the next step. Urban Alliance has graciously agreed to assist us in this endeavor, and they look forward to our collaboration.

The future of San Antonio depends on our youth. Recognizing the need for cross-sector collaboration, SA2020 has selected indicators in both Education and Economic Competitiveness that require citywide strategies in order to move the needle. If we implement a high school internship program that provides opportunities for youth in all of our schools, then we will not only be changing the course of these students' lives but changing the course of the city. We will see relationships built between employers and schools, business and government, aspiring students and growing opportunity. By the year 2020, we envision a young workforce that is not only talent and driven, but highly motivated to give back to the city that chose to invest in them.

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