

Internships fill crucial gaps

By Barbralu Cohen

Getting their hands dirty supplements classroom education for green industry interns.



University of Arizona graduate student Chris Rose tested the water of landscape architecture during an internship at Norris Design this past summer.

Photo courtesy Norris Design

By 2006, Meghan Oren was no stranger to higher education. A two-time ALCC scholarship recipient, she was earning her second bachelor's degree, this one in landscape horticulture design from Colorado State University. "It's an intense program," she recalls. "The faculty did a great job, but there are so many elements to grasp." A semester's internship, required for the degree, helped fill those gaps.

After interviewing companies from all over the country at PLANET's Student Career Days, Oren spent 12 weeks before her senior year at Lied's, a Wisconsin company with a garden center and nursery, as well as design, construction and landscape maintenance components. "I rotated through all the departments, according to a pretty strict schedule," Oren reports. From drafting to design work with landscape

architects to the garden center and hard-scape construction, she sampled it all. "The importance of hands-on experience in absorbing the ideas I had learned is irreplaceable. When you get your hands dirty, you really learn the concepts you were taught in school." She now is working as an estimator for ValleyCrest Companies in Parker.

Not all schools and programs require internships. At Colorado State University, for example, internships are required for degrees in landscape horticulture design, floriculture, landscape horticulture nursery and landscape horticulture turf. "We have all different focuses," says Bonnie Schilling, administrative assistant and internship coordinator in the horticulture and landscape architecture department. More than 50 students participated in internships this year, from California and

Oregon to Hawaii, Virginia, Florida and the Middle West. Interns worked at wineries, golf courses, nurseries and greenhouses, turf farms, residential and commercial landscape maintenance, construction and design firms, retailers, urban forestry departments, Denver Botanic Gardens, Denver Zoo, Denver Broncos and the Boston Red Sox.

CSU's interns are in demand nationwide because of the caliber of the program. Travis Sommervold, who graduated this spring in landscape design and contracting, was "definitely the top intern" at Hidden Lane Landscaping in Herndon, VA, in 2006, says owner Peter Murray. "He had good work experience, phenomenal drafting and drawing skills and an excellent design background—just from his classes."

According to Dr. Steven Cohan, professor of the practice of plant science and



Hands-on learning at Warren Tech helps place many of its students in internships.

More than 60 interns from branches of ValleyCrest from all over the country visited the corporate offices in Calabasas, Calif., this past summer. The three-day visit included tours of the corporate office, its tree nursery, several California branches and Warner Brothers and Universal Studios.

landscape architecture at the University of Maryland, internships expose students to the following aspects of the field that they don't experience in the classroom:

- Job cost management
- Scheduling
- Sales
- Meeting client expectations
- Commercial and residential installation and management standards
- Multicultural labor force
- Outdoor working conditions


But most importantly, he says, while applying the skills and knowledge they've gained in the classroom, students can "determine if they want to pursue a career in the landscape contracting industry and if so in what division—irrigation, construction, installation, residential or commercial?"

Rich Wilbert of Robert Howard Associates, Inc., in Boulder, agrees. Interns "get the flavor of what the whole company is all about." His interns work in each of his company's departments—administration, design/sales, construction and maintenance. "They even go on a sales call," he says. "We make sure the intern has the opportunity to experience our entire program."

"What turns them on is that not only do they get a good feel for how the whole company runs," agrees ValleyCrest Landscape Development Area Superintendent Randy Stoiber. "They get to meet everybody in the company"—which can be upwards of 275 people. In fact, at some point during the internships Valley Crest holds an intern roast. The whole company is invited. "We dress 'em up funny and poke fun," Stoiber says.

Interns at ValleyCrest in Denver—and across the country—are even flown to corporate headquarters in Calabasas, Calif., to meet with the company's top management.

Internships typically pay anywhere from \$8.50 to \$16 hour and may involve help with housing and uniforms, according to Schilling. While they sometimes get a



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bad rap as cheap summer labor, "that's not the intent of internships," Wilbert emphasizes. In fact, the PLANET guidelines upon which Wilbert relies defines an internship as "a working arrangement of prescribed duration with a guarantee that the student will rotate among all aspects of the company's functional areas for one or two weeks each, completing planned modules that cover the duties and responsibilities of that area."

Chris Rose, earning his master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of Arizona, experienced that broad scope at Norris Design this past summer. He was able to work on the planting design for a retail center's parking lot, on the graphics for a presentation and on conceptual layout and calculations regarding land use—and all of that within the first two weeks of his internship at the company's Denver office. "That's pretty good exposure," he says.

He adds, "One of the neatest things is to experience the collaboration in the office" between planners, landscape architects and design/build professionals. "In the classroom it's much more limited." The internship allowed him to work with specialists in a way that he hadn't in the classroom.

The success of an internship probably depends upon the level of mentorship and the structure of the program. Oren says that each of the five interns during her stay in Wisconsin was given his or her own mentor. "They encouraged us to ask questions. They had a very open door policy and spent a lot of time with us," she says.

Adds Sommerfeld, the team members at Hidden Lane "take the time to teach and correct you in a positive way. The foremen make sure that you understand everything and learn something every day you're on the crew. When you're in the office it's the same."

"I had a great time," Oren recalls. Yet her return to Colorado for employment is reflective of another fact about internships—they may or may not be a direct source of skilled employees. Wilbert recalled a former intern who came back to work for his company for about two years. "But she got some time under her belt and wanted to try something else," he says. "She decided that design/build was not her thing, and she took a position in another company working on design."

"We hope to get an employee to come to

us for a couple of years after an internship," says Phil Pheilan, CCNP, general manager of Bath, Inc., a Fort Collins garden center and nursery. "They get excited to come back and finish a project or take it to another level." Bath has had a relationship with CSU's internship program for 15 years and also has hired interns from schools in Utah, Illinois and the Netherlands.

For ValleyCrest, says Stoiber, "Internships are really important as a recruitment tool." The Denver office recruits primarily at CSU and at two campuses of his alma mater, Ohio State University. Other offices recruit at other campuses nationwide; if they run across a student who wants to come to Colorado, they let Stoiber know.

Now finishing his three-year degree program at Arizona, Chris Rose viewed his internship as a way to find a job. "It allowed me to test the water to see if Norris was a good fit," he says.

Whether a company finds future employees or not, internships create a huge opportunity for green industry employers

to look at the bigger picture and give students hands-on, learning, positive experience and a connection to the industry, Wilbert says.

In Lafayette, internships are reaching down even to elementary schools. In a short apprenticeship with Design Concepts, three fifth-graders redesigned Pioneer Elementary School's playground as a way to learn about landscape architecture. Design Concepts' mentoring program last spring began with a tour of the office, a presentation on landscape design and a lesson on how to scale and read a plan. The students analyzed the site and playground, brainstormed ways to improve it and designed the new playground with a space theme.

"It's helping students expand their world a little bit and get to know their community," says fifth-grade teacher Paul Crosson. "We hope to inspire them to think about careers."

—Contributed by *Barbara Cohen, editor of Colorado Green.*

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