



High School Students Find Ample Work Experience in Harney County

Internship program for high school students provides credit and valuable experience

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by Scott Barton

When Harney County patrons walk into any one of the many different businesses in Burns, there's a good chance they'll be assisted by a local high school student. It could be at a local restaurant, the hospital, a real estate office, the District Attorney's office, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, or any number of businesses or agencies in Harney County.

For many students, these internships provide opportunities to gain valuable experience in careers they may want to pursue after they graduate.

The Beginning

High Desert Partnership's Youth Changing the Community Collaborative is the reason why so many internship opportunities exist for high school students. In 2020, the collaborative started the Harney Internship Program with five students. This small number was largely due to restrictions placed on both students and businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, by the end of the year, students were registered for internships with 16 different local businesses. Today, Denise Rose and Camille Torres coordinate the Youth Changing the Community Collaborative, and its Harney Internship Program.

It Takes a Village



For the fall semester of 2023, the Harney Internship Program has more than 40 students enrolled. To date, more than 50 local businesses have come on board to offer internships. In a town of just over 2,500 people, and a county of roughly 7,500 people, the level of community engagement is impressive.

Photo courtesy of HARNEY COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE From L-R: Deputy Robby Tiller, Intern Merissa Medley, Deputy Cody Rusow, and Deputy Tanner Bennett. On May 18, the Harney County Sheriff's Office presented Burns High School senior Merissa Medley with a certificate of completion of the Harney County Sheriff's Office Justice Services Internship.

"The importance of collaboration can't be emphasized enough," says Rose, speaking to the work that occurs between students, parents, educators, and local

businesses. “Quite often, kids come to us with their own internship ideas, and it’s our job to not only help facilitate that internship, but also make sure it’s worthwhile for everyone involved.”

The level of student engagement is something the business community readily supports. Rose says that local businesses and agencies never blink when they’re approached about the opportunity of facilitating an internship. Not only are business owners thankful for the help, they also feel like they’re making a real difference in the community. Some students have gone straight to work for the businesses they interned for right after graduation.

Both Denise and Camille credit the increased interest in internships to a growing trend that sees high school students opting for trades and vocational education as opposed to the traditional college route. “Some students are realizing that pursuing even a bachelor’s degree is both time and cost-prohibitive,” adds Rose. Everyday, there are more and more of these opportunities in Harney County thanks to the Harney Internship Program.

Education Still Matters

Even though there’s a noticeable trend of high school graduates opting not to attend a four-year university, there’s no denying the importance of the role education plays in the development of youth.

At Hines Middle School, the curriculum is designed to get students into the career mindset early on. This is due in large part to the classes that Bryce Tiernan offers to students. They include photography, graphic design, careers II and III, and computers. Nearly every student that goes through Hines Middle School will take at least one of these classes where they’re encouraged to explore their curiosities outside the textbook and learning modules they’ve become accustomed to.

Once kids become juniors and seniors in high school, there are even more opportunities to pursue education and experience outside the traditional classroom. Not only are students encouraged to pursue internships in the community they’re interested in, but both Burns and Crane-Union High Schools offer programs for students to pursue trades that set them well ahead of the curve upon graduation.

One such opportunity is the welding program that’s available to upperclassmen. This program allows students to undergo both classroom and on-the-job training so that when completed, they come out with their welding certification and can go right to work making a livable and sustainable wage.



Opportunities in Healthcare

In Harney County, students have shown particular interest in internships in the healthcare field. To date, Harney District Hospital provides five internships per semester through the Harney Internship Program.

Pictured: Amanda Sanders, a Burns High School Graduate during her internship in 2022.

Camille Torres, and her work with the Northeast Oregon Area Health Education Center (NEOAHEC) are largely to thank for these opportunities. Camille initially became involved with NEOAHEC through their MedQuest summer camp that’s geared toward high school students interested in pursuing careers in the medical field. It occurs every June in Crane and students are accommodated in the dorms at Crane Union High School.

In her first year, the camp needed counselors and Camille fit the bill as she has extensive experience working with and mentoring young people. For a full week, she mentored kids at the camp where they had the chance to ask questions, gain hands-on experience, bond, and reflect on everything they learned. A highlight of the week was a group trip to Crystal Crane Hot Springs.

Though not directly tied to the Harney Internship Program, the NEOAHEC MedQuest Camp and Camille have helped numerous students gain highly sought after internships at Harney District Hospital. She's passionate about this work and is confident there will be more opportunities to align the two organizations and provide internships going forward.

A Student's Perspective

Sierra Otley is one of many students that have garnered an internship through the Youth Changing Community Collaborative. A senior for the 2023-2024 school year, Sierra has always had an interest in real estate. Having heard about the Harney Internship Program through a job fair in Burns, as well as from friends, she decided to pursue an internship with Jett Blackburn Real Estate. Her family has bought and sold many properties through the company, so it was a natural fit from day one.

For the fall semester of 2023, Sierra is hard at work creating a data sheet that shows the averages of closings the company has executed. At the completion of her internship, Sierra will have a PowerPoint presentation and facts sheet to present to all interested parties, saving them time and helping them make informed real estate decisions going forward. In winter term, Sierra plans to complete her real estate licensing education before attending Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton where she will study Ag Business.

A Business's Perspective

It's easy to see how the Harney Internship Program is of benefit to students. It allows them to explore career opportunities they might be interested in, gain school elective credit, and broaden their horizons. But how do internships benefit businesses and agencies? The answer is in a lot of ways.

Roxanne Worley of the Harney County Sheriff's Office says that interns have been a tremendous resource. "Law enforcement has come under significant scrutiny nationwide in the last couple of years," she says. "But being able to show our interns not only all the various aspects of and realms of the justice system, but how we are a positive and friendly resource in the community has been invaluable."

She adds that recent interns have shared their experiences with their friends, who in turn have come to not only further trust law enforcement, but have also learned about how to better utilize law enforcement resources when they're needed. In short, having interns has gone a long way in bridging the gap between law enforcement and the community.

With a background in internships and a passion for helping youth Colby Marshall with Jett Blackburn Real Estate is exposing Sierra Otley, as shared previously, to every aspect of the real estate industry. One of the agency's most experienced brokers, and the only Accredited Land Consultant in eastern Oregon, he's charged her with a long-term project of cataloging past transactions so that data can be compiled to help the agency's brokers better inform future buyers and sellers.

What's Required to Become Involved?

Harney Internship Program opportunities need to carry educational credibility. As a result, businesses need to identify three learning objectives for interns and that they need to be documented throughout the internship.

Students need to specify what business or area of work they're interested in, agree to basic work environment requirements, be available to work, and meet all learning and administrative requirements throughout their internship.

Final Thoughts

Perhaps now more than ever, there's a need for young people to enter the workforce. With baby boomers rapidly retiring in a trend that's referred to as the Silver Tsunami, it's estimated that for every 10 people that retire between now and 2060, there will only be one to three young people that enter the workforce. If the trend holds true, it's never been more important for young people to have opportunities to explore, learn, and get to work doing something they're passionate about and skilled at.

To learn more about internship opportunities for young people, or to enroll your business in the Harney Internship Program, visit the [Harney Internship Program](#) website.

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Youth Changing The Community Collaborative.

