

## Homework is key in the world of competitive internships

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Hundreds of résumés pour in for internships at the Air and Space Museum or the National Portrait Gallery. Some applications misstate the name of the umbrella Smithsonian -- it's Institution, not Institute. Others have typos, misspellings or factual errors. A few applicants say they want to work with the medieval collection, which does not exist.

Such applications are usually rejected by the Smithsonian's gatekeepers for summer internships. So too are candidates whose mother or father calls on their behalf. "That does not bode well for you, your level of maturity," said Tracie Spinale, academic programs manager for the Smithsonian, which offers about 65 intern programs throughout the year and hires 500 summer interns.

Welcome to the fiercely competitive world of summer internships in Washington, where locals fight for spots with candidates from around the world and where internships are sought by people ages 17 to 77. With deadlines for many positions coming in the next few months, those who haven't begun their search need to jump-start it.

Finding and landing an internship is a lot like finding a job; it requires a lot of research, persistence and networking. "The earlier you start, the better -- the more choices you have," said Mary Ryan, president of the Washington Internship Institute, which runs area internship programs for smaller universities.

Students, start at your college or university career center to identify resources and key dates. "If you're on the career services director's radar," you're at the forefront when opportunities open up, said Yazad Dalal, executive vice president of Vault.com, which produces an annual guide to internships.

Vault's list of the best internships includes those at the Smithsonian, the Kennedy Center, the accounting firm KPMG and Inroads, a St. Louis, Mo.-based organization that places minority candidates in employer programs.

Internships come in many flavors: paid and unpaid, part-time and full-time, those that yield academic credit, and those that offer work experience and the prospect of a full-time job after graduation.

Several organizations charge for internship placement and course credit, but they don't necessarily guarantee a spot. Ryan said the Washington Internship Institute reviews applicants' career interests, transcripts and recommendation letters before accepting them.

Ryan suggests checking government agency Web sites for "a lot of good paid internships." Identify the

coordinators, and read up on what goes into the application package.

Most places expect transcripts, recommendation letters and an online application, but some go further. The Smithsonian requires an essay.

"We actually read those," Spinale said.

Intern coordinators are flooded with applications, so apply only where you meet the qualifications mentioned in the posting, said Melinda Villagran, co-founder of DCinternNet.com and an associate communications professor at George Mason University.

"You don't have to rent a gorilla costume" to stand out, Villagran said. "Be absolutely prepared, absolutely punctual, and fit the job description they have posted."

Use your network of professionals, including professors and alumni, to advance your case for internships you really want.

If you are introduced to insiders at an organization, "be assertive and open about what you're trying to achieve," said Vault's Dalal.

Write a professional note that highlights your qualifications and your connection to that person and the internship you really want.

Although anyone in your network can help open doors, your recommendation letter should come from a professor in your interest area, Spinale said. At the Smithsonian, students with volunteer experience or previous internships at a museum, whether on campus or near the student's home, also have an edge.

If your grade-point average is average or below, show it in the context of other activities, said Mark Lyden, a college recruiter and author of "College Students: Do This! Get Hired!"

"For example, if someone is working 25-30 hours a week while still attending school full time, yet their GPA is a 2.8, well, that really brings the lower GPA into perspective," he said.

As long as your GPA is 2.5 or above, you need to list it on your résumé. But Lyden suggests giving your GPA for your major or your most recent year of college if they are higher.

If you missed the deadline for a favorite organization's internship, "contact them, let them know you would be interested in being a backup if someone declines," he said.

Or, to skip the fevered competition for summer internships, Spinale suggests aiming for a fall or spring position, which are less popular.