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NR 395

Working life essay

Unpaid Internships = Legalized Slavery

Wake up, drive to class, sit in class, drive to internship, do internship, drive to work, stay till midnight, get home and knock out. This was my life for a year straight.

It was my junior year and I was itching to land my first internship in my new field of study. After many applications, I was able to land one in my college town… unpaid. Although I knew this would be a financial burden for me, advancing my career was very important to me. I remember questioning myself, “Is this sacrifice I really have to making in order to get ahead in my career or am I right for wanting that also pays me?” I consulted my peers about this opportunity before I made a decision about it. I remember them saying things like “this is how people get ahead” and “experience is just as valuable as the money” or “it will be worth it once you have it on your resume.” I Begrudgingly accepted knowing I would also have to keep my part-time job so I could have some sort of income during that time. Not only that, I was also taking 5 classes that semester. 5 classes. Half-day internship. Part time job.

I had classes during the day from 8:00 am to 11:40 pm. Then I had my internship from Monday through Thursday from noon to 4:00pm. After, I would speed over to the theatre to make it to my 4:30 closing shift in time. I usually wouldn’t get home until midnight. I barley had any time to do anything but those three things. But I needed to work in order to pay my bills. I need to get my internship in order to feel like I was doing something that would be helpful for my future. I needed 5 classes to graduate on time. It got so bad where I considered just dropping my internship so I could have more time to study and just keeping my job working but my internship coordinator said I refused to allow me to quit. and I obviously couldn’t drop my job because I need money so I continued to let my grades struggle because of it. I did not study. I did homework during my breaks. I did not do anything but work, sleep, drive, and eat. Even my weekends stopped being a mental safe-haven because I had to work weekends in order to have enough money for my bills. I did try to give myself some time after my weekend shifts to hang with friends and mentally decompress, but I couldn’t even enjoy doing that because I just felt so much anxiety and guilt. The entire time I would think about how much further behind in my school would be and feeling like I am not prioritizing my school work because I decided to spend the small amount of free time I had doing fun things.

What made it even harder was watching my co-interns were much less stressed out that I was because they didn’t have to work. They were able to take these unpaid internships and have their parents send them money every week for their needs. I needed to work to afford gas for so I could be there, I needed my job to eat, I needed my job to stay in my apartment.

After my internship was over I became more selective with which a career advancing opportunities I took. After graduation I was offered a field geologist position paying 15 dollars an hour. That is the minimum wage in my county. 15 dollars. For a $100,000 degree. I cannot justify accepting low paying work in my field for the sake of advancing my career. I don’t think these unpaid internships are fair and they should not exist. Most people cannot afford to work without pay for long periods of time. Also, if the work is so valuable, why can’t these companies give a broke college student 10-15 dollars an hour for it? People who are poor wouldn’t be able to consider this opportunity. To have to pass up a career advancing internship because of financial circumstances is very disappointing.