

Destined for Greatness

D.C. Area Takes Fourth Spot
In College Destinations Index

by Heather Mueller

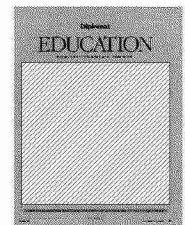
As an intern coordinator with connections to some of the Washington area's most prestigious organizations, Gail Youth helps dozens of students land competitive placements every year at the Smithsonian Institution, Library of Congress and U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

With access to an on-campus department dedicated entirely to internships and cooperative education, many students earn these spots in their first year of college.

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Georgetown University Healy Hall



And it's not unusual, Youth says, for second-year students to find themselves working alongside seniors and law students at other top-notch locations like the Maryland Attorney General's Office.

But Youth's program isn't at the George Washington University or Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. It's one to which every honors student at suburban Maryland's Montgomery College has access.

Such opportunities are part of what earned the Washington area a top spot in a new listing of the nation's best metropolitan areas for attending college. The 2009-10 College Destinations Index released in September by the American Institute for Economic Research identified 75 of the best places in the United States for college study and ranked Washington the fourth-best location, behind New York, San Francisco and Boston.

Here, it's not just the students of elite universities who have access to top-rated learning environments and highly sought career-building opportunities. Individuals come from all over the globe to experience what they call "the international capital of the world," where even two-year community institutions offer an "in" with the most competitive positions.

In fact, with its proximity to the nation's capital, Montgomery College is the only community college that offers internships at the Smithsonian and Library of Congress. It also has one of the nation's most culturally diverse campuses, with more than 170 countries currently represented in the student body.

Youth, who is also a professor of computer applications and web design at the college, said intimate class sizes, affordable tuition and relationships with four-year schools are attracting a growing number of students to the campus each year.

"We're accredited and have articulation agreements with many universities in the area, so students know if they get a degree from Montgomery College they're virtually guaranteed a spot at a school like the University of Maryland. It's a great leaping point."

Graduates have also gone on to universities such as Johns Hopkins, Notre Dame, Amherst, Wake Forest, Howard and Georgetown (pictured on page 23).

It was these factors and others like them that the American Institute for Economic Research considered when ranking the nation's 75 best metropolitan areas for attending college. And for many, it was no surprise that the D.C. area nabbed fourth place.

"It isn't just about professors and classes," the

report's authors wrote. "Conversations in coffee houses, performances in concert halls, and opportunities for corporate internships also contribute to education."

The institute assessed more than 360 metropolitan statistical areas, ranking each according to academic environment, quality of life and professional opportunities.

For Russel Brueton, a full-time student at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, there was only one answer to the question of where he'd go for his first college internship.

"In South Africa, the internships that stand out the most are those that take place in D.C.," said Brueton, who's participating in a work-study semester program at the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. "Most of the world's nongovernmental organizations and nonprofits with a global reach are stationed here. This is where the change in the world is

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Colleges

happening, and if you're ambitious, D.C. is where you have to be."

Various other factors also bring in thousands of new students to the area every year and keep an equally high percentage of current residents in place when it's time for college.

With increasing competition brought on by the recession, the Washington Center last year experienced the highest number of applicants in its 34-year history. And it's not just prestigious school admissions these students are eyeing: For many Americans, a semester in D.C. serves as an affordable alternative to more costly study abroad programs, where work experience typically isn't part of the equation. For others, it's the broad exposure to various sectors and access to hundreds of high-profile internships at federal agencies such as the Department of State and nonprofits like National Geographic.

Jennifer Clinton, the Washington Center's chief operating officer, says the declining popularity of New York's financial hub in recent years is also playing a role, as many would-be Wall Street wannabes are turning to Pennsylvania Avenue and Capitol Hill instead.

"There are a lot of various elements coming together that make us attractive," Clinton said. "The sheer economics of the city means

this area has a very high earning potential. There's so much to do, and we hear from many students that D.C. is a very livable city and is less intimidating than many other large metropolitan cities."

When Georgetown University won a top spot in Kaplan/Newsweek's 2008 "How to Get into College" guide, writers attributed the flow of 16,000 annual Georgetown applications to Washington's historic place in American history, politics and culture.

One recent graduate from Rhode Island said she was thrilled with the area's "internship opportunities, fun off-campus social life, as well being close to leaders in the government, nonprofit sectors and representatives from foreign embassies," the guide's authors wrote.

Washington and its suburbs are home to more than 70 community colleges and universities, along with at least 140,000 college students, as well as some of the country's top international relations programs located at American University, Georgetown University, George Washington University and Johns Hopkins Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

Nearly 30 percent of the metropolitan area's residents are enrolled in a college or graduate program, according to the Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey. Another 23 percent of those ages 25 and older already have a bachelor's degree, while nearly 20 percent hold a graduate or professional degree.

And with a steady stream of students providing a consistent pool of qualified applicants for internships and jobs, Washington isn't as hard hit as other areas during a down economy. In fact, at 5.6 percent, the unemployment rate in Washington is the lowest of the top 15 metropolitan areas on the College Destinations Index.

"Some 20,000 interns are coming into D.C. each year," Clinton pointed out. "When you look at the spending activity involved over those one- to four-month periods, you're looking at a significant amount being spent just on things like shopping, going out to dinner and dry cleaning bills."

And with an average earning potential of almost \$55,000 — second only to New York — Washington gets an additional economic boost each year as a number of them return for full-time jobs. Clinton noted that "about 30 percent of our students come back later to reside in Washington full time."

Heather Mueller is a contributing writer for The Washington Diplomat.

"Most of the world's nongovernmental organizations and nonprofits with a global reach are stationed here. This is where change in the world is happening, and if you're ambitious, D.C. is where you have to be."

— RUSSEL BRUETON
 student from Johannesburg, South Africa