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Building a workforce, one intern at a time

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From left, Eric Streeper, owner of Xerb, a media/streaming service, works on solving a coding issue with his intern, Mario Martinez, last month. Martinez is a computer science student at Santa Fe Community College who is participating in the PIL program the college offers. Luke E. Montavon/The New Mexican

“At first I was ... *taxes?*”

Samantha Martinez had accepted an internship at the accounting and tax services firm Barraclough & Associates through an internship program at Santa Fe Community College. She was a returning student majoring in business, but she wondered what she was getting into by interning at a tax

services firm.

Barraclough also wasn't quite sure what the outcome would be when it stepped forward as one of 19 businesses and organizations offering fall internships for 23 students enrolled in the college's Programa de Internos, Los Alamos or PILAS.

"I was initially envisioning 18- or 19-year-olds," said Rhonda Williams, a principal at Barraclough. "These are adults, mature adults. I wasn't expecting the motivation we got. We started treating them like new employees, which is a different level of expectation."

During the internship — 10 hours per week for a 12-week period — Martinez said she became a real member of the team.

"I did an actual tax return," she said, beaming. "I learned what I could handle and could not handle."

Martinez is 28 and Daniel Gonzalez, a fellow PILAS intern at Barraclough, is 23. The age range for last semester's 23 interns ranged from 18 into the 50s, a reflection of the overall demographic at community colleges for decades, with the national average age hovering just under 30.

"They actually gave us some fresh ideas on ways to do things," Williams said.

Internships allow participants to test-drive a job, but they also allow prospective employers a look at potential talent. And both sides say they are a valuable part of education.

"Accounting was on the list of things which could not have been less interesting to me a year ago," Gonzalez said. "I really enjoy accounting now. It's not just the numbers. It's about stating things in a clear and concise way."

These are paid internships, in which the interns earn the Santa Fe minimum wage of \$11.80 per hour. The college pays the students rather than the companies.

"Having the college pay the students makes it practically no risk for us," said Simon Woodruff, CEO of SciVista, which builds data platforms specializing in virtual reality.

SciVista has had three interns, one in each of the program's first three semesters. Woodruff has hired one intern full time and plans to hire a second in the coming months. SciVista has seven employees.

About 40 percent of last semester's interns likely will be "offered employment," the term PILAS internship coordinator Ya'el Chaikind uses rather than getting hired. Fall 2018 had 18 percent of interns hired and spring 2019 saw 38 percent.

Intern Mario Martinez, 27, is not quite sure if he'll be offered employment at Xerb, where he did his internship. He said he built the admin area for the Xerb website so any employee can update the site rather than just one person. He said his internship helped build a sense of professionalism.

"I got better at taking criticism," he said. "Before, it was hard for me to take what people said without taking offense to it. They are telling me things because they want me to learn best practices."

The PILAS program was started with \$40,000 from Los Alamos National Security to pay first-semester student salaries, followed by \$40,000 from the Santa Fe Community College Foundation for the second semester. The recently completed third semester was funded with \$40,000 from the Española-based Regional Development Corp., which is largely funded by LANL operator Triad National Security LLC. The SFCC foundation is funding the spring semester for \$40,000 with an additional \$10,000 from Triad.

Los Alamos National Security, the predecessor to Triad, initiated the conversation with the community college to launch the internship program.

"We are building a regional workforce," said Rebecca Estrada, a community outreach specialist for the lab. "We want to be a good neighbor. We are not interested in competing with our partners for employees."

The program marks the first time the college has paid interns, and the internships fit the college's mission, said Margaret Peters, the vice president for academic and student affairs.

"The community college is the place where you can go to gain the skills that can help you move on in life and do something you love to do," she said.

Chaikind said placing students with employers is as much about matching personalities as it is matching skill sets.

"I get so many reflections from employers: 'I thought they were going to do X and they did Z, and I didn't even know I needed Z,'" Chaikind said.

Michael Frey, 30, landed his internship at the National Center for Genome Resources after working his younger years as a bartender, sommelier and other associated jobs. One of his assignments was to find an open source code online to replace the software the center was using.

“I got into this PILAS program to get experience in anything I can get my hands on,” Frey said.

The genome resources center has had two interns.

“Michael digs right into problems and comes up with solutions,” said Peter Wargo, the center’s senior systems administrator. “Based on what I’ve seen so far, I am more impressed [with PILAS].”

For Frey, PILAS could be the path to a more stable life.

“I want a job where I can sit at a desk 9 to 5,” he said.

Business and organizations that hosted PILAS interns in Fall 2019

Barraclough & Associates

Bicycle Technologies International

Catholic Charities

City of Santa Fe Water Division

National Center for Genome Resources

New Mexico Film Office

New Mexico State Personnel Office

Reunity Resources

Revolution Farm

Robotics Innovations

Sacred Garden

Santa Fe Art Institute

SciVista

Stagecoach Foundation

STEMopps.org

Turquoise Trail Charter School

Wood Design

Woodruff Scientific

Xerb

Businesses and organizations that want to take on Santa Fe Community College PILAS interns can contact Ya'el Chaikind at 505-428-1418 or at randiyael.chaikind@sfcc.edu.

Source: Santa Fe Community College

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