

CREATING AND REPLICATING HIGH-QUALITY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

A GUIDE FOR BUSINESSES AND SCHOOLS

CASE STUDY

STEAM Summer Internship Program

Building a STEAM Workforce in Rural Georgia

Coffee County, GA



Carl Vinson Institute of Government
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

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Community leaders in Coffee County, in rural South Georgia, were seeing local students graduate from high school, go to college, and move away for work even though there were many opportunities available locally. Business leaders wanted to connect students to local science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) career options by providing opportunities for experiential learning. The Coffee County School System launched a STEAM Summer Internship program in 2013 to help grow the community's workforce, expose students to local companies, and connect them with opportunities in Coffee County after college graduation. According to Christi Thomas, the STEAM program coordinator, the goal of the program is to “have the companies build a relationship with the students so they get excited to earn a STEAM degree and then come back to Coffee County.”

Through the STEAM Summer Internship program, Coffee High School students ages 16 and older can apply for placements with local employers. The students must complete a rigorous screening and application process, participate in workshops on resume development and interviewing skills, and take part in mock interviews. The application process culminates in an interview and selection by the participating host companies. The program coordinator helps recruit employers to participate, handles the application process, and manages the program throughout the summer.

A variety of local manufacturing, health care, government, education, and other STEAM-related businesses serve as hosts, and students and employers are matched based on their interests. The paid internships last the entire month of June. Students work at the employer site four days a week and spend Fridays as a cohort in professional development seminars on employability skills and in seminars that expose them to employers in the community.

Students identify which potential placements align with their career goals, and the program coordinator attempts to match them based on interest. For example, PCC Airfoils, a local aerospace supplier, has hired summer interns interested in aviation and aerospace engineering. Students placed at Coffee Regional Medical Center have expressed an interest in a health care-related field, and several students have had the opportunity to shadow doctors and observe surgeries. Employers are asked to give students a real project to work on during their internship, which Thomas says helps to create a sense of belonging.

The program has already begun to pay dividends for the local community by bringing young talent back to area businesses. Many of the students have continued with their companies after the initial internship ended. Two students from the original cohort in 2013 have returned to full-time jobs in Coffee County with their STEAM summer employer. Thomas summed up the STEAM Summer Internship program as “a way for the school system to showcase what we're doing with our students and what our community's future workforce looks like. We need companies to help train the future workforce.”

