

Virginia Housing Development Authority Career Essentials Internship Program

"My experience at VHDA was essential to my development as a young IT professional. People were eager to help, and devoted to giving me real world knowledge in my area of study. Gaining such applicable IT training in the housing industry helped pave the way to my current position in the IT College Hire Rotational Program at Freddie Mac."

Alfrantz Lolagne, Former Software Development Intern

Brief Description of VHDA's Career Essentials Program

Career Essentials is a win-win program administered by VHDA's Organizational Development and Learning (OD&L) division that offers internship opportunities to area students. Internship opportunities are available for junior and senior high school students on a limited basis during the summer and for undergraduate and graduate students throughout the year.

Interns join a formal network at VHDA that orients them to the organization and provides experiential learning opportunities for them. *Career Essentials* also delivers ongoing mentoring from managers and staff, as well as peer support, training, evaluation, and feedback throughout the intern's tenure. In addition, VHDA invites interns who have exhibited a high degree of enthusiasm, academic accomplishment, and business acumen to return for multiple internship assignments.

Why/When it was undertaken

Career Essentials was developed in 2003 (and revamped in 2009) to provide learning opportunities for area students due, in part, to limited curriculum in affordable housing at the academic level. *Career Essentials* internships are focused on providing students with experiential learning opportunities to pique their interest and prepare them to be affordable housing advocates, whether for VHDA, redevelopment and housing agencies across Virginia, or national housing resources. There are also internship positions available in VHDA operational areas as well (e.g., finance, technology and marketing).

What VHDA has accomplished

Career Essentials takes a multi-faceted approach that provides a chance for emerging workers to be introduced to VHDA and discover the authority's impact at the local, state, and national levels. It also gives us an innovative way to integrate diverse talent into the organization during the internship period. VHDA interns work in their area of academic focus, applying classroom ideas to real projects and work situations. Conversely, traditional internship programs often provide work that is too limited in scope to either challenge interns or provide a good test of their knowledge, skills and ability. As a result, interns aren't able to learn from the work experience or make significant contributions to the organization.

"While employed as an intern at VHDA, I was able to take the knowledge I was learning in school and apply it in real life situations. I was able to work a flexible work schedule, which allowed me to focus on my studies and complete my remaining college courses. The internship program gave me real life real estate experience, which prepared me for my current full time position at VHDA. The mentoring that I gained from my co-workers has been invaluable in my growth and development as a real estate professional."

Heather Richey, Multifamily Analyst

"From the first day, Heather was such a quick study that she soaked in everything she needed to learn, and more. Her major in real estate at VCU, together with having worked part-time for a real estate attorney, gave her an excellent foundation. We were thrilled, when she graduated, to offer her a full-time position as a Multifamily Analyst."

Brenda Brophy, Multifamily Development Officer Manager

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Why it is Meritorious and Meets NCSHA Award Judging Criteria

Innovative

In 2009, the OD&L division expanded VHDA's original *Career Essentials* program—begun in 2003 using a year-round, long-term internship—into four categories designed to meet the varying interests of our business units and interns. These categories are:

- **Year Round**—can be up to 24 months and focuses on undergraduate to graduate level college students interested in pursuing their major area of interest through application of academic theory in a professional environment.
- **Summer**— high school and college students can be hired for up to 10 weeks.
- **Project-based**—focuses on a specific project for a fixed period of time not to exceed six months. Students perform research and other duties to fulfill this role. Projects performed by interns have a lasting organizational value.
- **Rotational**—involves a series of six-week assignments in up to four departments within a division. Rotations provide students with the opportunity to view different aspects of a particular division. In each department rotation, an intern is paired with a seasoned associate to show them the ropes.

Each intern meets with the Executive Director shortly after being hired and attends a Board meeting to gain a broader view of VHDA management and its operations. In addition, managers include their *Career Essentials* interns in staff meetings, planning and team building sessions, and a variety of authoritywide events. Also, interns are given opportunities for networking and informational interviews with key personnel.

VHDA interns also become involved in special housing projects, such as the Studios at Grace Arents in Oregon Hill (see attachment). These types of projects not only allow interns to provide VHDA's Leadership Team with new and creative ideas for affordable housing developments, but provide them with continuous organizational development opportunities in a team-based setting.

Replicable

Any HFA with upper management support and encouragement can easily replicate the *Career Essentials* program. The program provides an excellent opportunity to provide community outreach through schools, colleges, and universities while exposing HFA staff to new ideas brought about by different generational perspectives.

Responds to a management challenge or opportunity

Access to talented, educated and innovative thinkers invigorates and challenges our workforce. While interns must compete for any job openings upon graduation, they have a better sense of VHDA before seeking employment and what might be expected of them as a full-time associate.

Achieves measurable improvements in agency operations

Career Essentials interns are able to devote time to important projects that would otherwise be on the "back burner" due to insufficient time or talents among full-time staff. Interns have also proven to be a great source of assistance, given proper supervision, with projects in their area of study. For example, an intern earning a Master's Degree in Urban and Regional Planning at Virginia Commonwealth University extensively researched the housing components of local land use plans. This information is being used for training local planners as part of VHDA's "Revitalizing Neighborhoods through Housing and Economic Development" course, which is eligible for 14 AICP credits.

Provides benefits that outweigh costs

The benefits of *Career Essentials* include opportunities for current staff to develop management skills in supervising interns. In addition, interns often present new ideas, display innovative ways of working, and share new concepts with associates. Since the program's inception, VHDA has hired six interns through the normal recruitment process. Most of those interns remain employed with VHDA and several are in higher level positions. *Career Essentials* has

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no costs from employee benefits (health care, time off, holiday pay), and interns are paid an hourly rate lower than market rates for full-time associates.

Demonstrates effective use of resources

VHDA's *Career Essentials* program demonstrates an effective use of budget funds and other critical resources because it lets us:

- Gain fresh ideas and perspectives.
- Expand diversity among our associate population.
- Adapt to meet VHDA's changing goals and increase our productivity.
- Increase VHDA's visibility and reputation on area campuses, as well as with stakeholders statewide.

Achieves strategic objectives

The *Career Essentials* program supports our goal to increase affordable housing and address the housing needs of communities. In the short term, drawing on our internship program to provide support for specific needs helps us balance finite resources with fiscal responsibility. Longer term, our interns are exposed to the benefits of affordable housing early on and have the potential for becoming advocates. Interns may become future candidates for positions at VHDA and/or with our business partners, thereby benefiting the state's affordable housing industry.

On a more global level, VHDA is working to address the industry's long-term need to attract young people to the many facets of single and multifamily affordable housing by exposing them to a career they might not have otherwise considered. We want *Career Essentials* to help make affordable housing a career of choice, not chance.

Conclusion

VHDA currently has six interns, the majority of whom are minorities, working within three divisions—development, information technology services, and servicing and compliance. As the authority continues to evolve to accomplish our mission, the future could see the creation of additional roles for interns. We're currently looking to provide an intern for a non-profit green building business partner.

VHDA's *Career Essentials* internship program gives students a competitive advantage. These students comprise the workforce of tomorrow, and by offering them opportunities to gain experience while still in high school or college, VHDA has an opportunity to provide future labor pool participants with a "tool box" of skills that increase the likelihood they will succeed when hired into full-time positions.

Not only do interns provide an excellent source of new talent, they also support VHDA's mission. With the knowledge gained through *Career Essentials*, interns are able to be ambassadors of affordable housing, as well as compete for full-time employment with VHDA or other housing-related companies. Virginia also receives long-term benefits from internship opportunities provided to its students. A knowledgeable workforce—of both students and professionals—is a strong tool for economic development and the attraction of new businesses to our state.

Attachments: *Career Essentials* brochure, screen grab of vhda.com Internship Program page, and Summer Internship Project Overview.