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School of Architecture, Art & Historic Preservation Receives National Award for Creating Paid Internships Program for Students

Award recognizes how RWU SAAHP built an innovative program to connect students with paid, real-world internships



At left, Lance Jay Brown, ACSA Distinguished Professor from the Bernard & Anne Spitzer School of Architecture, City College of New York, presents the award to Associate Dean Gregory Laramie (center) and Dean Stephen White.

May 31, 2018 | Marcus Hanscom

DENVER – When limited funding prevented renowned non-profit architecture firm MASS Design Group from hiring David Mistretta '13 as an intern in 2011, he turned to School of Architecture, Art, and Historic Preservation (SAAHP) Dean Stephen White for a solution.

“As a student who had a lot of admiration and respect for the team at MASS and the work they were doing, I was compelled to let [MASS co-founder and Executive Director] Michael Murphy know how much a job at MASS would mean for me,” Mistretta shared recently. “Michael thanked me for my commitment to the mission at MASS, [but said] they had depleted their sources of funding and could not pay any additional staff.”

What began as a request by a single student has turned into an innovative program supporting all students in paid internships, transforming the connection between SAAHP and the professions. White investigated funding opportunities and learned he could tap the School’s student assistant wages usually reserved for on-campus work in order to support Mistretta in a three-month summer internship with MASS Design. The internship led to a permanent job for Mistretta, and began to change White’s thinking about the financing of internships and the relationship between the school, architecture firms and other organizations.

His solution launched SAAHP's Career Investment Program in 2012, combining federal and university funds to support paid internships available for all students in the School. In March 2018, the success of their innovative approach to connecting education with professional practice earned Dean White and Associate Dean Gregory Laramie an American Institute of Architects (AIA) / Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA) Practice + Leadership Award.

"What I appreciate most about this recognition is that the CIP supports all students and professionals that are engaged," White said. "We can achieve great ends within existing resources if we think bigger and more broadly for all involved – if we realize that we are part of a continuum between education and practice, where students become the profession over time."

To make this happen, White worked with university administrators to build a program that would create paid experiences for students throughout SAAHP. Through the process they realized that RWU already matched federal workstudy awards at three times the level required, but it was only being used for on-campus placements. Knowing the extent of available funding and the transformative impact of paid experiences with top-notch professional practitioners, they created the CIP which utilizes federal, university and donor funds to guarantee a paid internship component within each graduate student merit aid package and support eligible third- and fourth- year undergraduate students at least once during their studies.

The AIA/ACSA Practice + Leadership Award recognizes "best practice examples of highly effective teaching, scholarship, and outreach in the areas of professional practice and leadership" which "promote models of excellence that can be appropriated by other educators."

"[The CIP] reaches across financial need, skill set and discipline to provide students with viable work options where they can form connections, learn new skills and begin to understand work culture," AIA Rhode Island Executive Director Jennifer Zolkos wrote in a letter supporting the award nomination. "Students have not only worked as interns, but after graduation have secured placement in some of the best firms in the region."

Architects at international firm Stantec Architecture and Engineering also affirmed their support of the mutually beneficial impact for both the student and firm.

"Our interns have become integrated team members with real tasks, real clients, and with real budgets and expectations," Stantec principals Jill Rothenberg and Eric Weyant and RWU alumnus Michael Decoulos '13 wrote. "Their early access into our office has created, in almost every case, a transition to a full-time position following graduation."

Since 2012, the CIP has offered more than \$2 million in funding to students. Graduate students in the Architecture and Historic Preservation programs are eligible for up to \$3,000 per year. Eligible third- and fourth-year undergraduate students receive up to \$2,300 annually to work as interns in firms or assist on faculty projects. The funding moves with the student, allowing them to complete work across the U.S. or even abroad. Graduate student pay in the program is increasing to \$18 per hour beginning July 1, 2018 to align with industry standards.

"The CIP is intended to provide financing for undergraduate and graduate student work experiences outside of coursework both on and off campus," White said. "We're able to provide paid student work experiences within the university, within the architecture profession, and also in collaboration with nonprofit and community groups."

One of the benefits of the CIP is that it offers firms a chance to work with student interns without financial risk, White added.

"It supports the capacity to test-drive student capabilities, and we expect that the firms will take the students from there as they're capable and interested," White said. "We're excited that we've been able to invest highly in our students to work within smaller firms, which often have not had the funds or been averse to risk with taking on junior people. The CIP changes all this."

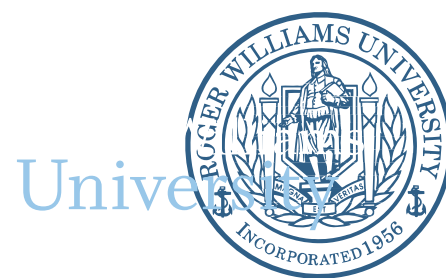
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