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Written by Administrator
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High school seniors selected from local neighborhoods in northern Manhattan and the Bronx recently completed Columbia University's five-week High School Summer Internship Program.

"The cream of the crop": Columbia's summer interns

Story and photos by Robin E. Kilmer

An early weekday morning in the summer might not be precisely when you'd expect teenagers to be holding forth in earnest presentations.

Unless you were at Columbia University this past Fri., Aug. 10th.

"My friends are probably sleeping," said Miguelangelo Veras.

Veras was one of 25 incoming high school seniors selected from local neighborhoods in northern Manhattan and the Bronx for Columbia University's five-week High School Summer Internship Program.

The program, which started three years ago, has grown from 15 interns and received over three hundred applications this year.

And this past Friday morning, the last day of their paid internship, the students gave presentations of the meaningful projects they did over the past five weeks.

The program was developed to honor the Manhattanville Community Benefits Agreement between Columbia University and the West Harlem Local Development Corporation that supports educational, cultural, health and civic programs meant to weave the university into the tapestry of the preexisting Harlem community where it is building a 17-acre extension.

"The internships are part of education and workforce development," explained Kofi Boateng, executive director of the West Harlem Development Corporation.

"The students get to learn how to work. They get to learn how work works," added Boateng. "They learn time management, what life is all about and how they can take advantage of opportunities to improve their own life and the lives of others."

And while Boateng is happy with the internship program, he is looking to expand it in coming years to include more students.

He noted that this year, also as a result of the community benefits agreement, Columbia offered 500 youth employment slots—a major improvement from last year's 200 slots.

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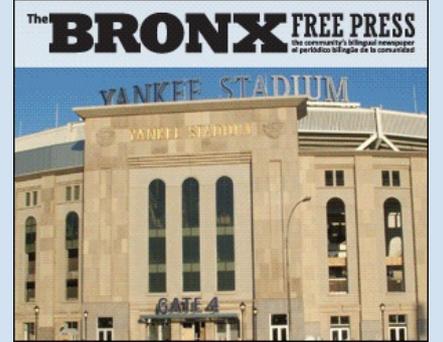
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The students had been split into four teams and became integral parts of several Columbia University departments, including its Weatherhead East Asia Institute, its Government and Community Affairs office, the Manhattanville Development Group, and its client support services and information and technology divisions.

With adult mentors, they surveyed electrical closets, saw the inner workings of Columbia's network operations office, created spreadsheets, visited Columbia University's construction sites, assisted with databases, created interactive menus for Columbia's dining halls, prepared a presentation for Mayor Bloomberg, and were also introduced to the more tedious aspects of office work—like scanning and answering emails.

"I was a 9-5er for the first time," said Josany Peña.

In a recession that makes summer employment opportunities for teens scarce, these industrious youngsters did not need much prodding to apply for the internship.

"I found out during parent teacher conferences. There were flyers too. I grabbed one," said Josany Peña, of Washington Heights.

Peña spent last summer volunteering at her school's office, but this was her first paid internship and she said she was hungry for more.

"Everyday was fun for me because everyone I worked with was amazing. Everyday was a favorite moment," she said.

Robert Krasdin, Columbia University's Vice President, also spoke to students.

"We've had a great summer. Columbia University is better when people in the community are a part of it. I want you to think of Columbia University as part of your community," he said.

Students were responsible for preparing and delivering their group presentations on Friday, and each team made sure to incorporate their sense of humor.

One group, who called themselves the A-team, introduced themselves in a video spin-off of *The Office*; another team wrote a poem to express their gratitude for Columbia University.

Team members high-fived each other after their presentations, and spoke readily of their college plans and career paths.

Jasmin Solis, who lives in Washington Heights, wants to work in finance and hopes to attend a CUNY or SUNY school, or Columbia. She found out about the internship from a friend and took the initiative to call her guidance counselor for more information.

"Not many people knew about it," she said.

"I liked Fridays the best," said Solis—not because it was the last day of the work week, but because she enjoyed the Friday speaker series that prepared her for her college search.

Alexandre Zelinsky of the South Bronx wants to study international law.

"I worked for the information and technology department and they showed me how networking and technology plays out internationally. There're a lot of international lawsuits dealing with technology," he said, mentioning Google's prominent cases.

After the group presentations, students received certificates and accolades from Boateng and La-Verna Fountain, the program director.

"The only thing that matters is where you are going, not the facts of your circumstance," said Baoteng to the group—who were picked from public schools around Northern Manhattan and the Bronx. "You go home and affect others."

"We expect you to be in a leadership role," said Fountain. "You are the cream of the crop."

