At age 23, Meredith Warren already can list the Pulitzer Prize on her résumé.

As a reporter for the Eagle-Tribune in Lawrence, Mass., Warren interviewed the families of four boys who drowned in the Merrimack River in December 2002. Her work was folded into a package of stories that won journalism’s top distinction the following year for breaking news reporting.

But getting the call to cover the story wasn’t Warren’s big break. Rather, it was getting her foot in the door at the Eagle-Tribune.

During her senior year in 2001, Warren spent a semester at Boston University’s Washington Journalism Center in the District of Columbia. For a full semester’s tuition, students live and work in the nation’s capital, writing articles about Congress and the federal government for small- to mid-size newspapers in New England that lack the financial resources to staff a Washington bureau of their own.

Warren was assigned to write for the Eagle-Tribune.

“The program prepared me for my career...I was actually a working journalist,” Warren says. “I communicated with my editor, received assignments, learned about the editing process and had my stories run in the Eagle-Tribune.

“It was basically a tryout for the paper all along, and they knew who they were hiring.”

A growing number of universities around the country offer similar opportunities for students to report on the federal government or state legislatures, providing customized content to newspapers without staff in Washington or their respective capit-
are a win-win for newspapers and student journalists alike

tals. Editors can work with journalism students and program directors to cover local angles, something not available through wire service such as The Associated Press.

Programs exist at the University of Maryland at College Park, the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and Michigan State University in East Lansing, among others, and are available to newspapers at little to no cost. Moreover, utilizing such programs is less expensive for newspapers than paying a freelancer or hiring an additional staff reporter. Plus, newspapers receive clean copy edited by program directors who often have previously worked in the industry.

Capital coverage programs also serve as a training and recruitment tool for papers, allowing editors to watch for talent and prepare students to enter the industry. Meanwhile, students gain priceless experience, make valuable contacts, accumulate professional clips and often land a job.

INSIDE THE BELTWAY

The Washington Times, with a daily circulation of a little more than 100,000 and about 100 full-time reporters, lacks the resources to truly compete with its cross-town rival, The Washington Post, which boasts a daily circ of 772,500 and 560 full-time reporters.

So when the University of Missouri School of Journalism contacted the Times 10 years ago about building a unique partnership, Foreign Editor David Jones jumped at the opportunity.

At the cost of regular tuition and fees, which can range from $3,000 to $10,000 depending on residency status, up to 25 Missouri J-school seniors, graduate students and international fellows spend a semester in the nation's capital covering the federal government. Students are partnered with newspapers throughout the country—from The Spokesman Review in Washington state, to the Anniston (Ala.) Star and the Orange County (Calif.) Register—that lack the financial resources to staff a Washington bureau; there is no cost to papers that participate. In search of stories with a local angle, editors work with students four days a week by phone and e-mail. Missouri professors provide students additional guidance on story structure and self-editing.

Every Friday, students also attend seminars hosted by lobbyists, Washington bureau chiefs and government experts who discuss the inner workings of the nation's capital.

"We foster a situation where student reporters work directly with a newspaper editor because it's more professional and the way it will work when they get a full-time job," says Wes Pippert, director of Missouri's Washington program.

At The Washington Times, which enjoys the luxury of face time with students, Jones says he likes his writers-in-training to come into the office every day with new story ideas. Those who shine the brightest, he says, sometimes even stay at the paper at the conclusion of the program.

"I really like the idea of being able to cover local events and build readership and circulation by writing about people involved with foreign policy," Jones says. "The students bring an energy to the newsroom that keeps us fresh."

The additional content isn't too shabby either. Heather Carlson, a graduate student at Missouri, wrote a story for The Times in October on a United Nations reform panel working to update the organization for the 21st century. The piece ran on page one.

"I am more marketable because of this program," says Carlson, a Missouri native. "The key to being successful is hands-on experience. We aren't typical interns who run around and get coffee; we do professional work."

Students from the Boston University Washington Journalism Center get their hands similarly dirty, often emerging from the semester-long program with 10 to 20 clips, says director Linda Killian. In addition to writing for newspapers throughout New England—Bangor (Maine) Daily News, The Cape Cod (Mass.) Times, The Salem (Mass.) News, and the Eagle-Tribune, for example—each student is required to intern at the Washington bureau of a major media organization two to three days a week. The university organizes all internships, placing students at The Los Angeles Times, The Sun in Baltimore, Congressional Quarterly and The Wall Street Journal, among others.

"Working with students gives us a chance to stay on top of Washington issues and provides weekly contact with our congressional delegation, bringing the nation's capital home to readers," says Bill Ketter, editor of the Eagle-Tribune and former chairman of Boston University's journalism department. "Plus, we get a chance to scope future talent in students already receiving professional training."

Those benefits come at a price, which Killian describes as a "modest fee." She declines to say how much newspapers are charged for the news service, but notes that the fees are "not a revenue-generator at all... they cover some basic operating expenses."

Boston University operates a townhouse in northwest Washington with housing accommodations for two dozen students. The basement and first floor contain classrooms, a computer lab and a newsroom. Tuition, room and board for the 15-week program is approximately $15,000.

However, according to Killian, the benefits to students go far beyond the costs.

"I tried to create the experience I wish had existed when I was in school; I think it can shave years off efforts by students to launch their careers," she says.

Courtney Paquette, a 23-year-old graduate student who possessed little journalism experience prior to attending the Washington program, fully agrees.

"Being a beginning reporter placed into the highest level of political reporting helped me get over fears of calling congressmen and senators," says Paquette, who wrote for the Manchester (N.H.) Union Leader two days a week and interned at The Hill, a daily that covers Congress, this past semester. "And to realize how important it is to be 100 percent accurate."

DECEMBER 2004 • PRESSTIME
AROUND THE COUNTRY

Washington isn't the only place where student journalists can learn the ins and outs of political reporting. Several universities throughout the country utilize their proximity to state capitals for similar programs.

Since 1994, Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond has operated the Capital News Service, providing area newspapers and readers greater access to the state legislature. Senior-level students enrolled in the program are assigned to a newspaper, and story ideas are generated by a blend of editor requests and student suggestions. Students typically write one 500- to 800-word story and several briefs each week. Program director Jeff South, an associate professor at VCU and former state editor of the Austin American-Statesman, edits each story and sends weekly updated story budgets to member newspapers.

Clients of the Capital News Service are small dailies and weeklies, including the Virginia Gazette in Williamsburg, The Southwest Times in Pulaski and three Times Community Newspapers in Northern Virginia. Each publication receives content free of charge.

"The service provides customized, localized coverage they will not get from The Associated Press—our students can follow specific legislative issues a newspaper's community cares about," says South, noting that VCU's location in Richmond has enabled the university to keep its costs down. "The students are getting stories the newspapers couldn't get because most don't have the staff to spare.

"We justify the no-charge policy because we want the Capital News Service to be available to all the newspapers and citizens of Virginia—their taxes help fund VCU, after all," South says. "Plus, it enhances the university's reputation.

The program is funded by tuition and state support to the university. Capital News Service saves money by simply distributing stories through e-mail, South says. The state provides students free space in the capitol pressroom, and Circuit City donated the PDAs students use to write stories from the field.

Pam Lettie, editor of the Loudoun Times-Mirror, says she uses VCU coverage of general news from the assembly, which is distributed weekly to all member papers. When she is interested in features on special issues or individuals, Lettie works directly with South and a student.

"It helps our editorial content because we don't have staff in Richmond full time, so the students can be our eyes and ears giving us localized stories specific to our area," she says.

The University of Nebraska's location in Lincoln provides the school with an equally golden opportunity for covering the state legislature. The journalism school is just three blocks from the capitol building.

In 1998, Associate Professor Charlyne Berens launched a legislative news service in cooperation with the Nebraska Press Association. Every spring, two to three seniors follow the appropriations and budget process in the state legislature, and a faculty member edits the copy before releasing it on a weekly basis. Students occasionally cover special issues when a newspaper editor makes a request, Berens says.

The NPA posts articles on a subscriber-only section of its Web site or e-mails stories to papers. Approximately 15 to 30 publications in Nebraska currently use the service.

Newspapers pay the NPA on a sliding scale, from $25 to $100 per legislative session, based on their circulation, says Alan Beerman, executive director of the association. The university also makes a donation to the NPA, which provides students with laptops and stipends of $2,700 to $3,100 depending on the length of the legislative session.

"The NPA doesn't make or lose any money," Beerman says. "Our purpose is to get current legislative news to weeklies that are not members of the AP and to help students launch their careers."

"By and large, these students will end up at papers like ours," adds Kent Warner, editor of The Norfolk (Okla.) Daily News. "This is how we can prepare them ahead of time so they are ready."

Sources


> Wes Pippert, University of Missouri Washington Program, administrative offices, 120 Neff Hall, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, Mo. 65211, (202) 662-7305, pippertw@missouri.edu.

> Jeff South, Virginia Commonwealth University Capital News Service, administrative offices, 901 W. Main St., Room 2216, P.O. Box 842034, Richmond, Va. 23284, (804) 827-0253, jsouth@vcu.edu.

Programs

> Boston University, www.bu.edu/dev/washjcenter
> University of Maryland, www.journalism.umd.edu/cns/
> University of Missouri, www.journalism.missouri.edu/washington-program/
> Virginia Commonwealth University, www.has.vcu.edu/mac/school/cns.html