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FOCUS: BUSINESS EDUCATION

## Internships on front lines in fight to keep college grads in Michigan

By [Dustin Walsh](#)

Courtney Czarnik needed an internship to complete her degree at **Central Michigan University**. But the marketing and logistics management senior couldn't find one in Michigan.

So last spring, she began looking out of state.

Just before she left for an offer in California, **Domino's Pizza Inc.** called Czarnik with a 12-week internship opportunity at its Ann Arbor headquarters; three months later, she was hired as an entry-level commodities specialist.

Nearly half of the more than 300,000 students educated by Michigan's 15 public universities will leave the Great Lakes state upon graduation for opportunities beyond the borders.

In 2005-2007 — before the recession — Michigan lost nearly 14,000 college graduates, second only to post-Katrina Louisiana when business was still underwater, according to **The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems**.

But Czarnik is among an uncounted faction across metro Detroit: She's living and working in Michigan because of her internship. And local business leaders believe that programs like it will help reverse the talent exodus that hampers the state's ability to move forward.

People behind the **Detroit Regional Chamber's** InternInMichigan.com, for example, are out traversing the state to align companies with talent. Its goal is to get 25,000 Michigan students into internships by 2014.

"There's a misconception here that there aren't any opportunities for graduates," said Britany Affolter-Caine, the program's director. "A lot of companies virtually have no (internship) recruiting efforts."

But some area companies offer substantive internship programs to prepare upcoming grads for employment here in Michigan. Their efforts are slowing, if not stopping, the brain drain.



"Our leaders are expected to hire interns that can transition into a full-time position here," said Eric Parsons, vice president of talent management at Domino's Pizza Inc. Case in point: Courtney Czarnik, whose 12-week internship led to her hiring as an entry level commodities specialist.

Photo credit: Dustin Walsh/Crain's Detroit Business

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### Making the connection

Southfield-based construction company **Barton Malow Co.** looks for construction management majors after their freshman year.

"What we do is very diverse and getting to them early and putting them on different projects. Each internship rotation allows them to get plugged into something different each summer," said Ryan Maibach, vice president of specialty contracting. "It helps them get a feel for the business and understand the diversification of our company as well."

For Barton Malow, interns are a direct source for new hires, said Jim Nahrgang, vice president of human resources.

"It's not just a summer job. It's our entry-level recruitment effort," he said. "It's an opportunity to grow our own (talent) opposed to buying the talent you want."

Elsewhere, the summer internship program at the **University of Michigan's Office of Development** is the first in the region designed to train students for a career in university fundraising.

"The theories and research to fundraising are relatively new," said Chrissi Rawak, vice president of talent management and development operations. "This program is really a pipeline into the profession."

Of the 58 interns that have cycled through the program in the last four years, 18 are now employed in the fundraising sector — seven at UM.

"We are really trying to create a pathway into the field," Rawak said. "This program is beginning to put it on the map."

### Best practices

There's more to an internship than getting cheap labor. The best programs offer substantive learning opportunities that prepare students for jobs within your company or industry, said Amy Cell, vice president of talent enhancement and entrepreneurial education for **Ann Arbor Spark**, which uses Intern InMichigan.com.

"For a program to be successful, it needs to be structured," she said. "An intern needs projects to work on during the summer, with opportunities to be creative and create a project plan."

Interns at the UM Office of Development attend a three-credit course every Friday on the role of philanthropic practices in higher education.

"There are things that we, as veterans to the job, know," Rawak said. "By making our knowledge theirs, we're helping the boat rise."

Domino's interns complete professional development training at its Pizza Prep School — where they run a Domino's store for four days.

"It's a good way to learn the business from the ground up," Czarnik said. "It shows us that this is where the money is made and we here (at the headquarters) are a resource for the stores."

Czarnik also worked on a summer-long marketing project as a Domino's intern. She and other interns from around the country worked to design and implement a marketing campaign for a franchise in the field.

"There's no hand-holding in this internship," Czarnik said. "They provide us with job preparation that I wasn't getting in school."

When the project was complete, the interns presented their efforts to top executives, including former CEO David Brandon.

"Our leaders are expected to hire interns that can transition into a full-time position here," said Eric Parsons, vice president of talent management at Domino's. "This causes less apprehension



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when hiring and allows us to make better hiring decisions.”

At Southfield-based content management software developer **ImageSoft Inc.**, interns are partnered with senior-level programmers for projects.

“Just bringing them (interns) in to let them sit on the sidelines and observe your business is not that beneficial,” said Rick Wilson, **ImageSoft’s** vice president. “It’s been crucial for us to put them in there and let them do real work.”

Recent **Lawrence Technological University** graduate Timothy Bond interned at **ImageSoft** for three years and developed several software programs for the company. He’s also the company’s point person for its contracts with **Grand Valley State University**.

“Tim is a poster child for the kind of talent we’re after,” Wilson said. “He’s really shown his stuff, and we’re happy he stuck around.”

**ImageSoft** hired Bond full time in May, following his graduation.

“There may be some photocopying involved, but they should also have real responsibility,” Affolter-Caine said. “You’ll be surprised by what they can do.”

Wilson also believes interns need to be paid.

“I think you’d be crazy not to pay them,” he said. “If you want the best talent, you’ve got to provide them with an incentive. Our interns do real work, and I want them worried about projects here, not whether they need to go out and get another job.”

Barton Malow also pays its interns.

“They are providing real value to the projects they are working on,” said Maibach. “Also, the top kids in the industry are getting paid internships elsewhere. If you want to play in that pool, you have to pay.”

Affolter-Caine said [InternInMichigan.com](#) advocates for paid internships, but it’s not always possible for government entities and nonprofits. She completed an unpaid internship at the White House, for example.

“Some programs don’t have the resources, and that’s OK,” she said. “But interns should be providing a benefit to your bottom line, so the program has to have value to them, as well.”

Barton Malow conducts exit interviews so the company can review its internship program and make improvements.

“It’s an exhaustive review of the program,” Maibach said. “But it helps us identify what’s working and what’s not and (then we) make tweaks to the program so that we can continue to draw the best talent.”

An employer tool kit on internship program best practices is available at [InternInMichigan.com](#).

But building a talent base extends well beyond 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**After5 L.L.C.’s** Connect After 5 Summer Intern Program, which began in May, is designed to attract interns to the city of Detroit, said Kerry Doman, founder and CEO.

“Young talent is the demographic we need to retain — and they are looking at more than just the available job opportunities,” she said. “They want to know there are things to do with people their age.”

The program hosts social events around Detroit to pique the interns’ interest. Events include a loft party, kickball tournament, tour of Eastern Market and concert at Campus Martius.

“This is a real opportunity to show interns there’s a life here outside of their 9-to-5 jobs,” Doman said. “We have a chance to engage them and create a community (of young professionals).”

**DTE Energy Co., Digerati Inc., Health Plan of Michigan Inc., Dykema Gossett P.L.L.C.**

and Barton Malow all are participating in this summer's program, which costs \$95 per intern.

#### **Win-win**

According to the **U.S. Chamber of Commerce**, 30 percent of all business failures occur due to poor hiring practices.

Interns offer employers a try-before-you-buy approach to gaining a talented workforce, Affolter-Caine said.

"Internships really provide employers an opportunity to test drive that person before they invest in a full-time hire," she said. "For a relatively low amount of money, employers are getting access to a great person that can get projects done."

Nahrgang of Barton Malow said hiring a headhunter to find the right talent costs 30 percent of a position's salary. If that's a \$50,000 salary, the company will spend \$15,000 before the hire's first day.

If the new hire doesn't align to the culture or doesn't work out, a company can look to spend one-and-a-half times the position's salary for a replacement. An intern eliminates this headache, Nahrgang said.

"It's an opportunity to see whether or not we are the right culture fit for them," he said. "It's a tremendous savings in the sense that you're not wasting time and money on someone who may or may not be a good fit for the company."

Parsons, of Domino's, said the internship program is an investment in the company's future.

"I'm very mindful that we can't just look at talent in the short term," he said. "Interns are an investment and position us to acquire talent in the long term."

Wilson of **ImageSoft** said interns provide a fresh perspective.

"Interns create a healthy mix in our office," he said. "They ask questions and offer suggestions some of the older guys just don't see."

Internship programs aren't just for large companies either, Wilson said. **ImageSoft** has 56 employees and generated \$12 million in revenue last year.

Commitment among small and midsize companies can make a big difference, said Cell of Ann Arbor Spark.

"We need these companies to get comfortable with the rawness of intern talent," she said. "The more of these growing companies that have this approach, the more we can pull local grads into jobs and grow an extensive talent pool."

And to Affolter-Caine, that's a win for the entire region.

"Collectively, building internship programs will make Michigan become a destination of choice," she said.

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