

Virginia Internship Program Pits Grad Students Against Gov Data

Colin Wood | August 25, 2015



Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe announced in July that the state would continue its data internship program for a second year. Last school year, 45 Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Business graduate students worked with more than 20 state agencies to find new uses for government data. McAuliffe said the program saved Virginia money and gave students an opportunity for real-world work experience. This year, the program will seek to eliminate the duplicative costs of collecting, maintaining and using data, while integrating services across agencies.

The main benefit of the program is that it allows Virginia access to talented people they wouldn't have otherwise, said Tim Catherman, director of aging operations at the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS).

"We can do a dive into the information that otherwise staffing won't permit," Catherman said. "It's also an opportunity for state agencies to learn cutting-edge data analytics techniques that they may not have been trained on in years past in college."

Catherman worked directly with student interns the past three semesters, he said, and the interaction is useful because in addition to the new skills students bring, they can also offer a “fresh perspective” on business operations.

Last year’s internship program centered around two main projects in his department. One was a practical look at the data pertaining to who receives services from DARS, and the other was an experimental look at the state’s funding formula for allocation of certain federal funds. Both projects yielded positive results, and that’s why they’re doing the program again this year, Catherman said.

The first project allowed his department to look at service data they hadn’t had the opportunity to analyze in years past. The department’s management, data scientists and student interns looked at who was receiving services, analyzed their daily needs and lifestyles, and compared that with the services that were provided. The purpose, Catherman said, was to find unmet need and unmet demand, and they found both.

“The assessment of unmet need and unmet demand highlighted problems that we’re having with that equality,” he said. “So it gave us an opportunity to look at what we can do to change.”

Catherman added that this type of data analysis will allow them to approach their stakeholders for a fresh look at how they provide services.

The second project was not aimed at any specific change within the department, Catherman said, but rather a pursuit of food for thought. The department considered the possibility of including more metrics in its federally required funding formula for allocation of Older American Act (OAA) funds.

“It’s pretty much census-based by most states, but I thought it’d be an interesting exercise to take a look [to see] if there was a way to adjust that with health status. ... We’re trying to target those individuals most in need, and most in need is a combination of physical need as well as minority, poverty and some demographic stuff like that,” he said. “We found that it pretty much confirmed the current way that we’re allocating funds, which was a real benefit to see.”

For students, Catherman said, the program gives them a chance to consider a job in government and to see the different kinds of jobs they will have access to once they’ve completed their degrees.

“When we get into the field of data analytics, it doesn’t pop out to you right away that you want to be an aging analytics specialist,” he said.

Benjamin Siegel, a master of science in information systems (MSIS) candidate at VCU, said the program was useful to him because it provided him with experience working on projects with deadlines. Working in government also showed him some of government's shortcomings, like the effects of data silos and the inefficient or non-use of data.

"And that's kind of what the internship was about was making all the departments aware of the data that's out there and how they can use it efficiently and if there's any ability to exchange the data, which is also a cost savings measurement," Siegel said. "The people [in government] who are actually working with data, they're on their game. They know what they're doing, but it's the executives who aren't necessarily aware of what's possible with data or how to use it efficiently. The world is becoming more data-centric and I think it's important to have these methodologies of handling data and making it more efficient."

The [internship program](#) for the coming year will focus on a new project within DARS. The project will focus again on the OAA, this time melding census data with internal service demographics to ensure that services are being provided in a uniform fashion.

<http://www.govtech.com/data/Virginia-Internship-Program-Pits-Grad-Students-Against-Gov-Data.html>