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Internship program gives kids a boost

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By Andy Smith
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MIDDLETOWN — Matthew Stoner, a 15-year-old student at Rogers High School in Newport, stood in the Unmanned Surface Vehicle Lab at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center, which looks like a large, but very clean, garage. Dominating the space were two rigid-hull inflatable boats crammed with equipment.

The boats, which can be controlled by radio, are designed for unmanned missions, able to go where the Navy would prefer not to send a manned vessel.

With an authority that belied his youth, Stoner gave a tour of the facility, describing the boats themselves, the command center with its multiple computer screens, the communications equipment on the roof of the building.

Stoner, who said he wants to attend West Point someday, is 1 of 25 students from three Rhode Island high schools attending a summer internship program at NUWC called the Undersea Technology Apprentice Program.

Jeff Feaster, head of work-force development, analysis and operations for NUWC, said the goal of the program is to increase the number of high school students with an interest in math and science.

“You’ve got to get them before they go to college,” he said. “This way, they get to see some applications for it [math and science] at an early age, so they can see why you do the advanced math in high school. ... The objective is exposure. Some of the kids are excited about it. Some decide they don’t want to be engineers after all.”

Stoner said his work with the unmanned surface vessels was difficult at first. “You need to be really good at physics and geometry, which I’m not,” he said.

The 25 students in the Undersea Technology Apprentice Program are divided into two groups. Each group spends one four-week session at the undersea warfare center, assigned to work 20 hours a week with mentors in different departments throughout the facility.

Once a week, all the students meet with Feaster and Candie Desjardins, director of educational outreach for the NUWC, to discuss their work. At the end of each four-week session, each student must deliver a presentation about what they’ve done to all the mentors, fellow students and NUWC’s senior leadership.

Feaster said the NUWC hosts another high school internship initiative, called the Science and Engineering Apprentice Program, which is financed by the Office of Naval Research in Washington, D.C. But the center

wanted to expand its internship opportunities, so it approached the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation.

Paul Harden, work-force development manager for the EDC, said the Navy came to the EDC last year and explained what it wanted to do.

Working together, they decided to target three schools as a start: Rogers High School in Newport, Times Squared Academy in Providence and South Kingstown High School. The undersea program is financed by the NUWC and administered under a contract with the Economic Development Corporation. Harden said the contract is for slightly less than \$25,000.

Feaster went to each school, spoke to guidance counselors, and left applications materials. During the program's first year, there were only 7 interns, less than a third of the 25 who attended this year.

"You do something like this for a few years, you get a reputation, and it gets a lot easier," said Harden.

A few of the students attending this summer's program, such as Stoner, the would-be West Pointer, and Dan Sheldon, a 17-year-old student at South Kingstown, who would like to go to the U.S. Naval Academy, have specific military ambitions. Most of them just wanted to give the program a try.

Tiffany Wiggins, who is assigned to the machine shop, said her physics teacher, biology teacher and calculus teacher all urged her to attend the program, writing recommendations without telling her.

"I didn't want to disappoint them," she said.

Several participants said an internship at NUWC would look good on their college applications.

They're right, said Desjardins. "Kids are very aware of what it takes to get into college. If you can get hands-on experience in science and engineering, there's nothing better. ... The work they do here is not the kind of thing you get exposed to in high school."

Milan Garcia-Dorsey, 15, of South Kingstown High School, is working with data collected from an instrument cable towed behind a surface ship that measures factors such as water temperature, depth and currents. She said her guidance counselor urged her to attend the program. "At first everything had to be explained to me, so it was sort of boring, but now it's more fun because I know what I'm doing," she said.

Brandi Jackson, a 17-year-old student at Times Squared Academy, is working in the NUWC chemistry lab, helping to test batteries.

"In chem lab, you actually have to know your sciences," she said. "I've enjoyed it. ... There are some things I definitely need to brush up on."

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Jeff Feaster
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