

Insure Your Future targets next generation of risk management professionals

Insurance intern program seeks to give students work experience early in academic career, help solve talent retention in Iowa

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Approximately 75 Eastern Iowa college students gathered Tuesday at TrueNorth's Cedar Rapids headquarters, 500 1st St. SE, to hear company leaders discuss the merits of Iowa's insurance industry.

The event was one of four workshops that are part of Insure Your Future, an early stage internship program that develops talent with Iowa's insurance industry.

The two-year-old program is a collaborative partnership between the Iowa Economic Development Authority (IEDA), the Iowa Insurance Division, Iowa's participating financial services companies and regional educational institutions, with the goal of bolstering Iowa's talent pipeline in the risk management industry.

"We found that people got into insurance by happenstance more than anything else," business development manager with the IEDA, Michael Gould, said. "This Insure Your Future effort is an effort to intentionally introduce college freshmen, sophomores to a very rewarding career opportunity, so they'll know more about it."

Over the summer, students who are enrolled in the program are plugged in to one of the 27 participating risk management companies as interns, rotating through several departments to get an overview of



Insure Your Future peer mentors Laura Bostwick, Callie Studer, and Regan Pal.

the different aspects of the industry. During their stint, participants attend four leadership workshops to network and learn from industry leaders. Upon returning to their institutions, they give a presentation on the program to their peers.

The program is open to college sophomores – and some freshmen – of all majors, who can easily plug their concentrations into different aspects of the industry, Mr. Gould said.

"The insurance industry is made up of salespeople. It's made up of actuarial sciences, finance people, accounting people, communications people, government affairs people. Even foreign languages are taken in. It's just like any industry – it really has all of these different elements that contribute to making it operate," he said.

A jump start to their career

With finals under their belt and the commencement of summer, most college students breathe a sigh of relief. Long days and warm weather bring the promise of freedom, friends, and pocket money from summer jobs.

For students in the Insure Your Future

program, however, it's an opportunity to develop the skills needed to further their chosen career and increase their odds of securing a job immediately after graduation.

Insure Your Future participants Callie Studer, Laura Bostwick, and Regan Pals, all sophomores at the University of Northern Iowa, were participants in the program last year and have since been elevated as peer mentors.

Drake University student Olivia Kennedy speaks during a breakout session at the Insure Your Future workshop on Tuesday.

Ms. Pals, a marketing and organizational leadership major who interns at Principal, said she spends about 20 minutes of each workshop meeting with other participants. "It's another way to connect with people on a personal level," she said of being a peer mentor, and the program has been beneficial for her professional and personal development.

"You can meet with people and network with people from all over," she said.

Ms. Bostwick, a business administration and business analytics major who also interns with Principal, said her mentorship status makes her more approachable for stu-

dents who may not be comfortable asking adults questions, and the program seemed like a good way to jump start her career.

The program's appeal hasn't been limited to Iowa, however – this summer, Insure Your Future has a student from Ulster University in Belfast, Ireland.

Allen McCandless said his family discovered the program through their association with the Excel Group.

"It definitely intrigued me. I've enjoyed the sales side of it and the advisors," he said.

Insurance industry second to agriculture in Iowa

In 2021, risk management and insurance (RMI) made up almost 11% of Iowa's GDP and is the state's largest non-agricultural economic sector, according to statistics from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. In terms of the absolute size of the industry, Iowa ranks ninth in the U.S., with annual economic activity exceeding \$19.2 billion.

The industry has also been a major source of steady employment for Iowans. Over the past 15 years, the state has added 4,231 net new jobs in the insurance sector, marking a 10.1% increase compared to a 2.4% increase for the state's overall economy between 2006 and 2021.

On average, Iowa insurance industry employees earned \$90,018 annually, which was over \$35,000 more per year than their non-insurance industry counterparts in Iowa who were paid an average of \$54,171 per year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"It's very stable, and it's got a lot of innovation going on right now," University of Iowa's (UI) Vaughan Institute executive director, Jim Lewis, said of the industry.



JIM LEWIS

"So it's not what you thought it was. I even had a joke, it's not your father's insurance company like it used to be. There's really interesting things going on with AI technology and cybersecurity," he said.

Interest in RMI has been growing rapidly among students, which Mr. Lewis attributes to their desire for "a return on their investment" and to reduce student debt. Eighty-seven-and-a-half percent of RMI students in the Vaughan Institute secure a job before graduation, he said.

"What's interesting to me about this is that when I came on campus here last September, we had about 50 students in the Vaughan Institute," which got its start in 2005, he said.

"But just [these] last nine months, it has had a 600% growth. We're over three hundred (students) now. That is probably the



Drake University student Olivia Kennedy speaks during a breakout session at the Insure Your Future workshop. PHOTOS BY ANNIE SMITH BARKALOW

fastest growing program in the country. It might even be the fastest growing areas of study anywhere in the country. And it's happening right here at the University of Iowa," he added.

UI isn't the only higher ed institution seeing a difference in RMI numbers, which several participating Insure Your Future colleges and universities attribute to word-of-mouth from participants.

Kevin Croft, director of the Kelley Center for Insurance Innovation at Drake University, reported that "through innovative new insurance programming on campus and great intern feedback student enrollment in insurance-related classes is up 49% from 2022."

And according to Iowa State University's Ivy School of Business dean David Spaulding, "we are at a record level of enrollment in our RMI electives and actuarial science courses. We are up 40% in enrollment in our RMI electives from 2022 to 271 students."

Program to help with employment retention

A frequent complaint of Iowa insurance companies has been talent retention, Mr. Gould said. College students at the end of their academic career typically have an existing pipeline to their careers through their internships, and the insurance industry isn't usually on their radar.

Giving freshmen and sophomore students the opportunity to begin internships earlier and gain multiple work experiences – introducing them to the insurance industry – prior to graduation would help with replacement rates. He floated the idea past several universities and RMI companies, which were receptive of the idea.

"So the first requirement is, you have to hire freshmen, and the second requirement was (that) you have to pay at least minimum wage," he said, of his conversation with the participating companies. "The third requirement is that you have to provide students the time to go to these four leadership sessions that we're going to hold

during the summer. And then the fourth requirement is you have to pay them for going to the internship leadership session. So not only give them the time to go, but I want you to pay them when they're there as well," adding that the participating companies currently pay double the minimum wage, sometimes more than double.

Charles Keene, associate dean for undergraduate programs and a professor at UI, devised a fifth non-negotiable: have the students rotate departments during their internship.

The first two years of college are "really about discovery," he said. "You're discovering yourself, you're discovering your career path, or discovering the things that you're passionate about. So let's give (students) a chance to really open that up, discover the industry as a whole and not just get locked into one functional area of that business," he said.

So far, the participating companies have been impressed with the young talent that comes their way.

"We are thrilled to have this next generation of young professionals spending time with us through the Insure Your Future program," CEO of TrueNorth, Jason Smith, said. "The insurance industry is a vast and dynamic industry with a wide spectrum of skillset needs. Exposing young people to the almost limitless possibilities the industry offers is a fun and energizing opportunity."

Mr. Lewis said one of the most encouraging aspects of students entering the industry has been their desire to help clients.

"They are drawn to making a difference, making an impact. They want to do something meaningful with their careers. And this is an industry where you're making the world safer, smarter, more secure. That, to me, is what is really encouraging, that it's not just about the money."

Interested students can sign up for the program through their learning institute or the IEDA's website, <https://www.iowaeda.com/insure-your-future/>. CBJ



TrueNorth CEO Jason Smith speaks to Insure Your Future participants at the company's headquarters in Cedar Rapids on June 18.