

BUSINESS

# Internships at Pioneer signal return to normal after pandemic

The pandemic is hardly over, but the interns are back at Pioneer for the summer - and it's the bank's biggest class ever with 17 students this summer

**Larry Rulison**

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 Connor Mchugh a Pioneer Bank summer intern in the financial/accounting department, talks about being in the program during an interview at Pioneer's headquarters on Wednesday, June 15, 2022, in Colonie, N.Y. (Paul Buckowski/Times Union)  
 Paul Buckowski/Albany Times Union

COLONIE — About four years ago, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Pioneer Bank in Colonie started an internship program.

The bank, which now goes by just the name Pioneer in its marketing to reflect the variety of services it offers beyond banking itself, wanted to create a program that would develop leaders of the future while also providing a community benefit to local college and grad students exploring careers in the financial services industry.

Of course when the pandemic hit the Capital Region in early 2020 and state government ordered widespread lockdowns and closure of many aspects of the economy, Pioneer's fledgling internship program also suffered, forcing the cancellation of the program for the summer of 2020 and going hybrid in 2021.

But while the pandemic is hardly over - infection rates are once again on the rise as new variants of the COVID-19 virus emerge - the interns are back at Pioneer for the summer - and it's the bank's biggest class ever with 17 students this summer all working full-time in the office.

So perhaps while we are learning to live with COVID-19, things like internships that are so critical to bridging the gap between higher education and the business sector may be returning to normal.

And for the bank's executives and other employees, having such a large intern class is a major benefit because of the energy and fresh perspective they bring after a couple of years where those interactions were limited.

The students, almost all of whom went to high school locally, come from a variety of educational settings. There are undergraduates from schools like Siena College, Hartwick College, LeMoyne College and SUNY Oneonta. And there are also law students - one goes to George Washington University Law School - and those in MBA programs.

And they are assigned to departments across the bank, including retail banking, finance, lending, compliance, legal, and back-office operations.

Susan Hollister, executive vice president and chief human resources officer at Pioneer, says the key to the bank's internship program from the start has been its structure. Interns are given real-life tasks to complete for the managers they work under.

They also participate in a lot of events that put them in contact with top Pioneer executives and even the bank's board of directors.

That structure leads to more meaningful internship experiences for everyone (the students get paid as well).

"In some of my prior experience, managers and leaders wouldn't want an intern because it could sometimes almost be a burden on the department," Hollister said. "So we worked to develop a program where that was not the case. And quite frankly, our leaders are clamoring for interns."

Pioneer also has other advantages. As one of the largest locally based banks in the region, Pioneer has all of its top executives working out of its modern headquarters building on Albany-Shaker Road in Colonie.

While some interns work in branches, most come to the bank's headquarters, which was designed for collaboration either in meeting rooms, hallways, the company gym or in the cafeteria. And the students stay busy, attending weekly workshops

"We think that's important for it to be a meaningful experience for the students," Hollister said. "We get a lot out of it as a company, we get the energy of the students, new ideas and a fresh perspective. We want them to be able to have a meaningful experience where they can take what they've learned here and translate it to their future endeavors."

While four previous interns are now working full-time at Pioneer (former interns can also find seasonal work at the bank when home from school on holidays), they often go on to careers or graduate studies elsewhere using their newfound skills and interests.

One of this summer's interns is Lily Mahoney, who will be a junior this fall at the University of Georgia. She is majoring in real estate and marketing and has been working in the residential mortgage department, which she says has given her a better appreciation of the retail mortgage business and how it relates to the real estate market and the communities where banks operate.

"It's been really great because being a real estate major, there's a lot of options once I graduate, whether it's in development or finance or investments, things like that," Mahoney said. "But regardless, I've really learned a lot that I don't think that I would have been able to learn in class."

Mahoney said she plans on going straight into the job market after graduating from Georgia.

"I am really interested in a lot of different things in the real estate industry," she added. "But I'm hoping to work maybe on the financial side or in development."

Although Mahoney learned about the internship program at Pioneer through a relative, others found out through their school's career office or on career or job websites.

Connor McHugh, who will be a senior this fall at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, found out about the program - which has an acceptance rate of about 25 percent - on Indeed, the job search site.

McHugh is majoring in corporate finance with a minor in data analytics. He was assigned to the finance and accounting department at Pioneer. McHugh has an extra year of eligibility as a pitcher at the school's baseball team due to COVID, so he is thinking he may get his MBA at St. John's Fisher with his extra year before seeking a job in finance.

"I've always been like a big numbers guy since I was little," McHugh said. "My main thing when I was growing up was math. So I have been always kind of leaning that way throughout high school and college."

This summer's internship program has also signaled a return to normal for the interns. Getting to work full-time around other people has been a great and somewhat new experience for interns like Ryan Eagan, who will be a senior in the fall at Siena. He is majoring in finance and has been working in the insurance department at Pioneer.

"It's been good getting back into an office kind of environment - like getting back into a classroom and having that personal interaction on a day to day basis," Eagan said. "Personally I get a lot of energy by being around other people and working with others. So for me, I love being back in like an environment like this and being with other people."

Written By **Larry Rulison**

Reach Larry on

Larry Rulison has been a reporter for the Albany Times Union since 2005. Larry's reporting for the Times Union has won several awards for business and investigative journalism from the New York State Associated Press Association and the New York News Publishers Association. Contact him at [518-454-5504](tel:518-454-5504) or [lrulison@timesunion.com](mailto:lrulison@timesunion.com).