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Field experience: Interns and WWOOFERS find work in Iowa and Illinois

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By Darcy Maulsby

Maybe you've wanted to learn more about sustainable living but don't want to be stuck in a classroom listening to lectures or reading books. You want to raise food for local and organic food systems, create systems for renewable energy and gain the hands-on experience to put your values in practice. Why not consider the many opportunities available locally and around the globe to become an organic volunteer?

"You'll get a new set of eyes," promises Lonnie Gamble, director of Fairfield, Iowa's Big Green Summer program (www.internproject.com). "These opportunities can help you set the direction of your life."

Established in 2006, Big Green Summer provides education and practical experience in imagining, creating and advocating for sustainable communities. While students complete classroom study, they also participate in hands-on projects in renewable energy, organic agriculture, local food systems, perennial crops, agroforestry, edible landscaping, water and waste systems, building

with local and natural materials, urban design, biofuels and more.

"You live what you learn at Big Green Summer, which makes our program unique," says Gamble, who is also an instructor at Maharishi University's Sustainable Living program in Fairfield. "You raise some of the food you eat, you live in a solar-powered building, and you learn to make new connections for sustainable living."

Big Green Summer, which expands on a successful internship program that has served hundreds of people over the last seven years, includes a two-week permaculture short course that can accommodate up to 20 participants. This short course is included in the full 10-week Big Green Summer program, which is open to a maximum of eight participants. Last year's participants ranged in age from 18 to 65.

"Being an intern here in Fairfield has made an incredible difference in my life," says Brian Robbins, who is featured on Big Green Summer's Web site and now lives in Fairfield, where he operates an urban permaculture site. "I feel more at home in the world, more in my place, than I ever have. I can no longer see the world as a place of scarcity, where resources are jealously coveted. I now see abundance everywhere — in the sun, wind, waters, forests, and in each other."

Robbins' story isn't unique. "Four of our students from last year have moved to Fairfield and now work with us on sustainable projects in the area," Gamble says.

Practical Farmers of Iowa

If you're interested in learning more about healthy food and diverse farms, you might want to become involved in Practical Farmers of Iowa's (PFI) commitment to fostering profitable, ecologically sound and community-enhancing approaches to agriculture.

"Our farmers are always looking for good interns," says Emily Clark, communications specialist with PFI (www.practicalfarmers.org). "We can utilize our Listserv to 'advertise' volunteers willing to help on a farm with those farmers who need the help."



Lonnie Gamble
Big Green Summer student Avi Pogel uses a custom wooden mallet to adjust straw bales during construction of Big Green Summer's new shop/lab, office and classroom building.

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Founded in 1985, PFI now has over 700 members in Iowa and neighboring states who carry out diverse programs to assist farmers with production and marketing needs, raise public awareness of where food comes from and how it is grown, and help educate youth about agriculture and the environment.

Become a WWOOFER

Whether you'd like to stay in the Midwest or explore the wider world of organic volunteering, Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) offers a wealth of possibilities. Founded in 1971 in the United Kingdom, WWOOF links volunteers with organic farmers to promote an educational exchange and build a global community conscious of ecological farming practices.

In the U.S., for example, WWOOF-USA's (www.woofusa.org) directory includes 500 organic farmers who would like to host volunteers on their farm. The directory contains descriptions of each farm, including the type of farm, crops grown, the personality of the farm family and/or community and farm projects. "WWOOFers" have the opportunity to learn about animal husbandry and growing organic vegetables, fruits, nuts, flowers, wine grapes, medicinal herbs, native plants and more.

Some farms host volunteers for as short as a few days, while others request longer stays (one to three months). Volunteers generally work for a half day, participating in farm work and projects as needed. In exchange, farmers provide volunteers with meals and accommodations.

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