

Behind the Scenes at AAI

By Jenny Westerkamp, RD

About 2 year ago, Katie Hamm approached me about starting a website for students. Sure, why not!? Little did we know that this website would be not only an unbelievable entrepreneurial experience for us, but a dynamic and helpful resource for over 4,000 users.

Although Katie will be pursuing other professional avenues (and I am sad to see her leave!), All Access Internships will continue to grow and strive to meet the needs of the dietetics student community. While only myself and a web developer are officially running AAI, we have had just under 100 student volunteers help us along the way since before the website even launched. What started as the Student Involvement Program where students were assigned small tasks has evolved into a Volunteer Program with more intense responsibilities and involvement in the company. These volunteers help with the internship profiles, the blog and the newsletter. They also serve as state spokespeople and marketing assistants! I also can't forget about the unofficial volunteers that have spread the word about AAI to their classmates! Finally, those that fill out our surveys are a HUGE help. I LOVE your feedback and do everything I can to respond to your comments! Thank you to all!

A student volunteer just recently asked me, "So what's a typical day in your life?" I thought that was a great question, so I'll do my best to answer. Because I have a full time job as a sports dietitian, I have to compartmentalize all my work tasks, setting aside certain evenings to focus only on all access work and chip away at big projects. Any day-to-day emails all come into one inbox so I am able to respond quickly if needed. For example, if internship directors send me updates regarding their program, I like to make the changes as quickly as possible. In general, my typical day involves a lot of prioritizing and making sure I am not doing so many things at once that I lose focus and am not as productive. It is a balance between being reactive to issues, but also knowing when you need a lot of focus to complete a task. Managing volunteers, developing marketing strategies, writing a book for dietetics students, and doing one on one coaching with students are just a few things that keep me busy.

I really enjoy having the challenge of AAI because I learn so much about all aspects of the business. A warning to aspiring entrepreneurs: It can overlap a little bit into your personal life because you sometimes have to make sacrifices to get work done. For example, I am writing a book on getting into dietetic internships, so I work on the manuscript on the weekends when I can really focus. Obviously weekends should be relaxing and they still are, but this is a sacrifice I am willing to make because I hope it will pay off. Remember, if you want to be an entrepreneur, the key is to have a balance and make sure that you are never 100% about work!! It's all about your attitude!

To anyone looking to start a business themselves, I have a few pearls of wisdom...

Communication is critical—Whether through Skype (since I am in Chicago, Katie was in Tennessee and my web developer is on the West Coast!), phone, GChat, or email, continuous conversation has allowed us to manage the website while still keeping full time jobs. Also talking with volunteers frequently has been beneficial to both them and the website.

Organization is the key to success –Two words. Google. Documents. In case you aren't familiar, Google Documents allows you to share files with other people so that anyone can edit the document. I have used this for volunteer tasks, to keep organized with web development projects, to draft emails/marketing materials for others to review, and to make sure everyone is on the same page with ongoing projects. It is an amazing organization tool!

Thanks again to everyone involved with All Access Internships! Now if only we could create a dietetic internship. Now THAT would really help meet the needs of the dietetics student community! ☺