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TASTE

Service Learning

 By **KAY S. HYMOWITZ**
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Globalization is threatening a lot of venerable institutions -- the midday siesta, the French film industry, Marxist economics -- but here's one you probably hadn't thought of: the old-fashioned summer job. Remember the kids mowing lawns, baby-sitting, cleaning beach cabanas and scooping ice cream? Now, for better and worse, it's internships for you, young man.

Actually, to be entirely clear, the summer job is not as old and venerable as all that. In fact, nowhere is it written in the founding documents that schools should be closed during July and August. Early on in our nation's history, Jefferson and other very wise men determined that the nation needed children who could read, write and recite the history of republican Rome. Parents, on the other hand, needed children working on the farm -- particularly in the spring planting and fall harvesting seasons. Rural schools had long breaks during those times, not during the summer.




Barbara Kelley

But by the late 19th century, thanks to concerns about ventilation in the hot months, as well as child-labor and compulsory education laws -- not to mention a growing number of middle-class families able to afford vacations at lakeside cottages -- the summer break was born. Rural kids still had to help out at the farm, of course. But in many parts of the nation, there was a school-free July and August with not a tractor or cow in sight. The upshot? The two-month teen stint at the root-beer stand, punctuated by a family road trip to the lake -- and finally another venerable American institution, the September essay called "How I Spent My Summer Vacation."

Today the relaxed approach to summer break -- and the menial summer job -- is as much a piece of nostalgia as "Grease." Teen paid employment is at an all-time low; about 35% of teenagers are working at some point in the year, compared with close to half at the post-World War II peak in 1979. That's because for kids these days, summer is no different from the rest of the year; it's always time for education, or, more precisely, résumé-building.

In the junior-high and early high-school years, middle-class strivers spend summers at soccer, hockey, swim, diving or baseball camp to sharpen their athletic skills; they go to science, computer and arts camp to pump up their academic records. In their junior or senior year they jet off to exotic destinations to fill in the international travel/community service credential, building huts in Guatemala, supervising nursery-schoolers in South Africa or, as one company offers, reforestation fruit trees in Fiji. And then, finally, for many older teens, it's an internship, a part-time, usually unpaid, job-lite at an office in a business or nonprofit organization.

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There's little question that the demise of the summer job is due in part to globalization. For one thing, with millions of low-skilled immigrants around, service industries don't need to rely on kid labor the way they used to. Lawn-care companies and fast-food restaurants can now employ a more permanent adult staff. And, according to Neil Howe, an expert on age cohorts, kids are so used to seeing immigrants doing that sort of work that they assume "I don't have to mess with food or cleaning stuff up." Ironically, the same kids whose parents are paying \$4,000 for them to go to Oaxaca to build houses for the poor can't imagine working for money next to Mexican immigrants at the local Dunkin' Donuts.

More important, globalization means competition. In this respect, kids are little different from auto companies: They're vying with their peers in Asia and Europe, as well as those here at home. Many school reformers bemoan the measly American requirement of 180 days of school and point ominously to the competition in Japan, where classes are in session 250 days a year. Mr. Howe says that in just about every school he visits, the principal is walking around with a copy of Thomas Friedman's "The World Is Flat" under his or her arm. According to Mr. Howe, everyone is asking: "Why should kids be dressing hamburgers and filling tacos when they could learn to get better SAT scores or lay building blocks for an education over the long term?"

And so the rise of the internship, perhaps the most concrete way to get an edge on the competition for the Big Career. Internships are generally for college students; a survey from the career information company Vault found that 84% of college students have at least one internship before graduating. But as in all things in contemporary society, internships are being defined downward. Now teenagers who used to sweep the drug-store floor are being "introduced to office culture," expanding their "skill sets," working with new technologies and beginning a lifetime of networking. This is what is called "real world experience."

But are internships really more reality-based than sweeping floors? Worried about running afoul of labor laws that might require them to pay interns a salary, many companies are insisting that kids get college credit for their experience; Vault says there has been at least a 30% jump over the past five years in the number of such companies. After weeks of cold-calling and emailing, my own daughter, a freshman at Skidmore College, landed a prized internship for this summer at a teen fashion magazine. My husband and I were duly proud, until we realized we had to pay a lot of money to the college bursar for the privilege of having her work -- meaning sort dresses and fetch shoes -- for free. We also had to cough up money for an office-appropriate wardrobe, subway fare and lunch allowance every day. If that's real-world experience, then Disneyland is the real America.

This means that internships are largely for rich kids -- and therein lies another problem. The menial summer job gave many kids their first paycheck and the feeling of independence that came with it. It was also inherently democratic. For eight hours a day, at any rate, working-class and middle-class kids were in the same boat. They all had to learn that life wasn't always entertaining. They had to wait tables for people who could be less than polite -- people who sometimes reminded them of themselves. With many of them in four-year colleges (where close to 75% of their classmates come from homes at the top quarter of the income scale), without a draft and now without menial jobs, privileged kids almost never meet up with their less well-off peers.

The menial summer job, in other words, was an exercise in humbling self-discipline. It should come as no surprise, then, that this is exactly what a lot of managers complain is missing in today's interns. Business Web sites and magazines are filled with stories of kids who have no clue that their exposed navel rings or iPods are less than suitable officewear, and that overconfidence and complaining are not the best way to ingratiate yourself with a boss. "This is the largest, healthiest, most pampered generation in history," Mary Crane, a Denver-based consultant, told the New York Times recently. "They were expected to spend their spare time making the varsity team." But maybe there's something to be said for serving its members fries and shakes one summer instead.

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