

Below, you will find one May submission selected to be read and commented on by Emily Brown, a USA TODAY editor. Our thanks to the writer for allowing us to publish the editor's comments (in blue) so that other college writers can benefit from her insights. A brief bio of Emily Brown follows her comments.

Untitled piece

By Briana Gerdeman

When summer rolls around, some students choose to spend their free time languishing by the pool. Others search for something a bit more productive to do during the break.

Some get a job to save money. Some take classes to push themselves closer to graduation. Some try to find an internship to boost their resume. Some choose to travel and explore new places.

And one company recruiting on campus claims their summer internship program combines all of the above.

But if it sounds too good to be true, is it?

Since 1855, the Nashville-based Southwestern Company has given young people the opportunity to support themselves by selling books door-to-door. After the Civil War, Southwestern recruited young men to sell religious pamphlets door-to-door. Today, their summer internship program signs up college students to spend the summer months selling educational books in suburbs and rural areas throughout the country.

The internship allows students to earn college credit, travel to another city and gain experience that will make their resumes stand out, said Trey Campbell, Southwestern's director of communications. And if they're good at sales, they can make more money than at an average minimum-wage job -- over \$8,000 last summer for the average first-year participant, according to Campbell.

"Everything they learn through this program can be directly transferable to their future career," he said.

The students are recruited from college campuses in the U.S. and 20 other countries, including Canada, the U.K. and eastern Europe. Once they finish classes in the spring, they head to sales school in Nashville, where they learn about the product they will be selling and learn sales presentations, safety, ethics and how to run a business.

"It's being called MTV meets boot camp," Campbell said. "It's not just, like, 'how to sell something'...it's pretty intense."

After sales school, the students are sent to another state to sell their books. From there, it's all up to them. Technically, they're not Southwestern's employees.

Instead, the students are considered independent contractors, which means that when they're selling books, they're technically running their own businesses. This means that if they have a hard time and don't make much money, Southwestern can't be held responsible.

"You're running your own business, so there's no guaranteed salary or paycheck," Campbell said.

But working as an independent contractor offers students some advantages too, Campbell said. They get to choose their own hours, and when it's time to file their taxes, they can claim meals and transportation as business expenses.

Once they arrive in the city where they will sell their books, students are on their own to find housing, as part of setting up their own business. Most students stay in hotels until they find someone who is willing to rent a room in their home to them.

They spend the rest of the summer covering the town, knocking on doors of houses that look likely to buy their books. Southwestern instructs students that most successful dealers work at least 72 hours per week over the course of 6 days -- from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily, or even longer. On Sundays, the students attend group meetings or activities, like going to a movie or Six Flags.

Although the program gives students experience that will help in their future careers, Campbell said, it can be physically, emotionally and mentally challenging, and the experience isn't right for everyone.

"We don't sugarcoat how easy this," he said. "It's a very difficult program."

However, if students do as they're told, Campbell said, he is confident they will succeed.

"It's going to work," he said. "It's never failed if you're doing 30 demos a day."

But many students who've participated in the Southwestern program say it has failed. A Google search for Southwestern turns up lots of bad stories with the good, many posted on the Website <http://southwesterncompanytruth.com>. There, students and parents share their bad experiences with Southwestern.

The students' stories reveal details that Southwestern doesn't mention. They tell stories of how their summers selling books went very wrong.

Many students failed to turn a profit, and ended up making pennies an hour or even finished the summer in debt. Often, their low sales were beyond their control. Some were placed in poor areas where supplemental textbooks were a luxury few could afford. Some worked in neighborhoods where Southwestern had sold the summer before, so they found few customers. Many underestimated their own expenses for the program, or had car trouble or crashes that proved expensive.

Some experienced health problems, like heatstroke and dehydration, from working in the summer sun. Others lost unhealthy amounts of weight from not getting enough food and sleep.

Some students experienced common illnesses and injuries that weren't directly related to the job, but they were told by their managers that they couldn't take a day off.

Students told of having car crashes from driving late at night after many long workdays with little time for sleep at night, or of cars breaking down after too much wear and tear. Others found themselves in unsafe situations at the houses they tried to sell to -- having to interact with people using drugs, being threatened at gunpoint and receiving unwanted sexual advances. Some students had the police called on them because people were suspicious of them selling door-to-door, or alternately, the police were called to check on the students because they were in unsafe areas.

Many of the testimonies on the site describe the experience with Southwestern as a traumatic one. For many students on the site, the summer was the worst of their life, and they say the emotional damage took years to heal. Some students say they found it difficult to deal with Southwestern's relentlessly positive attitude. When they had problems, or were discouraged or homesick, they say they were told not to talk about it, or made to feel guilty for complaining.

The words they use to describe their experiences are telling. The authors of the testimonies refer to Southwestern's "lies" and "cult mentality", and speak of the "brainwashing", "groupthink", "behavioral modification" and "mind control" that students experience.

Campbell said most of the company's critics did not finish the summer, or did not even participate in the program. But he admitted that for some students, the program might not be what they expected.

"Everybody has a different perception," he said. "For those who don't come back, they have a different perception. Some of it's reality and some of it's not."

The rumors are spread by social media and the Internet, he said, and many people will post something online that they wouldn't say to his face. If Southwestern were a cult, he said, it would have been shut down already.

"When people make those kinds of claims, they probably don't understand something," he said. "If we're a cult, we wouldn't have had this program since 1868."

Although the company is not responsible for students' health or safety because they work as independent contractors, Campbell said Southwestern's safety record is good.

Kristin Rae Spicer, who started <http://southwesterncompanytruth.com>, said she wouldn't use the word "cult" to describe Southwestern. But Spicer, a former UGA student who sold books with Southwestern in 2005, said she thinks the company is not as honest as it should be with parents and students about its internships.

"I think ultimately they're doing a really good job of pulling the hood over a lot of students' and parents' eyes," she said.

She said she was excited about the program when she was recruited as a freshman, but her enthusiasm didn't last long.

"Once the summer started and the shit started to hit the fan, all of us started to realize they had set us up," she said.

The summer had unexpected physical, emotional and spiritual effects on her, Spicer wrote in a testimony that has made its rounds on the Internet. The experience still bothers her to this day, five years later.

"It was absolutely a lasting effect," she said. "I was actually on a walk on Sunday, and I started to have a panic attack just from walking past the houses and feeling the summer heat."

But other students describe their experiences with Southwestern as overwhelmingly positive. Quintin Roberts, a 2008 UGA alumnus, sold books with Southwestern all four summers he was in college.

"The selling -- it was awesome. It was difficult, but it was exactly what they had said," he recalled. "I struggled in the beginning, but as the summer went on, I got better because I was working such long hours."

Roberts said he made \$11,000 his first summer by working 81 to 85 hours per week. Upon graduating from UGA, he was hired as Southwestern's corporate recruiter. As a student, he said, the program gave him a "dose of reality" and made him appreciate his parents more for supporting him.

"It's really helped me out with my motivation and work ethic," he said. "It gave me a much more realistic expectation of how hard real life is."

He said the allegations of brainwashing and cult-like behavior were "something every company has to deal with," but that the experience was a positive one for most students.

"I'd be hard pressed to find a student who worked with us through the summer and did what we said and didn't love it," he said.

Roberts admitted the job is not for everyone, but said he wouldn't call it a cult.

"If someone is not very mentally or emotionally stable, it's not a very good fit for them," he said. "As far as telling students how to think or feel, I don't know....I guess we're guilty of trying to teach students how to have a positive attitude."

As corporate recruiter for Southwestern, Roberts is now in charge of training most first years and managers at UGA. During the recruiting process, the company gathers recommendations from professors, fraternities and sororities, and students who have worked with Southwestern before.

Recruiters also pass out questionnaires in classes asking students' plans for the summer.

Then recruiters call the likely candidates and invite them to an informational meeting, in the UGA Career Center in Clark Howell Hall. Southwestern has a partnership with the Career Center, Roberts said. From there, interested students attend interviews before signing up for the program and traveling to Nashville for sales school.

Although Southwestern has been recruiting at UGA for over 20 years, Campbell said, the company has not been so lucky at other universities. In the past decade, several universities in the U.S. and the U.K. have banned Southwestern from recruiting on campus, and warned students that the experience may not be as good as it sounds.

This spring, Southwestern was banned from recruiting at the University of Idaho after complaints from students, faculty and parents, according to an article in the university's newspaper, *The Argonaut*. When the company continued to use classrooms without permission, a "no trespassing" order was issued in January. Southwestern is the first company that the university has had to ban.

At the University of Maryland, Southwestern was banned from recruiting on campus because it misrepresented its internships as business positions rather than sales jobs. As of last spring, the company was still banned, according to an article in *The Diamondback*, the university's independent student newspaper. But Southwestern has continued to recruit University of Maryland students in other ways and holds info sessions at another nearby college.

At Durham University in the U.K., the Students Union banned Southwestern from advertising and recruiting. According to Durham's student-run news Website, <http://durham21.co.uk>, the Students Union investigated the company and found the job was simply not profitable for students. Although even American students often make little to no money from the summer, it is even harder for foreign students to turn a profit because they also have to pay for a visa and round-trip airfare.

About a month ago, nine students at Texas Tech University reported Southwestern to the police for unwanted phone calls and text messages when the company tried to recruit on campus. According to *The Daily Toreador*, Texas Tech's newspaper, an executive associate dean, Lynn Huffman, sent an email to students warning that the internship could be a scam. The police investigated the company and resolved the confusion, but Huffman said Southwestern could have avoided the misunderstanding by telling students more clearly why they were calling.

After her bad experience with Southwestern, Spicer contacted the UGA Career Center and expressed her concerns. The Career Center was "initially concerned," she said, but after investigating Southwestern, "they just kind of blew me off."

Scott Williams, executive director of the UGA Career Center, said that Southwestern has been recruiting on campus since before he started working here 10 years ago. He said he has never personally heard any complaints about the company, and he's never heard Southwestern referred to as a cult.

When Williams worked at Vanderbilt University, he attended Southwestern's sales school to learn more about the program. It's not for everyone, he said, but it can be a valuable experience for students who want to have sales jobs in the future.

"I would agree that it's a very difficult experience," he said of the job.

In general, companies don't have to apply for permission to recruit on campus. But Williams said he wanted to make sure Southwestern's recruiting was done through the Career Center so students could voice complaints if necessary. He has also talked to Southwestern's head recruiter to make sure recruiters mention the company name in calls to students, so students can look up more information.

But some students are still wary of the company.

Justin Crews, a freshman at UGA, was contacted in April about an internship. But he said the caller was "secretive", and wouldn't tell him the company name or what the internship was about over the phone.

"I got a random call one day, and this guy told me he had been given my name," he said. "The whole thing seems really sketchy."

Still, Crews attended the first informational meeting in Clark Howell Hall. The meeting, he said, was the first mention of the company name, and of the fact that the internship involves selling books door-to-door. But although he was better informed after the meeting, he said he wasn't given much time to decide whether or not he wanted to sign up.

"It goes straight from them talking nonstop to you making a decision," he said. "What's so messed up is that the whole process takes about four days."

He signed up, but after going home and doing some research, he had second thoughts. After his girlfriend told him about <http://southwesterncompanytruth.com>, he decided not to go back.

Crews thinks the company targets students unfairly, and doesn't think it should be allowed to recruit on campus.

"I think a lot of their tactics are manipulation and appeal to authority," he said. "College kids are vulnerable."

Briana, nice job tackling a tough story. You did a lot of research, a lot of reporting and have a lot of great information in here. As you noted, the story is quite long, and longer than most newspaper articles. A good editor could help you tighten up. While the subject is very newsy, the length and some of the writing lends itself more to a classroom-style paper. The first place I would cut is the beginning- I don't want to have to get to the fifth paragraph to find out the real subject of the story.

I think re-organization would help bring more of the news out front, if only for a tease of what's to come. The fact that Southwestern has recruited at UGA for 20 years but is also banned at

other universities is really interesting, but buried late in the article. This could be mentioned when you bring up "students who've participated in the program say it has failed."

Watch your lead-in to quotes. A few times, the paraphrasing before the actual quote used the same language as the quote, making it redundant. Examples: "They're technically running their own business" comes before a quote where Campbell says "You're running your own business...." "If Southwestern were a cult" comes before the quote "If we're a cult...."

Speaking of cult, you have a lot of people responding to the cult claims, but I didn't think it was set up enough. The paragraph referring to student testimonies is a good start, but I'd like to see more there, either an interview with one of the students who felt that way, or a more complete quote from one of the testimonies with examples of what made them feel that way. It's a strong claim; make sure both sides are well represented.

Overall, I think the story is very well reported, but needs a little tightening and tweaking to get some more of the news higher up. Nice work!

Emily Brown is the online editor for national news, coordinating USA TODAY's online coverage with reporters and editors on the Nation desk, and preparing the information for USATODAY.com. Previously, Emily was an assistant online editor for *Stars & Stripes*, a military-focused newspaper distributed on all U.S. military bases worldwide, and was editor of AOL's CityGuide for Washington, D.C. Emily's career started as a features reporter for a mid-sized daily paper covering Northern Virginia, and she continues to enjoy freelance writing. Emily has written about or photographed two presidents, an attorney general, the secretary of defense, war heroes, rock stars and very inspiring "ordinary" people.

