

IISG interns can have invaluable *real-world experience*

IN THE SUMMER OF 2016, Abigail Garafolo was an IISG intern, working with Kara Salazar, the program’s sustainable community planning specialist who provides information and support to local decision makers and residents as they strive to protect natural resources. Through this internship, Garafolo was mentored by Salazar as she attended community meetings—experiences that gave Garafalo a good sense of how the planning process works.

Fast forward to the present—for the past six years, Garafolo has been an Illinois Extension educator who still uses skills and approaches that she learned during her time with Salazar. “One of the biggest things I learned, which I carry with me today, was that planning ideas need to come from the community members themselves,” she said. “They are the experts—our job is to be the facilitators.”

IISG’s intern program has been providing real-world, on-the-job opportunities for undergraduate students since 2012. Altogether, 59 students have served in this role.

These students assist IISG specialists focused on a range of topics—aquatic

invasive species, water supply planning, coastal resilience, green infrastructure, and Great Lakes Areas of Concern—to name a few. Their tasks might include engaging in outreach and education with people of all ages, developing publications and products, and tracking down critical data, all the while, learning as they go.

IISG’s Campus Engagement Coordinator Angela Archer, who manages the intern program, sees one of the major benefits of this opportunity as opening doors to possibilities. “Often, students are unaware of the variety of job options for students of science—research is not the only career path.”

The intern program also offers professional development opportunities that include further discussion about possible natural resource careers as well as other beneficial training.

In 2024, Erin Schimenti served as an intern with IISG’s stormwater team of Eliana Brown and Layne Knoche. A University of Illinois senior this fall, she is pursuing a dual degree in sustainable design and communication with a minor in game studies and

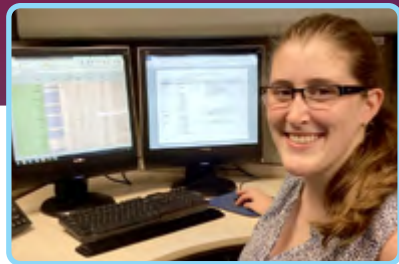
design. As an intern, Schimenti had the opportunity to grow her skills and explore her talents and passions including leading tours of the Red Oak Rain Garden, engaging in social media, and creating botanical drawings of the rain garden’s species.

She is hoping her career path will take her where she can combine her areas of study and intern experience, educating people about sustainability. Unlike most interns, Schimenti started well before the summer, so the opportunity allowed her to become a bit of an expert in the rain garden and related issues.

“When I look back on before I started working here, I had the motivation to be involved, but I didn’t know half of what I know now,” she said.

Grey North, finishing their last semester at Bowling Green University studying environmental policy with minor in education, also landed a well-suited internship in 2024 with Megan Gunn, IISG aquatic education associate.

North spent the first half of their internship helping Gunn wrap up the development of a new Lake Michigan-focused curriculum and the



Interns from over the years, left to right, Grey North with Aquatic Education Associate Megan Gunn, Emily Clark, Payton Ginestra, Crystal Hall, Lauren Schnoebelen, Jordan Lillybridge, and Erin Schimenti.

second half creating new lessons and engaging middle and high school students on Great Lakes issues as well as introducing possible careers.

The highlight of North's internship was being mentored by Gunn as well as connecting with the kids, and North sees that as confirming a possible career path. "While I'm not sure of my career goals, engaging in outreach and working with kids will definitely be a part of it."

Sometimes the internship helps students move their goals in a different direction. At one point, Garafolo saw herself as one day being the director of a nature center, teaching youth about local flora and fauna. But after her summer experience in community planning, she realized she liked that work a bit more.

"The internship kind of shifted me to a community perspective as opposed to a content perspective," she explained.

Gillian Flippo was a 2018 intern, working with the program's pollution

prevention team, led by Sarah Zack. She continued helping Zack develop publications and translate technical reports for a broader audience for an additional semester before moving to the Northwest where she held several positions focused on coastal stewardship and community science. Now, she is a toxics reduction specialist for the State of Washington.

"I feel like the internship gave me a really great introduction to pollution prevention, but it also made me realize I wanted a more hands-on approach" said Flippo. "Although I really enjoyed updating outreach materials and it's a valuable skill that I still use, I wanted to try doing more activities where I could physically see pollution being removed from the environment."

Helping interns find their way also makes Archer's job more satisfying. "When we expose students to these experiences and they find their path, especially one that they didn't know was there before, well, it's a proud moment for me." 🍀

