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# Using Interns for Research and Resource Management at Mesa Verde National Park: A Success Story

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## Program overview

In partnership with Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, Partners in Parks is managing the intern program in nearby Mesa Verde National Park. Starting as a small project with a few students, it has grown to ten students, from two schools, supporting several of the park's programs. The interns receive academic credit and a stipend for their work. Their assignments range from historical research, assessing archaeological sites and features, website and brochure design, and cataloguing artifacts, to surveying specific plants and animals, and designing computer programs for data management.

In 2001, Partners in Parks approached Fort Lewis College and Mesa Verde about establishing an internship program. Under the leadership of the college, four interns were placed in the park in 2002, and paid with park funds. In 2003, Partners in Parks obtained funding from the Colorado State Historical Society, along with matching funds from the Fort Lewis College Foundation and the Mesa Verde Museum Association, which allowed participation to increase to nine interns. In 2004, funding from the same sources as 2003, plus additional funds from the park and elsewhere, supported ten interns. The 2005 program will receive funds from the three partners and will support eight to ten interns.

We have an effective recruitment mechanism. The college establishes academic prerequisites for the intern candidates. Park staff hold an internship fair to attract student interest. Faculty screen the candidates for park staff to make the final selection.

Internship projects contribute to park programs. They are not just procedural exercises. Park staff have been enthusiastic and successful student mentors. College faculty and park staff evaluate the quality of the work done. Partners in Parks provides oversight to the ongoing partnership and manages the funds from all the sources that support this program. The three partners are strongly committed to the success of this program.

## The partners

Partners in Parks creates educational opportunities in national parks for students and volunteers. We recruit highly skilled individuals to conduct research and preservation projects in these special places. In addition to our internship program with Mesa Verde, Partners in Parks has sponsored a successful internship program with national parks since 1997, primarily at significant battlefield sites. Our interns are both graduate and undergraduate students who receive stipends and academic credit for their work. Several students have used their projects as the basis of their thesis or dissertation. Other current projects include a habitat restoration project at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (Arizona). We have awarded a fellowship to a master's degree student, who will conduct research on controlling two exotic species and restoring the native habitat. Zion Partners, a volunteer group working

at Zion National Park (Utah), manages the park's native plant propagation program and provides educational programs to local elementary schools.

Fort Lewis College is a four-year, state-assisted undergraduate institution that offers baccalaureate degree programs in the arts and sciences and in the professional areas of education and business. Fort Lewis College is an outstanding partner, for it is dedicated to undergraduate education that links knowledge with practice for all its students, and particularly for those whose ethnic heritage is linked with the Southwest. One of the academic deans, John Ninneman, directs the college's part of the internship program. He has encouraged the participation of several professors and helped standardize the academic requirements of the internships. He writes:

The close relationship between Fort Lewis College, Mesa Verde, and Partners in Parks is a natural one in which everybody wins. Not only are real-world experiences made available to students in a variety of disciplines, but the Park gains skilled and eager learners, and perhaps even future Park professionals. Partners in Parks has been the catalyst in helping this successful relationship to work as well as it has.

Mesa Verde National Park is one of the most outstanding and culturally significant sites in the country, with archaeological sites that are some of the most notable and best preserved in the United States. Created in 1906, it was the first national park designated for its cultural resources; all previously designated national parks primarily celebrated natural features. It was also the first area in the United States to be named a World Heritage site. The chief of research and resource management manages the park's part of the internship program. She has been able to involve a number of the park's divisions in the program.

### **The process**

The 2005 internship partnership among Fort Lewis College, Mesa Verde National Park, and Partners in Parks began with a planning meeting in November 2004. Guidelines for the internship program were developed, the roles and responsibilities of each of the three partners were defined, a schedule of activities for the internships was set, and potential funding sources for 2005 and beyond were discussed.

Park and college staff held an internship fair at Fort Lewis College for prospective interns in early February. Forty students attended; 18 returned a questionnaire, indicating their interest in an internship. Eight students have been chosen for projects to begin in May 2005. Partners in Parks will draft the internship agreement, which the three partners and the interns sign. For each project it specifies the work to be done, and who the mentor and supervisor will be.

Each intern has a park staff mentor, who prepares the student to do the assigned work. For some projects, park staff and interns work together as a team. For other projects, the interns do their work, checking in with the park mentor on a regular basis. The interns also receive oversight by their faculty advisors, who receive park staff recommendations and assign a course grade. Faculty members may assign additional reading and/or reports to support the work done in the park.

Eight interns will work this summer in positions funded by the State Historical Fund, Mesa Verde National Park, and Fort Lewis College Foundation. The students will begin their internships on May 9, 2005, with an orientation meeting. Their next requirement is to attend the park's two week interpretive training course at the end of May. An interim meeting will be held at the park in mid-June, at which each intern will present his/her internship project and accomplishments to date to the other interns and park staff. The interns will finish their projects in July and submit their work products and final reports to their park mentors and faculty advisors.

During the past several years, projects have been created in areas such as archaeological preservation and stabilization, architectural history, natural resource monitoring, and visitor education. Many of the projects include database management, computer mapping, and/or website development. Some archaeology project assignments require completion of the college's Archeology Field School prior to the internship.

Interns work for 400 hours. Partners in Parks provides stipends of \$8.50 per hour and pays some travel or housing expenses, in order to offer students of lesser means the opportunity to participate.

This intern program also focuses on American Indian students, as Fort Lewis College is required by federal statute to admit these students "free of charge for tuition." To lend prestige to the program, the college created a named internship, the Robert and Florence Lister Internship, which recognizes an outstanding student who has demonstrated a strong interest in historic preservation. Two students have already received this honor. A third Lister Intern will be named in April.

Partners in Parks is the fiscal agent for the program. Park funds are moved to Partners in Parks' account through task orders that are written each year and are attached to Partners in Parks' cooperative agreement with the National Park Service. Partners in Parks has raised over \$100,000 to support this program.

## **The outcome**

College students need practical experience in their area of interest, prior to making a career choice. They should learn from a practicing professional what their life work would be like. Such an experience usually energizes the students and focuses their interest, or occasionally causes them to change their major program. Either outcome is exceptionally valuable. The park offers a vast opportunity for discovery, contemplation, and study. Students are given an opportunity to advance their skills in a protected area of national significance, while helping the park fulfill unmet needs through professionally mentored internships.

The public benefit from this project is both direct and indirect. Students interested in natural resource management, archaeology, historic preservation, and related areas as careers are given the exceptional opportunity to advance their skills and study professional methods and techniques for college credit. The results of their work are added to the park's database, thus contributing to the knowledge and understanding of the site. Their work aids the park's visitor education program, as well, by preparing more information on the park's sites, which can then be imparted to the millions of visitors hosted by the park each year.

Here are a few examples of what our interns have accomplished. They have:

- Developed an internship program brochure and news release, centennial brochure, and illustrations for a “Got Ticket?” brochure;
- Completed historical research on a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp as the basis for a National Register of Historic Places nomination;
- Detailed documentation of painted surfaces, digitizing the information;
- Developed a GIS project that assesses relationship of precipitation and temperature changes to deterioration of plaster;
- Performed a structural assessment of Oak House and archival research of old photographs and stabilization records;
- Made the park’s archaeological research and preservation website more functional and attractive;
- Assisted the condition assessment backcountry field crew in documenting and monitoring more than 600 alcove sites;
- Assisted natural resource management staff in air quality monitoring; bird, bat, fish, and ponderosa pine stand surveys; and nonnative plant control;
- Upgraded storage of collections, worked on cataloguing, and updated database file records;
- Georeferenced historic maps; and
- Developed a program for a hand-held computer to collect data on invasive plants.

The internship summer was a highlight for me in my educational experience. The privilege was the intern’s to be working with outstanding mentors and having exposure to real world employment opportunities after graduation from college. It is my hope that this program will continue so other students may have the opportunities afforded to me from my internship.

— *William Tsosie*, Lister Intern

These projects and others like them are highly professional and very much a part of the park’s necessary and on-going work to protect and preserve its resources. Our combined efforts have enabled Mesa Verde staff to learn more about the significance of the park’s cultural and natural features and to expand the park’s database without adding staff or contractors.

### **The future**

There are several things we intend to do to improve and expand our intern program at Mesa Verde. We will expand the number of subject areas of the projects so more students are eligible to participate. We will include students from other colleges in our program at this park. We will establish internships at other parks in which students from Fort Lewis College and elsewhere might participate. We will continue to emphasize diversity among students who participate in our program. To accomplish this, we will need to increase the amount of funds we raise as well as the number of sources that support us.

Our goal is to use the partnership model we have created with Fort Lewis College and Mesa Verde National Park to establish an on-going relationship between national parks and

other colleges and universities. Starting with parks and academic institutions in Colorado and then surrounding states, we will continue to offer interested students a remarkable opportunity to advance their skills in protected areas of significance. With a network of college–park partnerships, parks will be able to recruit from any college or university in the region. Colleges will be able to expose their students to a great variety of professional opportunities.