An Interview with MontPIRG
Edited by Emily Pritchard

Katy Westhoff, Campus Organizer for the Montana Public Interest Research Group or as it is more commonly known, MontPIRG, hosts several interns every semester. These internships benefit both MontPIRG and the student interns in profound ways. “Our focus is creating real, tangible change and empowering students to achieve these goals.” Read on for more information about this organization and the internships it offers.

Briefly describe your organization and the work you do.

“MontPIRG is a student-directed and funded non-partisan organization dedicated to affecting real, tangible change through educating and empowering the next generation of civic leaders.”

How long have you worked for MontPIRG?

“I started working with MontPIRG during the summer, knocking doors and informing people about LR-126 and the dangers of eliminating election-day voter registration. I was a paid canvasser talking about an issue I am deeply passionate about. In fact, all of the issues MontPIRG focuses on I am deeply passionate about! I have been the campus organizer since December. I don't know how I got so lucky to work with people who care so honestly about these issues that people in our state and our world face, but I am truly, truly grateful. There's no better job in the world. (Sorry if this is mega-cheesy, I'm just being honest!! I love my job!)”

What are some of the issues you have focused on lately?

“In the fall semester, MontPIRG had a huge get out the vote campaign and fought to protect election-day voter registration in the state, encouraging folks to vote NO on LR-126. This campaign was hugely successful, and voting rights
are safe again for Montanans all across the state. This semester, we're focusing on lobbying our legislators on environmental protection, privacy rights, and social justice issues. We'll be putting on events all around campus to inform students about the importance of these issues and their impact on student life.”

**How does having UM student interns help your company? How many years have you had interns?**

“MontPIRG has been educating and empowering University of Montana students since 1981. Interns keep everything moving - they keep our legislative action plans in motion and do most of the day-to-day runnings of the organization. The interns are responsible for most of the action that MontPIRG has done, from canvassing to lobbying legislators in Helena to asking for signatures to putting on events on campus and in the community. These actions are vital to making sure that MontPIRG’s mission is being fulfilled.”

**How much time do your student interns work a week? How long do the internships last?**

“Interns usually work between 5-15 hours a week, though we are very flexible and can accommodate different requirements from different departments or professors on campus.”

“We offer semester-long internships, but many students have gone on to do two or three internships, expanding their skills and continuing to build contacts and connections. We also offer internships in the spring and summer sessions!”

**Does MontPIRG provide other experiences for students, i.e., professional development trainings, research, civic engagement, or global experiences?**

“Civic engagement is huge for MontPIRG interns. Students are able to talk one-on-one with legislators and can even lobby in Helena. Interns also attend a weekly class on different skills necessary for working in activism and politics.”
Do you offer any specific training for your interns?

“Training comes from first-hand experience. Our executive director and I do our best to prepare interns, but the best way to learn is by doing and taking on leadership initiative. We want our interns to be self-sufficient, and we provide the opportunities to lobby in Helena or put on events, but the real-world experience in event planning, lobbying, data entry, signature gathering, canvassing, and phone calling are vital in making sure our interns are getting the skills they need to be successful in any field they choose. “

What is the culture and work environment like for a student intern?

“Interns mostly work in a casual office environment, though they are often out in the field doing the real work - on campus gathering signatures or registering people to vote, or in Helena at the Capitol. MontPIRG strives to create a fun environment that fosters discussion and friendships. Our focus is creating real, tangible change and empowering students to achieve these goals. Teamwork is essential to accomplishing these goals.”

Do you have any advice for students seeking internships or other experiences in your field? Is there something you wish someone would have told you when you were still in school?

“Internships provide a great opportunity to get hands-on experience in a field, with more guidance and room for education than entering a job. An internship with MontPIRG also comes with the PIRG name - a well-respected and known organization across the nation that looks great on a resume. MontPIRG is known for producing quality leaders and employers in the field recognize this.”

When and how do you advertise for interns? How many do you generally have at a time? Are they paid opportunities?

“Our biggest recruitment tool for interns is through class raps at the University of Montana, as well as personal contacts. We take on between 5 and 20 interns at any one time, though we can always have more! There are some opportunities for interns to receive a stipend - this is for interns who have proven their leadership capabilities and can take on more responsibility.”

Are you looking for students from specific majors, years in school, or with specific qualifications?

“Any students in any major are welcome; departments that have benefited from the internship in the past include political science, environmental studies, and social work. Anyone wishing to enter the field of nonprofit work, activism, or politics would benefit from an internship with MontPIRG. Anyone interested in the topics we cover - environmental issues, voting rights, privacy, consumer rights, student rights, social justice, and fighting corporate money in elections would also benefit.”

Where can students go for more information?

“Visit mtpirg.org, or email me, katy@mtpirg.org”