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Liberty University junior to intern at NASA this summer

May 04, 2009 ¦ Teresa Dunham

For Sara Sullivan, majoring in athletic training was an easy decision. The Liberty University junior first learned about the career field when she was a freshman in high school. Her teacher announced that the football team needed a manager, and she jumped at the opportunity to meet new people.

“I thought that would be kind of cool. So I signed up for it, and they gave me the job. I started shadowing around the athletic trainer there, helping where I could by doing things like taping wrists, which were the easiest thing to tape — you just go around in a circle,” Sullivan said.

She also filled water bottles, fixed helmets and did other tasks that came easily to her. Eventually word spread that she was invaluable on the sidelines, so she ended up managing her high school baseball, lacrosse and wrestling teams, too.

Sullivan said her tasks “weren’t rocket science” back then — but the 21-year-old’s upcoming summer internship at NASA will literally place her among rocket scientists.

For seven weeks, May 19-July 2, she’ll work with an on-site athletic trainer at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., providing free athletic training for all NASA employees — from computer techs to astronauts who seek physical rehab or advice. The internship is provided by an organization called Rehab Works.

“I’m excited. It’s pretty much the opportunity of a lifetime,” said Sullivan.

She will intern for free and pay for her own housing, but she’ll get the ultimate résumé builder and an insider’s peek at the Kennedy Space Center in return. She found the internship by Googling undergraduate athletic training summer internships. When NASA popped up, Sullivan was immediately intrigued. “This was such a crazy coincidence,” she said.

Soon Sullivan was applying online and sending a written resume, cover letter, transcripts and letters of recommendation. As Rehab Works continued whittling down its candidate pool, she advanced on to a pre-interview and then a face-to-face interview with the head athletic trainer there. No one would tell her how many other people had applied — the numbers were so high that they said it would intimidate people — but she got her dream internship.

When she sets foot onto the NASA facilities this summer, she will be representing Liberty University and its athletic training program.

“The program here for athletic training is smaller. We know everybody by first and last name, and we’re on a first-name basis with our professors ... They really care about us, and they really dive into our lives — not just academically, but they want to know about our family and our friends and our spiritual lives as well,” said Sullivan.

Her professors are clearly pleased with her accomplishments.

“Sara is an outstanding athletic trainer student, and we are so very proud of her being chosen for this prestigious internship position,” said Dr. Vance Pickard, director of Liberty’s Athletic Training Education Program.

Before Sullivan started her studies at Liberty, she completed internships both in a clinical setting and with the University of Connecticut’s athletes. In fact, the Connecticut native had planned on going to her state university until late in her senior year of high school — but she chose LU at the last minute because she wanted to come to a Christian university.

“This is the best decision ever. I just love being here,” she said.

LU places its athletic training students with Liberty sports teams during the second semester of their sophomore year, so she has plenty of hands-on experience working with the university’s track, tennis, football, women’s volleyball and women’s basketball teams.

“I can really use this as a witnessing tool, and I didn’t really see that before I came to Liberty. I know that you can pretty much use any gift that you want for God … but when athletes are hurt, they are very vulnerable, and they go through a lot of psychological issues because they want to be ready for that game; they’re worried about losing their starting position; they’re worried about a career ending injury. They wonder, ‘Am I ever going to be able to play basketball again or hockey again?’ You can really be there for them, and they confide in you,” she said.

She loves the idea of being one-on-one with the athletes and letting them confide in her.

“If I can share with them my love for Christ, and that’s how I get through things, I can witness to them and let them know, ‘Hey, life’s OK. You might be hurt, but it’ll be all right. Another door is going to open for you. You might not be playing again, but you can definitely coach, and you can inspire other people to play just as well as you did,’” she said.

When she leaves Liberty, Sullivan’s ultimate goal is to be a certified athletic trainer where one has never been before.

“I don’t necessarily want to follow the path of going into collegiate level athletic training, and I don’t really want to do pro,” she said. “I’m looking into doing things like working with the wake boarders in Florida. I’ve also looked into working with extreme sports like skateboarding and trick bikes and motocross.”