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From the Buffalo Business First:

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Making ends meet

## The quiet way masters and PhD students make money while getting ahead

Jul 20, 2018, 4:44am EDT

Sean Smith had to finance his undergraduate education at Niagara University and knew he needed a creative way to pay for an advanced degree.

The 24-year-old found the key in an assistantship program, a pathway undertaken by many local college students pursuing master's and doctorate degrees. As Smith earned his MBA at Niagara from 2015 to 2017, he was a graduate assistant in the university's Office of Career Services.

The job: He did work closely related to his MBA concentration in human resources, including helping students with resumes and cover letters. He also helped market events and did presentations that helped him overcome his fear of public speaking.

The compensation: Niagara paid for his master's degree and paid him \$3,000 per semester during the assistantship.

He also worked as an intern and then part-time employee at Blue-Cross BlueShield of Western New York, which hired him full-time upon his graduation in spring 2017. He now works there as a recruitment process and systems specialist.

"The assistantship helped push me out of my comfort zone and learn new skills which have absolutely paid off now that I've started working full-time in a career," he said.

Many local colleges have a robust assistantship model, helping students simultaneously get professional experience while finding a way to pay for their studies.

Niagara University has 25 assistantships – five of which are tied to Ph.D. programs and the rest tied to master's programs – and spends about \$580,000 annually on tuition and stipends, said Thomas Chambers, faculty director in strategic enrollment management for graduate studies.

With about 1,000 graduate students, the positions are competitive.



Sean Smith, 24, started as an intern at BlueCross BlueShield of WNY in June 2016 and remained with the company while he completed a graduate assistantship and MBA at Niagara University. He is now an HR data analyst for the insurer.

“When I was in graduate school, an assistantship might have involved grading exams or filing a book request for a professor,” Chambers said. “Those are not the kind of assistantships we have. These are hands-on learning opportunities relevant to people’s fields.”

SUNY Buffalo State supports 35 assistantships, paying the full tuition and offering annual stipends ranging from \$5,000 to \$7,500, said Kevin Miller, dean of the graduate school.

That’s actually down from about 43 as the college sought ways to deal with declining state subsidies as a share of its overall revenue. But Miller said Buffalo State still appreciates the proposition an assistantship offers a student.

“It’s an extremely valuable experience,” he said. “The students make connections that serve them beyond their time on campus, and they gain skill sets that range from planning to problem-solving.”

Each graduate assistant at Canisius College is embedded in the discipline they’re studying, with the purpose of making connections with relevant professionals, said Anne-Marie Dobies, director of The Griff Center for Academic Engagement.

For instance, four Canisius students studying for master’s degrees in higher education and student affairs work alongside professional staff at the college, doing everything from advisement to career services to advancement.

“It’s a great way for students to get that practical experience moving forward,” Dobies said.

**Dan Miner**

Reporter

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