The Patent Experience Extern Program (PEEP) is the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s (USPTO) unpaid externship (student volunteer) program. Externships range from eight to 14 weeks and provide students the opportunity to interact with experts in various disciplines, while developing personal and professional skills.

Opportunities are available in the areas of engineering, science and law. Students learn about the agency’s mission and get to experience what it is like to be a patent examiner, specifically the responsibilities of various patent practices, including obtaining a practical working knowledge of patent decision-making processes.

Most students participate in the program during the summer. However, spring and fall opportunities are available on a limited basis. Externships are typically available at our agency headquarters in Alexandria, VA, and our regional offices in Dallas, TX; Denver, CO; Detroit, MI; and San Jose, CA.

In addition, we provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. These include on-demand sign language interpretation, real-time captioning, memory aid recording devices, office video phones, screen readers and more.

Visit www.uspto.gov/jobs/student-programs to learn more about the Patent Experience Extern Program. Please note that we do not provide lodging or accommodations.
If you ask Shannon why she applied for an externship with the USPTO, her answer would be simple. “In college, I heard about the intersection of engineering and law and was eager to learn more about the field. I felt that the Patent Experience Externship Program would provide the initial exposure to intellectual property I was looking for.”

During Shannon’s two-month externship in the summer of 2011, she worked on patent applications involving semiconductor technology. What she enjoyed most was obtaining first-hand patent examining experience. “I was assigned real cases and used the actual search tools full-time examiners use. My favorite assignment was a hearing aid application because it was a device that has benefited my family. It was cool to see inventors working to improve that existing technology.”

As Shannon reflects on her experience, she believes participating in the externship program is a good opportunity because it provides more than a glimpse into the life of a full-time examiner. She had to prioritize her cases to meet deadlines, conduct research to determine whether the technology disclosed in patent applications already existed, speak with attorneys and complete legal and technical writing, just as full-time examiners do.

Today, Shannon holds a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering from the University of Virginia, and she has been a full-time patent examiner for two years. She continues to do work on semiconductor technology, as she did as an extern. Her favorite part of her job is being able to clearly understand its expectations. “I know my exact duties and can easily construct a list of priorities. The USPTO provides all the resources that are required to succeed in my job.”

And if you ask Shannon why she likes working at the USPTO, she enjoys the agency’s sense of community. “People are welcoming and eager to help new examiners. I also like that the USPTO offers a diverse array of employee affinity groups, which are organizations based on shared interests. They provide opportunities to meet co-workers outside the office.”

If you have an interest in engineering and law, Shannon recommends that you pursue an externship and ultimately a full-time examiner position with the USPTO. “Since joining the agency, I’ve always felt welcome and secure. I can certainly say that you cannot find this community and flexibility in every organization.”

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Uyen's journey at the USPTO began in 2011, when she was an eight-week summer extern in the Patent Experience Extern Program (PEEP). Uyen learned about the USPTO from her brother, who was already a patent examiner. Neither of them knew about the program, so when Uyen began researching the agency, she was surprised to discover PEEP. “I was interested in applying for a job as an examiner, and I thought the externship program would be a good opportunity to learn more about the job itself.”

When Uyen started as an extern, her first stop was the Patent Training Academy, where she spent eight days learning about examining patent applications. From there, she was assigned to a group that examined applications related to electrical circuits and systems, and she worked alongside a patent examiner.

“I enjoyed my externship experience. It was nice being on campus and living in Alexandria, about 15 minutes from Washington, D.C. The public transit system was so convenient, I took the Metro from work into D.C. I loved visiting the museums, restaurants, and neighborhoods.”

Starting at the USPTO as an extern helped Uyen realize that working for the agency as a patent examiner was a good fit for her. “The combination of my brother working at the agency and my externship experience positively influenced my decision to pursue a full-time job. Through the externship, I was able to understand the responsibilities and challenges of being an examiner. However, what was most important to me was the satisfaction of having a career I could see myself excelling in.”

Upon receiving her Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from the University of South Florida in 2013, Uyen immediately joined the USPTO. She says, “The work I do as an examiner is similar to my experience as an extern, so I think PEEP did a good job at preparing me.”

Today, Uyen lives in Florida and is an examiner in the Patents Hoteling Program (PHP). She was able to return to her native Florida as a full-time teleworker after meeting all of the PHP requirements.

She examines patent applications related to static memory. “I see how my decisions impact the consumer through products like cell phones, games and computers. It’s amazing to see patents applied to the real world and shape technologies that we use every day.”

Uyen recommends the agency as a great place to work. “I have a good work/life balance, and I’m happy. I would suggest students participate in PEEP to get a feel for what being an examiner is like.”