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RALEIGH -- Forty-seven college students are being steeped in the workings of their counties under a new summer internship program.

The Public Service Internship Program is designed to foster a new generation of community leaders in North Carolina's rural counties. The interns, working in their home counties, will rotate among different county departments to better understand the issues their communities face. Each student is paired with a local government mentor.

The program is sponsored by the by the State Employees' Credit Union Foundation and administered by the N.C. Rural Economic Development Center in cooperation with county governments.

"These interns not only will be giving back to their communities in the short term, but will learn what is needed to improve the long-term economic future of North Carolina's rural communities," said Jo Anne Sanford, a member of the SECU Foundation Board of Directors.

The interns and their mentors attended an orientation session last month that included a bus tour to study innovative rural communities. Each intern will receive a $2,500 stipend for 160 hours of work. The interns are rising sophomores or juniors at one of the 16 campuses of the University of North Carolina System or are enrolled in a two-year college program of one of North Carolina's 58 community colleges.

"We are impressed with the quality of these students and with their desire to serve their home communities," said Billy Ray Hall, Rural Center president. "We couldn't ask for better partners to ensure a strong and vibrant rural North Carolina."