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# Recommendations for a Successful Internship Program

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## Abstract

The value of and need for work-related experiential learning in college curricula have received increased attention in recent years. Activities such as internships and co-ops provide important and well-documented advantages to students, colleges, and employers. Recommendations for a successful internship program are presented and discussed in this article.

## Introduction

Work-related experiential learning activities such as internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships have a long history of being offered as components in college curricula, but typically as options in which few students participate. A number of articles have recently been published which not only provide additional evidence for the value and importance of work-related experiential learning activities, but also stress the need to require all students to complete such course work.

Sutliff (1995) reported on the growth of interest in youth apprenticeship education programs affiliated with educational institutions. Hoerner (1994) argued for the need to initiate applied, work-based learning strategies throughout the educational system for all students. Brink (1994) noted that one of the recommendations of an external review team evaluating the curriculum in the Animal Science Department, University of Nebraska, was that greater emphasis should be placed on the student internship and work-experience programs. Merritt and Hamm (1994) reported that as part of a complete re-evaluation and revision of the curricula at Cook College, Rutgers University, experience-based education was included as one of eight objectives that must be met.

Bekkum (1993) conducted a national study on the experience needs of college graduates in agriculture as perceived by employers and found that they placed great value on co-op programs, internships, and various other work experiences. He highly recommended that a directed experience such as co-op or internship be included to complement the academic program. Herring, Gantzer, and Nolting (1990) summarized many of the advantages and benefits of internships based on

a survey of departments of agronomy. These included providing depth to the undergraduate degree, helping students develop self-confidence, enhancing students' problem solving skills, and promoting professionalism. A potential problem area identified by the survey was the lack of direct faculty control of the internship experience. Fanwick and Gartin (1990) surveyed former interns and their employers to determine the effectiveness of the internship program in the College of Agricultural Sciences, Colorado State University. The authors found that the internship was viewed positively by interns and that employers ranked it as an important criteria for selecting employees.

Zimmerman (1990) discussed the importance and need of industry involvement in college educational programs and the value of a required internship course as a link in such college and industry partnerships. Authors such as Coorts (1987), Broder and Houston (1986), and Merritt (1984), have included various types of work-related experiential learning in their recommendations for improving and updating college curricula in agriculture.

The author has more than twenty years of experience with internship courses at two universities and in both associate and baccalaureate degree programs. Based on this background, experience, and information from the literature, he has developed a list of recommendations for a successful internship program which are presented and discussed in this article.

## Recommendations

**Note:** Although internships are the particular focus of this article, these recommendations are also applicable for other types of work-based experiential learning activities. Also, the author will provide copies of any of the written materials discussed below on request.

**Make internship a required course.** Making internship a requirement not only guarantees that all graduates will have participated in this valuable activity, but also makes the experience much more effective because it can be incorporated as an integral part of the curriculum. By becoming a basic part of the tradition and culture of a college, the internship program is strengthened and provides additional benefits to all involved.

**Require that all intern students be paid employees.** In order to gain the maximum benefits of a work-based learn-

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ing experience, students need to be placed in a "real-world" situation in which they are actual employees and subject to the same requirements, expectations, and conditions of their co-workers. This also eliminates concerns regarding liability and other problems associated with having non-employee interns at the work site. It should be noted that some governmental agencies and other nonprofit organizations have formal volunteer internship programs which treat interns very similar to paid personnel.

**Assign to students the responsibility for finding internship employment.** Students should have the responsibility of identifying and securing a work position that is appropriate as an internship experience. This policy ensures that students will have the opportunity to develop and practice important employment seeking skills such as conducting a formal job search, writing resumes and letters of application, filling out job applications, making follow-up calls, and completing interviews in a "real world" environment. The instructor's role should be limited to assisting students in finding internship employment by providing leads and helping students develop their employment seeking skills.

**Design and implement a well-structured and organized internship program.** Because most of the internship program is based on off-campus activities and assignments, faculty do not have direct control of all aspects of the course. Therefore, it is critical that the internship program be designed with adequate structure, organization, and management systems in place. Also, if an internship experience is to be most effective, it needs to involve much more than simply sending a student off-campus to independently complete a work experience.

**Create and make available to students and prospective internship employers a clearly-written and comprehensive course syllabus.** A major factor for success in offering an internship program is having all essential information in a printed course syllabus which is made available to students and prospective employers. This enables students and employers to learn about requirements, timelines, and the roles, duties, and responsibilities of all parties before committing to an internship. The syllabus also serves as the official document for the internship program.

**Structure the internship so that paperwork and formal obligations on the part of the employer are minimized.** Employers who agree to participate in the internship program are donating time and effort to assist the college in educating students. Therefore, it is important that the college structure the internship to minimize paperwork and formal obligations on the part of employers. Examples include having all parties sign a standardized agreement form (but not a formal contract) prior to the start of the internship; providing pre-printed forms to employers for evaluating students; requiring that students be subject to all the regular employment practices of their employers including hiring, dismissal, work schedule, and wages; and placing no obligations on the part of employers regarding employment of students after completion of the internship period.

**Develop and provide standardized forms to students and employers.** Standardized forms are convenient, save time for all involved, and provide a uniform format for recording important internship information. Forms are graded on the basis of completeness and being returned on time. Forms used by the author are the *Employment Agreement* which records basic information and details about the internship position, the *Tenth Day Report* which contains questions for students to answer concerning the status of the internship experience during this preliminary period, *Activity Reports* which cover details of work activity and skills learned on a bi-weekly or monthly basis, and *Evaluations* which are used by employers on a regular basis to evaluate the performance and progress made by students on the job.

**Hold pre-internship sessions with students at which the course is discussed and packets containing the various internship documents are distributed.** The internship program and requirements should be discussed in detail with students at prearranged sessions early in the quarter or semester preceding the planned work experience. Packets which contain two copies of the student and employer course syllabus, the correct number of each type of the four standardized forms, pre-addressed postage-paid return envelopes for the forms, and a copy of the journal handout should be distributed at the start of the session and serve as the basis of the discussion. Extra copies of the course syllabus should be made available to those students who are investigating internship opportunities with several different employers.

**Carefully evaluate each proposed internship position and employer prior to approving it as an internship station.** Internship employers obviously play a major role in the internship course and experience. Although intern students are expected to perform normal job functions like any regular employee, employers are asked to expose students to as many different phases of the organization as economic and time constraints permit. The instructor needs to evaluate the proposed internship position and employer to make sure that the objectives of the course will be met and that the student will complete a variety of work experiences within the general context of the primary job assignment.

**Do not get directly involved in wage or salary negotiations.** Just as is the case with other employees, the pay received by internship students is established by their employers. Students and employers mutually agree on a starting wage or salary prior to the internship. If asked to provide recommendations about wages, the instructor should be ready to state the general range of pay other interns are receiving.

**Offer internship as a graded course.** Internship is one of the most important courses in the curriculum and therefore should be offered for a grade just like any other course. However, it is important that students be held to the same standards of rigor in the internship course as in classroom courses. If instructors routinely award high grades to all intern students instead of assigning a complete range of grades based on differences in the performance of students in completing the various course requirements, then it would be more honest and appropriate to revert to a simple S/U grading system.

**Base internship grades on a system which includes several different criteria and types of assignments.** As in any course, it is important that the internship instructor's assessment of the student's performance and resultant course grade be based on several different criteria and types of assignments. Some of these will be unique to the internship course. The author uses the following system for determining the course grade: Forms - 10%; Employer Evaluation - 25%; Instructor Evaluation - 10%; Term Paper - 35%; and Journal - 20%.

**Assign a term paper as a major requirement of the internship.** One of the ways that a structured internship differs from a simple work experience is the expectation that students think and learn about broader aspects of the organization and industry in which they are employed. The term paper serves to guide students in this endeavor and provides a vehicle for capturing what they have learned. Major topics covered in the term paper include the employer's organization, products and services, service area, competition, buildings, and major equipment; policy and operational recommendations for improving efficiency and performance; safety issues; details of on-the-job activities; and comments regarding the internship experience. Specific instructions and requirements for and a detailed outline of the term paper should be included in the course syllabus. Copies of several high-quality term papers submitted by students who previously completed internship (used with their permission) should be made available as examples for review by current students.

**Require that students keep a journal while on internship.** A journal is an excellent tool for students to informally record internship activities and experiences. However, a journal is more than just a written log because students also write about their thoughts and feelings. Therefore, keeping a journal not only helps students in preparation for writing the term paper, but it is also a valuable experience in itself and therefore is a very effective assignment. The author provides students with an internship journal handout which contains detailed information about journals and the journal assignment. Copies of a range of entries from journals submitted by students who previously completed internship (used with their permission) should be made available as examples for review by current students. Selected journal entries are read and discussed with students during the site visit. The journal is collected and graded at the end of the internship period and then returned to the student during an individual meeting with the instructor at the end of the course. Readers interested in more information about journals are referred to an article by Zimmerman (1991) which presents a detailed discussion of journals and their use in internship and other courses.

**Base part of the internship grade on both the employer's and instructor's evaluation of the student's on-the-job performance.** Because credit for the internship course is based on actually working for an employer, it is appropriate that the employer's evaluation of the student's performance be included as part of the grade. Standardized forms listing the performance criteria to be used should be made available to employers. Students should be evaluated at least twice dur-

ing the internship so that progress and improvement can be monitored. It is important to realize that the expectations and attitudes of individuals completing the evaluations will vary. Therefore, the internship instructor, who has the advantage of observing and comparing the performance of all the interning students to a common standard, should assign part of the performance grade.

**Make at least one on-site visit.** A site visit to the internship location by the instructor or a designated representative has important benefits to all involved and should be a requirement of the internship program. Students often comment on how much they look forward to and enjoy visits from their instructors. These trips help instructors keep current with changes in the industry and the interaction with employers provides excellent public relations benefits for the college. If college-owned vehicles are not provided, then mileage reimbursement funds should be budgeted for the course. The time and date of the visit need to be arranged in advance. The instructor should meet jointly with the student and supervisor and then individually with each. The instructor should develop a set routine to follow at each visit including a standardized list of questions to ask the intern and the supervisor during the oral interviews.

**Require that students enroll in and pay fees for the internship course during the quarter or semester in which they intern.** At some colleges students are allowed to register for an internship course during the quarter or semester when they return to campus, which means they pay lower or even no fees for the course. However, a high-quality internship program has considerable instructional and other costs associated with the awarding of academic credit to the student. Therefore, it is appropriate that students register and pay fees for this course during the quarter or semester in which they are interning.

**Include the internship course in calculations of teaching load.** If instructors are assigned the internship course during a regular quarter or semester, then the course should be included as part of the teaching load. Instructors should receive supplemental pay if they are assigned the internship course during the summer or other off-quarter or semester. Proper coordination of the internship course involves a considerable amount of time and effort, and instructors deserve to be compensated just as they would for any other course.

## Conclusion

The benefits of work-related experiential learning activities are well-documented. Many recent studies of college curricula have suggested that programs such as internships or co-ops be required for all students. Requiring that every student complete an internship or other type of work-related experiential course represents a major commitment by and presents unique challenges to college and industry personnel. However, with proper planning, organization, structure, and control, off-campus work-related courses such as internships can be successfully and effectively integrated into the college curricula.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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The NACTA Journal Book Review policy encourages the academic freedom of peers in the constructive criticism of unsolicited books submitted by publishers for review. The peer reviewers are persons who teach and/or conduct research in the subject matter area in which the book is written. A given review expresses the opinion of only the reviewer, and does not necessarily reflect the opinions of NACTA and/or the NACTA Journal.

**John R. Campbell. *Reclaiming a Lost Heritage, Land-Grant and Other Higher Education Initiatives for the Twenty-first Century.* Iowa State University Press, Ames. 1995. 269 pp. Hard cover, \$32.95.**

John Campbell's work, in short, is both a source book and a guidebook to the exciting future of the American state and land-grant universities in their continuing mission of service to this democracy and, indeed, to the world. This book could hardly be more timely, coming as it does when numerous entities across the spectrum of activities in our nation are needing just such inspiration and just such a resource as they plan for coping with the challenges higher education will face in the next millennium.

The value and virtue of Campbell's book is that it puts state and land-grant universities into clear perspective in context of both their history and their future. The author—having served higher education the past four decades as a teacher-researcher, director of academic programs, college dean, and university president—is extraordinarily well-qualified to do this job.

The specific merit of this book is two-fold. First, it honors education. This book reminds us over again through sharp and telling anecdotes—a trademark found in Campbell's other books including his classic, "In Touch with Students"—why these people serving universities have been essential to the fulfillment of the signal ideas of American democracy. If some of the points are obvious, they are not always as well appreciated and understood as they should be.

Second, this book, while drawing on the past and explaining the present, forthrightly speaks to the future. It is a future in which the state and land-grant universities must play a revitalized central role. We must continually remind ourselves not only of the history but also of the promise of a tomorrow founded on the concept of education as an absolutely essential element of continuing progress as a nation.

Campbell's overarching purpose in this book is to revisit the truism that the course of human events is ultimately determined not by a select few—important though they may be—but it is determined rather by those in the mainstream of society. He reminds us that Thomas Jefferson's belief in the common people led him to vigorously espouse the notion that a democracy works best when its citizens are well educated. Democracy cannot succeed without the benefits of education and education cannot fulfill its potential without democracy. The land-grant college and university system has contributed immeasurably to providing greater educational access to the citizens of the United States.

The author further points out that land-grant colleges and universities are on the hinge of history. While closely connected with the past, many are swinging into other directions. This book revisits their historical past. It examines the public mandate that served so well as their guiding compass. It describes and attempts to evaluate significant new developments. Finally and importantly, it proposes new initiatives for the twenty-first century. If implemented, the new directions could help garner greater public support as land-grant institutions respond to crucial public issues and needs.

"Reclaiming a Lost Heritage" will become a standard reference for those interested and involved in higher education in general and land-grant institutions in particular. It is especially timely today as public institutions of higher education focus on priorities and plans for the future.

I commend this scholarly work to your attention. I expect every teacher and program administrator in higher education will find it, as I did, stimulating, valuable and profoundly encouraging.

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