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ADVICE FROM AN INTERNSHIP VETERAN

Virtually every academic area in our institution requires a student internship. Though they vary widely in frequency and duration by program, internships are viewed as critical components to student professional development and graduate placement.

Our student internship experience has evolved gradually into a mechanism that yields high value for students, employers, program, and institution. Colleagues from other institutions seek advice on implementing and administering student internships—e.g., "Which companies employ interns?" or "What do interns normally make?" However, the advice they need most includes the following recommendations.

Emphasize learning. While we underscore the real-life work component of our internship program to students and employers, we view the internship site as an off-campus learning environment. In this context, students advance the skills and knowledge they have worked hard to acquire, as well as gain new experiences and expertise—for which all interns are accountable (they must record their experiences and reflect on them). From our view, if the experience does not include an academic component, then it is not an internship; it is a job.

Be flexible. The timelines of external organizations rarely coincide with academic calendars. As educators, we have two primary responses: 1) fight it, and be frustrated when things do not work out; or 2) be flexible, and keep an internship employer happy. While accommodating employer timelines has challenged us to be creative, we always have managed to facilitate positive internship placements.

Do not forget spring and fall. Most employers think of internships as occurring during the summer, but often are open to working with interns during other times of the year, as well. In fact, programs that facilitate internships during times other than summer often can increase their intern placements—and, consequently, graduate placements—significantly.

Recognize the commitment. In our program, internships require personal visits; constant contact with interns, their mentors, and human resources' personnel; and management of timesheets and reports, etc. If an institution or program is unable or unprepared to commit the valuable time and attention of one or more faculty to the placement, monitoring, and evaluation of student interns, then internships are discouraged strongly.

Set pre-requisite standards. Though employers are equipped to orient new employees to their unique processes and systems, too often students are allowed to undertake internships for which they are patently unprepared—resulting in intern and employer frustration. Our program has established minimum academic standards students must meet before undertaking internships. However, regardless of the specific prevention(s) implemented, students should never be sent into situations for which they do not possess the skills and knowledge to be successful.

Develop mentors. Clearly, the individual(s) that interns work with most closely have the greatest impact on the quality of their experiences. However, individuals who have never worked with interns—or even interns from a particular internship program—often have little idea what the expectations should be for interns or themselves. Not surprisingly, short orientation sessions with mentors can yield great dividends in the long run.

Know the benefits—for employers. Educators frequently speak of the rewards for students who undertake internships. There is no shortage of publications that enumerate the benefits students gain from these experiences. However, we rarely have to sell students on the virtues of internships. In fact, most jump at the chance to participate. In contrast, we regularly find ourselves speaking with prospective internship employers about the benefits they will derive as a result of participating in an internship program.

Through internships, employers are able to work closely with new talent—with fresh perspectives and current skills—at costs below those they would normally have to pay a more seasoned professional. Internships also provide employers with opportunities to evaluate interns' skills and knowledge, and how well they fit into particular organizational cultures—important considerations in determining whether employment offers will be

extended. However, even if an organization hires only a small portion of the interns it employs, internships allow employers to play a direct role in the development of the talent pool for their industry, while providing students with exposure to experiences virtually impossible to replicate in an academic setting.

Close the loop. Just as interns and employers can benefit significantly from internships, academic programs and institutions can, too. Unfortunately, few make use of available feedback.

Academic advisors can use employer feedback to tailor remaining portions of student plans of study to address any weaknesses that may have been identified during internships. Programs can use information provided by interns and employers to improve the overall quality of the internship process and emphasize students' prior learning experiences. Internship programs also represent important means through which institutions can evaluate the extent to which their workforce-oriented programs are serving constituents. Poor utilization of such valuable feedback is practically unthinkable in an age of increased postsecondary competition and accountability.

Do it right; everybody wins. Institutions, programs, students, and employers vary widely. Student internship experiences will, too. However, administered correctly, internships can be win-win-win-win experiences.

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BE A SCHOLAR, TOO

Sometime faculty choose to remember only the negatives and the hard work of their own education and training, not the joy and excitement of new learning and discovery. Often, the only reason that a teaching professional goes back to school is to advance in rank or salary. Being turned off to their own learning most likely affects their teaching.

Continue to be a student, retain that enthusiasm, and do something for yourself. First, mentally take yourself back to school and find that thought, idea, fact, piece of research, or theory that fascinated you, but which you consigned to a shelf in your brain because you had no time or energy to pursue it. Second, recall the reason it captivated you, and put it into a conceptual framework. Third, start a journal around the topic. Read something about it, find a former mentor or a wise veteran teacher, and talk about it. Be careful, start slowly, and pace yourself. Do not use it as an escape from something you really need to do. And, remember to journal.

Slowly, but surely, your thirst for knowledge will have you reading everything you can find about the subject. Seek out others who are also interested, and share. You will find a new enthusiasm for life as you transform yourself into a discoverer of new ideas. Even when you find that someone else was "there first," you will be inspired to continue on to discover something else new. It is certain to recharge your teaching. Remarkably, those who take the "road not yet traveled" are often rewarded for blazing a trail, but the sheer exhilaration of the trip becomes its own reward.

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