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Internships

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Internships

Students Engage in Community and Find Careers



Dr. Lara Smith-Sitton

The internship course provides guided and supervised practical experience to participating MAPW students. Each internship is chosen according to the students' concentration, allowing them to further explore their professional interests. Dr. Lara Smith-Sitton is the English Department's Director of Community Engagement, and the Q&A below explores her involvement with the Department's community engagement work, as well as her work with students regarding professional development, both in and outside of internships.

What is your role in the department with respect to professional development of MAPW students?

One of my scholarly interests relates to the pre-professional needs of students and the expectations of twenty-first-century employers. I build upon this research within our Department to help writing and English studies students prepare for rich and valuable careers and professional endeavors. I also work within the broader community to educate employers about the qualifications and abilities of our students in our program. These are some of the responsibilities of my role as the Director of Community Engagement. Yet, I am well-aware this work is not completed by me alone—we have a rich, engaged faculty who also supports our program and students. I just have the privilege of really dedicating a substantive amount of time to this alongside of my teaching.

Specifically, there are three primary ways that I work within the English Department to support the professional needs of our students. First, my teaching focuses on writing, editing, and rhetoric courses. Within these classes, I include community-engagement projects and other activities that explore how the academic and theoretical content explored within those courses transfers to opportunities outside of classrooms. Second, as the English Department's Director of Community Engagement, I oversee the internship program and work to not only identify and build community partnerships that serve the interests and needs of our students but also reveal to organizations in the community the range of skills and abilities of our students.

I also teach PRWR 7600, the practical internship course. Third, I am here as a resource for students supporting individual career goals. This facet of my work gives me the opportunity to help students in a variety of ways, for example the development of writing or project portfolio content, creation of strong resumes and/or vitas, drafting of graduate school application materials, crafting capstones that articulate students' unique research and practicum interests, and preparing students for job interviews. I recognize that the KSU Department of Career Development and Planning also works to support our students, but I approach these topics in ways that specifically serve our disciplines. I want students to maximize their MAPW program efforts and see how they can reach their goals and compete for the positions they feel would benefit them professionally—I am glad to be help with these explorations and efforts.

In your experience, what kinds of opportunities have been created between the MAPW program and the community that allow for professional development of our students?

When I joined the faculty in 2015, the MAPW program had a strong presence in the community because of the students in our program and the work of our faculty. I, however, was hired to develop more opportunities that help the professional development of our students. The department has really done so much over these past few years. First, I would have to say working to expand internship experiences for graduate students to explore career opportunities in the Atlanta community is one of the most significant projects I have undertaken. We had some existing

partnerships, but I am working to develop stronger relationships so that the internship providers look to our program first for interns. This calls upon me to gain a better understanding of the professional interests of our students as well as projects that could lead to practicums and other capstone-related work. For example, Peachtree Publishers has a strong framework for internships, but we helped one student build upon an editorial internship to develop a style guide that provided for a practicum capstone project and content for her writing portfolio. Another example is a student who had an interest expanding her understanding of community-engaged and service-learning pedagogies. Recognizing that she intended to pursue teaching at the university level, we constructed an internship that gave her the opportunity to learn about these topics and construct pedagogically-sound projects that she could not only implement within her composition courses but also develop a research project that strengthened her PhD application materials.

Could you provide a brief description of the internship course?

I think of the internship itself as a text book for the course, so you first have to get an internship and apply for internship credit. Throughout the course of the term, students attend group and individual internship conferences to discuss topics related to their internships and learn about the experiences of other MAPW students. In the internship conferences, we discuss assignments and the learning outcomes for the course. Largely, I teach the course as an advanced writing course where students have a series of assignments to choose from that work to enhance their individual internship experiences and prepare them for future professional opportunities. For example, a student may elect to craft a written biographical sketch that they will use for a writing portfolio or develop a video biography or resume. Students also select a book that directly informs their internship responsibilities and write a book review. Other assignment options include a self-evaluation with reflective writings in the form of behavioral interview question responses and conference abstracts or proposals. Many students have come back to advise these assignments were so valuable. One student who will be on the market in the fall advised that in looking at job postings, some companies are requesting a video resume—she is so glad she has one to submit! Other students have published their book reviews in scholarly journals, which provided publications for their resumes or vitas and strengthened their PhD program applications. These assignments are meant to give students opportunities to learn how to prepare these kinds of deliverables and receive critical feedback that will allow for finalizing them for future use.

The internship course provides opportunities for students to maximize their experiences through faculty support, assignments, and discussion throughout the internship period. I am able to support students and the internship providers to build valuable internship experiences—this, I believe, can transform internships into rich experiences. I hope to grow the enrollment in this course in the year ahead. The opportunity to teach a class that provides for a space for these kinds of practical, challenging writing assignments with a career focus is helping our students achieve their professional goals once they leave the program—well, even while they are still in the MAPW program. I hope more students will seize the opportunity to gain practical experience while continuing to advance their writing and research abilities.

How do these professional development opportunities help the students?

As I mentioned above the practical, direct conversations about not only jobs but also what is needed to compete for jobs just helps our students connect the dots to reach their career goals. I also want to add that I think education is about experience and learning. The more students know, the more prepared they are to make deliberate decisions about how they spend their time and where they place their energies. I spent a good amount of time discussing the practical, pragmatic facets of my work, but I also believe these initiatives serve the personal interests of our students. Many are in this program because they love writing—all kinds of writing—writing that is found in so many different forms and locations. Professional development gives individuals options—options for work and knowledge about the opportunities that may exist for them beyond this program to engage in the world of writing for personal or professional enjoyment.

I believe that it is hard to get where you are going without a map. Professional development is about creating a map—you may take detours or change your final destination—but a map calls you to plan, know what to pack, and get going on the road to somewhere new. And with this map, you know you are headed somewhere and prepared for a variety of stops along the way.