

# The Value of Internships

Ed Seagle, Regents' Distinguished Professor of Teaching and Learning,  
Associate Professor of Environmental Horticulture,  
Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College

Internships are vital components in the curriculum of many college students in their preparation for life and work. Through these experiences, students are able to identify and develop life skills that were perhaps only discussed in case studies in the traditional classroom setting. To see specific daily activities in progress, to observe people's actions and reactions, and to perform a viable function in the real world are three goals which better prepare the intern through improved problem solving skills. Interns are able to think creatively and critically, and exercise rational approaches to finding answers. In college, students learn to think, but it may not be systematically applied. In the workplace, thinking is employed both analytically and diagnostically in the problem solving process.

According to Inkster and Ross (1995) there is a meaningful educational value at the core of an internship experience. Their experience as academic advisors has taught them that the primary value of an internship lies in its contribution to the student's intellectual and ethical growth. Furthermore, an internship engages the student in a unique relationship between the work place and the academic institution - a three-way partnership where the intern, site supervisor and academic coordinator/advisor are key players in the learning opportunity. By their definition, "an internship is a structured and supervised professional experience, within an approved agency, for which a student earns academic credit." An internship differs from an independent study or research project, which often involves extensive library research and study on a topic or research question and which rarely is guided by learning goals or supervised by both academics and agency personnel.

Internships are motivational as well as educational in that they work as a stimulant to the participating student intern. Such programs encourage the student by providing each with a preview of what's appearing on the forefront of their chosen career. This synergistic effect carries over into the remainder of their college classes and is long-lasting well into their careers. They are able to experience human resource and project management on the job. They are better able to realize the needs of the workplace and the characteristics needed by the workforce of the future.

Stanton and Ali (1994) described an internship as "any experience wherein students learn by taking on responsible roles as workers in organizations and observing and reflecting on what happens while they are there." Expected outcomes of such experiences include increased self-esteem and personal growth derived from successful meeting new interpersonal and intellectual challenges, acquisition of particular skills and knowledge, exposure to various work roles and

career choices, and service to a particular community or group. Also, Kendall, Duley, Little, Permaul and Rubin (1986) noted that everyone - faculty, students, administrators, field sponsors and experiential educators - have praised the value of experience as an effective means of exploring career goals and preparing for specific careers.

The true value of the internship must be experienced, not just described or mimicked in lab. Careful site selection, student intern and employer staffing, selective management styles, documentation of work activities and training exercises through record keeping and reporting, accountability measured by class identification and application during the internship, and further communication through student intern seminar presentations are vital components of an effective internship program.

A model internship could best be described in a pyramid configuration. The three base corners represent the student intern, the employer and the collegiate advisor or professor. The vertical peak represents the workplace. The three faces of the pyramid represent the training and activities building towards experience, the collegiate curriculum, and human and material resource management. The base of the pyramid that supports the entire structure denotes written, verbal and non-verbal communications.

Characteristics and skills experienced during an internship program include work ethics, dependability, personality, judgment, initiative, cooperation, teamwork, determination, leadership, organization and problem solving. Working with others as a team in setting priorities and achieving job completion becomes a rewarding reality. A better understanding of management decisions and their impact on the daily activities is realized. Student interns develop a more global vision of the workplace rather than becoming comfortable and critical with a more limiting, smaller local picture.

## REFERENCES:

- Inkster, Robert P. and Roseanna G. Ross. *The Internship as Partnership: A Handbook for Campus-Based Coordinators and Advisors*. Raleigh, NC: National Society for Experiential Education, 1995.
- Kendall, Jane C., John S. Duley, Thomas C. Little, Jane S. Permaul and Sharon Rubin. *Strengthening Experiential Education within Your Institution*. Raleigh, NC: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1986.
- Stanton, Timothy and Kamil Ali. *The Experienced Hand: A Student Manual for Making the Most of an Internship*. Raleigh, NC: National Society for Experiential Education, 1994.