



Internships as a High-Impact Practice: Some Reflections on Quality

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Before joining AAC&U, I worked at a large university as a program director and counselor in career services, focusing much of my time on helping students identify their interests, figure out the connections between their academic majors and future careers, and test out these interests and connections experientially, most commonly through internships.

The beauty of internships is that they can serve different purposes for different students. For those students just beginning to figure out their choice of major and career interests, an internship can help them to become aware of the many different kinds of organizations comprising “the world of work,” build early professional experience, and sometimes discover what they *don’t* want to do. For those students who are clearer about their career interests and academic pursuits, an internship can help them apply what they are learning in “real world” settings, gain more substantial professional experience, and begin to develop a network of people in fields that interest them.

For both types of students, internships can challenge them to take an active role in charting both their short-term and long-term plans. Following an internship, some students add a second major or use their elective credit to complete a certificate or minor. Some change their majors completely. Regardless of the paths students eventually take, internships can help students understand in a profound way that college is a time to explore their interests, clarify their values, and test their knowledge and skills in new settings.

This is the ideal scenario, anyway. It is true that for a number of the students I worked with, internships provided a high-impact learning experience that integrated learning and real-world experience. At the same time, I also met many students who landed in my office precisely because their internships lacked direction and meaningful work. These students, frustrated and disappointed, began to view internships quite cynically as “resume fillers” and “door openers” that needed to be completed in order to land a job after graduation.

What made these experiences so different? What makes an internship, as an experiential activity, high impact—or not?

WHAT MAKES A PRACTICE HIGH-IMPACT?

The 2008 report *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, published by AAC&U as part of its LEAP initiative, sparked a great deal of interest among college and university leaders looking to increase student success. In the report, author George Kuh uses data from the National Survey of Student Engagement to demonstrate the positive impact of a set of educational practices on student engagement and success. The practices are familiar to most campus leaders: first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, community-based learning, and capstone courses and projects. Rounding out the list is internships.

Kuh’s argument is that as long as these practices remain marginal to the whole curriculum, there will be insufficient breadth to reach all students and insufficient depth to help students become more sophisticated in their learning over time. His message for increasing student success is simple: “make it possible for every student to participate in *at least two high-impact activities* during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field” (Kuh 2008).

Yet there is another, equally important message in Kuh’s report, and it relates to the *quality* of these experiences. In the report, Kuh identifies six common elements across the practices that—*when employed*—make the practices high impact:

They are effortful. High-impact practices “demand that students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks [and] require daily decisions that deepen students’ investment in the



activity as well as their commitment to their academic program and the college.”

They help students build substantive relationships. High-impact practices “demand [that students] interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters ... over extended periods of time.” High-impact practices help students “develop a meaningful relationship with another person ... a faculty or staff member, student, coworker, or supervisor” and “put students in the company of mentors and advisers as well as peers who share intellectual interests and are committed to seeing that students succeed.”

They help students engage across differences. High-impact practices help students “experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves” and “challenge students to develop new ways of thinking about and responding immediately to novel circumstances as they work ... on intellectual and practical tasks, inside and outside the classroom, on and off campus.”

They provide students with rich feedback. High-impact practices offer students “frequent feedback about their performance ... [For example,] having one’s performance evaluated by the internship supervisor is rich with opportunities for immediate formal and informal feedback. Indeed, because students perform in close proximity to supervisors or peers, feedback is almost continuous.”

They help students apply and test what they are learning in new situations. High-impact practices provide “opportunities for students to see how what they are learning works in different settings, on and off campus. These opportunities to integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge are essential to deep, meaningful learning experiences.”

They provide opportunities for students to reflect on the people they are becoming. High-impact practices “deepen learning and brings one’s values and beliefs into awareness; [they] help

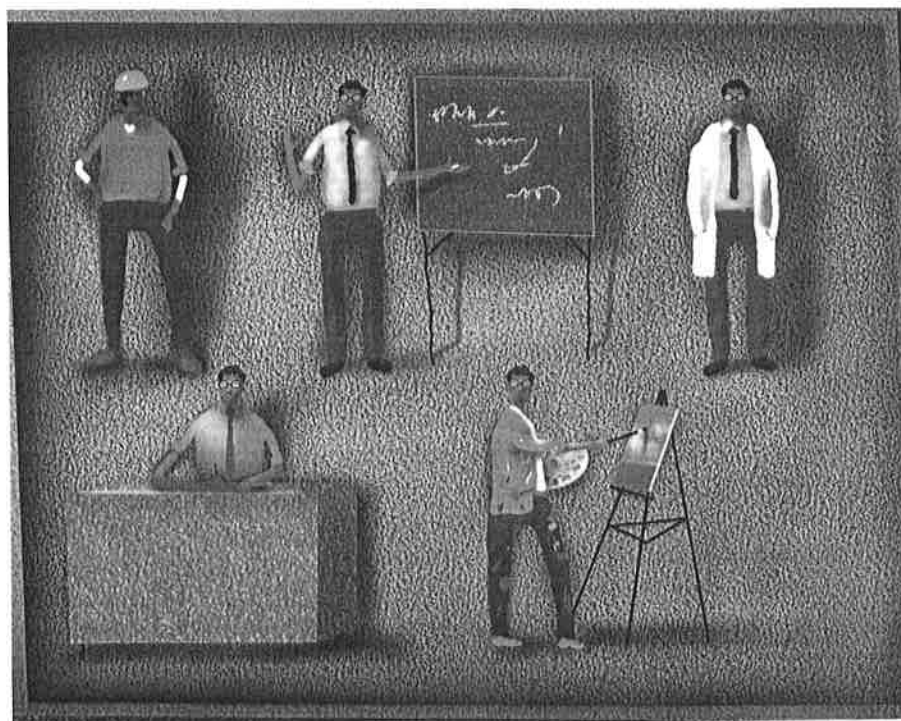
students develop the ability to take the measure of events and actions and put them in perspective. As a result, students better understand themselves in relation to others and the larger world, and they acquire the intellectual tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition.”

Based on these elements, we can posit that an internship is more likely be “high impact” for students when it is intentionally organized as an activity that leads to particular learning outcomes; when students apply what they have learned in courses to work experiences, reflect on these experiences, and receive feedback that helps them to improve; when students build mentoring relationships with supervisors, faculty, and peers; when students are exposed to differences across people and in ways of thinking; and when students are asked to use their experiences to clarify their values, interests, and personal goals—including, in this case, their values, interests, and goals related to careers.

Campus leaders examining any of the “high-impact” practices on the list may find instances where a practice exhibits fewer of these characteristics than one would hope. Yet one could imagine that internships, more than many of the other practices included in the report, have a *higher degree of variability* in terms of their learning potential. I believe there are several reasons for this, beginning with how an institution defines an internship.

WHAT IS AN INTERNSHIP?

An Internet search of “internship definition” yields more than fourteen million responses, with many from campus websites. Definitions found on campus sites have some commonalities but also some interesting differences. One large university’s arts and sciences career services webpage describes an internship as something that “*integrates career related experience into an undergraduate education through participation in planned, supervised work.*” A smaller university’s center for experiential





education website describes an internship as *"a supervised discipline-related work experience [involving] an intentional experiential learning strategy, an emphasis on professional development, performance assessments, and reflection and acknowledgment."*

Moving to a community college, a cooperative education department web page describes an internship as something that *"engage[s] students in a process of active learning that links work experience with opportunities for critical analysis and reflection."* A small liberal arts college's career development web page describes an internship as *"a pre-professional opportunity within a specific career...It is specific, project-based, and allows the intern to gain exposure to the kinds of duties of an entry-level person in that career. An internship has a supervision component where an experienced professional will provide guidance and exposure to areas of that career."* Finally, a large university's career center web page describes an internship as *"a real world experience related to your career goals and interests. It may, but does not have to be related /connected to your academic major or minor."*

Commonalities across the definitions include a reflection component, onsite supervision/guidance, and gaining exposure to a career or furthering one's interest in a career. Across the definitions, internships are characterized as "experiential," "active," and "real world." Projects and reflection are mentioned, and one definition references assessment. Important for the discussion here, some of the descriptions refer to a student's academics—the discipline or academic major or minor or undergraduate education generally. One description mentions a specific learning goal, critical analysis. However, in one case the connection to academics is optional, and in another case there is no mention of academics at all.

This comparison underscores the point that internships can easily vary *even before a student takes a step to become involved in one.*

It also suggests that whether an internship is high impact may depend as much on the standard that an institution sets for those engaged in developing internships.

A comprehensive standard comes from the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), a consortium of thirty-five professional associations "concerned with the development and promulgation of professional standards and guidelines for student learning and personal development support programs" in higher education (www.cas.edu). In its standards for internship programs, CAS describes internships as becoming "an integral part of a college education" over the last forty years due to two forces: efforts to make learning relevant in order to "solve societal problems" as well as "demand by students and parents for a more career-oriented curriculum." The standards note that:

What distinguishes internships from other forms of active learning is that there is a degree of supervision and self-study that allows students to "learn by doing" and to reflect upon that learning in a way that achieves certain learning goals and objectives. Feedback for improvement and the development or refinement of learning goals is also essential. What distinguishes an intern from a volunteer is the deliberative form of learning that takes place. There must be a balance between learning and contributing, and the student, the student's institution, and the internship placement site must share in the responsibility to ensure that the balance is appropriate and that the learning is of sufficiently high quality to warrant the effort, which might include academic credit.

The CAS standards emphasize that an internship should be framed and developed as a *learning activity*. An internship should be "a deliberative form of learning" that involves "doing," reflection, and "feedback for improvement"—all in support of "learning goals and objectives." According

to the CAS statement, this would happen whether the internship is part time or full time and whether it is for credit or not for credit.

The quality of internships also is affected by how well the experience is developed and implemented. AAC&U argues that a main reason for variation in quality has to do with a lack of consistent intentionality on the part of institutions:

Students today have many opportunities for "learning in the field," including service-learning courses, internships, cooperative education, and community-based research ... While all these experiences present rich opportunities for connecting knowledge with choices and action, too many are essentially "add-ons" in which students are left to their own devices for any insights gained. Students perform service on their own time; they find jobs and even internships independently of their academic studies ... (AAC&U 2007)

What CAS calls for in being "deliberative" about internships, AAC&U pinpoints in its call for campuses to be "intentional" about integrating experiential learning, such as internships, "into the curriculum":

To apply knowledge productively in field-based settings, all students should experience in-depth questioning from faculty, staff, and other mentors about their assumptions, analyses, conclusions, and actions. Learners also need both guidance and feedback, from mentors and peers, as they probe the facets of a complex issue and test their own insights against both theory and the experiences of others. (AAC&U 2007)

In other words, internships provide a location in which students can test out theories and methods learned in courses, but they also contribute rich material to students' academic experience that they can and should draw on in the context of their learning with faculty, staff, and peers. What then, can campuses do better ensure



that internships are integrated into the curricular experiences of students?

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING INTERNSHIPS

Strengthen how internships are defined. Some of the campus definitions made clear the connection between an internship experience and the student's undergraduate education, but not all did. Not all campuses or academic departments will require internships of their students or offer course credit for all internships that students complete, and this is not an argument for that to occur. Rather, if we follow the CAS philosophy that all internships be anchored to learning objectives, there is utility in thinking about ways in which students could be asked to draw on their internship experiences (and other experiential learning) in their courses—even traditional courses that don't have community-based components themselves. Moreover, students also can be asked to articulate their learning and career development from internship experiences—credit or noncredit—through an e-portfolio or some other mechanism designed to help them to integrate the variety of classroom and nonclassroom based experiences they will have in college. What is critical is to have students enter a process where faculty, staff, and peers ask them to reflect, challenge their assumptions, test theories, and make connections across different sites of learning.

Distinguish between learning goals and career development goals—and include both. Again, as witnessed in some of the campus definitions, internships can be framed in a way that speaks very little to what *college learning* could and should take place through the activity. Yet internships can be designed by faculty/advisers, students, and site supervisors with specific learning goals in mind. For example, AAC&U has articulated a set of learning outcomes related to personal and

social responsibility that includes ethical reasoning, taking seriously the perspectives of others, and striving for excellence. One could imagine crafting an internship with a student, or an entire internship course, that included goals related to exploring ethical decision-making in the workplace, reflecting on what "striving for excellence" means vis-à-vis developing as a professional in a particular field, or consciously including multiple and competing perspectives as part of solving a problem in the field.

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At the same time, this internship or internship course can and should *also* have a set of career development goals. These could include clarification of work-related interests and values; exposure to several types of work settings within an industry; the development of contacts in a particular field; or the creation of work samples that can be shared with future employers.

Address departmental reluctance to do "vocational education." A study of sociology graduates recently presented at the meeting of the American Sociological Association indicated that among 2005 sociology graduates, "70 percent were satisfied with their major when they were seniors. By 2009, asked whether they were satisfied with their major after having been in the world of work or graduate school for a few years, only 40 percent were satisfied." The reason for this, according to an article covering the meeting, is that "generally, sociology graduates ... give very low marks to their programs for career (or graduate

school) preparation. And graduating seniors tend to say that they learned the least about the skills they perceive may help them the most when it comes to getting jobs."

Why is there so little focus on career development in an academic discipline? The article continued:

At the same time, scholars said that they were proud of their intellectual traditions and didn't want to sacrifice them ... The [ASA] has just released a resource guide for departments on

helping their students get ready for jobs. The guide and the discussion about it here dealt with a mix of packaging vs. curricular change—and speakers stressed that these changes did not involve watering down the curriculum.

The idea that addressing career development in the context of the major would "water down" the curriculum is a powerful one, with deep roots. It reveals a common reaction in academia against anything that smacks of vocationalism or apprenticeship. What suffers, as a result, are things like hands-on learning, developing marketable skills, or "learning by doing"—exactly what internships can provide. Yet internships organized as learning activities can also encourage application of sociology concepts and methods to complex problems, critical thinking, strong communication and interpersonal skills, and personal and social responsibility.

The fact is that the vast majority of undergraduate majors will not go on to



become PhDs in an academic discipline; they will become editors, branch managers, research analysts, correspondents, lawyers, and dozens of other things. Students ultimately will respond to this antivocationalism by protesting with their feet—changing majors or transferring institutions—or by later expressing dissatisfaction when they should be serving as ambassadors for a discipline and for a particular program. Professional programs typically give more attention to real-world capacities than the traditional arts and sciences disciplines, though a recent *New York Times* article indicates that even philosophy

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programs are now increasingly focusing on the discipline's relevance for careers and for making sense of complex, contemporary issues—and drawing record numbers of majors.

Improve collaboration and communication between career services professionals and faculty. One of the side effects of antivocationalism in the academy is the tendency to relegate career development to student affairs, which stereotypically deals with the “lesser” (i.e., nonacademic) aspects of students' lives. Yet all of the high-impact practices identified by Kuh, including internships, would benefit from collaborative designs developed between student affairs, faculty, and academic administrators, particularly at the dean level. Consider an internship course where a department wanted to strike a balance between career development and learning goals. The course could be team-taught by faculty and career services professionals or could feature

embedded career development modules offered through a campus career center that could then be woven back into the course and addressed in student reflections.

Departments could also partner with career development professionals to develop ongoing relationships with a variety of employers, keyed to the interests of students in a particular discipline. This practice has a long history, again, in preprofessional and professional programs, including cooperative education programs in engineering and architecture.

With regard to internships, it is worth noting that CAS deliberately crafted its

standards for internship programs to include both student affairs and academic departments:

Of considerable significance is the... notion that an internship program is not the sole purview of a career center or off-campus programs office... Setting standards for internship programs will establish for administrators, faculty, and staff a set of benchmarks that identify what a quality internship program on a college campus should be [and it assumes] that there is sufficient communication between [these entities] so that the appropriate expertise can be utilized across divisions and throughout the campus.

Mid- to senior-level academic and student affairs administrators, in particular, have an important role to play here. There must be a willingness on the part of an institution to remove or reduce barriers to collaboration and communication, including the formal

and informal ways in which individuals, especially faculty, are rewarded for *not* collaborating within and across departments and units.

CONCLUSION

Are internships high-impact educational experiences? This is a question individual campuses and departments will need to answer for themselves. In this issue, readers will learn about the high degree of the intentionality with which several colleges and universities are designing or redesigning internships. This issue is particularly timely, given the worldwide economic downturn and the need for employees to have broad and flexible skill sets in order to evolve within a highly volatile work world.

To fulfill this “high-impact” potential, everyone—faculty, advisors, career development professionals, and employers—must agree to help students set and fulfill explicit learning and career development goals for internships. Whether students complete an internship for credit or not for credit, or closely connected to or tangential to their majors, it is critical that they no longer “be left to their own devices” in developing, completing, and utilizing these experiences to further their learning and professional development. ■

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