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# Internships: Academic Learning Outcomes

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PROPONENTS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING have long recognized the learning benefits students can achieve through internships, service-learning experiences, and co-ops. There are others, however, who see those experiences as "career exploration," "good for the resume," but not integral to academic learning and so, not valid for the earning of academic credit. Even if internships are viewed as a valid component of the learning cycle (Kolb), what do we expect students to learn? How do we articulate outcomes that relate to a student's discipline major or to a liberal arts curriculum? Finally, how can we assess whether a student is meeting the outcomes we identify?

The Experiential Learning Committee at Alverno College, a liberal arts college for women, wrestled with those questions for over a year as we re-examined the learning outcomes for our internship program. We hope that the statement of these outcomes might be of assistance to those who are establishing academic programs or seeking academic validation for existing programs.

**Background:** Prior to 1971, Alverno education and nursing students had traditionally put their knowledge to use in off-campus settings, but other students seldom had that same opportunity. In 1971, the faculty, recognizing the value of teaching and clinical field experiences, implemented an internship program for students of all majors. Early in the development of the program, the faculty also articulated a theoretical philosophy as an academic foundation for experiential learning and through the years have continued to refine it. The philosophy drew primarily on the work of Kolb and Argyris and Schon. In recent years, Boud's work on reflection, in particular, has affirmed and stimulated our thinking on how students learn from experience. Faculty were and are convinced of the academic validity of the learning students can gain from an internship experience.

As more students and faculty became voluntarily involved in the program, they also recognized the learning benefits. In the late 1970s some discipline departments began to require an internship of their students. Presently, all departments require at least one internship as part of a student's academic program. The student earns academic credit for the internship with the discipline department of the student's major awarding the credit and determining the number of credits. A central office administers the program.

Because we award academic credit for the internship, we require faculty monitoring of the learning-from-experience process. The monitoring, concurrent with the placement, takes place through a seminar or individual faculty supervision. We offer three semester-long seminars. One interdisciplinary seminar is for students participating in their first internship. In keeping with the interdisciplinary approach, two faculty from different disciplines teach the seminar. The other two seminars are for students majoring in business and management or psychology who are required to do a second internship; a faculty member from the respective discipline teaches a departmental seminar. Other

departments, which do not offer a discipline-based seminar, provide a faculty member to monitor a student's second internship by meeting with her periodically throughout the semester.

An Experiential Learning Committee oversees the process described thus far. It is a standing committee composed of faculty representatives from the discipline divisions, a representative from the office of Career Development, and administrative staff of the Off-Campus Experiential Learning program. As described in the Alverno Educator's Handbook (Appendix 3), its main functions are to:

- Ensure quality in all of the college's experiential learning programs:

- conceptualize the role and developmental nature of experiential learning;
  - promote the coordination of experiential learning programs and the integration of experiential learning into the total curriculum;
  - develop procedures and policies for experiential learning;
  - collaborate with other college committees as appropriate to further implement experiential learning strategies.
- Train faculty and site mentors as appropriate in order to maintain quality of programs.
  - Explore, develop, and refine theoretical frameworks which examine the relationship between learning, experience, and student development:
    - establish and maintain relationships with national and regional associations concerned with experiential learning;
    - disseminate theoretical insights and practical applications to the college as a whole and to external groups and individuals.

**Rationale:** As part of its function, the Experiential Learning Committee recently saw a need to re-articulate the outcomes for our internship program. Our rationale included the following considerations:

- Need to have uniform outcomes across disciplines. Prior to this, each discipline articulated its own outcomes for the off-campus experience.
- Need to take a fresh look at what we expect our students to gain from an internship.

■ Need to make clearer to students, mentors, and faculty how internship outcomes relate to the liberal arts curriculum, the disciplines, and the eight abilities we teach for, i.e., Communication, Analysis, Problem Solving, Valuing in Decision-Making, Social Interaction, Global Perspectives, Effective Citizenship, and Aesthetic Responsiveness.

■ Need to make the outcomes reflect our experiential learning philosophy in a more explicit manner.

■ Need to assure that outcomes for internships are consistent with outcomes for other programs which incorporate a requirement for off-campus experience, e.g., nursing, education, and music therapy.

■ Need to educate newer faculty about the academic value of off-campus experiences to gain their involvement and commitment.

■ Need to motivate experienced faculty to continue their commitment to the integral relationship of practice and theory.

**Process:** Members of the Experiential Learning Committee brainstormed academic expectations for internships, synthesized ideas, and created a draft of outcomes, which was distributed to discipline chairs and other key persons, then rewrote and distributed a second draft. Our final version is now being implemented. We redesigned all internship forms to reflect more clearly the outcomes we identified. This was a labor-intensive process but the final version was collaboratively arrived at and agreed to by all participants.

**Internship Outcomes, Examples, and Assessment:** Each outcome defines the criteria we would ask students to demonstrate in order to meet the intent of the stated outcome. What follows is a discussion of these outcomes and their criteria.

■ **Articulates connections between student's off-campus experiences and course work across the college curriculum.**

■ *Recognizes and articulates multiple perspectives:* All students take a core of general studies including science, psychology, social science, arts, and humanities. Students begin to develop the ability to look at multiple perspectives through and across these various discipline courses. They also learn to identify their values in relation to other value systems. By the time the students do their internships in their third or fourth year, they have had significant practice in developing these critical abilities in a structured classroom setting. The students are now ready to test out these skills in a less structured, less predictable setting such as a work environment.

One exercise, which the instructors use in the first interdisciplinary internship seminar asks students to respond to a real scenario from a past work experience that produced conflict. They deliberately use a past experience to avoid any present emotional response. Based on conflict resolution, perspective taking, and valuing, small groups within the class discuss the situation and propose various responses. It is critical in this exercise that students take into account more than just the student perspective. They need to consider the perspective of the site supervisor, co-workers, and the organization. They also need to understand the value system of each in relation to the student. The intent is to have students see how they can transfer the process to their internship experience if needed.

■ *Articulates relationships among individuals, internal organizational departments, and the organization within the larger social context:* Through their liberal studies students have begun to develop a world view. In that context, students in a second internship experience, required of all business and management majors, explore the social responsibility of their respective organizations. In the research process they are required to interview someone at the internship site on the topic of social responsibility and its connection to the organization's mission. They also investigate what social programs the organization already supports. As a classroom assignment, the student identifies a specific social issue of concern to her. She takes on the role of a permanent employee and describes the relationship among individuals, internal organizational departments, and the organization within the larger social context. To successfully complete this assignment the student must provide a plan of how it would be possible to work within the organization to achieve some action to address this social need.

■ *Takes responsibility for her own learning:* During the first two years of her liberal arts studies the student develops increased sophistication in taking responsibility for her own learning. When the student begins her internship she should be able to recognize that she, not her mentor, is responsible for her learning. Her mentor, her faculty instructor, and she herself can evaluate her demonstration of this by providing examples of the following behaviors: seeks information in an appropriate manner, makes connections between the tasks she is doing and the work of the organization, and takes advantage of additional opportunities for learning beyond those provided by her assigned tasks.

■ **Demonstrates discipline departmental outcomes in the work setting.**

■ *Articulates disciplinary outcomes and identifies specific discipline frameworks relevant to the work situation:* Toward the end of the internship in the interdisciplinary seminar, students are asked to articulate the outcomes of their respective majors and minors. In this assessment, students give an oral presentation relating their off-campus experience to these outcomes. Students are asked to give specific examples from the work site of how they applied and adapted discipline frameworks and concepts.

For example, one of the outcomes for our social science majors is to exercise social imagination. Here is how one student described, in her oral presentation, how she met that outcome through her internship at a shelter for battered women:

I was able to do [this] by applying the concepts and models that I've learned through my coursework into [a] real situation, ... to take the situations and experiences that I was hearing from the women and ... then to provide those experiences as examples to explain the models and concepts of domestic violence to the women.

... They basically didn't have much idea about where the men had gotten their behavior from. So I was able to explain socialization to them...one of

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the things I've come to understand the most and can always return back to out of my social science work — socialization — the effect society has on people.

It wasn't because of alcohol or drugs... it may be because of...family...[or] the message society is sending to a man about his position over his wife. I think this [explanation] was able to bring some different thought to the women that took away their own responsibility in a situation and their sense of failure and really helped them to explore different ways to explain what they were going through.

- *Searches out and professionally uses appropriate disciplinary resources and methods to accomplish her required tasks:* Throughout the student's work at the internship site, she needs to search out and professionally use appropriate disciplinary resources and methods to accomplish her required tasks. On her learning goals form, she describes the means to achieve each of her goals by listing not only the tasks at the site but also other resources she needs to use to accomplish her learning goals. In the final review, the seminar instructor will have the site evaluation and the student's self-evaluation to determine whether or not the student demonstrated this criterion.
- **Uses work experience to further develop discipline knowledge and outcomes.**
  - *Articulates how work experience enhanced understanding and use of discipline theories:* Students recognize they may need to modify the models they learned in class. They continue to develop confidence in their ability to adapt frameworks to tackle new challenges within the organizational constraints of time and resources. They increase their sophistication in doing this through the interdisciplinary seminar, discipline courses that follow the internship, and in second internships. We know students do this through class discussions, reflective logs, and student self assessments.
  - *Provides evidence as to how her work experience has led to increasing sophistication in demonstrating discipline outcomes:* A biology major, interning in the paternity department of a blood center, stated the following as one of the outcomes of her major: "Demonstrates proficient library and computer skills in data gathering and analysis." In her required oral presentation she explained how she met that outcome:

I took responsibility to conduct and extend a scientific project. At my [internship] site, I was working with DNA research and I learned how to do the isolation and the purification of the DNA which was going to be used in paternity studies. This further gave me [experience] on [the site's] computers as well as library knowledge to find out the different techniques that would be used and what their uses would be for the real life studies that I was working on.

After the internship we see further evidence of this. For example, the internship experience for many psychology students serves as a stimulus for further research into some of the issues they have encountered. These issues provide the focus for their senior seminar research projects. One student in her placement with a psychologist at a Milwaukee public elementary school assisted in observational assessments to identify hyperactive children who may have had an attention deficit disorder. She became very interested in this subject and chose it as a research topic for her senior seminar in which she explored the possible biological links to the parts of the brain which affect behavior, as well as some of the controversies attached to mislabeling children. Another student did her internship with a large multinational temporary placement service. For her senior seminar she chose to research the psychological profile of the temporary worker and related issues.

- **Develops increasing sophistication in reading the organization.**

- Provides evidence that she understands the formal organizational structure.
- Provides evidence that she understands how the culture of the work environment, including the informal structure, is relevant to her position: In one session of the interdisciplinary seminar, students within their work groups are required to explore organizational structure on a variety of levels. They examine their own family structure, then the college structure, and finally the organizational structure of the internship site. Throughout the analysis, they consider, by comparing and contrasting both the formal and informal structure, how decisions are made and how tasks are assigned (Cromwell, "An Internship Seminar").

The mentor evaluates how well the student shows her understanding of the formal and informal structure of the organization on both the mid-term and final evaluations. This understanding of the organizational structure becomes apparent in whom the student approaches for information or decisions.

- *Demonstrates an understanding of the organization's mission and efficiently contributes to the achievement of the organization's mission:* We rely on the mentor's evaluation of the student's performance at the site for this criterion. In the final evaluation, the mentor is asked to evaluate how well the student met each of the mentor's work goals and to describe the quality of her work. Another question asks how well the student showed initiative in accomplishing assigned tasks, and to provide behavioral evidence.
- **Demonstrates professional responsibility.**
  - Identifies and describes professional expectations within the organization and acts accordingly.
  - Describes the relationship between organizational expectations and professional standards within her field: As students become more familiar with their internship setting and their responsibilities, we ask them, as part of a seminar assignment, to observe and clarify what professional behaviors are expected. Through this assignment, students continue to develop their understanding of how professional behaviors are related to professional responsibility. To help each student develop her own sense of professional respon-

sibility, the class is led through the following process. The student interviews her mentor and colleagues at her site. To get a broader perspective she interviews professionals who are working in her discipline area. The students bring this information to the seminar class and meet in small groups according to their disciplines. They share their ideas and identify issues particular to their discipline. These issues are then posted. Students from various disciplines discuss commonalities and differences in professional responsibility from the perspective of their major. The final part of this assessment requires a student to write a statement of personal professional responsibility, integrating her understanding of professional behaviors, personal commitment, and her own values and ethics to those she observed at her internship site and identified in her research as critical to the standards of professionalism within her discipline. The student can use this paper as part of her professional portfolio.

The site mentor also evaluates the student on her demonstration of the following professional behaviors: confidentiality, professional demeanor as appropriate in that particular work setting, understanding the formal and informal structure of the organization, appropriate personal appearance, dependability, attendance, and punctuality. This evaluation takes place both at mid-term and at the end of the internship.

■ *Successfully completes the mentor's internship work goals:* The mentor identifies the work goals at the beginning of the internship. The student and the mentor discuss these goals and reach an agreement on what is to be accomplished and when. This provides the basis for the mid-term evaluation, which not only provides an opportunity for the student to get feedback on her performance but also to re-evaluate jointly the work goals and the timeline. At the conclusion of the internship the mentor is asked specifically to comment on whether the student met each of the work goals and to give evidence which describes the quality of her work. The student also does a self assessment.

■ *Works efficiently and effectively:* Students need to know that it is not only important to get the site work done but also to have work habits that will lead to efficient and effective use of time and resources. According to site supervisors, abilities such as communication, initiative, independent problem solving, team work, conflict resolution, and acceptance of feedback are essential to the workplace. The site mentor evaluates the student for these abilities on the mid-term and final evaluations.

We strongly recommend that the completion of these forms be a joint activity in which the student and mentor actively participate. It is beneficial to both parties to have a conversation as part of the evaluation process so that they can reach consensus about the student's performance.

■ **Successfully completes the requirements of the accompanying seminar or monitoring faculty member.**

In order to receive credit for the internship experience, the student must do satisfactory work in the seminar and at the internship site. The student must attend the seminar regularly and complete all assignments. If students are doing a second internship where there is no accompanying seminar, the student

must meet periodically with the faculty member who is monitoring her work. She must satisfactorily complete the assignments, many of which are the same as those used in the advanced seminars.

Reflection is the key to the seminar experience and the thread that runs through all the assignments. Reflective logs and self assessments are the two major tools used to document the student's progress. The student is required to reflect on her experiences in a meaningful way to provide a basis for change and to facilitate professional and intellectual growth.

In reflecting on the value of the internship experience, one student cited that the seminar helped her refine and develop her professional skills. The variety of people in the class and in the small groups gave her multiple perspectives on learning styles and allowed her to compare and contrast her own concept of professionalism across a spectrum of disciplines.

**Conclusion:** We implemented these re-articulated outcomes in the fall of 1995. They are doing what we hoped they would do. They guide the internship process from start to finish, from advising, placement, and monitoring to student self assessment. Students and faculty have a consistent, coherent, and explicit framework to talk about how an internship experience relates to an academic discipline within a liberal arts curriculum and to the eight abilities for which we teach.

We hope that our work will be of benefit to those who are establishing internship programs for academic credit. We are eager to engage in a broader conversation with others who have also identified academic outcomes for off-campus experiences.

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