

Internship & Co-Op Information

BEGIN WITH THE BASICS

What is an Internship/Co-Op?

“An Internship/Co-Op is any carefully monitored work or service experience in which an individual has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience.” - National Society for Experiential Education

Why are Internships/Co-Ops so important?

The value of participating in an internship is measured in many ways:

- Gain professional experience in your preferred career field
- Develop or sharpen specific skills that are transferable to a variety of occupations and career fields
- Establish a network of professional contacts within an organization or industry
- Explore and develop a realistic view of the working world

What makes a quality Internship/Co-Op?

Internships can be found in a wide variety of industries and occupations, and although these experiences will be varied by organization and functional role, two common themes can be found in quality experiences:

- 1.) Quality internships involve work on specific projects or programs that provides an opportunity for professional growth and enhances your skill development.
- 2.) Quality internships provide an opportunity to work closely with a professional who will take an interest in what you do, as well as, provide insight about yourself and the nature of the work/industry.

What’s the difference between an Internship and a Co-Op?

Internships and Co-ops are very similar. However, the Co-op is closely monitored by the Career Center and guarantees that you will gain hands-on experience related to your major. The Co-Op requires a two semester commitment and is paid. A student must meet specific qualifications to be accepted into the Co-op program. Additionally, co-op students are evaluated each semester by their supervisors.

Internships may or may not be paid and do not have a GPA requirement. Internships are not monitored by the Career Center and do not have a two semester commitment. Internships are still great ways to gain experience and they also help you figure out what you want to do and what you don’t want to do.

Many times, students are encouraged to complete an internship prior to a co-op to ensure the students’ interests. That way, students are not committed to two semesters and can figure out if they are interested in the field before committing to a co-op.

What's the difference between an Internship/Co-Op and a Part-time (or summer) Job?

There are many similarities between the two, however there is a fundamental difference. Internships are designed to provide a substantive, career related experience, a part-time or summer job serves as a means of earning income.

Internships can be unpaid, paid or done for academic credit. Part-time or summer jobs can provide extremely valuable experience and allow students the opportunity to acquire skills. Both experiences are an essential part of the career development process and can provide you the necessary edge to be an attractive candidate for future employment.

DEMONSTRATE YOUR PROFESSIONALISM

Take on Responsibility

Don't hesitate to ask questions about your work, remember internships are supposed to be a "learning opportunity" and you aren't expected to know everything on day one. As the "new intern" you will encounter a brief grace period where making mistakes is bound to happen and are more readily forgiven. When given an assignment, ask for a clear idea of the results expected of you, a deadline for completion of the project, and where it falls among other priorities. It's o.k. to initiate new projects or responsibilities, just be sure you've discussed it with your supervisor and are able to maintain what is already expected of you.

Develop Interpersonal Skills

Depending upon the culture you may face with a variety of interpersonal challenges such as; working under pressure, knowing when to speak and when to listen, how to handle criticism or praise, or how to be persuasive. Learning how to effectively communicate your ideas or what you know to supervisors, co-workers, or clients will be equally as valuable as knowing how to manage your workload.

Maintain a Positive Attitude

A "can do" attitude is essential, by making sure your time is spent on meaningful, useful and timely assignments you can avoid falling into the trap of having a dull and boring experience. Staying positive, optimistic and focused on the tasks at hand can assist you in dealing with stressful periods and eliminate fatigue. Don't ever engage in gossip about the organization, department or co-workers, it will reflect poorly on you. Let your experience be a memorable one for all the right reasons.

Establish a Professional Network

Cultivate good working relationships with all of your colleagues – your supervisor, co-workers, fellow interns, support staff and professionals in other departments. You will want to develop a solid professional relationship based upon your work performance, not your personal life. Establishing a good network can be essential down the road, as you will want to maintain contact with individuals who will be able to provide you advice, letters of recommendation, or future networking contacts.

Leave Your Mark

Before you leave ensure you have fulfilled all of your responsibilities and tied up any loose ends. Upon completing all of your assignments ask your supervisor for a written letter of reference.

Request this before you leave as your supervisor will be able to evaluate your performance while it's still fresh in his/her mind and gets busy with other things.

After you leave send a Thank you letter to your supervisor and any other employees that provided you guidance or were helpful to you. Your letter should indicate your appreciation for the experience, a review of the learning goals you accomplished, gratitude for any letters of reference written on your behalf, and your contact information should they want to stay in touch with you.

EVALUATING YOUR EXPERIENCE

When you have finished your internship, it's important to reflect on what you have learned, in addition to the specific tasks you performed and the skills you developed. Ask yourself what you learned in relation to your career path:

Was this your ideal work environment? Were you comfortable there?

Were these the type of people (colleagues, clients, etc.) that you enjoyed working with?

Did you prefer team oriented projects or working independently?

Was the pace of the work what you are looking for?

Did it have the right balance of work tasks?

Was the level or style of supervision what you need?

What parts of the experience did you enjoy?

What did you really dislike?

If you could have changed anything about the experience, what would that have been?

Do you see yourself in this field, or do you need to re-evaluate your career choices?

Would you recommend the experience to a peer? What would you say?

Maintaining a daily journal during your internship experience is a great way to assist you with the reflection process. The entries need not be lengthy, but should capture your general thoughts and reactions to your work as you experience them. Reviewing the totality of the experience and sharing your insights about it will help you in making another important step in realizing your career goals.