THOUGHTS ON ACADEMIC INTERNSHIPS, IDEAL AND OTHERWISE

The Ideal Internship - An ideal internship is one that offers the student a progressively challenging work experience, supported by an organization that provides solid orientation, training, supervision, and feedback. The nature of the work is both substantial and relevant to the goals of the organization, allowing the intern to see the value of his/her contribution and to appreciate how this work fits within the context of the larger entity. Academically, the student has engaged a professor/sponsor who is interested in providing guidance throughout the process, beginning with helping to identify internship opportunities that are functionally relevant to the chosen course of study and the student’s individual interests. Through the development of the learning objectives in the contract, ongoing communication and reflection with the student during the term, and processing appropriate learning outcome measures at the end, the faculty sponsor’s role is to help the student explore the interplay between the theoretical and what is being experienced. It is this junction that is the very key to experiential education. Without the grounding in theory and ongoing intellectual challenges of a faculty to help make these connections, the internship experience is diminished in its relevance to a liberal arts education. The ideal internship is enhanced when the intern is also provided with structured opportunities to reflect upon the field experience with other students engaged in similar endeavors (e.g. in a practicum class or in other small group discussions). This dialogue challenges them to more deeply examine their own work and learn from the perspective and values of others.

The Versatile Internship - While this describes a vision of an ideal academic internship, it is imperative to recognize that perhaps the greatest attribute of this structured experience is in its capacity to meet a broad range of learning needs in our student population. Students may use an internship to explore a potential career, to complement a specific class (e.g. working with autistic children while taking a cognitive neuroscience class), or to gain practical skills and experience vital to success in their chosen field (e.g. related to diversity, conflict, assertiveness, stress management, work habits, networking, etc.). From a career development standpoint, early stage internships are invaluable. Attaining the high profile, intellectually challenging senior internship (or job) is increasingly dependent upon a student having had previous successful entry level internship experiences.

Experiential education in the form of individually designed academic internships offers a viable alternative pedagogy that recognizes the idiosyncratic needs/strengths of students and enhances the school’s ability to help each succeed. Students who are losing traction in school, or who are simply overwhelmed by an unrelenting didactic workload often benefit greatly from engaging in an internship that provides a change of pace, setting, and energy that ends up offering a vision of where a liberal arts education may lead. On the other hand, a well designed internship provides the focused student with a golden opportunity to apply developing research, writing, and analytical skills towards real world challenges under conditions not possible in the classroom. To gain a sense of the value of these experiences to students, one need only read the many “internship success stories” gathered on the Macalester website, hear those shared at the annual Internship Reception, or simply peruse the internship self evaluations. The vast majority consider their internships to have been very positive learning experiences, and in many cases, as vital and life-changing.

The Less-than-Ideal-but-Still-Quite-Valuable Internship - Due to the dynamic partnership of the student, faculty, and community partner (ultimately overseen by Macalester’s internship office), an internship can be an excellent learning experience even if one of the components is less than ideal. For instance, an intern working in a relatively chaotic organization with sporadic supervision can compensate for this through the external guidance and structuring provided by the learning contract and the faculty sponsor. The professor offers an academic lens through which the intern may analyze the organization, understand the nature of the work, and approach tasks that can provide meaningful context. Sometimes the nature of the work itself is more busy than meaningful, as, for example, may be the case in certain roles within a political campaign. On the surface these might appear to be poor internships, but if a student aspires to a career in politics, this is an absolutely vital experience. Here again, the faculty sponsor role is to enhance this internship by challenging the student to fully explore the underlying dynamics, organizational structure, and personal skill development necessary to understand and function within a political campaign. Conversely, an internship with a marginally involved faculty sponsor may still result in a positive, relevant learning experience if the work at the host site is solid, the supervision strong, and the academic learning objectives and outcome measures well designed.

The Developing Internship - It is one of the primary roles of the Internship Program to provide oversight that will identify deficiencies in any aspect of the internship partnership, and work to address them through communication, education, and application of program standards for excellence. Commonly, for both faculty and community partners, it is merely a lack of awareness and information that is at the root of performance problems. Most quality internships are developed over time, and it is our charge to monitor the situation, provide feedback, teach the willing and eliminate from the program those disinterested in change.