

# AN EXEMPLARY INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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## ABSTRACT

*Each year, about 250 students from our department serve 240-hour internships with local businesses and participate in a classic win-win situation. All participants benefit from the happy coincidence of a campus located in a thriving economy—the Silicon Valley. This program is unique not because of its place, but because it is so meticulously managed by faculty and has become so respected by the mentors of local industry who sponsor student interns again and again. While 250 per year is a large number, each year more internships are offered than necessary. "Great" internships go fast, but every student is able to find an internship, and sponsors compete for interns nearly to the extent that interns compete for sponsors.*

## BACKGROUND

The internship program is one 3-unit course in a 42-unit B.S. degree. It provides students the opportunity to gain practical experience in a professional work setting as part of their academic program. The student must work 240 hours. We recommend six 40-hour weeks, or the equivalent hours of part time employment not to exceed 12 weeks. A 40-hour week exposes students to the pulse of a company, many of the routines and meetings they might miss if they only worked afternoons or two days a week.

A key to the program's success is that each student must work under the supervision of a qualified working professional. We are choosy about where our students can do an internship. We will turn down campus organizations, for instance, who are interested in having our students do their marketing communications for them, but who have no experienced person to supervise them. It is absolutely necessary that the organizations have experience to pass on to the students, and are not relying on the students to merely implement what they've learned in a few classes. The sponsoring company's authenticity and the individual sponsor's qualifications are verified during the internship by a faculty visit to the internship location.

## Before the Internship

All department majors must take the internship as part of their 42-units. It is recommended that it be taken during the summer between the junior and senior years. Students must have completed nine resident units in the advertising major with a grade of C or better to be eligible to apply for an internship.

Each spring, one or two faculty members will conduct four or five separate internship meetings to describe the process, recommend next steps, highlight resources, and answer student questions. Students must fill out an Internship Prerequisite form, listing all courses taken in the department and the grades earned in those courses, and have the form signed by their faculty advisor. Having satisfactorily passed three courses, the student can offer more to a sponsor than those in some programs where students are allowed to undertake internships any time after they are registered as majors. This requirement is an important one in maintaining the integrity of the program and all sponsors I have talked with appreciate the university's insistence on this prerequisite.

We encourage students to regard the internship as an internship only, and not plan to turn it into a job. Regardless, they have all heard the stories of the students who parlayed internships into great jobs, and many have aspirations of turning that into reality. This puts undue pressure on the sponsor, who in no way has agreed to consider the student for full time employment.

## Waiver of Internship

With significant professional experience, well documented and sworn to by a person the student did the work for, a waiver of the internship requirement is possible, though this seldom happens. The waiver process requires substantial proof of performance and approval by the department curriculum committee. If the internship is waived, the student must take three additional units to meet graduation requirements.

Students are cautioned not to begin an "unofficial" internship at a company, hoping to apply it to the internship program later. These informal internships are often part-time jobs that the student wants to count both ways (often with the winking approval of an employer trying to do the student a favor). When presented to the faculty adviser, these "deals" are often dismissed entirely, sometimes re-aligned to become valid internships in keeping with the rules, but never blessed retroactively. This disappoints some students, but it keeps the program's integrity intact, and everyone benefits in the end.

### **Getting Started**

Students are responsible for finding their own internships, but they get a lot of direction from the department. We maintain four 3-inch binders full of hundreds of final student reports on internships going back over the past two years. Students are free to browse the previous students' reports on their experience with the intern sponsors, and apply to those that appeal to them. The process is much like applying for their first job, and we encourage them to approach it with as much gravity.

We will typically recommend using both a phone call and a resume to initiate the internship interview, advising students to apply early for the more prestigious internships (with Fortune 100 companies and major ad agencies). Early means February for summer internships, and those who put off their search until mid-May when the spring semester is about over will find that most of the first- and second-tier internships are gone and they have to choose among sponsoring companies that, while providing a good experience, won't look so impressive on their resumes.

### **Out of Area Internships**

If students have family or friends in appropriate positions to sponsor them, they can use those connections (and thus build the long-term base of sponsors). If they live out of state, internships can be arranged with select sponsoring companies in their home town, but stringent rules apply. The company must be national in scope or known to at least one faculty member who can vouch for the professionalism of the company.

Our Southern California students often find it not too difficult to secure a sponsor in the Los Angeles/Orange County area. We have enough

student interns there (on the average, 20 each summer), that we send one faculty member down for a week to visit all the sponsoring organizations.

### **Compensation**

At a minimum, sponsors are required to pay for the cost of the course, (currently \$315, paid through our Continuing Education department). If they do not, it is not an internship. No exceptions. This requirement lets sponsors know that we value our students' time and effort, and inclines them to do so too. We are fortunate to be where we are—in an affluent area (median household income in the county approaches \$50,000), rich in jobs and major corporations. Colleagues from areas with a paucity of jobs often feel they are fortunate to get any kind of internship for their students, and believe that requiring sponsors to pay for the course would reduce the number of sponsors. But I strongly recommend requiring the sponsor to pay, at least for the course, or some token to the student, to underscore the very real value to the sponsor of the intern and the internship program.

In addition to paying for the course, we advise sponsors to pay the intern some kind of wage or performance-based bonus. I tell them to plan on an investment of \$1200 to \$1500 for the internship. About 70 percent of the employers pay students a salary, bonus, or commission beyond the course, and students are free to negotiate whatever they can with their sponsors.

### **Faculty Compensation**

Faculty who advise the internship program are compensated as they would be for teaching a summer course through Continuing Education. If 100 students pay \$315 for the course, the university's gross is \$31,500, and portions are allocated to the school, the department, and the individual internship adviser. One faculty member can usually handle 30 to 40 interns during the summer. The compensation for advising this would be at least that equal to teaching a summer course, and usually more.

### **Weekly Reports**

During the internship, students file weekly reports. If they are working less than full time, they file a report every 40 hours that they work, so they all file six reports over the course of their internship. The report describes the work they've been involved in, the time spent on different tasks, includes examples

of their own work, and is open ended to allow for exposition of any problems or concerns. A faculty adviser is on duty to read the reports daily as they come in, and respond to them immediately if the student has asked to be contacted by a faculty member. Sponsors, too, have the option of contacting the department and arranging an interview with a faculty adviser if any problems are occurring. Failure to file weekly reports is cause for termination of the internship.

Both the intern and the supervising sponsor are encouraged to conduct weekly critique sessions specifically on the intern's performance. The purpose is to maximize the value of the experience for both student and employer/sponsor.

### **Faculty Visit**

A key element in the success of this program is the faculty adviser's visit. It should take place in the second week of a full-time internship or the third week of a part-time internship. This timing allows for the sponsor to have had some experience with the intern, and yet enough time to make any corrections or adjustments deemed necessary. On the ideal visit, the faculty adviser will meet individually with the sponsor first, then with the student. The adviser will get an appraisal of the student's performance from the sponsor, noting especially such obvious areas as punctuality, appearance, professionalism, ability to work as a team member, initiative, etc. We have a form for this interview and file it as part of the student's internship file. During the interview, the faculty adviser is also checking on the sponsor's organization if not already familiar with it—does the operation look professional, organized, etc.? is the intern supervisor knowledgeable and experienced?

The faculty adviser also has the opportunity to sell the department and program at this time, perhaps with an eye to lining up potential guest lecturers, placing graduates in positions with growing companies, apprising potential donors of department needs, etc. The faculty adviser can also keep abreast of some of the current practices in the industry, or make appointments to return for more exchange of ideas and techniques. The faculty visit, in short, is a marvelous networking tool, helping establish and maintain links with the local business community.

In interviewing the student, the faculty adviser wants to make sure that the student is satisfied.

Sometimes the students are uncomfortable but can't articulate their dissatisfaction, and it takes a little probing to find and help correct problems. Usually, students are doing very well, enjoying the experience, and eager to get back to school so they can finish and get back to work as a professional.

### **Finishing**

To conclude the internship, students must complete the final questionnaire and file it with the department office. This becomes the data base for next year's aspiring interns. The sponsor must write a letter saying specifically that the intern has satisfactorily completed 240 hours, and commenting on the quality of the student's work. After these letters are filed, and providing the adviser's visit report and the six weekly reports have been filed, the student gets the CR grade. The other grades are No Credit or Incomplete, and the student has to make up the work as in any other class.

### **The Student After the Internship**

Almost without exception, when the student returns to classes in the fall following the internship, it is with a new respect for the courses and their content, a new perspective on the discipline, one energized by a real, if brief, brush with "the real world." They are better students, with a more mature understanding of the need for timeliness and attention to detail.

### **Common Problems Avoided**

A frequently mentioned problem, one that plagues many internship programs, is that sponsoring companies will try to use interns as free or low-price labor to cover summer vacations. We avoid this with three mechanisms: 1). we require the sponsor to pay for the course, at least; 2). we require the sponsor to describe, in writing, the intern's specific activities and approximate time in each; 3). we always have a faculty visit to the site.

Another problem is inappropriate use of interns or insufficient supervision. We have discontinued using organizations as sponsors if they don't use the students correctly. One organization, for instance, had four interns working under a "supervisor" only slightly more experienced than themselves in a "boiler room" telemarketing operation. While some telephone solicitation may be appropriate as part of the overall experience—as, indeed, some making of photocopies and running an errand or two may be

appropriate—we don't send students out to do clerical work and will discontinue any internship in which they are being used primarily that way.

The faculty advisor is always only a phone call away for students who have any problem on the internship. We have often stepped in to help settle misunderstandings between interns and sponsors, and saved what might have been a bad situation. Some can't be saved, and are terminated.

Conversely, we have an obligation to our sponsors to see to it that the student performs in a professional manner. At least once each summer, we terminate an internship because the student's behavior was unacceptable at the sponsor's place of business. At a minimum, students must repeat the internship. Disciplinary action up to dismissal from the university is possible for misconduct.

#### SUMMARY

I call the internship program a win-win-win program. Students love it (*after* they've taken it), faculty advisers typically enjoy it, and sponsors are virtually unanimous in their support. Many sponsors are impressed by the faculty visit to monitor the student's progress, as it shows concern for both the student and the sponsoring organization. Most sponsors come back again and again. Sponsors also like the idea that we require a minimum of nine hours of advertising courses before the internship, and that most students are more than halfway done with the 42 units in the major. For the most part, sponsors don't mind paying the tuition, and most (about 70%) pay a stipend or some additional remuneration to the student, often keyed to performance. Finally, many sponsors or mentors feel this is an excellent way of evaluating prospective employees... and it is.

Our program has momentum, with many regular sponsors of multiple interns. Every year we send a few hundred more students out and many of them are now in a position to be sponsoring interns themselves. Almost without exception, they remember the experience as a valuable one and are more than willing to pass it along.