

Coordinating Internships for Students with Disabilities

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Introduction

An internship is a “fixed-term work experience with clear learning objectives” that takes place outside of the traditional classroom (Stanton, 1992, p. 31). Simply put, internships are a type of experiential learning. Students work with employers in a supervised learning situation for planned learning activities and real-world experience (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999). Internships can be for pay or not for pay, part-time or full-time, and they can range in duration from a few weeks to a few years depending on the type and purpose of the position. In general, internships last three to six months, and sometimes schools will give a student academic credit for their work-based learning (Stanton, 1992). At some institutions, participation in internships is a mandated requirement for obtaining a degree. When internships are a requirement in a course of study, students can be assigned to a specific internship placement; however, it is common for many programs to have a student obtain a placement themselves as an exercise in job hunting.

Though individuals with and without disabilities can benefit greatly from the internship process, the power of internships for those with disabilities takes on additional significance because of social inequalities in education and income that result in drastically poorer employment outcomes for people with disabilities (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Internships can serve as fundamental skill-building tools by which students with disabilities can obtain the critical career development and decision-making competencies needed to compete in an increasingly competitive job market (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Track & Harney, 1998). Listed below are general benefits and guidelines for arranging internships. Also, a sample step-by-step listing of procedures is provided as a template for internship planning.

Possible Benefits of Internships

For All Students: (Stanton, 1992)

- Real-world experience valued by employers
- Career exploration - clarification of career interests
- Opportunity to make job contacts
- Development of new skills
- Improved self-esteem and ability to make decisions, set goals
- Improved classroom performance - academic theory is linked with practice
- Extra spending money, usually in the form of a monthly stipend
- Practice in job seeking, finding a placement that matches one's interests and credentials
- Opportunity to be offered a job upon graduation from school
- Opportunity to sharpen skills learned in prior academic and technical training

For Employers: (Stanton, 1992)

- Inexpensive source of labor - cost of interns and investment of resources minimal
- Opportunity to “try-out” a potential employee to see if the person is suited for the job

- Eagerness to learn of many interns can make them good and productive employees willing to work hard and contribute to the organization

Suggested Guidelines in Arranging Internships

For Educators and Internship Coordinators:

- Determine specific learning objectives of the internship program and review them regularly, on at least an annual basis, in order to stay current with what the industry wants in an employee (Hodgson, 1999).
- Collaborate with both the student and employer to develop a learning experience that will meet everyone's needs (Hodgson, 1999).
- Request that the internship supervisor from the placement site be involved in the internship planning process (Hodgson, 1999).
- Establish a protocol for addressing problems and monitoring progress before the internship starts. Regular meetings with the student intern and occasional emails or phone conversations with the on-site supervisor are good ways to informally monitor progress and resolve issues as they arise (Hodgson, 1999).
- Develop a system of formally evaluating the internship process to see if learning goals and expectations for the internship have been met. This evaluation should occur on a regular basis while the internship is underway, and it should also take place after the internship is over. Feedback on intern performance and the quality of the internship experience should be obtained from all parties involved - from both the student and employer/on-site supervisor - using any combination of reports, questionnaires, meetings, presentations, or one-on-one interviews (Hodgson, 1999).
- Consider long-term follow-up and real-world applications. An internship program can also be evaluated by employment and academic outcomes - for example, how often internships lead to jobs at the placement site and how well the student is able to apply their experiential learning to the classroom setting, respectively (Hodgson, 1999). The ability of an academic program to successfully assist its students in the transition to work reflects positively on the program and serves as a benefit by attracting new student enrollees and improving relationships with employers in the community.
- Be willing to market the benefits of internships to a variety of employers - some that are experienced in hosting interns and some that are new to school-to-work activities. If time constraints prevent you from communicating with potential employers, see if your academic unit has a work-study coordinator or tech prep coordinator available to help you (Hodgson, 1999).

For All Students:

- Make an appointment with an academic advisor, mentor, or faculty member that you trust in your field of study early in the course of your academic program to discuss internship opportunities and any program requirements you must fulfill in order to obtain full academic credit.
- Be proactive. Though some academic programs will arrange internship placements for you, other programs place the responsibility of finding an internship solely on your shoulders. How much assistance you receive in acquiring or planning an internship varies greatly from program to program. However, most academic advisors or departments will have a listing of previous internship placements you can contact. You should also visit career services on campus and investigate what resources they have available for internships. It is always a good idea to speak with a career counselor or equivalent about your interests and academic program, your learning needs, job search and resume skills, upcoming workshops and career fairs, and what on-line or print-based resources are available to assist you in finding an internship (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999).

- Make it a priority to attend workshops, career fairs, and seminars on career development. You will expand your network of contacts, improve your job seeking skills, and enhance your awareness of resources and opportunities available, thus giving you a competitive edge (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999; University of Kentucky Engaging Differences Project, 2000).
- Speak with friends or contacts within associations you might belong (fraternities, sororities, community service organizations, honor societies, etc.) about career/internship opportunities and experiences. Notably, upperclassmen or individuals a year or two ahead of you in your program of study can also provide a wealth of information and advice on internship seeking.

For Employers:

- Market your internship opportunities to colleges and universities locally (and regionally if possible) through career fairs, workshops, print-based materials, on-line advertisements, etc. Develop relationships with college career centers, Disability Support Services offices, academic departments, and work-based learning programs as well as workforce development centers in the community.
- Update your position announcements regularly in both on-line and print-based forms. Notify internship coordinators, work-based learning programs, and career centers of new position announcements (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999; University of Kentucky Engaging Differences Project, 2000).
- Provide orientation and training to the student intern before he/she is expected to perform job duties. Allowing the intern to acclimate to the work setting and to get comfortable with his/her job responsibilities will result in better performance and less frustration.

Important Considerations in Arranging Internships for People with Disabilities

For Educators and Internship Coordinators:

- Encourage students with disabilities to actively pursue internships and encourage employers to recruit students with disabilities for work opportunities (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999; University of Kentucky Engaging Differences Project, 2000).
- Meet with the student and if applicable, his/her disability services counselor to assess specific learning and accommodation needs so the internship experience can be planned accordingly.
- Work collaboratively with the student and employer/on-site supervisor to arrange for accommodations. Ideally, the student should disclose his/her accommodation needs to the employer, but sometimes follow-up or further clarification from the educator or internship coordinator is necessary to ensure that appropriate accommodations are made and that the work needs of both student and employer are being met. Since it may be necessary to discuss with the employer the purpose of the accommodations and their appropriateness for the completion of job tasks, don't be afraid to consult with both the student and his/her disability services counselor for any information that will facilitate the accommodations process.
- When you arrange internship sites for the institution or develop contracts with these sites, provide information on role expectations to all parties involved, such as a handbook or other reference material. Clarify to whom accommodation requests will be made and how they will be implemented.
- Know the rights of students and employers under the law so you can be an effective liaison between the student intern and the placement site. Consult the Office of Disability Services to discuss how accommodations are provided in the workplace and the employment implications of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

For Students with Disabilities:

- Register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and speak with a disability services counselor about possible campus resources or options for work-based learning. Though it is not the responsibility of ODS to find you an internship, they can often be a good place to start for information, referral, and to view posted positions and opportunities for work (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999).
- Let ODS and internship coordinators know what accommodations you might need to effectively perform in a work setting early on before you are placed in an internship so that ample time can be made to make arrangements (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999; University of Kentucky Engaging Differences Project, 2000). If you are unsure as to what accommodations you might need, work with ODS to identify what accommodations would best suit your particular disability.
- Consider transportation needs. It is your responsibility, not the responsibility of ODS or the employer, to get you to your internship site. When selecting an internship, evaluate whether or not transportation will be a problem, find out what arrangements can be made, and discuss your needs with your internship coordinator so that he/she is aware of the situation and can help you find the most appropriate job match.
- Be your own advocate; once you start an internship, keep the internship coordinator and on-site supervisor informed of your progress and if you have any learning or functioning needs that are not being met. If an accommodation isn't working and/or if you need a different accommodation, be sure to keep all parties informed as you go rather than waiting until after the internship is over to voice your concerns.
- Know what your rights and responsibilities are under your institution's college's policies and the law. That is, be aware of the legal implications of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and what workplace accommodations you are entitled to under the law. If you do not self-identify and present current documentation of your disability, you might not be eligible to receive accommodations. Consult with ODS to obtain more information.

For Employers:

- Work with the various work-based learning programs, career centers, and disability service providers on college campuses and within the community at large to promote internship opportunities to students with disabilities (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999; University of Kentucky Engaging Differences Project, 2000).
- Be flexible and collaborative. Work with the internship coordinator, if available. If there is no internship coordinator, work with the student and the institution's Office of Disability Services or equivalent to ensure that the student with a disability is appropriately accommodated on the job.
- Know your rights and responsibilities under the law to provide appropriate accommodations for individuals with disabilities. If you have questions or concerns, seek consultation on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Disability Support Services, Academic Affairs offices, internship coordinators, and academic advisors/departments might be able to address your concerns. Some institutions also have an ADA Coordinator to specifically assist with understanding and implementation of the law.
- Train your staff on diversity and disability awareness so that on-site supervisors and co-workers are informed and supportive (University of Washington DO-IT Program, 1999; University of Kentucky Engaging Differences Project, 2000).

Sample Procedures in the Internship Planning Process*

(*Adapted from an Introductory Internship Syllabus developed by Nancy Dugan, Ohio State University)

Student Objectives

By the end of the work experience, the student will be able to do the following:

- Use a variety of skills needed by competent entry-level workers in the area of specialization.
- Exhibit positive attitudes and work cooperatively with employer/supervisors and employees.
- Identify areas in which additional knowledge and/or skills are needed to perform competently in entry-level jobs in the area of specialization.
- Set goals and objectives for improving and/or developing and gaining additional knowledge.

Instructional Objectives

- Plan a work experience with employer/supervisor and write a work experience proposal.
- Participate in a practical work experience and initiate/complete project(s) related to the work experience to achieve objectives planned.

Evaluations

The instructor will determine a grade for the student after a conference and examination of the projects and evaluations (employer/supervisor and student's).

Learning Activities

The student will do the following:

- Contact the employer and obtain employment.
- Write a Work Experience Proposal, which is to be approved by the instructor and the employer/supervisor.
- Plan, write up, and implement a program for work experience and projects during the work experience with the approval of the employer/supervisor and the instructor.
- Develop projects completed during the internship.
- Complete an evaluation of work experience.

Responsibilities of the Student Intern

- Meets with Academic Advisor and develops a plan of study that includes the appropriate courses.
- Schedules an appointment with the instructor to discuss internship opportunities and requirements the semester before the internship semester.
- Completes the Internship Application and submits to instructor.
- Contacts the organization with whom he/she wishes to work and discusses with them the learning experiences that are available and meet the student's area of interest.
- Completes the Internship Contract and returns it to the instructor.
- Participates in a seminar prior to internship.
- Gives Employer Evaluation to the supervisor that will be evaluating his/her performance.
- Schedules an appointment to meet with the instructor midway of the internship.
- Submits the Mid-Quarter Report and weekly work schedule to instructor.
- Completes the Self-Evaluation Form and meets with Supervisor to review student's performance during the internship.
- Completes and turns in Student's Self-Evaluation and Employer/Supervisor's Evaluation forms at the end of the internship.
- Submits projects for evaluation by the instructor at the end of internship.
- Arranges a final conference with the instructor.

Responsibility of the Instructor

- Talks to the student about possible internship positions and/or gives them feedback about current positions. Helps students generate ideas for relevant work experiences and project ideas.
- Hands out an Internship Packet with information and forms.
- Gives student permission to enroll after completion of the Application form and verifies the completion of all requirements.
- Assists students in preparing Work Experience and Project proposals and gives approval.
- Confers with the student occasionally throughout the quarter, and meets with the student to review Mid-Quarter Report.
- Evaluates final internship projects and meets with student to evaluate the internship experience.

Responsibility of the Employer/Supervisor

- Determines the conditions of employment and completes the Internship Contract.
- Approves the Work Experience Schedule and Project Proposal.
- Guarantees the student the appropriate number of required hours.
- Supervises work experience.
- Completes the Employer/Supervisor Evaluation form concerning the intern and meets with them during the end of the internship to review with the student their work performance during the internship.

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Additional Resources

Disability and Business Technical Assistance Centers (DBTACs). These ten regional centers act as a "one-stop" comprehensive resource on ADA issues in employment, public services, public accommodations, and communications. Available at: <http://www.adata.org/dbtac.html>

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Home Page, U.S. Department of Justice. Available at: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

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Important Note

This information is available in alternate format upon request. Please call the Office for Disability Services at (724) 738-4877.

It is also available at <http://www.sru.edu/ods> and Accommodate faculty resources tab at <https://sru-accommodate.symplcity.com/>.

Public requests for accommodations through the Office of Disability Services can be made by visiting the following link: https://sru-accommodate.symplcity.com/public_accommodation.

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