

# Effective Strategies for Organizing Undergraduate Internships

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**Abstract**—Student engagement is critical for student success—particularly during an internship. To ensure students are routinely engaged and motivated in their studies and in their internship, it is paramount that they are involved in their placement process, in developing achievable goals, and in assisting with the facilitation of future students' placement by providing evaluative information about their internship experience. This evaluative information, coupled with open communication with community partners about students' perceptions of their learning experience as an intern, promotes quality learning experiences whereby the student succeeds throughout the course and feels ready for a career in that field. This report addresses the high impact practices that were utilized to work with community partners and students to ensure student interns achieved a quality learning experience and were prepared to succeed in a career in the field of their study.

**Index Terms**—service learning, collaboration with community partners, performance assessment

## I. INTRODUCTION

Internships provide undergraduate students an opportunity to experience learning in a field that is similar to one in which they may enter after graduation. This hands-on learning opportunity is beneficial for students and the community [1], [2], whereby the university prepares the student for best practices in the field, the student exercises those techniques, and the community gains a well-educated intern who in turn, may be invited for an interview [3], and hired based on their hands-on experience [4].

It is critical to consider the preference of the student intern in their placement site [5]. A student intern who chooses their site based on hours of operation, location, and learning opportunities available is more likely to be satisfied with their placement [6] and perhaps to be more dedicated in their placement [7]. Likewise, the site director/mentor will in exchange gain a student intern who demonstrates professionalism and passion about the position.

To aid the student intern in their professional development, it is recommended that they develop achievable goals and a learning contract with the site [8]. This contract serves as a reference tool by which the

student can actively work toward achieving desired goals, and the site mentor can hold the student accountable. These goals can be modified if needed, but ideally, they offer structure and support for both the student intern and the site director/mentor.

Following the initial placement, frequent communication with students and community partners/mentors from the internship coordinator assists in ensuring the students are meeting the expectations of the community partners, and the students are receiving a quality learning experience [9]. By encouraging communication and acting as a point person, the internship coordinator is able to protect the best interests of the student and the community partner. In the event a student needs to be removed from their internship, or chooses to change internships, the internship coordinator can act on behalf of the student/community partner to facilitate the move while maintaining a positive relationship with the student and community partner. Frequent communication between the student intern and the site mentor is critical [10] as it aids in preventing problems, addressing issues of concern, and ensuring the student intern is making adequate progress toward their goals.

The final stage of the internship requires solicitation of feedback from both the student intern and the site director/mentor. Asking both parties their opinions of the experience, student performance, and for future suggestions allows them to feel important, heard, and improves the university internship program [11] by integrating the ideas into future internships.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the high impact practice approaches that were utilized in the facilitation and culmination of student internships at the undergraduate level.

## II. PROCESS

### A. Student Placement

The student placement process began with students submitting an application to the department which included information relevant for placing them in the field, including a background check, requisite inoculations (e.g., TB test), and a resume. Students were asked to keep a copy of the materials in the event the agency to which they are assigned required the same materials—students were asked to provide the agency

with the requested documentation upon being onboarded. Agency directors were contacted 14 weeks prior to the start of the semester. Emails were sent inquiring how many students each agency/site could accept for the upcoming semester, and agencies were asked to respond within two weeks. From this information, a chart was generated, whereby each agency that was able to take students was listed. The chart also included information that helped students make an informed decision about where they would like to complete their internship; including the name of the agency, location/s (if it was a large agency with multiple locations), hours of operation, clients served, learning opportunities, and which concentration of the major it supported (e.g., an internship with a pediatric therapeutic center supported the Counseling and Family Services concentration). Finally, a column at the end was provided for students to indicate their ranked preference of the internships offered for that semester. This chart was disseminated to students via email 3 weeks after the initial email was sent to agencies (11 weeks before the start of the semester). In addition to the chart, students were also provided with guidelines of the placement process (so they understood what to expect). After reviewing the guidelines, they were asked to complete and pass a quiz on the placement process, which informed the internship coordinator that the student read the assigned material. The email also contained an agency directory, which described each agency in detail, along with the agency's requirements for being onboarded (e.g., a successful interview, completion of an application, orientation, etc.), and a link to a placement preference survey, whereby each student ranked their top 3 preferred placements. The quiz and survey were due 2 weeks later to ensure students had sufficient time to review materials and select their preferred placement (9 weeks before the start of the semester).

Students received their preferences based on the order in which they submitted their materials and completed the quiz, and whether they met any necessary criteria for the agency (e.g., previous experience, based on information provided in the resume). Criteria may differ within and between industries [12]. To place students, a second chart was developed, which listed the name of each student in the order in which they received priority to choose their agency. In the column next to their name, the name of the agency that the student was assigned to was entered, until the agency was assigned to the maximum number of students the agency could accept. Once an agency had all spaces filled, a student was subject to receiving their second most preferred placement. This process continued until all students were assigned/aligned with an agency.

The following week (8 weeks before the start of the semester), all agencies and students were emailed (one email per agency, students copied), and introductions were made. The email contained pertinent information for both the students and the agency director, including the name of the agency director and their contact information, the location of the agency/whether it had multiple locations to choose from, and next steps for the student to

contact the agency director. Students were asked to take initiative and to follow-up to 1) ensure their long/short term goals were aligned with the opportunities available at the agency; and 2) to secure an interview/begin an application as needed, and ensure the placement was a good fit. Students were informed they would have one week (7 weeks prior to the start of the semester) to request a re-assignment if they felt the agency was not a good fit. The email included Agency Expectations and Student Expectations, which functioned as contracts so both students and agencies understood what was expected and included examples of in/appropriate behavior.

Students received introductions 8 weeks prior to the start of the semester to allocate sufficient time for additional background checks that many agencies required, independent of those required by the University. These sometimes took up to 8 weeks to clear, which then ensured the student could begin accruing hours at the start of the semester. Students were informed in the materials they received that a delay in contacting their assigned agency or beginning the onboarding process could result in a delayed start of their internship—therein running the risk of falling behind in the paired course, or not completing their internship in time for the end of the semester. All communications to students emphasized the importance of time management and completing all materials/requests as early as feasible to ensure a timely start and end of the internship.

### *B. Learning Goals Contract*

Approximately three weeks into the semester (once students started to develop a routine at their internships), they were assigned a Learning Goals Contract to complete, in which they were instructed to identify three personal, three professional, and one civic goal they aimed to achieve by the end of the semester. Each goal needed to be described with specific activities they aimed to accomplish, and a corresponding deadline within the semester by which they were to accomplish each goal. Students developed their goals based on what they wanted to achieve and what was feasible at their agency. Students were tasked with 1) identifying their mentor for the semester; and 2) meeting with their mentor to review their goals. Mentors were asked to review the goals with the student and make suggestions as needed (based on feasibility of the goal and proposed deadline). Mentors and students then completed a contract, providing their contact information and agreeing to the goals. Both were informed that the goals could change as needed, but both parties needed to amend the contract if so. The fieldwork coordinator kept a record of all contact information to reach the mentor during the semester, and as needed.

### *C. Site Drop-Ins*

Following completion of the Learning Goals Contract, the fieldwork coordinator began to conduct periodic drop-ins at the agency sites. The purpose of these drop-ins was to assess student performance and performance of the agency. These were especially necessary if the fieldwork coordinator learned that an agency or a student was demonstrating behavior inconsistent with the

Expectations contracts (e.g., students were only assigned to clean, mentors were unavailable; students were unproductive; students were violating agency rules). The fieldwork coordinator remained at the agency to observe and take notes on the situation. On occasion, the agency/student requested drop-ins so the fieldwork coordinator could view first-hand an issue of concern. Following the drop-in, the fieldwork coordinator was able to draft a report and share it with the agency director/student as needed. Depending on the issue that was observed, this could result in a conversation to course-correct for either the student/agency, or a decision to re-assign a student to another agency. Toward the end of the semester, drop-ins were performed primarily to observe student mastery of a skill/goal.

#### *D. Communicating with Mentors*

Mentors were informed they would be contacted at least twice during the semester, once after six weeks, and again after 13 weeks. At six weeks (nearly mid-way), mentors were asked to complete a mid-semester evaluation of their mentee/student intern. This evaluation asked questions pertaining to the intern's progress in the internship—including knowledge and commitment to the ethics and values of the profession, responding appropriately to clients, knowledge of the agency's philosophy and structure, work habits, understanding of the client, professionalism, communication, and ability to use knowledge of the field in their practice. The evaluation was shared from the internship coordinator via an online survey, and upon completion, students were presented with the same survey and asked to rate themselves on each of the same domains prior to receiving the results of their mentor's evaluations. Students were asked to reflect on the differences (e.g., they expected a greater score than they received on a domain), and to take notes. Then, students were encouraged to meet with their mentors to review the mid-semester evaluation and discuss how to make additional progress throughout the semester.

Near the end of the semester (approximately 13 weeks), mentors were sent the same survey, but were asked to give the student a number/letter grade and indicate the likelihood to offer the student a job/hire them upon completion of their internship. Mentors were asked to complete the survey only once the student had completed their internship. The grade the mentors issued was calculated into the final grade for the students, and students received their final evaluation during the last week of class.

While most communication with mentors/agency directors was straightforward, pleasant, and expected, there were instances when students report concerning behavior at their site in which the fieldwork coordinator was required to meet/speak with the directors. At the beginning of the semester, students were informed that they should discuss issues with their mentor when feasible (e.g., miscommunication), and should always feel comfortable notifying the fieldwork coordinator of any issues, especially those that might need to be rectified (e.g., breaching of the contract). In doing so, students

were assured that their grade would in no way be impacted by reporting a problem with their site and should feel encouraged to discuss any issues with the fieldwork coordinator. Navigating interactions (reports from students with agency directors) can be challenging, as it is important to understand issues from the perspective of both parties and determine whether it is in the best interest of the students to allow them to continue working with the agency. In the event a student reported an incident to the fieldwork coordinator, the fieldwork coordinator recorded all information for their records and contacted the agency/director with the information of concern. Based on the student report and feedback from the agency regarding the report, the fieldwork coordinator determined whether the student/all students at the agency needed to be reassigned, if unannounced drop-in visits needed to occur on a semi-regular basis to observe the activities at the site, or if a meeting was recommended between the agency mentor and the student. In all cases, it was important that the students felt supported—either to have serious matters handled for them or when appropriate, to be trusted to handle the matters themselves. Similarly, agency directors/mentors should be treated with respect, as the opportunities they offer and the willingness they have to mentor the students are paramount to their education.

#### *E. Assessing Student Experiences*

Following the completion of the semester, students were sent an online survey asking about their experience at their internship site. Students were asked to rate their mentor, quality of the supervision/training they received, duties they had, and to detail the strengths and areas of needed improvement. This process was implemented in part because research has demonstrated that internships are more effective when mentors demonstrate increased supervision and mentorship [13]. In an attempt to validate the information in the internship directory, students were asked to list the opportunities that were available at the site, the clients that were served, hours of operation, and the concentrations in the major that would benefit most from interning at that agency. They indicated whether they would recommend the agency for future placements (and note why/why not), and were asked if there were other opportunities they would have liked to have seen in the internship directory. Finally, students recommended agencies that were not in the internship directory that might be interested in hosting future student interns.

The internship coordinator took note of the student wishes (for internship opportunities that were not offered), and recommendations in a separate document. The summer when students were not interning was spent researching additional opportunities students requested and following-up on recommendations. The internship coordinator made appointments to visit agencies to assess goodness-of-fit, surveyed the resources and space, the willingness/skill level of the staff to mentor students, and whether the agency had experience hosting student interns (agencies with little/no experience were assigned no more than one student intern for a given semester as a trial run). After determining which agencies demonstrated

an ability to host student interns, the internship directory was updated.

#### F. Reporting Student Experiences

Once student responses of their experience were recorded, data were aggregated and analyzed based on each agency. Reports were generated for each agency, identifying student satisfaction with their mentor, supervision, duties, and site, and their likelihood to recommend the agency as a future internship option. Charts were developed to 1) examine these data for all students and all agencies, 2) examine the data within an agency; and 3) compare the satisfaction rate for each metric within an agency compared to the average. A summary listed the number of students who were represented in the average and agency sample, a list of the mentors, the main inferences from the data (e.g., students felt overwhelmingly positive about the supervision they received), and how one agency fared compared to the others that served as internship options that semester. After compilation, information about the report was used as a final evaluation of the internship agency. This information aided the fieldwork coordinator to determine whether to 1) retain the agency as an internship option for the subsequent semester, and/or 2) plan more/less frequent drop-ins to assess the field site and its operations. Reports were offered to agency directors during the summer to inform them of areas in which students were satisfied with their experience, and to offer suggestions of areas in which they could improve. Sometimes, the feedback was specific to a mentor, or a particular responsibility that a student had—which was helpful for the agency director to either engage in a conversation with the mentor, determine whether to increase specifically requested opportunities, or eliminate certain responsibilities to improve the internship experience for the next cycle of students.

### III. CONCLUSION

This report addresses effective strategies and high impact practices that are utilized in organizing undergraduate internships. Some of the most effective practices include 1) offering students agency in selecting their internships; 2) providing structure for students to set and attain goals under the supervision of a trained mentor; 3) maintaining open communication with students, student mentors, and agency directors; 4) soliciting feedback about student and agency experience and satisfaction; and 5) using feedback from students and agencies to improve internship offerings and experiences.

Managing and employing these practices takes deliberation and time, and difficulties or unexpected occurrences sometimes happen, which may impact the process. Some of the more common occurrences arise with students early in the semester and include issues with students managing time (starting the internship late leads to difficulty in setting/accomplishing goals in a reasonable timeframe); lack of communication with the fieldwork coordinator/agency mentor (due to intimidation), and not taking initiative at the internship

(due to lack of confidence in their own abilities). Many of these issues occur because students lack experience and exposure to a professional setting, and over time, students realize that the fieldwork coordinator can act as their advocate if they communicate well, and that all parties share a desire in their success. Additionally, in a supportive classroom environment, students become empowered to take initiative in their internships.

To effectively execute the organization of internships, nurture community partnerships, and support students, the fieldwork coordinator should be employed fulltime to manage the fieldwork program, and to teach sections of the fieldwork course. Additional responsibilities that are required of tenure-track faculty, such as producing scholarly work and committing to service activities in support of the department and university would be difficult to manage and would take time away from maintaining a strong internship program that routinely utilizes high impact practices. Depending on the size of the program, it may be necessary to ask part-time instructors with certain expertise to drop-in on sites and perform evaluations, especially if the department requires course-instructors/the fieldwork coordinator to evaluate student performance in the field, as opposed to agency mentors.

Student internships are critical for undergraduates to receive a hands-on learning opportunity in a field similar to one in which they may be employed, following graduation. By utilizing high impact practices to facilitate the internship process and to establish and maintain community partnerships, students can feel supported and have a positive learning experience, while community partners can learn best practices in the field from students. In training student interns, community partners can reinvest in their own agency—as recent student graduates may seek employment with those agencies following graduation. This cycle encourages quality community engagement and student support, and prepares empowered, educated students for careers in which they've received excellent training from caring mentors.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the CSUDH Child Development community partners, and the CSUDH Child Development Directed Field Experience students for their cooperation and participation in the Directed Field Experience program.

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