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INTERNSHIPS

Job Requirement

By JOSEPH P. FRIED

SCHOOL-supported stints in the workplace have become as familiar a part of the undergraduate world as bleary-eyed cramming for finals. While on most campuses such spells are optional, more than 125 institutions require a dip into the workforce for certain majors, and at least a dozen mandate it for every full-time undergraduate.

The experience can be had through an internship (typically part-time, frequently unpaid) or a cooperative program (full-time study alternating with full-time — and paid — work).

A period of work tied to academics, these colleges say, is too important to be elective. “It’s integral that students take what they learned in classes and be able to apply it in the real world,” says Susan Leister, director of the internship program at Alverno College, a women’s college in Milwaukee where undergraduates — some 2,000 — must intern before graduation.

While there’s no one model, many programs weave in pre-job classes that discuss career skills (self-presentation, networking, organizational analysis) and post-job seminars that sort out how it went. Some students do journals, papers or portfolios while on the job. Colleges frequently work with students to find companies with appropriate positions, but preferred placements are not a given. Hopefuls sometimes have to compete not only with applicants from their own colleges but with others from around the country.

At [Northeastern University](#) in Boston, about 90 percent of undergraduates participate at least once in its widely known co-op program; that comes to 6,000 placements in any given year. “We spend a lot of time channeling students to the placement they’re most interested in,” says Jack Greene, dean

of the college of criminal justice and special assistant to the provost for experiential learning. “We spend a lot of time vetting the placements, and all are reviewed by cooperative and academic faculty for their complexity and challenge.”

While co-op programs can theoretically steer students to any corner of the earth, part-time internships are limited by geography (read: fewer opportunities at a college in a cornfield) and are more vulnerable to downturns in the economy. That’s one reason Michael True, chairman of the Internship/Co-op Special Interest Group of the National Society for Experiential Education, prefers they be an option in most majors, not a requirement.

At Messiah College, a liberal arts college in Grantham, Pa., where Mr. True directs the internship center, stints are voluntary except in nursing, teaching and a few other fields that require on-the-job training. “I like to see a student choose to do an internship, to say, ‘I want to take responsibility for my career choice and for getting experience off campus.’ ” Much to the dismay of liberal-arts advocates who think work can and should wait, surveys increasingly show that college is viewed as career preparation. So the concept of integrated work is a selling point at these institutions:

Alverno College (Milwaukee)

REQUIRED One or two internships, depending on major, each totaling 120 hours, usually 8 to 10 hours a week.

Illustrating how internships relate to academic interests, Ms. Leister cites two recent examples: a management major assisted an operations analyst at Harley-Davidson, scrutinizing productivity reports and seeking avenues for improvement. Pay: \$12 an hour. In a non-paid internship, a sociology major interviewed new clients at a public defender’s office. Internships are paired with classroom seminars in which students reflect on their experiences.

Bennington College (Vermont)

REQUIRED 210 hours of interning, in each of three years.

Bennington sets aside the months of January and February (sans tuition) as Field Work Term, which dates back to the college's founding, in 1932. Most students leave campus for the duration — some even go abroad — to work at places like television networks, publishing houses, museums and nonprofit groups. The grade is based in part on the student's interpretive essay and on the employer's comments. It is possible to fail. While internships are often related to a student's academic work, this is not a requirement, because the college sees the experience as "not just doing a specific job" but as a way of "studying what it is to work," says a Bennington spokesman, David Rees.

Kettering University (Flint, Mich.)

REQUIRED 11 weeks of classes alternating with 12 weeks of work year-round for four and a half years.

"Students mature more rapidly in a professional work setting," says Stan Liberty, the president of Kettering, which focuses on science and technology. "They seem to have more self-confidence than students in strictly academic settings." All 2,300 undergraduates follow the work schedule, no exemptions, until graduation. "We have employment fairs, and the companies come in and recruit students as they would regular employees," Mr. Liberty says. Students are expected to stay with one employer, because switching to a new one often means another round of entry-level tasks instead of more responsibility — and more money (starting pay is usually \$12 an hour). More than 600 companies, in fields like pharmaceuticals, medical technology and automotive and aerospace industries, hire Kettering students under the program.

Keuka College (upstate New York)

REQUIRED 140 hours in each of four years.

Most students at this Finger Lakes institution fulfill the requirement by working full time in January, when no classes are scheduled (the college calls it Field Period). "What's important is the connection between experience and theory," says Anne Marie Guthrie, dean of the Center for Experiential Learning. Interns have set up Web sites for nonprofit groups, connecting

lessons in video art with the digital nuts and bolts of the workplace; accounting majors have helped with bookkeeping at private companies.

Northeastern University (Boston)

REQUIRED One experiential component, which may be co-op participation, internship, study abroad, community service or research.

Northeastern's experiential requirement, part of a new core curriculum, went into effect this fall for entering freshmen. Most students in the co-op program spend two or three six-month periods in the field (tuition-free) alternating with six months of academics on campus. Usually, Dr. Greene says, "We send them out with questions from coursework they have to address."

He continues: "When they come back it's grist for discussion in a reflection seminar. It's complementary learning, being tested in a real world setting. A capstone course at the end of senior year ties up the threads of what the student has learned." Students receive grades for the seminar as well as the capstone course.

Dr. Greene says that in some years up to 80 percent have been offered jobs by their co-op employers. But, he says, "We're not into the vocational aspect of this." He ticks off the skills students acquire — how to communicate, how to solve problems. And then he cites one more benefit: "learning who they are and how they can participate and have more direction in their lives."

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