CHAPTER 5

Preparing Students for Internships

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Preparing political science students for a successful internship experience involves helping them find an appropriate internship placement, assessing their goals, clarifying expectations, and providing a forum for discussion and reflection that allows them to anticipate issues that could develop during their work experience. A successful internship does not occur by accident. Success requires intentionality and planning on the part of the faculty and flexibility on the part of the student.

INTRODUCTION

A significant function of a successful internship program is helping students find a good placement and preparing them for undertaking that internship. Often students will find an internship entirely upon their own with no coaching. It seems that just as often, students have little idea about the internship they wish to pursue or how to land one that complements their major or advances their career prospects. In this chapter we address these and other issues, the solutions for which have proven to be essential to the internship program at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).

Our discussion covers preparing students for finding an internship as well as the process of placing students with organizations, a system that is well-developed in our case. We address how to assess students' academic goals and aspirations (which are key to landing an internship) and we also outline effective steps for navigating the application process.

Professional development is a component of the internship course at UIC, which has been designed to facilitate discussion and reflection on all aspects of the internship experience. We explain how an internship curriculum can serve as a vehicle for debriefing, writing about, and examining complementary theoretical and practical lessons, an approach that helps to maximize student learning throughout the internship experience—but especially as a means to prepare students for experiential work.

We conclude by discussing the techniques and methods that constitute best practices and sharing evidence for their efficacy—approaches intended to help participants avoid mistakes and render the internship a successful learning experience, even prior to their first day at the worksite.

IMPROVING INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

Internship programs in many political science departments remain underdeveloped. Collins, Knotts, and Schiff (2012) conducted a survey to determine the degree of career preparation that occurs within

the political science major, discovering that most departments rely on voluntary internships and few require internships or other specific courses designed to address professional development.[1] They found that roughly only 10% of political science departments required internships while some 97% of department chairs reported that a political science major could receive academic credit for an internship. In a national study of internship practices, Gentry and Van Vechten (2018) surveyed political science departments in 2015 and 2016, finding that nearly all departments in four-year institutions award academic credit for internships (89.6%), but that less than half of community colleges do (43.8%).[2] These results imply that internships are a common means to facilitate experiential learning and that virtually all political science departments rely on them for the professional development of their students. However, the suggestion that most interns have neither a class, nor required readings, nor a discussion forum signals the ineffectiveness of this approach. Students can be confronted with a wide array of internship opportunities—in fact the job posting site, Chegg Internships, advertised 13,310 positions for summer 2021[3]—but opportunity alone does not guarantee an equally good experience or maximal learning.

PREPARING STUDENTS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

Student preparation is a critical determinant for both finding a fitting internship and obtaining the professional development that an internship experience should offer. At UIC, we have developed processes to place students at appropriate sites and prepare them for success. Over the three decades we have taught the internship class, we have assembled paper files of more than 100 community organizations, government organizations, political campaigns, civic groups, and law firms which have hosted our interns in the past or have specifically requested interns. Although we have not yet digitized our files, any interested students (including those looking for potential jobs after graduation) can come to the political science office to peruse the files for possible internships, or we provide direct suggestions to inquiring students. The larger college also maintains its own database of internships that students can consult and advertises opportunities through their own outreach efforts.

We meet individually with prospective student interns, in person during non-pandemic times or remotely or electronically otherwise, first determining whether they have already obtained an internship. The only criterion we insist upon in order to receive course credit is that it be related to public affairs: government, politics, or the law in some way. By this measure, working for a homelessness agency by itself would not qualify, whereas working for a community or civic group trying to change government policies around poverty, hunger, or homelessness would. If they have secured a suitable internship which qualifies for credit and in which they can work at least 10 hours a week for the 15-week semester, we approve their internship and grant them permission to register for the class. At that time, we recommend that they read the first book assigned for the course—preferably before they begin their internship.

If students don't already have an acceptable internship, we assist them in their search. In our interview with prospective interns, we first ask where they live within our large Chicago metropolitan area, as that will often determine which elected official or community organization will be most interested in accepting them and will be the easiest to access geographically, i.e., with a short commute. We also determine whether they have a preferred type of internship in mind. Information from our files, our one-on-one meeting, and independent exploration of websites helps students narrow their search. We recommend that they select at least three, but preferably five, possible sites. Once they have assembled a short list of possibilities, the students themselves must make the phone calls to request an interview and complete the applications.

Students don't always obtain the internship at the top of their list, so it is important that they apply to more than one place. However, we have found that if students are willing to be flexible about their placement and make a sufficient number of contacts with potential sites, all of them will land an internship within a few weeks. Even faculty in universities that are located in smaller towns or rural areas where there are fewer internship possibilities are usually able to place students, although significantly more effort might be required on theirs and the students' parts to identify potential placements. Because some internships that have moved online are likely to remain online, geography is no longer a barrier in all cases (see Chapter 15 by Cabrera Rasmussen and Van Vechten).

We find that much of the work of preparing interns for work can be done within an internship class once students have secured a placement. Students not concurrently enrolled in a course can also benefit from the materials which we make widely available. When it is not possible for a political science department to offer an internship class because there are too few students or too few faculty or staff resources to do so, then meeting with students individually during their internship semester, or even better, meeting with groups of internship students several times during the semester, can work as well. Overall, we have found that placing students in a class or workshops where they read course materials together and discuss their internships as they evolve, either weekly or several times a month, produces deeper learning.

FINDING AN INTERNSHIP

Many students have no idea how to search effectively for an internship and require faculty assistance; a good internship program helps match students to the best available possibilities. This begins with an assessment of a student's academic goals, professional aspirations, and personal interests. Personal evaluations can be performed with a faculty member, as described in Chapter 8 by Lowenthal and Sosland (see sample self-assessments in Supplemental Internship Resources, hereafter "supplementals"), or students can also self-assess independently with tools available through career placement or service learning centers on most university campuses, as Reeher and Mariani (2002) suggest. Essentially, students should identify possible placements that deal with the subjects and issues that interest them but not allow their preconceptions, biases, or political beliefs to hold them back from trying something unfamiliar—a pathway that could help them develop a better understanding of our multidimensional and fluid political world.

We recommend building a department file of potential internship sites, whether maintained in hard copy or managed electronically. Records can be built over time with feedback from previous interns and should be updated systematically. At some universities students are encouraged to write letters to future potential interns containing candid perspectives and "insider" information about their work experiences. Also, student reflection papers submitted at the end of the course often provide instructors with a clear idea of which internship sites have been most to least productive or have provided the best opportunities and supervision, information that can be added to the growing files. The least productive sites can be flagged or removed from the files as potential future placements. If permanent internship files are not maintained in a political science department, we would advise students to consult campus service learning or civic engagement centers for their internship advice; they often have relationships with community and civic organizations that welcome university support.

APPLYING FOR AND LANDING AN INTERNSHIP

Frequently, students do not know how to apply successfully for an internship and would benefit from an internship coordinator's assistance or advice. During the preliminary one-on-one meetings in which we help students identify three to five prospective sites, we coach students on how to navigate the application and interview process.

Among the points we stress are that the internship application, phone contact, and internship interview represent opportunities to make a good, first impression; therefore, students will need to pay close attention to detail when completing written applications. Parris and Adams (1994) suggest the following steps for applying for an internship:

- Read requirements and follow directions carefully
- Establish a checklist of requested information
- Make note of deadlines
- Request official transcripts if required
- Begin writing a letter of interest (a cover letter)

- Make sure that all materials are typed neatly with no spelling or grammatical errors
- Make sure that you have followed all directions
- Make copies of all materials for your personal files
- Send all requested materials in one packet three to four weeks before the deadline
- Follow up within a week to confirm that your application packet was received

Clearly, when done well, the application process requires considerable lead time to assemble and polish a high-quality application packet.

The most common error, as with job searches, is that students simply assume that sending a single email to the generic office address or submitting an application electronically will garner a reply. Students need to be informed that this not the case. At worst, offices tend not to follow up unsolicited email applications. In Chicago politics for instance, the saying from political machine politicians is: "We don't want nobody; nobody sent." That is, in politics a recommendation from a trusted source is often what opens doors, which is why students should take advantage of networking events both on- and off-campus (or online, such as town halls or district events) to make connections with elected officials, staff members, and alumni who can facilitate introductions to internship coordinators. At best, email recipients do not answer quickly because of other priorities, thereby delaying the process.

To avoid the worst-case scenarios, we advise students to call the organization, ask for the internship coordinator, and request an internship interview (in person or electronically), following up if they don't hear back within a few days. We stress the need to talk to actual people at potential internship sites, not to rely on one-way communication via emails or websites.

INTERVIEWING FOR AN INTERNSHIP

Faculty often wrongly assume that students know how to behave and dress professionally. Personal appearance is one aspect of professional etiquette, which we discuss as being important not just during the application process but throughout the internship experience.

Although most internships are unpaid, students should still approach the internship interview with the same respect that one would have for a full-time job. The following "do's" apply when interviewing for an internship:

- Dress professionally, even in the event of a remote interview. Professional attire is the standard for interviewing (see supplementals).
- Be prompt. Students should show up for the interview on time or before the appointed time.
- Be respectful and courteous at all times, even if you are asked challenging questions.
- Research the official or agency with which you are seeking an internship so that you can (a) demonstrate that you are informed, and (b) ask meaningful questions.
- Clarify what your hours and main responsibilities would be and how the internship will be performed: in-person in an office, completely remotely, at events that require transportation, or some combination of these.
- Have copies of your résumé and, if possible, letters of recommendation on hand when interviewing in case you are asked to supply them.

In 30 years, we have never had a case in which students who diligently pursued an internship with our coaching didn't land one, although it may not have been their first choice. Regardless of their placement status, by the end of the first individual mentorship meeting or class, students should be equipped to navigate these initial stages of an internship and launch their search with the best possible chances for success.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS THROUGH AN INTERNSHIP COURSE

Many students have already found an internship before the class begins, but all students are required to have secured an internship by the end of the second week of class and to submit a letter from their internship supervisor spelling out the conditions of the internship and tasks to be performed. Some programs require a more formal contract (see other chapters in this volume and supplementals for samples), or an agreement spelling out the goals and expectations of both the internship provider and the student, as well as the student's anticipated learning opportunities, which could include attending staff or public meetings, undertaking research projects for the internship site, or attending events. We warn our students that they cannot get course credit without opportunities to learn, even if they can expect to answer phones or file paperwork.

Students should be given the opportunity to reflect on their activities and observations throughout the internship, integrating political science with practice. While it is possible to meet with individual students regularly, it is certainly more efficient to hold weekly hour-long class sessions. Our internship classes range in size from five to 25 students and we generally agree that about 15 students is the ideal class size. Another advantage of a class is that students can learn from their peers and work through shared, practical dilemmas, such as how to address mistakes or avoid costly ones.

The internship class at UIC incorporates different methods, materials, and assignments to achieve a sense of dynamism: readings, journaling, oral reports, book discussions, and, most importantly, discussions about site activities. Each week students report successes and problems that suggest to fellow interns (and us) various strategies for improving their experiences. As a class we also attend special events held on Constitution Day, the National Student Issues Convention, and the Urban Forum, and reflect on those shared experiences in class.[4] Finally, students are separated into three or four subgroups with peers who work in similar settings (public offices, political campaigns, law offices, and the like) for targeted discussions and readings.

The class is structured around discussions involving everything from making a great first impression to the use of pressure and confrontation strategies to protest political power; we consider political processes such as organizing, funding, and winning political campaigns. To facilitate dialogue and deeper understanding, students are required to read and analyze five books during the semester: three as a class collectively; one that students select individually that directly relates to their internship; and one with a subgroup, which they report on to the entire class so that those working on campaigns, for instance, learn from peers working in another area, such as law. Teaching a text to the entire class builds student confidence and presentation skills. Students use these readings to help frame their final reflection paper as well. For instance, they might reflect on the implications of campaign donations, examining the assertion made in the campaign-related text about the need for candidates to call or meet with prospective donors personally to raise larger amounts, and weighing it against the reality that their candidate refused to do so and was underfunded in comparison to the opponent.

The shared class readings cover three main topics. Office etiquette and professionalism are thoroughly addressed in Reeher and Mariani's *The Insider's Guide to Political Internships* (2002).[5] Simpson and O'Shaughnessy's *Winning Elections in the 21st Century* (2016)[6] encompasses electoral politics, campaigns, public officials, and civic agencies. Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (1971)[7] introduces students to non-electoral political activism via community-based organizations.

Because students typically work for Republican or Democratic campaigns, pro- or anti-mayoral blocs of the Chicago city council, organizations favoring or opposing particular legislation, prosecutors or public defenders, and corporate or public interest lawyers, they can use class time to directly compare their diverse experiences inside a common framework of readings and lectures, interaction that enriches and deepens their internship experience. The faculty coordinator and students agree to keep confidential what is said in class and written in final reflection papers.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS ON-SITE

Many students are new to professional settings and therefore may need training in workplace protocols.

As Reeher and Mariani (2002) stress, successful students, even when they are unpaid, treat their internships as a professional job, while students who "phone it in" tend to have negative internship experiences without gaining the contacts and skills needed for career success. Since worksite success depends partly upon being comfortable and confident, the class helps build confidence and lets students know that it's okay to approach their supervisors to volunteer for greater responsibilities or to ask to attend staff meetings where they can learn more.

We begin the first class session with a review of a few do's and don'ts of internships.

1) Seek to become an assistant to a particular staff member so they can mentor you on the job and so you can learn particular skills and assume real responsibilities if you have not been assigned them initially.

2) Insist that while you are happy to duplicate papers or do data entry, your university (and/or professor) requires you to attend staff meetings, attend court proceedings, city council meetings, or staff planning sessions, or learn particular skills to earn course credit. If handling mail in a public official's office, for instance, the work could progress to drafting letters or emails in response to constituent letters, press releases, website announcement, or drafting a candidate's public remarks. Meaningful work should be spelled out in a work plan or course contract as much as possible (see supplementals for samples.)

3) You should not be afraid to ask questions. "Fake it until you make it" does not fly in a professional work environment. Pretending to understand something, while you clearly do not, will lead to awkward moments and generally more work.

If students find their work consistently unfulfilling then they should talk with their supervisors or seek out faculty for advice. Reeher and Mariani (2002) point out that students have agency, and while they will not always get exactly what they want, they can take steps to make their internship a positive, educational experience. Interns should also be urged to have fun, work hard, try to stay positive, and do their best. In the rare cases when an internship doesn't work out, they should be moved to a new internship by the course instructor without penalty. Whether they are in an internship class or doing an internship under the general supervision of a faculty member, it is important that students report regularly on their progress and any problems. They should be mentored by the faculty member as well as their on-site supervisor.

OTHER ISSUES RELATING TO PREPAREDNESS

As the course progresses, we focus on the students' experiences, attitudes, and observations during their internships. We review strategies for success in future endeavors, preparing them for myriad challenges that await them by focusing on skills such as managing expectations, exercising patience, and accepting the incremental nature of tackling new tasks. These aspects of internships will persist beyond the pandemic, which has forced many students into online internships, as will being able to work remotely in the "new normal" of the post-pandemic period.

Millennial and Gen Z students tend to value authenticity, organic style, and individuality over "fitting in," but there are limits to the value of these qualities in different workplaces (Francis and Hoefel 2018).[8] We encourage students to be themselves but emphasize that they need to understand and respect the existing social norms and rules of an internship worksite. For instance, we note that personal appearance ought not to provide a distraction to others.

One psychological phenomenon we address in class is the "imposter syndrome," a common, powerful, and often paralyzing feeling of self-doubt that plagues first-time job applicants: they feel they don't belong. Chrousos and Mentis (2020) explain that those with imposter syndrome have an innate fear of being discovered as a fraud or non-deserving, despite their demonstrated talent and achievements. Imposter syndrome has been found to be more prevalent in high achievers, women, and underrepresented racial, ethnic, and religious minorities (Chrousos and Mentis 2020).[9] One way students might move past this normal feeling is to "dress the part" or "dress for the job they want." If they know they appear

professional, they are more likely to project confidence and professionalism.[10] Discussing the issue in class can also be useful in overcoming student fears.

CONCLUSION

How do we know that these techniques to prepare and guide student interns work? The first level of evidence are the evaluations of different faculty members who have taught our internship class, students' reflection papers on the experience, and the evaluations of internship site supervisors who employ our interns in positions year after year. In addition, we have reviewed student course evaluations stretching over several decades. They show that regardless of whether tenured faculty or advanced graduate students teach the UIC Internship course, if these methods are followed, students rank the course highly and intern supervisors are equally positive in their student evaluations.

In addition, a significant number of our interns are offered full-time jobs and supervisors frequently write highly positive recommendations for students going on to graduate or law school. About 10% to 20% of our students each semester receive job offers by the end of their internship. Some land scholarships, including major ones like the Truman or Marshall Fund scholarships. A large number of our interns go on to law school or graduate school. Finally, many former interns now hold important positions in government, the private sector, and non-profit organizations.[11]

The more regularly an internship program is offered, either each semester or once a year, the easier it is to recruit students into the program, build up a series of placement sites that take interns, and improve the internship experience over time. The internship program at UIC benefits from 30-plus years of successful coordination with over 100 host sites and organizations and our internship course is well-developed. For departments that do not offer a class to complement for-credit internships, we suggest at least an orientation workshop for all interns during the first week of class, and reiterate that faculty mentorship needs to occur during the semester (see Chapter 6 by Berg) rather than at the end of the course when students submit a final reflection and evaluations are complete.

Our experience is that of a solid, well-rounded internship program, whose core elements include one-on-one counseling sessions, thorough preparation of students for all stages of the internship experience, and an intentionally structured classroom experience. Our goal is to provide a meaningful and value-added learning experience for students, and experience teaches that this "formula" works well across time and generations. The internships we help develop for students are, in many ways, a capstone to their political science major.

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ENDNOTES

1. The authors find that voluntary internships and traditional faculty advising still dominate departmental approaches to the task of preparing undergraduate students for the job market.

2. Based on a 2015 national survey of four-year institutions (n=115; response rate of 20.5%) and a 2016 follow-up survey of community colleges (n=51; response rate of 6.7%). The latter statistic is consistent with the results of a 2018 APSA Community College Faculty Survey, whereby 39.7% (n=112) reported that their institution offers internships for credit. Survey was administered to 2,634 faculty in the US; 298 responded to the online survey between March 26 and May 2, 2018, for a response rate of 11.2%.

3. "Find Political Science Internships." *Chegg Internships*, Accessed April 20, 2021, https://www.internships.com/political-science.

4. The National Student Issues Convention is held every October. As of 2020, more than 10 universities and community colleges send more than 300 students to participate in designing a student issues agenda and meet directly with public officials to press for local, state, and national government action on student concerns. The UIC Urban Forum is held annually at the University of Illinois at Chicago with 700 students and community leaders who meet with major urban scholars and public officials. The theme of the 2021 Urban Forum was racial and income inequality in Chicago and nationally.

5. The guide does not address race, ethnicity, and culture in a meaningful way—something that is of the utmost importance, especially in the current political context. The guide focuses on federal political internships rather than aldermanic, mayoral, or other local and community-based organizations, civic/activist groups, and law internships, which are most popular among our students. Their guide is technologically and historically outdated, written before smart phones, social media, COVID-19, Zoom and similar online platforms, and the Obama and Trump presidencies, rendering parts of the book obsolete.

6. Simpson and O'Shaugnessy (2016) offer a definitive guide to elections, political campaigns, elected officials, and civic organizations. In the interests of full disclosure, it is written by one of the chapter authors and is a primary text for the internship course at UIC.

7. Alinsky (1971) highlights the substantive and symbolic power of political activism through pressure and confrontation strategies. We find that it spurs genuine debate and engages students in robust discussion.

8. Francis and Hoefel (2018) argue that the current college-age generation feels comfortable not having only one way to act themselves. The search for authenticity generates greater freedom of expression and greater openness to understanding different kinds of people. We encourage students to be individuals and at the same time to understand and respect social norms.

9. Slank (2019) argues that individuals who experience imposter syndrome are rational. We agree with Chrousos and Mentis (2020) that institutions and departments should take steps to allay these fears, as the political science pipeline could suffer.

10. Chrousos and Mentis (2020) state that professors, principal investigators, and peers should encourage students and fellow social scientists to focus on factual evidence regarding their academic performance and to set realistic expectations. One way that we address this is in the discussions around managing expectations and exhibiting professionalism in internships.

11. It is worth noting that our interns often hold campus leadership positions such as student body president or student member of the university's board of trustees.