

## Managing Quality Internships Abroad: A Case Study

U.S. INSTITUTIONS AND EDUCATION ABROAD ORGANIZATIONS across the country are seeing a rapidly growing demand for education abroad internships. Academic departments at U.S. higher education institutions are increasingly requiring that their students combine theoretical learning with practical application. And U.S. undergraduates of the “millennial generation” are seeking opportunities abroad that reach beyond the traditional classroom setting and allow them to engage in personal and practical learning experiences with local communities.

Some students seek credit-bearing opportunities that will apply to their course requirements for their degree. Others are looking for noncredit engagement to complement their coursework and provide access to and activities with the local working world. Fields such as engineering and business, for example, require students to participate in an internship as part of their degree program, but they do not always require the internship to be done for credit. As the field of education abroad tackles the current hot topic of fostering engagement and cultural learning on

education abroad programs, internships, and the many different forms that they take, can be an effective vehicle for meeting current student interests, faculty expectations, and education abroad learning goals.



**Many forms of applied learning opportunities exist beyond internship experiences, including work abroad, volunteering, and service-learning options.**

### Defining Internships

In education abroad programs today, internships exist in many different forms. The Learning Abroad Center at the University of Minnesota has offered internships on education abroad programs for more than two decades and has created a variety of options in consultation with University of Minnesota faculty and the university’s domestic internship office. The Learning Abroad Center currently organizes or works cooperatively with a third-party provider to offer internships in locations such as London, Sydney, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Ghana, India, Kenya, Mexico, Senegal, South Africa, and Spain.

Along with these range of locations, the range of internships also vary. Some are credit-bearing internships accompanied by a mandatory class that is taken as one of the student’s course options throughout the semester. Other sites have six-week internships with local development-focused nongovernmental organizations that result in a final research paper on the topic of development in the host country. Still, others are noncredit bearing and offer students the opportunity to engage with the local work culture in a structured organizational setting. Units on campus, such as the Institute of Technology and the Carlson School of Management, support discipline-specific, not-for-credit internships that meet undergraduate degree expectations.

Identifying a single common definition for this variety of opportunities can be challenging, and

definitions vary across institutions and providers. The following guidelines are based on internships offered by the Learning Abroad Center and serve as a case study of how internships are structured for U.S. education abroad students.

For the Learning Abroad Center's programs, the following characteristics are essential:

- The job experience itself is spread over several weeks or months and almost always takes place within the setting of an organization.
- The experience should be of sufficient duration to allow the interning student to gain an understanding of the host organization and to participate in an organized learning assignment.
- The experience is structured, with pre-established learning goals and work assignments.
- The student's experience is supervised by a member of the interning organization who ensures that learning goals and work objectives are achieved.
- For credit-bearing internships, learning activities take place in a group setting with faculty and, whenever possible, with other interns. In most education abroad programs, these activities take place at regular intervals throughout the period of the internship. Occasionally, students' internship locations are geographically disparate so that such sessions necessarily are limited to a few occasions. In the case of individual overseas internships outside the context of a program, the sessions might be limited to student meetings with faculty before departure and after return.
- Assignments are required in order to earn credit. These assignments demonstrate the student's learning and typically consist of written work such as papers or journals, but other media are sometimes used as well.

The following descriptions outline recommended methods of achieving quality, structured internships for undergraduate students. They are not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive but rather to serve as a springboard for continued discussion and reflection on achieving quality learning experiences for U.S. students studying and interning overseas.

## Who Are the Players?

Internships have several people and/or organizations responsible for different aspects of the internship. The descriptions below of the different possible agents of an internship are designed to help define the issues and structures that should be kept in mind in creating an effective internship opportunity.

- **INTERN:** The student who is engaged in the internship.
- **ON-SITE SUPERVISOR:** The agency staff member with primary responsibility for overseeing the internship and providing support and guidance to the intern.
- **INTERNSHIP PLACEMENT COORDINATOR:** The person in the host country who negotiates the internship placements on behalf of the education abroad program.
- **INSTRUCTOR(S):** For credit-bearing internships, the person(s) who help(s) structure the intern's academic learning and who assess that learning for the purpose of granting credit. In some cases, the instructor may be the same person as the internship placement coordinator.

While each of these players has a unique role in establishing and implementing a successful internship experience, it is essential that there be good coordination and communication among them for the internship to meet the established learning outcomes.

## Role of the Intern

The student intern is both at the center of the internship experience and the player who needs to be most proactive in making the internship successful. As a result, it is important to clarify with the student his or her interests as well as the importance of being an active player in the internship experience. The following steps can be helpful in preparing a student (and the receiving agency) for the internship placement.

- To assist the internship agency and the placement coordinator in identifying an appropriate internship, the student should articulate some of the characteristics s/he would like the internship to fulfill, including setting (e.g., urban vs. rural, institutional vs. field), the



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type of agency, the type of activities, and, in broad terms, the new skills and knowledge to be gained as a result of the internship.

- The on-site supervisor will want to know not only what the student wants to do and to learn but also what he or she can do. Before the on-site phase of the placement process can begin, therefore, the student should provide information on skills (e.g., language, computing, teaching), knowledge (e.g., relevant academic coursework), and experience (e.g., prior jobs, volunteer experiences, extracurricular activities, hobbies).

- As part of the preparation process, it is important that the selected student understand that an internship requires a firm commitment. The agency puts considerable effort into defining the internship, preparing the site supervisor, and orienting and training the intern once on site, and in turn has a right to expect a reliable, interested intern.

- It is important to remind the student that the most successful interns are both flexible and capable of taking the initiative to engage in projects at the internship site that might not have been identified initially. On-site supervisors are often managing multiple responsibilities, and students need to be prepared to be proactive in order to realize the most from their internship experience.

## Role of the On-Site Supervisor

The on-site supervisor is the primary liaison between the agency, the student, and the internship placement coordinator. For an internship to be successful, the on-site supervisor should be willing to provide the following:

- To identify substantive projects for the student, the internship coordinator should meet with the on-site supervisor to identify short-term and long-term projects that would be of benefit to the agency and feasible for the student to accomplish. The on-site supervisor might organize short-term activities that involve simple tasks and require little training, such as “shadowing” certain key employees, with the goal of imparting to the intern a sense of the breadth of activities of the organization. In addition, it is important that the student have a substantive long-term project in order to make the internship rigorous.

- The supervisor should document in writing the nature of the projects that the students will be assigned as well as the expected long-term learning outcomes that the student will achieve during the internship period. The student, the on-site supervisor, and the internship placement coordinator should all retain copies to consult as the internship progresses.

- The supervisor should ensure that the student has adequate activities to use the internship time constructively. This includes training, monitoring, and evaluating the student in the internship. Although the intern may work with several people in the agency during the course of the internship, the on-site supervisor needs to maintain contact with the intern to facilitate a cohesive internship.

- The supervisor should have enough authority in the agency to direct the student's work and coordinate the internship assignments. The supervisor should agree to provide an understanding of the overall goals of the agency, how the student's work fits into these goals, the reporting relationships of the intern, and basic operational functions such as the telephone, mail, and work hours. The on-site supervisor should also be available to meet regularly during the internship with the student and the internship coordinator to assess the development of the internship and make any necessary adjustments.

## Role of the Internship Placement Coordinator

The internship placement coordinator plays a critical role in identifying suitable internships, ensuring that the internship progresses smoothly, and making changes in placement, if needed. As a result, the coordinator has the lead responsibility for developing the internship. To accomplish these goals, the coordinator should be able to provide the following:

- The coordinator should be very knowledgeable about the local culture, business climate, local organizations, and overall national or local regulations that might relate to the internship.

- The coordinator should be available throughout the duration of the student's placement with the agency to handle questions and

work with the agency to make any necessary adjustments. This would include visits to the agency to see the internship in progress and to meet with the on-site supervisor.

- For credit-bearing internships, the coordinator should be aware of the academic goals of the program established by the course instructor in order to make an appropriate placement.

## The Role of the Instructor

If an internship is to carry academic credit, it is essential that an instructor evaluate the student's academic learning and assign a final grade. The instructor may be an overseas faculty member, the program's academic director, or a U.S. faculty member. While discipline-specific expertise will vary widely, it is important that the instructor of record be academically qualified to evaluate the internship in light of the overall academic goals of the program and be sufficiently knowledgeable about the location or the topic to design a meaningful academic program for the student that incorporates the internship.

Depending on the overseas program's structure, the instructor may have an active role throughout the student's internship experience or be more engaged before and after the internship. The following examples illustrate different forms of instructor engagement in education abroad internships:

- While participating in the internship experience, the student simultaneously enrolls in an accompanying on-site course that examines the host work culture, its values, and manifestations. Students use the internship experience as their “textbook,” and meet as a group each week with the course instructor to reflect on their individual experiences as well as to engage in a comparative discussion of the host culture's work environment and the students' home culture. Credit is awarded for the academic work the student completes as part of the accompanying course (a final paper, student presentations, etc.) as well as the quality and consistency of the student's job performance at the internship site.

- Prior to the internship placement, the student enrolls in coursework overseas that discusses the nature of the internship experience, introduces the student to appropriate

research methodologies, and examines critical aspects of the host culture. The student then engages in the internship and meets periodically (in person or electronically) with the instructor of record to discuss the student's experience and research progress. In some cases, the instructor may require the student to submit an outline or drafts of the final paper during the internship period. At the conclusion of the internship, the student submits an academic assignment in which the student critically examines his/her internship experiences, the agency's activities and goals, and larger cultural insights gained as a result of the internship and the student's own research. Credit is awarded for the quality of the academic submission as well as the quality and consistency of the student's job performance at the internship site.

■ The student works with a faculty member from the home campus to outline an internship experience, usually as part of an independent study course, that will serve as the basis for a final assignment due upon the student's return to campus. The U.S. faculty member confirms that the structure and nature of the student's internship overseas will allow for critical reflection and has verification that the overseas agency is prepared to receive the student and provide a substantive experience. The student may be required to provide progress reports during the internship period and submits a final reflective assignment (such as an academic paper) by a prescribed date to the U.S. faculty member in order to receive credit.

The most important criterion to keep in mind is that academic credit should be awarded for the learning that takes place as a result of the internship experience and not for the internship experience itself. Students must document what they have learned from the experience, and the instructor of record must assess the documented learning.

## Assessing Credit for Internships

One of the questions that education abroad programs must address is the appropriate number of academic credits to award for an internship experience. Although there is no single answer to this question, the Learning

Abroad Center follows the general guidelines for University of Minnesota courses and ensures that the number of hours of student effort meet the minimum requirement for the number of credits offered. The general expectation is that each semester credit should reflect approximately 45 hours of total student effort.

Total hours of student effort on an internship include time spent at the internship site, independent research or reading conducted as part of the student's academic assignments, time spent in class if there is an accompanying course, and meetings (in person or virtual) with the instructor of record regarding the progress of the internship.

## Challenged to Reach Beyond

Many forms of applied learning opportunities exist beyond internship experiences, including work abroad, volunteering, and service-learning options. Each opportunity brings with it unique challenges and exciting possibilities. As education abroad professionals continue

to expand the range of options for students, a greater number and range of U.S. students will be challenged to reach beyond their initial comfort zone and engage in new ways with cultures beyond their own. **IE**

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*Note: This article includes information created jointly with Carl Brandt, director of the University of Minnesota's Career and Community Learning Center, and Chip Peterson, program director, Office of International Programs. The author also thanks Martha Johnson, director of the Learning Abroad Center, for her insights.*

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