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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to assist interested faculty members in designing, developing, and evaluating political internships so as to produce the best learning experience possible. Political internship is a program developed to teach college students about politics and government by exposing them to a "real world" political experience. It can also assist future graduates in developing contacts and references useful in the job market. Three issues that are addressed include (1) the concept of political internship, (2) the role that internship plays in a contemporary political science curriculum, and (3) some of the important questions that should be raised in developing or evaluating internship programs. Recommendations are given for dealing with these concerns. Emphasized is recognition that the internship program complement and enhance the classroom experience rather than merely be a job training program. (Author/ND)

THE UNDERGRADUATE INTERNSHIP TECHNIQUE:

an Essay on Program Development

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ABSTRACT

"The Undergraduate Internship Technique:
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Recently professors of political science have begun to turn their attention to the techniques and methods of teaching students about political events, as well as the researching of political behavior. The political internship is one technique that is being used. Motivated by student concerns of the late 1960's and the 1970's, departments of political science and government are utilizing this "field experience" technique more and more.

This paper is principally concerned with assisting interested faculty members in designing, developing, and evaluating political internships so as to produce the best learning experience possible. The paper indicates issues and problems to be addressed as well as the recommendations of the authors in dealing with these concerns.

I. Introduction

This paper and more generally this series of panels is directed at the teaching of college students about politics and government. Until recently the techniques and methods of teaching about political events received little attention at most political science conventions. The result of this relative neglect is a tremendous need to explore and further develop ways of communicating information about political activity to students.

Recently publications, panels, faculty seminars and grants have been more prevalent and the development of new, innovative teaching methods have been more fully explored. One technique that has received much attention is the political internship. This paper addresses three issues related to the internship: (1) what is a political internship; (2) what role does the internship play in a contemporary political science curriculum; and (3) what are some of the important questions that should be raised in developing or evaluating internship programs.

II. The Political Science Internship Program

The internship concept is not new to academia. Professional programs such as law schools, medical schools, as well as advanced business and public administration programs have used the internship extensively for a long time. (Cookingham: 1973). The political science undergraduate internship program has been developed more recently and largely because of two stimuli. According to information collected by the Center for Public Service Internship Programs located in Washington, D.C. public service internship programs increased in number and magnitude during two distinct periods: the late 1960's and the early to the mid 1970's.

The late 1960's were marked by a high level of student concern for the workings of the (political) system. This heightened concern has variously been attributed to the war in Viet Nam, new social programs involving previously apathetic minorities and deprived, as well as the resulting (?) social protest movements.

In turn, this renewed interest in the system by college youth created a demand on (and off) campuses to get more fully involved in the system. Departments of political science and government seemingly responded to this demand by instituting and/or enlarging cooperative education or internship programs allowing students to receive credit for political experiences in the "real world."

The second stimulus for political science internship programs seems to have been economic, rather than political, circumstances. The early years of the 1970's hosted the initial awareness of the over abundance of college trained students. An increasing number of students were being graduated for a stagnating number of "white collar," generalist postions.

Liberal arts programs (of which government or political science is one) have typically stressed the broad, classical education. To learn about ones environment, to understand it, and to learn to communicate and interact within it were sufficient "tools" for employment in a "sellers" job market. However, as larger numbers of college educated students appeared on the market, the employer became dominant. The broadly educated, generalist with the liberal arts background lost marketability to vocationally trained students.

The Center of Public Service Internship Programs substantiates that this rising interest in job-related degrees (programs and majors that teach one how to do something rather than how to think about things) were and are much more popular than the classical liberal arts programs. Today's students are seemingly much more job-oriented than students five or ten years ago.

A major outcome of this trend has been the "vocationalizing" of liberal arts programs. (A more complete discussion of this process and its affects on the liberal arts program are found in, Stephenson and Sexton: 1975) In political science courses such as public administration, methodology, planning, etc. have sprung up for the first time and are gaining new popularity where before they could be barely justified to the administration.

Importantly, one of the most popular vocationalizing tactics has been the political internship. This is a program developed to expose the student to a "real world" political experience, a program that can assist the future graduate in developing contacts and references useful in the job market. From the student's point of view the program demonstrates the "practicability" of a political science program. From the department's standpoint, it offers the potential for new credit hours.

These stimuli not only produced different motivation for the development of the internship they also seemed to emphasize the structuring of different types of internship positions. While the "involvement in the system" movement emphasized campaign work; the latest interest in internships seem heavily oriented to administrative positions--principally planning, administrative assistance, research analysts, etc. This seems to be consistent with our suspicion that the latter movement has clearly emphasized the job market over the "learning about the system." Too, while the initial movement was somewhat consistent with the liberal arts tradition, the more recent interest first appears at odds with that tradition.

However, it is our general contention that internship programs have too often been structured as "job-training" exercises and not often concerned with other features of a political science program. The internship can complement a liberal arts program if it is carefully designed and monitored.

III. The Internship in the Political Science Curriculum

In evaluating the functions of a political science program, we would suggest a rough check list of four functions. First, political science programs expose the student to contemporary as well as perennial political questions and issues. Secondly, a political science program exposes the student to information, facts about politics and government. Thirdly, the program offers the student a chance to analyze political (more generally societal) issues and political information--either empirically or normatively.

Finally, the political science program does assist in preparing the student for employment. We would submit that political science programs have always offered these services; however, the relative priorty of each as well as the means of offering these services clearly have changed.

A carefully designed and administered internship program can offer support to all of these areas--not just the last. Admittedly most internship programs have tended to emphasize the job training dimension, but careful evaluation of established or new programs can aid in expanding the worth of the political science internship program.

To illustrate we would like to discuss our experiences in the context of these four functions of political science programs noted above. Beginning with what we perceive to be the most traditional of functions, a discussion and appreciation of contemporary and perennial political questions, we see the internship program assisting that function in several ways.

First, many issues and concepts are very abstract for the 20 year old student to grasp and the classroom format seems inadequate in dealing with certain issues. Take for example the question of "plea bargaining" and its role in the justice system. Few of our "liberalized" students can embrace such a process. Yet all of our interns that have worked with district attorney officies as well as one that worked in a parole office admitted the importance as well as the necessity for such a practice in the presently constituted judical system. We would submit that such an exposure could not have been accomplished in most other formats.

Secondly, many of these perennial questions can take on new, contemporary meaning by use of the internship technique. A carefully supervised student can clearly see the subtle battles between elected officials and administrators. Likewise, the broader question relating to the threat technocracy is having on democratic principles can be made more vivid by witnessing the necessity and prominence of information possessed by the full time administrator over the part time city council.

We are not suggesting that the internship can illuminate all of the questions of politics and government, but we do suggest that a carefully organized and administered program can assist the department in providing this function.

The second function listed above is that of supplying information about government and politics to the student. The examples of this are too numerous to even list. But perhaps one example might assist us in making the point. Teachers of public administration have continually fought a battle in the classroom that we will call "exposure." Few "typical" students have ever been exposed to the administrative element of organizations. While the battles within congress, the presidency, and political parties capture the interest of students, the workings of the administrative branch of government are rarely of central interest to students. Conversely, the best public administration students seem to be the ones that have already served in the military or worked several years before college. In short, most students have no background information on administrative procedures. The exposure that a student receives by taking an internship in an administrative agency has nearly always resulted in a greater appreciation of the public administration course (that would nearly always be required before the student could take the internship.)

The third function we noted as central to a political science program is data analysis. Often we associate this function solely with statistical analysis, or perhaps the writing of a term paper. On the other hand, most internships offer the student a chance to do information analysis and evaluation on actual agency problems. In addition many times the consequences of the decision that the student has worked on can be witnessed during the internship period.

Once again we would caution that the internship is not a substitute for a methods course or for term papers but it is complementing of these exercises. Indeed, before a placement is made the departmental methods course and some level of written and/or oral communication skills could be required. (Such requirements are discussed in more detail below.)

Ironically the final and most accepted role of the internship, job training, may not be its strongest feature. To be sure, the student involved in an internship assignment will learn about the informal procedures and ways of doing things that can not be taught in a classroom or addressed in a text. But few students (at least undergraduates) will be qualified to step into that agency or organization upon completing the internship. In addition, the chance of an opening occuring even in large agencies for which the student would be immediately qualified is rare. The student will probably be exposed to a junior or senior level management position held by someone with schooling and experience.

Never the less, the student's internship does potentially assist him (or her) in the job market. If he or she does well the intern has an invaluable reference---someone outside academia that can tell others how well the intern worked in an actual job situation. Secondly, the old bug-a-boo of experience required is becoming more and more the rule even for low level administrative positions. The internship puts the student at least one-half step above the student without such an experience. Likewise the student's experience may tell him if he or she wishes to pursue such a vocation. Some interns (especially those interested in the law) have found their exposure to the real world less than what they anticipated.

In any case, the experience does add to the student's marketability as well as adding to the student's educational background. Importantly we have several times alluded to a "well organized and administered program." Too often the internship is not well conceived and administered; hence the value of the experience deteroriates. It is to these questions of administration and organization that we will now turn.

IV. Administration and Design of the Internship Program

In an effort to maximize the internship experience we would suggest several questions that should be examined prior to and/or during the development and operation of the program.

Access: The issue of who should participate in the program is certainly one of the more fundamental questions. While the overriding concern must be the program's role in the department and the school's mission, certain issues should be explicitly addressed. For example, should all departmental majors and minors be required to take the program or should the program be elective? Should only majors be allowed into the program? Should the student be of upper division standing or can a lower division student enter the program?

Although we have felt some pressure from administrators and some students to open the program up, we have found that especially the new program should consider a strategy in which the program is semi-restrictive. By this we mean that good departmental students should be encouraged into the program, while less talented students should be pursued with caution.

Criteria for admission to the program could include senior standing, a minimum grade point average, as well as an appropriate classroom background. For example, a student wishing to intern with a planning agency could be expected to have taken most of the following courses: a methods course, urban politics, planning, cartography, and an economics course. To be sure, these requirements must be tempered with common sense, but we have found them to be rather good preliminary screening techniques for (especially) the first several groups of interns. In addition these requirements seem to add to the "experience." Those with a good background seem to get far more out of the internship than those without the classroom preparation.

There are several reasons for this "go slow approach." Credibility of the program is certainly one. After the program has been accepted by university officials, agency officials must be sold. Because many times these public officials are inexperienced with the internship or personally suspicious of a college student coming into and assisting them in their job, placements must be as good as possible, student's must be willing to work with these suspicious and poorly trained agency and academic supervisors. In short, this shakedown period is very important for the future development of the program. To restrict the participants to the

better qualified student can add to the success and hence credibility of the program.

This strategy is justified in two additional ways. Program notariety will be carried by these first interns. A successful experience will multiply the level of interest among all concerned. In addition to student interest, agency interest will be expanded by the postive experiences of others.

Once again we want to caution that the access question must be one decided on after thorough discussion of the purpose of the program to the individual department. Our experience has been that the restrictive approach deserves careful consideration--especially in the early stages of program development.

Credits and Grades: A second issue is the awarding of credits and grades. Two theories exist regarding the amount of credit that should be given for an internship experience. Those that argue that a substantial amount of credit (as much as a full time term load for a full time position) should be awarded suggest that this is a means to emphasize to the student the importance of the position. They argue that a student receiving 9-15 credit hours will be more serious and attentive in his or her position.

There are those that argue the number of credits awarded should be minimal, 3-6 credit hours. They tend to argue that evaluation is difficult and rewards can be found in other ways than credit--for example, financial awards for some and the "excitement" of working on actual issues in a real-world context. No clear trend seems discernable in our discussions with other program coordinators.

Of even more difficulty is the grading of the experience. Should the program be graded or not? If it is to be graded, how should the grades be assigned? If it is not graded, how does one insure a high level of interest and activity?

Once again our ideas have been influenced by our own university's decisions. We have a credit system of from 6-15 quarter credit hours that is graded. Credit assignment is based on the amount of time the student will spend in the position and the responsibilities

of the position. A minimum of six hours of credit is earned for 15-20 hours of effort (a ratio of approximately 1:3). Student's working a full 40 hour week will receive from nine to twelve credit hours based on the responsibility and sophistication of the internship. (A student assisting a philosopher-king might warrant fifteen quarter hours of credit.)

In addition, these experiences do receive grades. The grades are based on not fewer than two personal interviews with both the intern and his or her agency supervisor. Students producing written reports are asked to submit a copy to us. The student is also evaluated by means of a paper that addresses the interface between the experience and the classroom work that relates to the experience.

Never the less, the grading aspect of the program does not seem to us to be desirable. Interest seems to be maintained not by the grading, but rather by the experience. In any case, the academic value of the experience can not be determined without a very difficult and arbitrary evaluation procedure.

Agency Interest and Cooperation: The organization that will offer the internship position must be carefully screened for its interest and ability to participate in the internship program. Placements are developed in three ways: student initiated, faculty contact, or by means of an internship clearinghouse agency.

The student initiated method seems to be the least desirable. We have found that this procedure is more often than not a relative or friend offering a position to the student and the student trying to get academic credit for the job. However, on those occasions that the suggestion seems legitimate staff contact is a prerequisite before proceeding.

Such contact makes the student initiated position essentially a "faculty contact." This second means of securing participation seems to us to be preferable. Agencies are contacted on their potential for offering an internship position. This potential includes past internship participation, nature of the position to be offered, as well as personnel interest. The agency that has had experience in supervising interns is to be highly recruited.

This quality above all others seems to be contributory to a successful internship experience. The supervision and use of an intern in an agency is an extremely difficult task and one that is provided best by someone with experience with interns or by someone who has previously been an intern.

Also of major concern are those agencies with positions that are amenable (structurally) to interns. Certain political experiences do not seem to be as appropriate for interns as others. We have found positions with political campaigns and private law firms, while attractive to the students, are especially difficult to design. In the campaign organization the student is more likely than not a leg man or a paper schuffler; while the private law firm finds few tasks for which they will assign one not trained in the law. We do not mean to suggest that such internships should be systematically rejected, but rather that the development of the placement be done with care.

A third aspect of agency potential is interest. This characteristic has been seen to overcome problems of inexperience in supervision and problems of positions not readily amenable to the internship experience. The agency supervisor that is interested in the program--as an educational experience--is a very important variable in the selection of placements. However, the supervisor whose interest is motivated principally by "cheap labor needs" is not to be highly considered in the placement selection.

A frequently asked question by the student and the agency supervisor is "how much money will be involved?" The student may need financial assistance--especially if the placement is during the summer term when he or she ordinarily earns money for school. To ask the student to give up a summer job for an internship offering no or little compensation is likely to be unsuccessful. On the other hand, public agencies seldom budget money for intern programs and such budgeting is often questioned as unneeded.

Aside from offering the obvious solutions--pay the student or do not--there is one other alternative possible. Rather than having all the university's work-study students work on the campus, interns that qualify for work-study funds can be placed

in an internship position and be compensated through the university's resources. Often times these funds will be matched by the employing agency. The obvious shrtocomings of such a program are: (1) university cooperation; and (2) those that do not qualify for the work-study aid can not be aided.

The third method of securing an agency placement is by a clearinghouse or third party agency. This agency approaches the potential agency directly, secures a list of placements, and then markets the list to the interested students and/or universities. For their services the clearinghouse agency will take a small fee, paid by the agency.

In concept the idea is good. However we have encountered several problems. First, the clearinghouse jealously guards contact with the agency making supervision more difficult. Secondly, placement is almost totally controlled by the clearinghouse. The academic screening process noted above is severely limited.

In sum, we feel that positions must be critically evaluated before the initial placement. Experience in the internship program, applicability of the positions to the internship's goals, and personnel interest seem to be best evaluated directly by the faculty supervisor(s) and not the student or a clearinghouse organization.

Academic Supervision: One of the most important issues to be considered in developing the internship is the method of supervising the intern. This general issue breeds several more specific questions that constitutes the supervision issue: how should the intern supervisor be credited for his effort; who should supervise the various intern positions; and what means should be used in the supervision.

The intern supervisor(s) face an enormous amount of work and effort in developing and maintaining the program. In most cases such an effort pays off in academic credits that can be used to justify "released time" for the supervisor. However, even in those cases there is a lag time problem. We have found that the bulk of the effort occurs before the placement. The contacts with the agency, the screening of the students, and the internal paper work at the university occurs from one to two

terms prior to the placement. Unless the staff member is given permanent released time to function in this role, problems of time arise.

Apart from the issue of how such "crediting" is done (if at all) the question of who should supervise the various interns is important. For example, in the last year we have placed students with private law firms, county attorney's offices, the Minnesota state legislature, the St. Paul Consumer Protection Office, the St. Paul Planning Office, and the St. Paul Police Department. One individual is hard pressed to have an expertise in all of these areas. Thus, does the intern supervisor farm the student out to the appropriate faculty person or assume the supervision himself? If the former, does the supervisor receive the released time or the various faculty members? The issue is not only one of good academic supervision and program development, but an issue also of faculty morale.

The third question related to academic supervision is, "what instrument, methodology, etc. can or should be used to evaluate the student?" Personal supervisory visits, conversations with the students and agency supervisors, as well as written assignments are often used. Good preparatory efforts as well as weekly on-campus seminars can also be used to assist in this most difficult task. In short, the means by which students are evaluated in the internship experience is an issue that deserves more than passing attention. Who does the evaluation and how it is done are important questions not easily resolved.

Multi-Unit Programs: A final organizational question is especially important for smaller departments. Is a position with the city budget office a political science position, a position for an economics student, or perhaps one for an accounting student? The issue may not be important until other departments begin to develop an internship program. However, with success comes duplication. In order to resolve the issue before it becomes a problem the multi-departmental organization structure might be proposed. For example, the Social Science Internship Program incorporating political science, economics, sociology, geography, and perhaps

business administration might be suggested. The arguments over whose department administers the placement, as well as more effective utilization of staff resources are clear advantages of such a multi-departmental organization. The obvious shortcoming is the appropriateness of economists monitoring political science students working for the state bureau of the budget.

Yet another multi-unit approach could involve cooperative efforts between universities. Rather than crossing disciplinary lines, several schools in proximity to one another may pool their resources and offer a joint internship program that is alternatively monitored and supported by the participating institutions. The issues of intern supervision, program funding, and credit-grade assignments are potential problems that must be addressed.

The advantages and disadvantages of multi-unit organizations can be easily listed. To reconcile the seeming irreconciliable consequences is another matter. However, we do feel that an individual department's own situation will dictate what if any of these alternatives will be considered.

V. Summation and Conclusions

As important as any thesis discussed above is the recognition that the internship program can be more than a job-training program. Quite the contrary, we feel the internship can complement and enhance the classroom experience. Clearly the program should be carefully organized and administered to maximize the benefits of the program. However by considering the issues and questions noted above we believe that such a broad based program can be achieved.

Aside from the academic contributions of the internship program noted above certain community service and research opportunities can be advanced by such a program. In developing programs administrative personnel and community leaders will be approached and introduced to not only the internship program but the departmental and university program. Such an orientation many times establishes research and community service contacts that can be used in

other departmental programs. Community leaders functioning as classroom speakers, as representatives on departmental advisory committees, as well as offering access to community facilities and programs can all act as spinoffs from the internship program.

In sum, the political internship can be a very important tool in a department's program offerings. A carefully designed and administered program, one that has carefully considered the department's goals as well as resouroe constraints, can complement classroom activities far more than by just offering "job-training." Likewise, the internship program offers the staff the opportunity to more closely relate to community officials, thus affording the staff additional research and community service opportunities.

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