Improving Academic Internships
Key considerations for implementing a successful campus-wide review

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**Internships are important, but colleges and universities need to ensure their educational value. York College made this a campus-wide initiative.**

Experiential learning is receiving increased attention in the higher education community with special consideration given to internships. For example, internships were recognized as one of the high-impact educational practices that research suggests can increase retention and student engagement (Kuh, 2008). Internships can also provide opportunities for application of academic knowledge (Shoenfelt, Kottke, & Stone, 2012) and attainment of professional skills (Shoenfelt, Stone, & Kottke, 2013; You, 2014), which can provide advantages for both marketability and compensation in securing jobs after graduation (Gault, Leach & Duey, 2010).

In terms of how employers view internships, one study found that more than 80 percent of employers believe that completion of a supervised and evaluated internship or community-based project would be very or fairly effective in ensuring that college graduates have the requisite skills and knowledge for success at their company; more than two-thirds (67 percent) indicated that a faculty supervisor's assessment of these types of experiential learning would be very or fairly useful in evaluating a candidate's potential for success (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 2008). Finally, separate research found that more than 70 percent of employers prefer to hire college graduates with relevant work experience; 60 percent of these employers prefer that this work experience be gained through an internship or co-op (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014).

Student perceptions of internships is also positive (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragnolini, 2004), with students indicating that application of academic knowledge as well as development of workplace awareness and specific skills were important benefits of completing an internship.

While this body of research supports the importance of internships within higher education, there can be a great degree of variability among internships with respect to their learning potential (O'Neill, 2010). Institutions must take intentional actions if they are to ensure the educational quality of internships (O'Neill, 2010).

Higher education always seems to be in a process of change and re-evaluation, but two prominent national trends compel institutions to improve upon their own practices. First, an ever-increasing attention is being paid to the first destinations of college graduates resulting in the scrutiny of colleges and universities through these data. From news stories that draw upon average salaries by major to questions about being ready for a 21st century economy, schools are being looked to for answers. Second, as accrediting bodies have increasingly emphasized the idea of outcomes assessment, programs are finding it necessary to look at their own practices to ensure that benchmarks are being met. These two trends dovetail in the examination of experiential learning programs.

Initiating a Campus-Wide Review

The purpose of this article is to share lessons learned from one college's campus-wide review of its academic internship program. York College of Pennsylvania is a private comprehensive college serving approximately 4,600 undergraduates. The college has roots back to 1787 as a college preparatory academy; four-year degrees have been offered for approximately 45 years. The college currently offers more than 50 baccalaureate programs, which are the focus of this piece. The academic internship program was formalized in 1998 and has operated with a centralized model of administrative coordination in the Career Development Center, with decentralized academic oversight from faculty members. While the program and academic internships have been included in the majority of the planning documents for the college, there had not been a comprehensive review of it from its 1998 inception until our review was conducted July 2008 through October 2009.

Among the issues that the institution faced was a need to ensure that standards were appropriate and common across campus (such as GPA requirements, hours of experience necessary, and so forth); consideration of the legal liabilities for the college and faculty; and a reevaluation of the correlation between academic learning, associated assignments, and site-specific components of the experience.

A sub-committee of the academic senate's Academic Programs Committee was formed to conduct the review. This served to provide a venue for the eventual acceptance of the study and a mechanism to allow for action to be taken following the report. The 10-person sub-committee was composed of members from almost all academic departments on campus and a member of the Career Development Center staff who coordinates the program, and associate-dean level administrators. The review consisted of examining national guidelines and regional peers for best practices, comparing offerings within committee member departments, and considering how various proposed changes to the existing model would impact the effectiveness of the internship program. The following are the lessons learned through the work that may be of value for another institution considering a similar endeavor.

Lessons Learned

**Lesson #1: Determine where the "official" request for the review should originate and create an informed, diverse committee.**A crucial first consideration needs to be where the request for the committee originates. This is going to vary from campus to campus, but central to the consideration is thinking through if it is faculty or administration that needs to "buy in" to the final report.

In instances where the administration is largely on board prior to the examination of the need for change, it may be best for the review to originate with a faculty committee, and vice versa. To the extent possible beforehand, it is also worth considering what the likely recommendations from the report are going to focus on and how that may influence decision-making.
Regardless of where the request comes from, the ideal review should be constructed in such a way that all stakeholders agree with the thoroughness of the report and its recommendations, and are willing to work together collaboratively.

At York College, the review was conducted through a faculty senate committee, which provided for ease of faculty buy-in when it came to the curricular changes being proposed. Further, by including both administration and staff in the committee, the review team was able to work throughout the process on acceptance and recognition of the report by different groups within the institution. As the committee was being formed, the leaders were intentional about seeking to include individuals who represented diverse perspectives both in terms of their areas of expertise as well as their ability to serve as ambassadors to different areas of campus. Decisions regarding division of work, both product and process, were made so as to capitalize on each individual's strengths and contribute to the collective whole.

**Lesson #2: Carefully frame your key questions so that you have a comprehensive review broken into manageable topics.**A key consideration of any review is that the dimensions of the review must be clear before it begins. Rather than starting with a generalized charge to examine the internship program, the group began with a listing of eight separate areas to explore. These were related to both specific areas of the program to investigate and to specific recommendations from national guidelines.

While it was important that each committee member establish an overall foundation of experiential education knowledge upon which to build his or her work, making explicit the areas to investigate enabled the committee structure to work well as separate charges were allocated to pairs or individuals for investigation. Careful framing of the key questions allowed individual members and the committee as a whole to meet deadlines and stay focused. Splitting the charges also allowed the group to look at issues first in isolation and then to bring them into conversation with other charges and eventually the whole work. For example, GPA and credit requirements were considered separately, then reexamined as part of the larger discussion of how prerequisite standards connect to national and peer best practices. This in turn was folded into the final recommendations of the study for new policy language.

**Lesson #3: Consider how best to identify and use resources.**As with most tasks, when conducting a review of an academic internship program it is imperative to use resources effectively to produce the best product. However, beyond simply recognizing all available internal and external resources, it is also important to consider which resources will resonate best with a particular campus at that point in time. When the review occurred at York College, there was a strong desire among many on campus for changes to be driven by an intrinsic desire for improvement rather than from external drivers. To capitalize on this sentiment, the committee opted not to use an outside consultant for this particular work but instead to integrate external resources through the use of literature from relevant professional associations, conversations with experts, and information from peer institutions. Internal resources were especially crucial in shaping a positive finished product; the campus community responded well to celebrating and sharing the best practices of its members and listening to colleagues with expertise in experiential learning. The committee itself became an internal resource as its members developed substantial expertise through their work and were able to share it with the rest of the community.

Since every campus has different needs and a unique culture, it is important to spend time carefully considering both what resources are available and how best to use these resources to ensure a successful outcome that can be accepted by the campus community.

**Lesson #4: Be ready for new issues to arise; deal with what is pressing and put others aside to maintain focus.**The committee's review was focused on internships, but, as part of that review, the first charge included an examination of what experiential education itself is. Fulfilling this portion involved a broader discussion of experiential education, review of the literature, standard definitions from national organizations, and so forth. As a consequence of this initial consideration of defining experiential education, the review team ended up recommending that similar self-studies occur for non-internship experiential education components. This enabled the group to set aside those issues and focus on its central concern.

Note that focusing on central concerns need not entail ostrich-like refusal to be aware of needed other considerations. For example, after the group had largely completed the first charge of defining experiential education, an external branding consultant made a suggestion relevant to internships at the institution. While outside the scope of the team's original charge, this was clearly relevant to the group's work and needed to be addressed. Examination of the issue extended the duration of the review, but the group believed that not considering the recommendation would mean that its eventual report would be incomplete and action on its findings would be delayed as another group (or groups) would be replicating work already begun.

**Lesson #5: Keep the focus on learning and quality.** During the review process and the discussions that will ensue, it is important to ensure that the conversation stay focused on learning and quality. In any endeavor that involves diverse perspectives and upcoming changes, there will inevitably be disagreements; it is important that learning and quality stay at the forefront of all decision-making and communication.

For example, one topic that generated differing opinions was the idea of what constituted appropriate academic work for an internship and how best to balance the emphasis placed on academic work versus on-site work. The review process provided a chance for the community to learn more about how experiential learning is handled across academic programs on campus; this provided an excellent opportunity for cross-pollination of ideas. Because the review committee stayed focus on learning and quality, there was consensus to strive toward improvement. Adopting this perspective, however, did not translate to a rigid set of standards across the campus; in fact, variations in the weighting of academic work persist, reflecting the standards of each academic area. However, formative and summative methods of assessment were built into each internship experience, providing a flexible framework to maximize student learning with on-site exposure.

**Lesson #6: Check in, check back…repeat again and again.**During an internship review, the importance of good communication cannot be overstated, as all members of the campus community will come to the discussion of internships with varying levels of understanding. To provide a solid foundation, all members of the review committee at York College were provided with a set of well-organized, comprehensive materials, including details about the history of the internship program at York College, forms related to the program, faculty manual language about internships, relevant information from professional associations, and so forth. Committee members worked diligently to share this information and the on-going work of the group with all members of the campus through various communication channels. In addition, the review committee frequently checked in with the campus community to solicit input during department meetings, academic senate meetings, special discussion forums, and other gatherings.

Moving Forward

The work of a campus-wide academic internship review is not over when the report is delivered.

At York College, completion of the review was a great start for enhancing an already strong internship program, but implementing the recommendations is a work in progress. Some recommendations, like the creation of revised paperwork with an enhanced learning focus, were easy. Others require deeper levels of change and on-going, longer-term implementation and monitoring.

The work of those involved in a review must continue beyond the submission of the report; review committee members need to serve as advocates of the recommendations and ensure they stay on track amidst the inevitable transitions in academic and administrative leadership. As noted in Lesson 1, it is important to consider those initially driving the request for review and the composition of the committee at the outset in order to sustain the will to implement longer-term recommendations even as the institution moves on to other issues.

Given the importance of internships in higher education, periodic review of the program is essential to ensure the best educational experience possible. Although not exhaustive, keeping the importance of these lessons central in the planning process for your internship review should help to facilitate a process that is both efficient in its review and effective in its outcome.

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- See more at: http://www.naceweb.org/j112015/educational-value-internships.aspx#sthash.FOMWPQIY.dpuf