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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ON THE JOB--A BUSINESS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

San Diego State University has run a business internship program since the early 70's, placing between 40 and 70 interns with local business for a semester of work experience. Our program is somewhat unusual in that it is entirely student-run and self-financed. These features offer tremendous advantages in allowing an independent program, but as the number of interns and participating businesses grows, we are revising the program somewhat to allow for more orderly and efficient expansion.

Since our business internship program has gone through several phases, our experience should offer useful information to other schools having internship programs or wishing to start them.

STRUCTURE OF PROGRAM

Each semester, undergraduate students are interviewed and "hired" by the current staff for the following jobs:

Three Personnel-- These students interview prospective interns and note their skills, interests, completed coursework and so on.

Three Sales--These students prepare mailings and prospect lists and sell internships to local businesses. One Director-- This student runs the entire program for a semester. He or she supervises the sales and personnel staffs, troubleshoots for businesses with intern problems, and runs meetings with prospective and current interns.

Graduate students are hired as follows:

One Graduate Supervisor--Usually a former graduate advisor, this student runs graduate student meetings and acts as liaison between graduate advisors, businesses, and interns.

Graduate Advisors--One graduate advisor is hired for each 4-5 interns. The graduate advisor helps the business and intern get the project set up, contacts the business at least once a month, and the intern twice a month, to check on possible problems, and is one of the graders of the intern's paper at the end of the semester.

In addition, the program has a faculty advisor who takes care of problems with businesses and interns that can't be resolved by the staff. The entire program is advised generally by members of the Business Advisory Council's subcommittee on internship, three people from businesses who offer help in recruiting new businesses and streamlining procedures.

As you can see, the vast bulk of the work is the responsibility of the undergraduate staff.

FINANCING OF PROGRAM

Each business pays \$250 per intern in the form of a donation to the College of Business. Part of the money is currently spent as follows:

each intern	\$125
each graduate advisor	50/intern
graduate supervisor	250/semester

The program has one large expense every semester in the form of a luncheon for all interns, their business supervisors, and staff, at which framed certificates are given to participating businesses. (Lettering and framing of certificates also takes a certain amount of money each semester.)

Assuming a program paying fifty interns, ten graduate advisors, and a graduate supervisor, \$3500 is available each semester for the luncheon, certificates, and office expenses (typing, copying, postage, and telephone). In the past, when businesses paid only \$200 per intern, only \$750 was available for the above expenses and frequently the program was in the red. Since it was sponsored by the Associated Business Student Council, this organization absorbed the loss because of the program's value to the school. Businesses do not seem to be balking at the increased price, so the current financing should prove to be more businesslike.

ACADEMIC FEATURES OF THE PROGRAM

The sales staff and the graduate advisors are very conscious of the main requirements for acceptable projects from businesses: that the project be worth upper division credit and be supervised by a managerial employee. A semantic problem surrounds the word intern for us in some instances, as some school intern programs are set up to give students business exposure and the business free labor at a low level. We spend some time establishing our business interns as upper division students who have specific skills in marketing, management, accounting, finance, and information systems and who deserve to be paid.

Required Courses

Students who apply to the Internship Program must have completed at least three of the following five upper division courses: Statistical Analysis for Business, Quantitative Methods, Fundamentals of Finance, Management and Organization, and Marketing Principles. This requirement insures that businesses will receive interns with some solid theoretical courses behind them.

Term Paper

Each intern writes a term paper which relates the student's classroom education to the practical realities of the business world as observed in the firm. The specific comparisons found in these papers are evaluated by the student's graduate advisor and the faculty advisor. A copy is also sent to the business.

Grading

Advisors submit four grades for the interns:

- a grade for the term paper
- a grade for the internship itself
- a company grade, obtained from the supervisor
- an overall grade, considering the above grades

The faculty advisor has the responsibility of assigning

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the final grade, after evaluating the term paper and the graduate student's judgments.

PROBLEM AREAS TO BE REVISED

The program is currently being re-evaluated by the staff and our business advisors, and the following questions are being considered:

- 1) What sort of office organization, forms, and telephone procedure will enable the program to function most efficiently?
- 2) Would a paid staff produce significantly more sales of worthwhile projects?
- 3) Could the graduate advisors function as the sales staff, since the two phases of the project don't take place at the same time, and the graduate advisors are the later liaison with the company anyway?
- 4) Should the program be doubled in size? What problems might this create?
- 5) Can part of the program be administered by functional area clubs, such as the APICS organization?

Our solutions to these problems should be of value to other schools where internship programs exist or are being planned.

Office Reorganization

Because one complaint received fairly frequently from businesses trying to call the internship office was that we were hard to reach, one Business Advisory Committee member donated an answering machine to the program. As a result, staff members only need sign up for afternoon office hours, since the machine is on every morning. (Because the majority of our classes meet in the morning, staff members rarely have free time then).

The improved message capability of the combination of an answering machine and office staff should show up particularly in the sales phase of the semester (usually the last month, to gather projects for the upcoming semester). Companies which have had interns in the past usually have no questions about projects, but new companies may need help designing a project or may have questions about our deadlines, and the new phone procedure should make things much less frustrating for them.

When the entire financial structure is revised, we may be able to hire a full or half-time office assistant who would take care of phones, typing, and general organizational matters, so that the staff can concentrate on management and sales.

As far as paperwork is concerned, the internship staff and advisors already are using effective forms and letters. Anyone wishing copies of these forms should write directly to me and I'll get you the most current versions. We have sales letters, informational letters and brochures, thank-you letters, advisor forms, office contact forms, and so on.

Paid Staff

We are considering paying the staff of seven undergraduates on a share basis, depending each semester on how much money the program brings in. Since only tradition has made the sales and personnel staffs undergraduates and the advisors graduates, further modification might call for a total staff of ten without this grade level distinction, with members assigned advising, sales, and administrative responsibilities and paid by shares.

Since the graduate students would benefit from closer ties to the sales staff (they later must work with the businesses' supervisors on the projects), it seems like a good idea to have some graduate students double in advising and sales. The graduate students currently acting as advisors seem to feel this is a logical proposal, since as the program grows, accurate communication between parts of the program becomes even more important.

Expanding the Program

This semester 140 students expressed an interest in the internship program, 20 more than in the Fall Semester. Attrition, lack of matching company projects for student interests, and lack of student interviewing skills cut the final number of Fall interns to 47, which is about the same proportion as in previous semesters. We are trying to place 75 interns this semester and increase the program even more by Fall of 1980.

The biggest problem accompanying the program's projected growth will be the possibility of a larger number of communication problems between staff, companies, advisors, and interns.

Some of these problems can be alleviated by the new forms which note office contacts (calls, letters, reports from staff) so a history exists of all internships and thus problems can be headed off before they become serious. This log also helps update staff on what has gone on since they were in the office.

We are designing a new informational brochure which stresses a few points which apparently were not made clear enough in the past:

--Interns are never preplaced in a specific job either by the company, the intern, or a professor. All internships are earned through competitive interviews.

--All companies requesting interns do not necessarily get them. Some project descriptions don't sound worthy of upper division credit, some companies have a history of supervisory problems, some companies seem to need student part-time help at the minimum wage instead of an intern.

--All acceptable projects are worth three units of upper division credit. Students must be supervised by someone in management, and are expected to let their advisor know if they appear to be used as slave labor.

Students should spend the majority of their time at the business, so they'll gain general knowledge of the business (in addition to that of their assigned area). Thus, students cannot spend much of their time in the library, handing out samples, or photographing real estate appraisals.

--School computer time is not available to interns except on a very minor basis, which is subject to faculty advisor approval.

In the Spring semester, we are also experimenting with letting the APICS club, which has a very active parent chapter, sponsor several interns. These interns will be advised by the club, will undergo a similar interview process in order to be chosen, and will also write a final term paper. The club plans to use parent chapter businesses to develop upper division credit projects, and since the production and inventory area is a very specialized one, these new projects should provide a

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positive enhancement of the current intern program, rather than take away from it.

If this way of expanding the program is successful, we may consider adding accounting, marketing, and information systems clubs using this method. As long as the interns are chosen in the same way, advised in the same way, and perform the same kinds of upper level work, the club adjunct work should be helpful to the program.

CONCLUSIONS

The Internship Program is one of the most successful projects for creating positive public relations that the College of Business at San Diego State could have.

The past seven years' programs have placed about 700 students with local businesses. These qualified upper division students have almost uniformly done a superior job and have certainly impressed their business supervisors.

Each semester a number of businesses like their results so much, they create jobs for their interns. Many businesses repeat the program each semester with new projects.

Businesses gain knowledgeable workers, students gain practical job experience, and the school gains a positive reputation for producing worthy graduates. In return, businesses give supervisory time and expertise, students accept a lower wage (in the form of a small scholarship), and the school gives a small amount of office space to the program. Our internship is a very self-sufficient program--and we'll be happy to share the details of running this successful program with anyone who asks.