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Academic Internships: Can cash and credit coexist?

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NO LONGER DOES anyone seriously question the value and validity of internships as an integral component of an increasing variety of college and university curricula. Indeed, a good deal of competition has developed among institutions to arrive at the most effective (and attractive) internship program. Internship opportunities have become the subject of college newspaper advertisements, and conferences on internships now attract hundreds of faculty members and administrators across the country.

A Conflict Emerges

Yet, all is not peaceful in the world of academic internships. A conflict is emerging that pits professor against practitioner and forces the college student to decide whether to take part in an internship program on grounds that are unrelated to academic, intellectual, and personal needs.

The issue is whether students who take part in collegiate internship programs ought to receive both academic credit and monetary compensation for their activities. While this does not sound like a cataclysmic question, nonetheless it is one that has significant implications for higher education, for the concepts of learning and community service, and for the world of voluntarism and voluntary action.

For the sake of convenience, I shall use "internship" as a generic term to encompass all types and styles of off-campus learning programs.

Qualitatively, an internship can be defined as that component of an educational program that provides the student with the opportunity to enhance his intellectual development through the application of knowledge in a real world setting. The key element is application of knowledge. An internship, by this definition,

cannot be purely observational. Thus, a student who spends several hours a week watching the proceedings of the city council from the vantage point of the public gallery is not serving an internship—even though he may be learning. On the other hand, a student who spends the same amount of time serving as an aide to a member of the council, as part of a structured academic program, is indeed engaged in an internship.

The amount of time that a student spends in the activity is often a factor in determining whether a specific involvement constitutes an internship, but attempting such quantitative measures causes one to lose sight of the purpose of the internship as a learning experience. The only truly useful measure is whether the commitment of time is sufficient to permit the student to obtain the necessary intellectual benefit.

Internship or Job?

This leads us directly to another definitional question. When is a work experience an internship and not a job? Here is the crux of the controversy. The simplest answer is that if the student receives a monetary reward—pay—it is a job. If he receives academic credit, it is an internship. By making such a distinction one is judging not on the basis of the quality of the experience but rather on the basis of two factors that imperfectly measure that experience.

We all know what pay is for. It is compensation for work performed for an employing organization. It reflects, to a certain degree, the value of the person's service to that organization; in classic economic terms it represents a portion of the value his labor adds to the product or service produced by the organization.

Academic credit, on the other hand, is neither compensation nor a substitute for compensation. It is a

measure of a student's learning, and the awarding of it (note the difference between *awarding* credit and *paying* compensation) is supposed to represent the acquisition by the student of a certain increment of knowledge and intellectual skill. It has nothing to do with the value of a student's service to an academic institution or, in an internship, to an outside agency or organization.

If these two elements are independent, measuring different accomplishments and rewarding them in different ways, then why all the hue and cry over providing both if the nature of the internship experience so merits? That is, why should not a student receive compensation, if his activities on behalf of an organization are of value, and, in addition receive academic credit if he has a valid learning experience related to his academic program? Is it logical to expect the awarding of academic credit to serve both purposes? One may argue that awarding academic credit for services rendered off-campus to an outside agency is a violation of the basis for the awarding of such credit and, indeed, cheapens and demeans its very concept. But we know that far too many students are awarded academic credit for on campus work experiences totally unrelated to their academic programs. It is just such a use of credit—not the providing of compensation—that violates the educational rationale for internships.

Pros and Cons of Cash and Credit

The most common argument against combining cash and credit is that compensation compromises the learning experience, that the remunerated internship suffers from qualitative deflation. According to this theory, the compensated student ceases to perceive the internship as a learning experience, and sees it rather as a job to be carried out according to the dictates of the agency or organization that is paying his or her way. The process of learning becomes subordinate to the performance of the requisite duties. Advocates of this approach argue that since the organization is paying the student, it can assign those activities that are most beneficial to the organization—even if they are unrelated to the student's academic program.

Such abuses can and do occur. A student is assigned to an internship and ends up emptying wastepaper baskets, filing papers, and running the mimeograph machine. But can one attribute this outcome to the paying of compensation by the agency? Experience indicates that there is virtually no difference in the frequency of such violations for paid or unpaid internships. The distinction is that in the unpaid, "volunteer" internship, a student may easily walk out, while compensation provides an incentive to remain and treat the assignment as a job, albeit an onerous one.

The solution to this problem is not to prohibit compensation but rather to deal with the underlying cause of the improper utilization of students. It is the obli-

gation of the faculty member who supervises the academic component of an internship to assure that there is complete understanding and agreement among the receiving agency, the faculty members, and the student regarding the nature and content of the internship experience. If the faculty member is simply sending the student to any organization that agrees to accept an intern, without a clear agreement as to what is to be accomplished, then the likelihood of failure is considerable—whether or not the student is paid.

Agency-Intern Relations

The concept of organization/college/student contracts for internship experiences has been discussed many times in *Synergist*. There is an obligation to formulate such an agreement and then to expend the necessary effort to police it. Experience has shown that where the student is assigned to inappropriate activities, it is frequently because the receiving organization (and particularly the immediate supervisor) is not aware of the purposes of the internship. All he knows is that another person has been assigned to him. No wonder, then, the internship in such a situation may fail. But that failure is not the result of compensation; it is the result of a breakdown in communication among the three parties involved in the internship.

Another argument concerns the fear that compensation gives the agency too much control over the student. But it might equally be said that paying compensation gives the receiving agency or organization a stake in the outcome of the internship. If an agency commits its resources to support a student's involvement, it has a vested interest in his performance.

While some have argued that unpaid volunteers receive better treatment from and access to agency staff, experience is to the contrary. The unpaid intern often is seen as a burden that some well-intentioned superior in the organization has foisted on the department or division. If he or she keeps out of the way and out of trouble, fine, but if the intern seeks to make a claim upon the resources or the time of the staff, friction and conflict often result. The paid intern, on the other hand, has a certain degree of organizational status and is expected to contribute and to lay claim to the capacities of the unit—including the time of the supervisor.

Academic Credit as Compensation

Some will say that academic credit is a form of compensation, so that paying monetary compensation is redundant. However, academic credit and compensation relate to two independent elements of the internship: credit is a measure of intellectual growth on the part of the student; compensation is a measure of the student's services to the agency.

Another objection to the argument that academic credit is of itself sufficient compensation rests on the

fact that it is the student who pays for those credits. It seems specious to argue that a student is being compensated for internship activities by receiving that which the student himself has purchased through the payment of tuition. If an internship is academically valid, then the awarding of credit must be on the same basis as awarding credit for the successful completion of a classroom course.

Motivations and Money

The remaining objections are interrelated: (1) that compensation for internships violates the concept of voluntarism, and (2) that the opportunity to perform useful public service through an internship should be, of itself, a sufficient reward. There is no question that voluntarism is a deeply rooted component of American life, indeed one of the most humanitarian traditions of our citizenry. Certainly, if a student feels an altruistic or humanitarian urge to give of his time to an agency and can find an unremunerated placement, that is laudable. It serves both the public good and the student's academic interests. But is it reasonable to exact from each student who wishes to undertake an internship as part of his learning experience a commitment of this type? Social commitment is a personal act; it should not be extorted as the price for participating in an important component of one's education.

The second aspect of this argument is the most invidious. It is fine to say that public service should be its own reward, but we must take into account the fact that an increasing proportion of today's college students are financially strapped. These students cannot afford to give up twenty hours a week, or ten to fifteen weeks full-time, to take part in an internship that does not generate income. If academic credit and compensation are mutually exclusive, then we must ask these students to choose between slinging hash to earn the funds with which to continue their education—or having a meaningful, intellectually valuable internship. The absurdity of forcing such a decision is patent; by doing so we are saying that academic internships can only be open to those whose financial security enables them to donate their time. Tremendous strides have been made during the past decade to extend the benefits of higher education to virtually every person who has the motivation to seek it. Are we then to deprive these students of internship opportunities because of our unwillingness to allow them to use their limited time efficiently in terms of both learning and earning?

Enhancing the status and involvement of an intern in the workings of an agency and extending the benefits of internships to less affluent students are only two of the reasons for providing both cash and credit. The compensated internship also gives the student a realistic understanding of the value of work at a professional or pre-professional level and of the consequences of being a part of an organizational entity.

The Federal Government has recently recognized the inseparability of compensation and credit. The new U.S. Office of Education regulations governing the College Work-Study Program now permit schools to award academic credit for off-campus internships funded through this program. The consequences of this clarification of Federal policy are several. It makes possible the development of a whole realm of valuable internship opportunities with public agencies and private non-profit organizations that might otherwise be unable to support student interns. It also frees the financially needy student from the drudgery of low-skill jobs and enables him to receive a work-study financial assistance award for an internship that also offers academic credit.

However, not every academic internship must carry with it cash compensation. There are still many students who are willing and able to accept internships without pay, particularly if they have a social commitment to the goals and purposes of the organization to which they are assigned. Similarly, many agencies and organizations with outstanding internship opportunities simply cannot marshal the resources to provide for compensated internships, although the new College Work-Study regulations should help alleviate that problem. If a student and an agency or organization can agree on an academic internship, and compensation is not an issue, that is laudable. But such an agreement must derive from a student's personal desire for such an arrangement.

It also is important to recognize that compensation may be provided in forms other than stipend or salary. Some organizations, while unable to provide a full wage, may provide assistance for transportation or other expenses; others may compensate the intern retroactively by crediting his time spent with the agency as an intern in determining a graduate's entry level or applicant ranking for a regular position.

Determining Factors

Several factors will ultimately determine whether cash and credit can coexist in academic internships. First, internships are increasingly becoming a curriculum requirement in an ever-expanding number of disciplines and fields. Second, the cost of obtaining a higher education continues to spiral upwards, increasing the pressures on students to budget their time in the most economically efficient manner. Third, college students are becoming more career-oriented, and internships approximate a professional, real world environment. Finally, additional resources are becoming available to bring compensated internships within the reach of many agencies and organizations that have never before been able to pay even a modest stipend to a student intern. These factors will ultimately compel the acceptance of compensation as a necessary component of academic internships. □