

Internships in Higher Education: Promoting Success for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

This article examines how internships in higher education can benefit all students as they prepare for their careers beyond graduation and particularly students with disabilities. Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, universities have a responsibility to insure equal access and accommodation for students with disabilities during the internship process. Two particular issues faced by students with disabilities that have been identified through a review of recent case law include (1) meeting academic and technical standards for a program and (2) disclosing their disabilities and requesting accommodations. Key principles and support strategies which address the issues and concerns of internships for students with disabilities, developed as part of a comprehensive career-planning program for postsecondary students with disabilities at Virginia Commonwealth University, are discussed.

Internships in higher education are gaining in popularity. Both students and faculty recognize the potential value of internships as a significant part of preparation for careers beyond graduation. In the current job market, employers are not only looking for workers with a college degree, but workers who can apply their academic knowledge. Ideally, the workers also have practical work experience in which they demonstrated their abilities (Reardon, Lenz, & Folsom, 1998). Students in post secondary education are finding that participation in applied learning experiences such as internships and cooperative education programs provide opportunities to build a network of contacts, which become invaluable in the job search process, as well as gain the necessary practical experience to eventually be successful in their careers. (Cates-McIver, 1998).

Impact on Career Development and Academic Performance

Internship experiences can have a positive impact on the career development of participants. These opportunities enable students to test their career interests, enhance their career goals, gain transferable skills that are sought by employers, and increase their networking opportunities (Chambliss, Rinde, & Miller, 1996; Carter & Franta, 1995; Davis, Steen, & Rubin, 1987). Internships can also assist students when seeking employment after graduation (Getzel, Briel & Kregel, 2000). Students who engage in several career related work experiences while in college, including internships, are able to secure employment more quickly after graduation, are more

likely to be employed within their field of study, and are generally more satisfied in their current work positions than graduates with no career related experience (Kysor & Pierce 2000).

Participation in work experience or internship programs can contribute to students' academic performance. For secondary students, work-based learning has been found to motivate most students and has had a positive effect on students' academic performance, graduation rates, and enrollment in post-secondary education (Jackson & Wirt, 1996). Results from an evaluation of the Boeing Company's Summer Internship Program for juniors, seniors, and first year college students indicated that the internship motivated students to stay in school (Wang & Owens, 1995). In addition, a comprehensive review of trends and effects of paid employment among college students revealed that student employment has a positive correlation with academic performance as long as the job is closely related to career interests and aspirations (Stern & Nakata, 1991).

Impact on Future Employment Opportunities

Job related work experience has been identified by employers as being very important when recruiting college graduates for entry-level employment (Reardon, et al., 1998). Participation in internships also positively influences the ability to obtain an interview through resume screening (Perry & Goldberg, 1998). Further, with technological changes in the economy and corporate trends supporting downsizing and restructuring, many businesses actually use cooperative education, internships, and part-time jobs to provide an economical way to screen, train, and develop potential full-time employees (Brooks & Greene, 1998; Carter & Franta, 1995).

The business sector is becoming more invested in the outcomes of higher education to prepare a future workforce to meet their recruiting demands. As business environments advance technologically and respond to globalization, employers look for individuals who can solve problems, work as a member of a team and be proactive in their work. Higher education is being challenged by the business community to include more opportunities for undergraduate students to gain practical experience through internships, be actively engaged in the learning process, and address the needs of the current and future business environment (American Council on Education, 1997; Oblinger & Verville, 1998).

Career Related Experiences for Students with Disabilities

Significant numbers of college students with disabilities have little or no meaningful work experience or have difficulty recognizing the influence of their disability on the career decision-making process (Luzzo, Hitchings, & Howland, 1995). Although many college students with disabilities understand how their disabilities impact their learning in education, a large number of students are unable to explain how their disabilities could affect them on the job (Hitchings et al. as cited in Aune & Kroeger, 1997).

Internships and cooperative work opportunities can facilitate career preparation and development for students with disabilities (Baggett, 1993; Mazurek & Shoemaker, 1997). These experiences are particularly helpful to students who may be undecided about their career choices and may enhance the students' confidence in their own capacities to select appropriate careers (Enright,

1996). By providing ample opportunities to acquire work experience prior to graduation, while still in the protected environment of internships, students can confirm their career preferences, develop employment histories, and identify the possible services and supports that will maximize their opportunities for employment success (Getzel & Kregel, 1996). Furthermore, internship and cooperative education programs can help students to address some of the barriers they will face when seeking employment. Simultaneously, the attitudes of employers about the potential of individuals with disabilities can be influenced, and even changed (Burgstahler, 1995a).

Internships provide an excellent opportunity to assess the current and future support needs for individuals with disabilities (Getzel, et al, 2000). It is important that students with disabilities have access to necessary supports as they transition to an internship setting to acquire their professional skills. University faculty, disability support services, career advisors, rehabilitation counselors, and site supervisors must work with students and assist them with the identification of immediate and future support needs. Ideally, they coordinate the provision of services during this critical period.

Internship Access and Accommodations

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, with its civil rights provisions in Section 504, mandates colleges and universities receiving federal funds to insure equal treatment for individuals with disabilities during the recruitment period, the admission process, and the term of enrollment (29 USCA Sec.794). Section 504 imposes a responsibility to reasonably accommodate an otherwise qualified student with a disability unless such an accommodation would fundamentally alter the program or constitute an undue burden. Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 also prohibits discrimination against qualified people with disabilities and has extended coverage to include places of employment, state and local government, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications (42 USCA sec.12101).

An internship site suggests some overlap regarding coverage under the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Varying views exist regarding how employers and universities share responsibility to ensure that the civil rights of students with disabilities are not violated. Scott, Wells, & Hanebrink (1997) outline specific responsibilities for employers, students and universities, and conclude that the institution has primary responsibility for students who are participating in its programs (whether on or off campus). The institution has the ultimate liability for the provision of reasonable accommodation and is responsible for ensuring auxiliary aids for students with disabilities. However, from their experiences within the occupational therapy profession, these authors have found that the internship site generally assumes the duty for providing accommodation on the site. Provision may also be made through vocational rehabilitation services or other community resources. The university is responsible for providing guidance to the internship site regarding the provision of academic adjustments or accommodations, and must monitor what happens in that environment to ensure that no discrimination occurs against students and that students are provided with all necessary accommodations.

Career advisors have expressed interest in the clarification of responsibility for the provision of accommodations for students with disabilities at internship settings. Preliminary efforts to

delineate the separate and distinct roles and responsibilities of university representatives and prospective employers have been developed by the University of Minnesota's General Counsel (LRP Publications, 1999). According to these administrative guidelines, the university is responsible for providing accommodations with "for-credit" internships or off-campus work-study jobs. The employer is responsible for providing accommodations for non-credit, non-paid, and paid internships. With the exchange of money, the employment relationship between the student and the internship site takes precedence over the student relationship with the university. However, if the internship is both paid and "for-credit," it is recommended that the student, disability service provider, and a representative from the internship site agree up front who will pay for accommodations.

Institutions of higher education are required to provide admission to those individuals with disabilities who are otherwise qualified. When applying this definition for admission to an internship site, field placement sites should develop standards and procedures for determining qualified interns that will be used as a basis for admission for all students who apply. Technical standards are defined as "all nonacademic criteria that are essential to participate in the program in question" (Scott et al., 1997, p.17). These standards and requirements are to be determined by each institution and in collaboration with the university department, institution, office of services for students with disabilities, and legal counsel. Standards are to be applied to all students equally. Institutions must be able to establish that the standards are necessary and essential. In addition, consideration should be given to the position that the university takes with respect to third-party intermediaries to assist persons with disabilities in meeting the requirements of the curriculum (Association of American Medical Colleges, 1993). In other words, when does the use of a third party to observe or interpret information potentially compromise the standards that the student must meet, to perform the essential functions of a program?

While the process to disclose a disability and request accommodations from faculty is sufficiently established in most post secondary settings, the process at an internship site is less clear. The very nature of an internship usually involves an additional site supervisor and possibly a field liaison to coordinate the internship program. In some instances, students must contact site supervisors, complete applications, and interview for positions. The internship situations are very similar to the ones students are likely to experience in competitive employment settings. Students with disabilities must be familiar with the responsibilities for disclosure that are outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act. This may be a student's first experience with disclosing a disability in a community setting. College students with disabilities are often not prepared to arrange job accommodations or environmental modifications (Brodwin, Parker, & De La Garza, 1996). Too often, disclosure occurs after a student receives a failing grade (Ashland Regional Technology Center, 1997).

Strategies for Creating Internship Experiences

Many students with disabilities will require little or no assistance as they complete their academic programs and enter the workforce. For those students, specialized work site assistance is not required. Other students may benefit from the workshops or ongoing programs sponsored by a college or university's office of career planning and placement for the university community at large. For some individuals, specialized assistance may be essential. It is important that each

student have access to the amount of internship or work experience assistance and support that they feel is necessary to attain their long-term career goals (Getzel & Kregel, 1996).

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has designed a program to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities prior to graduation. Students with disabilities are able to access services and supports to acquire internships in their field and maximize the use of university and community services. Students self-identify their need for assistance and direct the implementation of the services provided. To ensure that students with disabilities are able to maximize their internship experience, the VCU Career Connections Program staff emphasizes placement assistance, on-site strategies to facilitate learning, and the coordination of community supports. Examples of the range of supports provided to students are highlighted below.

Placement Assistance

Many students with disabilities benefit from the workshops and ongoing programs that the university's Office of Career Planning and Placement sponsors for the university community at large. Other students require specialized assistance, including referral to and placement services provided by the state or local rehabilitation agency, to secure and successfully complete an internship experience. It is important for universities to provide an array of services for students with disabilities, and in particular to consider site selection and student requests for accommodations.

Site Selection

The selection of an internship site may be a key factor in providing an optimal environment for learning for some post secondary students with disabilities. Differences in potential placements occur based on the nature of the work environment, the personality and management style of the site supervisor, and the responsibilities agreed upon between each site and academic supervisor. The university generally issues specific provisions for fulfilling academic requirements, and provides guidelines for site supervisors to develop work assignments and evaluate the on-site work of the students. Often, university faculty have established relationships with the site supervisor, are familiar with the style of supervision that is provided, and have approved the facility as an acceptable setting. This information can be very useful in determining a positive match between a student with a disability and a placement site.

It is important to choose an internship site that maximizes the strengths of each individual with a disability and can accommodate the student's learning style. Students must identify the most critical factor or factors in determining their ideal placements. For example, one student with a mental health disability functioned optimally in the morning hours and prioritized his site selection with one that offered this time slot. Although this factor limited the student's options, taking this particular factor into account was important for the student's growth, and his ability to learn and be successful. Another student with a traumatic brain injury selected a smaller setting that had a basic daily routine. This regular routine established a structure, which provided a solid foundation to develop professional skills.

Requests for Accommodations

If a student knows that he or she will require accommodations at the internship site, it is best to encourage the student to disclose to the site supervisor early in the process, or to give the field placement coordinator permission, in writing, to disclose after the placement has been made (Scott et al, 1997, p.46). One student, Susan, was majoring in mass communications and was seeking an internship with a radio reading service. Susan uses a wheelchair and also has a learning disability. The VCU Career Connections staff initially contacted the Director of the Reading Service to inquire about accessibility of the building. The student made arrangements to visit the internship site and found she was able to maneuver within the recording studio with minimal adjustments to the work setting and continued with the application process.

Recommendations for accommodations from the university can be made to the site supervisor and ample time provided to coordinate access to assistive technology if necessary, make modifications in the work schedule, or make adjustments to assignments. For example, one student with a visual impairment requested a 17" computer monitor to increase his efficiency when using the Zoom Text software. An internship setting can be an optimal time to develop self-advocacy skills that will ensure success in future employment opportunities. The opportunity to practice disclosing a disability and requesting accommodations helped prepare this student for future employment (Getzel et al, 2000; Burgstahler, 1995b).

For those students requiring specialized support to secure an internship, the VCU Career Connections staff assisted students with developing resumes, contacting professional organizations, arranging informational interviews with identified companies, and attending job fairs. Staff provided extensive information regarding student rights and responsibilities under the ADA and also addressed individual disclosure concerns. For example, program staff worked with Steve, a student with an Attention Deficit Disorder, who expressed an interest in pursuing an internship in photography. He experienced difficulties with reading and writing and elected to not disclose his disability to employers. Staff assisted Steve in searching and identifying opportunities available through local classified ads and the Internet and recorded Steve's responses on several applications. An internship was secured at a local newspaper and the student took full advantage of the networking opportunities. The newspaper printed some of Steve's pictures, which he used to develop a portfolio for other photography jobs.

On-Site Strategies

A wealth of strategies can be utilized to facilitate improving the rate of success of students with disabilities with regard to completing their internships. Supervising faculty should request initial feedback from site supervisors in the first several weeks of the internship, be familiar with optional instructional strategies to recommend, and be aware of additional resources to access, in order to support skill acquisition for students with disabilities.

Initial Assessment

The first 2-4 weeks of an internship provide an excellent opportunity to assess the need for future supports at the site, particularly for those students who are uncertain if any modifications at the site will be needed (Getzel et al, 2000). The site supervisor can be instrumental in identifying key areas in which the intern may benefit from supports. The university faculty and intern should

receive initial feedback about the intern's attendance, organizational skills, initiative, professional coworker interactions, time management, and performance skills. During this initial period of the internship, relevant instructional strategies can be recommended, accommodations requested, or community supports arranged to ensure that the student is receiving effective training, and is also performing at the level expected at the internship site.

For example, one student with a traumatic brain injury was arriving late to his placement or reporting to the site on unscheduled days at a local hospital. Support was provided to explore alternative ways to follow a schedule, including use of a daily calendar, a two-alarm watch that displays days of the week, and a monthly wall calendar at home.

A second example concerns a student with a learning disability who was having difficulty completing written reports in a timely manner. The VCU Career Connections staff assisted this student with exploring effective compensatory strategies to enable her to organize material, synthesize details, and write using proper grammar. Some strategies that were implemented included the use of graphic organizers, writing software programs, and developing a framework for several reporting styles.

The use of a team approach is recommended for employers, faculty or students who are uncertain about how to address support needs. Having prior connections with vocational rehabilitation specialists to identify effective compensatory strategies or counselors familiar with assistive technology may have a positive impact on the successful completion of internship responsibilities. Often, assistive technology equipment can be loaned on a short-term basis or technology can be purchased that can move with the student from job to job as his or her career progresses.

Instructional Strategies

Students often begin their internships with a period of observation and then move on to assume greater responsibilities. For many students, this transition to increased responsibility is an acceptable process, and a useful progression toward skill development. Other students with more significant disabilities may need additional support with skill acquisition. While the natural tendency of a site supervisor may be to extend the observation time for a student who is having difficulty, a more effective method is to modify the instructional approaches (Getzel et al, 2000). Effective instructional strategies are dependent on the learning style of the student, the targeted skill, the work setting, and availability of the site supervisor. Attention to the social nuances of the work environment and clear behavioral expectations may be needed. The strategies described in Table 1 proved effective for students participating in the VCU Career Connections Program.

Table 1: Effective Strategies for Students with Disabilities

Participating in Internship Programs

- * Rearrange observation time to include short assignments within a demonstrated task.
- * Involve the student in a task and give direct feedback on his or her contribution.
- * Restructure routine to have repeated practice of a targeted skill.

- * Model task and have student immediately repeat the same task.
- * Assist student with breaking task into smaller components, rather than assigning one large project.
- * Extend the learning time for initial skill acquisition.
- * Role-play leadership activities or social interactions.
- * Ensure student writes out steps to a skill.
- * Identify stress management strategies and encourage use at the work site.
- * Provide clear boundaries for coworker relationships.
- * Videotape intern performance, review with intern, and provide constructive feedback.

These strategies are designed to provide increased structure for the student and to actively engage him or her in the learning process. Opportunities are also built in for the supervisor to give specific, immediate feedback to the student.

One-on-One Coaching

Several students with disabilities participating in the VCU Career Connections Program benefited from extensive, on-site supports in all areas of the internship process. The staff modified techniques and strategies used in supported employment to assist the students in successfully completing their internships and preparing them for employment. Support is given on site to facilitate communication between site supervisor, co-workers, and intern. In addition, staff members conduct task analyses to identify various skills, and eventually provide the necessary one-on-one training until skill acquisition is met. Assistance is also provided with identifying and coordinating effective accommodations for those students with no previous work history.

Bill, a senior majoring in exercise science, needed to complete a 400-hour internship to finish his bachelor's degree. In high school, Bill was diagnosed with anxiety and depression and experienced debilitating mood swings. His college advisors did not anticipate Bill's challenging work behaviors because he completed his academic requirements with a solid GPA. These behaviors included fear of getting out of the car to report to the internship site, leaving the work site when feeling stressed and reporting that he did not feel well, lack of communication with co-workers and the general public, and difficulty appropriately applying academic information when at the site. The VCU Career Connections staff provided one-on-one on site support to identify and practice stress management strategies, develop appropriate social skills, and facilitate learning through task analyses, modeling, and repeated practice. Bill was able to successfully complete his internship hours and became employed in his field of study.

Linkage with Community Resources

Establishing connections with community resources can be an important and often essential component for successful placements for some students with disabilities. Knowing how to access assistive technology at the work site or obtain support to address behavioral issues related to disability can be critical issues that need to be resolved in order for students to fulfill their requirements. It is recommended that university personnel work closely with the Services for Students with Disabilities Office and Career Center counselors to establish relationships with key

agencies for consultation. Contact with local vocational rehabilitation service directors provide a solid link to potential community resources.

For example, a deaf student was completing her final requirements at an internship site in the field of business and was working with colleagues who were unfamiliar with sign language. Program staff contacted the State Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and a TTY was loaned to the agency. In addition, sensitivity training sessions were conducted for coworkers. The non-profit employer had not anticipated the need for a TTY answering machine and the expense involved in the installation of the private telephone line. Coordination with the Department of Rehabilitative Services proved successful for addressing this concern.

Conclusion

Internship and work experience opportunities can be instrumental in shaping the career path for individuals with disabilities. Opportunities for students to explore areas of interest, experiment with effective accommodations, and make valuable connections with employers must be integrated into the college career planning process. For many students with disabilities, the first work experience paves the way for future career growth and advancement. It is critical that students with disabilities have access to individualized supports that will promote their learning and preparation for a professional career (Getzel & Kregel, 1996).

Work experience programs for students with disabilities provide opportunities for students to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired to a work environment. The VCU Career Connections staff found that for a majority of the students participating in the program, their first real professional working experience occurred during their internship. Staff was able to work with students to resolve such issues as technology, disclosure of a disability, and work accommodations. In some cases, students who had successfully completed their academic studies were in jeopardy of not graduating because they were experiencing difficulties completing their internship program. In large part, this was due to the lack of exposure to work environments. The internship enabled these students to develop and implement strategies to determine what methods were most effective to successfully complete their requirements. As a result, the students were more prepared to begin a career in their chosen field having the knowledge and experience gained through their work experience.

Internship programs provide a critical link between the academic setting and the work environment to enable all students, particularly students with disabilities, to apply their knowledge and determine the appropriate work environments that best match their skills and abilities.

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> **Commentary** : Mike Hoenig
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Internships in Higher Education: Promoting Success for Students with Disabilities does a very good job of framing the importance of internships to students in general. The importance of networking and work experience to students with disabilities was very well recognized. The discussion of how best to help students with disabilities identify their accommodation needs is very helpful because it is important for the student to become self-confident enough to research, and then advocate for, the best solution. The discussion of responsibility for costs of accommodations was informative and the listing of support strategies was very good. The "troubleshooting" which the organization provides is particularly impressive.