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Applied learning: giving African-American students an edge in the job market

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Applied learning: giving African-American students an edge in the job market. *Jennifer Jones.*

Abstract: Applied learning experiences such as internships, cooperative education or public service programs offer significant benefits to African American college students. Students gain exposure and develop contacts in various industries prior to graduation. Applied learning also helps students evaluate their career interests and objectives as well as improve both their pre-employment and job survival skills.

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Applied learning is a unique way of integrating academic theory with practice. Internships, cooperative education, and other types of applied learning experiences give meaning to the student's academic life and the complex world of work.



Marissa McPherson (left) and Heather Simpson work in a College of Medicine laboratory as part of the Summer Research Apprenticeship Program held at the University of Florida. (UF photo by Ray Carson)

While applied learning experiences are important to any student, they are extremely beneficial to African-American students and to first-generation professionals who may be the first in their family to enter college and to seek higher level professional positions. The most obvious benefit is that the experience enables students of color to gain access to industries before graduation and obtain valuable contacts in their field of interest. An African-American human resource professional provides the following perspective: "According to the Workforce 2000 trends," occupation needs are shifting into the service sector. Demographic studies point to a drastic decline in available, skilled, educated workforce," says Edward Bullock, director of human resources at Lancome Manufacturing, Cosmair/ L'Oreal. "Cooperative education is more critical now than ever, in any period in our global and competitive economy. "Corporate downsizing, rightsizing, buyouts and mergers require a workforce that is flexible, multi-skilled, and upwardly mobile." "The opportunity to combine academic performance coupled with practical experience in a monitored environment becomes a critical ingredient to the successful minority's entrance into the marketplace," Bullock continues. "Changes in attitudes about affirmative action and equal opportunity programs will challenge the process of the equal playing field.

Cooperative education provides a unique opportunity for minorities to understand corporate culture, and to develop mentoring relationships and the all-important track record that will hopefully ensure their success."

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The time out of the classroom also allows African-American students to explore and develop career interests, evaluate values, learn new skills and technology, and observe how organizations work. In fact, an applied learning experience is probably one of the few times in your career when you can take the time to take an inventory of yourself with minimal risk and maximum support.

How to Maximize the Experience

One important reason for participating in an applied learning experience such as cooperative education, internships, or public service programs is to develop and enhance your career plan. There are many questions that you should consider while you are interning. For example, What impact will this career have on you and others? Will the field that you have chosen provide for your basic needs, desires, and interests?

Applying for and acquiring hands-on-experience can also assist you with important components of your career development: self-assessment, pre-employment skills, and job survival skills.

Self-assessment

Use this time as a period of self-reflection and data collection: Where am I going, how will I get there, and what are the internal and external barriers that may hinder my success? Values, attitudes, interests, and desires are strong motivators in directing your career path.

Pre-employment Skills

In a tight economy, even applied learning experiences are competitive. You will want to present yourself on paper and throughout the interview process in your best way. You should prepare early, so you have adequate time for resume revisions, discussions about job requirements, and those difficult interview probe questions.

Just a quick note on the resume: The chronological resume is the most widely recognized resume. It may not, however, present the best picture for African-American students who are returning to college after gaining valuable work experience or for those with a limited or spotty work history. In either case, a functional or combination resume might be more appropriate. Most applied learning programs have a counselor to assist you in developing a resume and preparing for the interview, so that you can make your best presentation on paper and in person.

Job Survival Skills

Problem solving, communication, networking, and teamwork are key to your success. Applied learning experiences present the perfect time for learning and applying those survival skills and understanding the corporate culture.

Look for mentors. Mentors are people who take an interest in your professional development. Mentors are your role models. They consistently strive for excellence and freely impart their knowledge to others. Their style becomes contagious to those who work for them. Mentors understand that power is gained by empowering others.

A mentor's help can become a lifeline, especially when you are a new person on the job. Do consider cross-cultural mentoring and remember: Help does not come in a color. You may find well-meaning individuals who are culturally different and who want to assist in your development.

You will invest a great deal of your resources--both time and money--in a career. Applied learning work experience programs, if properly structured, can assist you with:

1. Professional development
2. Cognitive development
3. Collecting valuable information about career interests
4. Pre-employment preparation:
 - * Recruitment process
 - * Researching companies
 - * Answering difficult interview questions
5. Job Readiness:
 - * Learning to be proactive
 - * Developing critical thinking skills
 - * Learning to lead and work in teams
 - * Understanding your own and others' communication styles
 - * Office politics

Take notes during that internship! Keep in mind that what you do now represents shades of what you will do in the future.

How to Access Applied Learning Experiences

Applied learning experience--internships, cooperative education, practicum, and public service programs--are accessed through the academic departments or career service departments at your college. Students may enroll, depending on college policies, as early as the freshman year of study in either part-time or full-time work programs. Duration of time in the internship and academic credit, again, depends on the policies at your college.

For Additional Information:

The Cooperative Education Association 11710 Beltsville Drive, Suite 520 Beltsville, MD 20205 (301) 572-2329

The Institute for Experimental Learning 1735 I Street NW, Suite 716 Washington, DC 20006 (201) 833-8580

The National Commission for Cooperative Education 501 Stearns Center 360 Huntington Avenue Boston, MA 02115

The National Society for Experiential Education 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207 Raleigh, NC 27609-7229 (919) 787-3263

The World Association International Secretariat c/o Mohawk College P. O. Box 2034 Hamilton Ontario, Canada L8N 3T2 (416) 575-2296

COMMENTS ON THE VALUE OF APPLIED LEARNING:

"Students of color should take advantage of internships and co-op ed opportunities, because they are a way of exploring career options without the commitment a permanent position requires. Students are free to look beyond their positions to gain a privileged, insiders's perspective of how things operate in a particular line of work."

Niamo Mu'id, Director,

Development & Communications National Black United Fund, Inc.

"Cooperative education will give minority students an opportunity to learn skills and expose them to the work environment."

Dorothy Echols Tobe Assistant Vice President for Administration and Finance Ramapo College

"Minority students don't understand corporate culture. Co-op gives students the opportunity to get acculturated not only to the corporate climate but [also to] what it means to work in a professional work environment."

James Donnell Training Director for Western Resource Center, Inc.

"The increasing competition requires minority students to have more hands-on experience.

"Secondly, because these students

"Secondly, because these students are behind the baby boomers, they are finding it more difficult to secure meaningful experience.

"Thirdly, if the students are from an urban area, the data suggests that young African Americans and Hispanics are two to six times less likely to have a meaningful work experience or be employed.

"Here's a way for companies to meet diversity needs by grooming and mentoring the future workforce."

Dr. Glenn B. Lang Executive Director The Educational Opportunity Fund

"If we do anything for African-American students, we have to work on their spirit. Look at successful African Americans and you will find, they are strong in spirit and strong in direction."

Dr. Fred Abitia President,

The Western Resource Center and Pastor, Iglesia Batista De La Fe

"Cooperative education has allowed me to get a hands-on experience and develop professionally. Also, I personally believe it helps you to become a better student and to know what academic curriculum to choose. "My current job deals with contracts. I have learned how to gather and work with data to formulate decisions and ideas."

Keith Maloney Cooperative Education Student The U.S. Forest Service

"Co-op adds something extra to your educational experience. It enables students to grasp more of what they are learning."

Kimberly Davis Cooperative Education Student Hampton University

Jennifer Jones is director of the Cooperative Education Department at Jersey City State College.

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