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## **Agency and Community College Leadership Development: Social Science Internships**

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When Tracie Huls, a 21-year-old sophomore at Illinois Valley Community College, learned about dysfunctional families the example did not come from a sociology textbook. Huls observed a children's support group at a shelter for battered women operated by Alternatives to Domestic Violence. She volunteered there for a short time through Illinois Valley Community College's internship program.

"One of the children in the group told me her father had died in a fire. I told a staff member at the shelter. The staff member explained that the father was not dead, but that the child was coping with the parents' divorce by telling other people that his father had died in a fire, rather than tell them the truth about the divorce," said Huls.

Huls is one of several students who have pursued their educational major by volunteering to work at a community based internship site arranged by Illinois Valley Community College's Division of Social Science and Public Service. To grasp the powerful influence that an internship may have on students, it is interesting to examine what interns themselves have been exposed to and their personal reflection about their experiences.

### **Student and Community Benefits**

Early exposure to practical applications of a profession can assist the student to focus more clearly on continued development of skills and various subfields within a profession, or to change the major altogether (Conrad & Hedin, 1987; Katz & Chedester, 1992).

"The internship probably exposed me to more facets of history that could go into," said Marie Michnovicz, a 27-year-old sophomore. "Now I have much more to think about!"

Marie was located at the LaSalle County Historical Society, Utica, Illinois, where she developed a county history that will be given to fourth graders as they tour the Society's one-room school house. She plans to find an illustrator and have the history book published. Her biggest challenge for the project was writing the material at a fourth-grade level. After studying other fourth-grade level books and changing the vocabulary in the text to match that level, she successfully completed her project.

Tracie Huls, a sophomore sociology major, hopes to work with abused children. While interning at a domestic violence shelter she did housekeeping and baby-sitting chores. She said that she regretted that she wasn't there long enough to get more involved, and to interact with more adults, but the internship convinced her that she is in the right field.

"I really enjoyed it. I had a good time and it was a great opportunity for me. One negative thing was getting close to the children, and then having to go home and leave them behind. It is not really something you can get yourself used to. It was hard for me. I got attached to them. This internship gave me the chance to open my interests...to rid myself of fear while dealing with people who are different from me, including race and physical handicaps," said Tracie.

The domestic violence shelter requires its active volunteers to take 40 hours of training in domestic violence related issues. By the time Huls completed the training, more than half her internship was over, said the program coordinator, Kristy Pierce. Interns are common at domestic violence shelters and give the agency help in areas such as child care where they are shorthanded according to Pierce.

Kelly Meagher, a sophomore student, also interned at the LaSalle County Historical Society. Meagher researched the museum's roots as an Illinois and Michigan Canal warehouse. She admits a fondness for archive work. "I was always the weird kid who liked term papers."

When Meagher's project reached a stumbling block, she received support and encouragement from Society members. Museum curator, Nancy Maze, directed Meagher to helpful materials.

"The college, by placing history interns with us at the museum, has given us an extra way of informing the public about our work," said Nancy Maze. "We benefit from the students' work, and they can benefit from our materials here at the historical society," she said.

She continues to look for other interns from the college in the future.

When she transfers to a university, Kelly Meagher believes her internship will help her not only by supplying reference people in her field of history, but also by giving her a lead on resources in local and public history.

"Student interns get experience textbooks don't offer," replied Linda Burt, director of Patient and Family Services at St. Margaret's Hospital in Spring Valley, Illinois. The hospital hosted one IVCC intern who worked with the terminally ill patients and their families. Like Huls, the hospital's intern was limited to observation.

"He'd ask how we go home at nights after a stressful day," Burt said. "We told him, if you don't leave it here, you use yourself up and you're no good to anyone." "It's one thing to have theories; another to take them and apply them. It can be like being hit with a brick, (the realization) Oh, that's why. "He gained very valuable insight into the life and death decisions that people have to face daily in a hospital setting. He received a different perspective on the role of health care providers. It's still valuable even if you don't get hands-on experience and are limited to observation. You can decide if this is something you want to do. He [the student intern] can shape the direction he now wants to go, and focus on areas he'd like to learn more about or specialize in."

From the above remarks, one can conclude that the internship experience provides an important link between the college's instructional mission and the community's need to visually see the

application of traditional classroom learning to a work environment. Service-learning through the Social Science internships offers the student, community, and the college experiences that transcend class-room instruction. As one educator recently noted, "As these programs grow, coordinators often discover ways to meet community needs on a more consistent basis. They also become increasingly aware of the educational benefits inherent in community service." The educator concluded by saying that, "when teachers, program coordinators, and agency personnel co-operate to combine learning and community service in the same activity, many new opportunities emerge for students, institutions, and the community" (Fenstermacher, 1992).

## **The Program Description**

Students majoring in a social science discipline at Illinois Valley Community College, after completing 12 hours in history, political science, sociology, or psychology, may apply to the divisional chair for a Social Science Internship. In consultation with the chair, the student selects a particular agency to which they are assigned for a term.

The student's responsibility includes 75 hours of on-site contact with the supporting agency and a final project, presentation, or paper. The project/paper may be a journal of the internship experience or it might be a 12-page research paper based upon the material gleaned from the agency. For example, a student located in an historical society could use archives to explain some aspect of local history. The project/paper is then graded by a supervising instructor selected to oversee and grade the results based upon his or her expertise. The supervising instructor is the one who makes the arrangements between the supporting agency, the college, and the intern. If no supervising instructor can be secured, the divisional chair fulfills that role for the internship. The supporting agency schedules, in conjunction with the student, the times and the assignments for the intern based upon the student's special interests or preparation. The schedules are negotiated around the intern's work, other classes, and the agency's needs for time slots and tasks to be accomplished. A student may work 20 hours in one week at the internship site but only five hours the next week. Whenever the student finishes 75 hours and the final project/paper, the internship is completed. The student receives 1.0 semester credit hours for the internship experience in social science. Social Science Internships lends itself to other academic departments or areas such as Humanities, Life and Physical Sciences, Business, Education, etc., and is also easily replicable by other two-year colleges. Such ready duplication by other colleges of this program is what makes this an exciting curriculum change that has an immediate and positive impact upon students at the two-year college level.

## **Conclusion**

Internships as a learning device for exposing students to their chosen profession have been in the academic community for a long time. The occupational/vocational fields have relied upon the practical application and professional contact internships have provided. What is unique about the Social Science Internships program is that it applies the same service learning methods to an traditional academic area

At Illinois Valley Community College the academic transfer students have the opportunity to explore a specific area of their major discipline and glean the advantage of making a more precise

decision about their professional and educational future at the sophomore level when they still have a chance to make adjustments in their pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Not only do the student interns gain the advantage of witnessing textbook theories in application, but they also meet many professional people who will serve as sources of support and possibly future references for them. After the student intern completes the internship, a chance to reflect on the experience is given. Each student writes interview responses about his or her experience that are used by the divisional chair to monitor the impact of the program from the student's perception and also to receive an impression about the various community sites that have been hosting interns.

Occasionally, student interns do not work well with an on-site coordinator. Depending upon the severity of the differences, the intern may have to be relocated, or at least be advised on how to cope with personality and philosophical differences that arise in any workplace. Even the negative internship experience can be a powerful learning tool for the student who is willing to explore his or her reactions to authority, rules, procedures, menial tasks, and employees who do not like their job.

Service-learning through academic internships at the sophomore level can quickly and effectively be adopted at any college or university, but it is especially advantageous to the two-year college where the triangle of benefit falls upon the community, the college, and particularly the student.

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