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Internships Help Students Prepare for Workplace

Job shadowing also a tactic schools use for career readiness

By **Caralee J. Adams**

Internships and **job shadowing** offer a close-up look at life in the workplace, yet some high school students are so focused on academics that they pass up the opportunity, or they are uncertain about their interests and don't know where to start.

But the push to improve college and career readiness and produce a better-prepared workforce is increasing the pressure on schools to build partnerships with businesses. What's more, educators realize that students are motivated when they see the relevance of what they are learning.

"The central goal is to get students out of the classroom and into the real world so they can feel and see the entire work process," said Randy McPherson, the director of counseling services and college preparation for the Memphis, Tenn., schools and the American School Counselor Association's counselor of the year in 2011. "Otherwise, they don't really grasp what a day looks like or what a job entails." While there is no agency tracking trends with internships, interesting models are being used across the country, and students often find the work exposure enlightening—even life-changing.

Internships can be set up in various ways. Some are offered in the summer, some on evenings or weekends or during part of the school day. They can last a few weeks or more than a year. Many are unpaid, but some offer a paycheck or grant school credit for the work. With job shadowing, students typically spend a few hours or a full day on a job site to learn about a profession.

Whatever the structure, a work experience can confirm, or rule out, a career choice. It can also help students cope with mistakes when the stakes aren't so high, as later in life.

Learning on the Job

Alex Carroll worked last fall as an unpaid intern at a golf course near his home in Searsport, Maine. The high school senior has a passion for the sport and was considering it as a career, along with mechanical engineering. The golf pro showed him the business side and how to maintain the course.

"I knew a lot of money went into it, but I didn't realize how much. And I didn't realize how much was needed to care for the fairways," said Mr. Carroll, who had to write a weekly blog about his experience for school. After the internship, he decided a two-year golf college wasn't for him. Instead, he's applying to colleges, including the University of Maine, and may try to play golf there.

Recognizing the value of workplace exposure, Mr. Carroll's teacher, Kathleen Jenkins of Searsport District High School, has expanded internships and job-shadowing programs with local businesses, including a solar-energy company, jewelry store, newspaper, and plumbing firm.

Internships at Searsport, like at many high schools, are unpaid. And that can be a barrier for the teenagers who need to earn money to make ends meet or save for college.

But Garrett Miller, a New Jersey-based workforce-productivity coach and the author of 2012's *Hired 'Right' Out of College*, encourages students not to rule something out because it doesn't pay. "You are being paid in experience," he said. "A recruiter looking at a résumé never asks how much were you getting paid. ... If it looks interesting, he just says, 'Tell me about that.' "

With all the emphasis on grades and college, schools have fostered an "elite" attitude that doesn't always embrace workplace experience, according to Bill Coplin, a professor of public affairs at Syracuse University, in New York, and the author of *10 Things Employers Want You to Learn in College*, published in 2012. In addition to academics, students need to develop a work ethic, communication skills, and the ability to work on a team. The high school curriculum is "traditional and very narrow," said Mr. Coplin, which particularly hurts low-achieving students who may not be pursuing a four-year degree but need to develop career skills.

It can be difficult to persuade students to take the time for an internship or job-shadowing day, especially those in Advanced Placement classes, and increasingly, many don't want to work for free, said Cara Kirby, the senior career-experience specialist for the Fairfax

County district in Virginia. "They are scared to miss one day of school, even though the opportunity could change their lives. It's a challenge," she said.

Polishing Up Students

The more successful internship programs make workplace expectations clear to students.

"You have to work with students to [help them] understand there is an appropriate dress, way to act, and address people," said Mr.

McPherson of the Trezevant center.

In Fairfax County's hospitality program, Pat Edwards teaches juniors and seniors the basics of the industry in the classroom before they spend two days a week in an internship at local businesses. She explains the etiquette of the workplace, but students don't always catch on right away.

One of her seniors, Jermane Whyte, was in an all-day orientation at the Ritz Carlton, Tysons Corner this past fall when he pulled out his cellphone during some down time to text his father. He also missed about a quarter of his internship days the first semester because of conflicts with college interviews and other activities.

The hotel supervisor called Ms. Edwards, who then talked with her student to reinforce the rules. Looking back, Mr. Whyte, 17, said he recognizes his mistakes and is more aware now of his conduct. He continues to intern at the Ritz and has enjoyed rotating among various positions, from the front desk to security. "I had no prior work experience," he said. "This has opened my eyes to work life and team building."

Talking It Over

What's missing from many work experiences in high school is time to reflect, said Mr. Miller. To get the most out of an internship, students should talk about what they enjoyed, what they didn't, and how that translates into their next move, he said.

At Children's Hospital of Colorado, Stacey Whiteside holds weekly group debriefing sessions for interns. "They may see something hard emotionally or physically, and this is where they need to be talking about it. And they are assigned a mentor on the unit," said Ms. Whiteside, who coordinates the hospital's high school internship program aimed at underrepresented minority students.

More than 200 students in Denver apply for the 25 positions in the hospital's two-year, paid **Medical Career Collaborative**, which includes training, monthly field trips, and internships. At the end of the

program, students give a formal presentation to a group of about 70 hospital staff and family members about their experience. "Many families are blown away by seeing their student in a professional role," said Ms. Whiteside. "They have not seen that side of them, and it helps the families buy into college."

Former hospital intern Chisom Agbim is a second-year medical student at the University of Colorado. In 2006, she worked alongside a nurse in the emergency room at Children's Hospital and says it solidified her career choice. "It was exciting to be able to see what was going on ... to see how the whole team works," said Ms. Agbim, who noted that the experience gave her a different impression than what she had imagined from watching episodes of the drama "ER" on television. "I had a more realistic sense of what patients are like and what physicians can do."

Now 23, Ms. Agbim says she understands it was rare to get a hands-on opportunity in medicine as a high school student, while she knew of others who just volunteered and got stuck shelving books.

Clarifying Responsibilities

To help students, mentors, and employers understand their responsibility in an internship, Ms. Jenkins of Maine has all parties sign a contract. "It makes it clear who is accountable for what," she said. Once, Ms. Kirby of Fairfax sent three students to a job site and the chief executive officer asked them to sweep. "They were furious," she recounts. After later talking with the CEO, she learned he had started at the company by sweeping and was trying to convey that to the students. "Even if it is not ideal, you still have to be respectful," said Ms. Kirby.

In Lincoln, Neb., all students at **Northeast High School** take a career course that includes job-shadowing, and next fall, it will be expanded from one quarter to a semester of instruction. "Every student is required to do job-shadowing. It's the only way for students to make a good decision and be confident in their career decision," said Ruth Lohmeyer, a counselor and the counseling team leader, recently named 2013 School Counselor of the Year by the ASCA.

The district has increased its emphasis on working with the business community, and Ms. Lohmeyer has found employers receptive. "People like to talk about their occupations," she said. The push to make business connections is also fueled by efforts to stem the brain drain from Nebraska and keep graduates working in the area.

As a teenager in Pennsylvania, Meagan Phelan toured a manufacturing plant, bank, and hospital as part of her mother's goal to introduce her to a variety of careers. "It created in me this curiosity," said Ms. Phelan. Learning how various professionals arrived at their jobs was liberating for her because she realized there were many paths to take with a degree.

After studying biology and Spanish in college, she went on to get a master's in science writing and now works as a writer for a firm in Boston, as well as a columnist for the website Prepped & Polished. "Everyone is working hard to get good grades in high school and studying for the SAT," she said. "But not everyone is interning, and so many get to college undecided."

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