

Internships: Fertile Ground for Cultivating Integrative Learning

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Internships are an increasingly popular practice in higher education today. For those of us concerned with persuasively articulating the value of higher education, assessing the *quality* of internships presents a noteworthy challenge. Internships often provide graduates with a competitive advantage — something of a head start — as they attempt to gain a foothold in today's tight economy. Yet, there is a genuine question about whether or not any list of desired outcomes could stand as a valid index for assessing the educational quality of internship experiences across the board — let alone one that we have adequate tools to assess.

We need to be clearer in documenting the authentic learning that accrues from an internship, especially as a capstone experience of an undergraduate education. More specifically, internships — at their best — are sites of broad integrative learning. AAC&U's VALUE rubric for Integrative Learning, moreover, is a suitable tool to document the outcomes of this experience. This, in turn, offers us a strategic vantage point for rethinking the alignment of higher education and the workforce — and in a way that better addresses the needs of students navigating today's economy.

To start, though, it will be helpful to call attention to a fundamental misconception that often clouds our thinking about the quality of education in general and of internship experiences in particular. All too often, learning is assumed to represent simply acquiring new pieces of information. On this view, the mind is an empty bucket waiting to be filled. Institutions of higher learning are places students go to fill up their buckets with things they will need to get them started in life. They acquire new breadth of knowledge in the general education curriculum and specialized knowledge in the major. Then, they make their transition out to autonomous functioning in the workforce.

If we think of internships in light of the empty bucket theory of education, however, that transition to the workforce is at best an awkward extension of the major. In this instance, an internship is an opportunity to cash in some of that specialized knowledge from the major by applying it to the particular situations in the workplace. In a few cases, in fact, this is true enough. Think, for example, of the political science major who interns on Capitol Hill and successfully navigates the experience by recognizing things in action that she had previously only studied in her major on campus. In today's complex and rapidly changing economy, however, these direct theory-to-practice application opportunities are increasingly rare.

Importantly, if this transition involves only adding to specialized knowledge from the major, then the assessment of the effectiveness of higher education in preparing students for their futures is a highly fragmented endeavor — spread out over a multiplicity of areas of specialization — that will look like a patchwork quilt at best. It is also not clear that we — and not the supervisors of the entry level of the workforce — are in the best position to assess these outcomes

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credibly. And, from the student's point of view, specializing in a major looks incredibly high stakes for what might be a hit or miss match. If filling an empty bucket is the best we can do to help students navigate their life paths, then it might just be higher education that is holding the empty bucket. Little wonder narrowly vocational credentials seem so popular these days!

It is time that we kick away the empty bucket and reclaim the value of authentic learning experiences. A good place to start is by assessing the integrative learning that takes place in internship experiences.

Recently, my organization, The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars, adapted the Integrative Learning Rubric from AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Learning (VALUE) project to help assess the impact of the internship experience. Having helped students obtain and benefit from their internship experiences in the nation's capital for over 35 years, our sense is a great deal of integrative learning has occurred. For years, we've helped students document this learning in portfolios that represent their learning directly and authentically. This rubric gives us an important new tool to help advance and document that work more systematically.

The rubric defines integrative learning as "an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus."^[1] We found some of the language in the rubric a better fit for on-campus experiences than for the internship experiences we facilitate in Washington, D.C., and adapted accordingly.^[2] But the five intellectual skills the rubric delineates all resonated as vital and essential to a transformational internship experience. The first two skills are obvious enough — drawing connections to experience and connections to discipline (which we call connections to academic learning).

The next three skills, however, capture what is perhaps most important about the learning that takes place in internships. These are the skills of transfer, integrative communication and reflection and self-assessment. How does a student adapt skills developed on campus (or elsewhere) to a new professional environment? Can she communicate this effectively across the many modes of communication that take place in the professional world? Finally, does she have the ability to assess her own learning continuously in a way that will position her for future success in a dynamic economy?

One way to appreciate the value of integrative learning proficiency is to consider the scenario in which the internship does not go as planned — one that, in fact, sometimes occurs. What if after her internship the student does not want to work in this industry? Has her education come to nothing? Does she need to go back and pick up a second major? Actually, this is precisely where a liberal education that culminates in an integrative learning experience in an internship adds most vitally to a student's future prospects. She has now cultivated her abilities to transfer skills from one context to another, to communicate this learning, and to reflect strategically upon her learning process. And these are lifelong skills that will be useful well beyond the entry level of a career.

To conclude, there are three potential benefits of obtaining evidence of integrative learning through an internship experience.

Internships often provide graduates with a competitive advantage—something of a head start—as they attempt to gain a foothold in today's tight economy.

First, though individual students might set any number of particular objectives for their internships experiences, integrative learning is something we should expect will occur in every internship experience. Accordingly, using a rubric or some other measure of integrative learning can serve as an instructive index of these desirable outcomes.

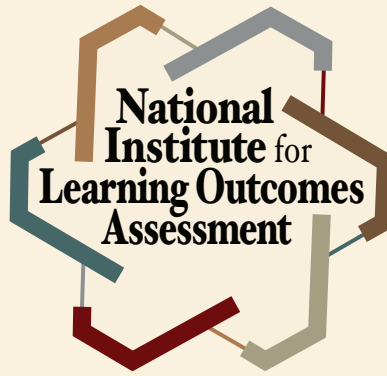
Second, developing competence in the skills that make up the capacity for integrative learning is arguably more important to helping students navigate their futures than a hodgepodge of specialized outcomes that are narrowly tailored to this, that or the other particular vocation.

Finally, while work performance in a particular job is best assessed on the job where the work is done, integrative learning is best accomplished when students construct and reflect upon portfolios of their work products and experiences. To insure this happens, faculty and staff must help students construct a comprehensive portfolio that features integrative learning skills and competencies.

[1] See Rhodes, Terrel L. ed. 2010. *Assessing Outcomes and Improving Achievement: Tips and Tools for Using Rubrics*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities. More information from AAC&U is also available online at <http://www.aacu.org/value/index.cfm>.

[2] For a helpful guide on adapting rubrics to other programs, see Rhodes, Terrel L. and Ashley Finley. 2013. *Using the VALUE Rubrics for Improvement of Learning and Authentic Assessment*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

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