

The Need for a Best Practices Guide for Political Science Internships

Despite claims about their considerable value and the fact that ninety percent of political science departments offer internship credit as part of their curriculum ((Van Vechten, Gentry, and Berg, 2021), those who supervise such internships recognize that the discipline is lacking a clear understanding and guide to best practices. In this paper, I explain why a best practices guide is needed, with operationalization of commonly agreed-upon objectives, and how it can be accomplished in coordination with the publication of the American Political Science Association's (APSA) report on Rethinking Political Science Education (APSA, 2024). The purpose of my paper is to call attention to the lack of such best practices and encourage discussion of the possibility of such a guide.

Literature Review

The American Political Science Association has provided an excellent resource for those interested in political science internships: Political Science Internships published in 2021, and edited by Renee B. Van Vechten, Bobbi Gentry, and John C. Berg. In this volume, APSA has pulled together a collection of articles on the various issues of concern to those who work with students on political science internships. Among the topics covered are how to prepare students for internships, monitoring the work of interns, legal considerations, and assessment of interns and internships. Chapter 1 may be of particular interest, as it covers, among other issues, the history of internships within the discipline, including an important meeting of political science notables in 1965 (Van Vechten, Gentry, and Berg, 2021).

An outstanding contribution of this compilation is Van Vechten's chapter 2 entitled "A Review of the Literature: Internships and Best Practices." The author reviews the issues concerning internships, not just within political science, but within academia more generally, and

provides links to relevant literature pertaining to each area. Among the issues addressed is ongoing concern about awarding academic credit for non-academic work, which is, of course, most of what is involved in a political science internship, as students work in legislative offices, law firms, political campaigns, and other related organization. This question was addressed decades ago by Urban Whitaker (1989) who argued that academic credit should be only for college level learning not for the work performed *per se*. As Van Vechten points out, this means that a valid internship has to include more than just hours worked, but also papers, discussions, and other meaningful academic assignments. This is clearly an area in which a guide to best practices would be useful. In this same chapter, Van Vechten (2021) also provides tables summarizing best practices in internships from different perspectives: the college or university, the student, and the internship provider, each with subdivisions and relevant literature, making this chapter exceedingly relevant and useful. General objectives for students include the ability to:

- “apply and build discipline-related knowledge;
- Develop and apply transferable competencies and skills,
- Prepare for (engaged) citizenship,
- Develop self-knowledge, more accurate self-concept, and ethical perspectives, and
- Discern one’s career path (pursue career development).”

As noted earlier, these general objectives are widely accepted, but once again, they are not operationalized so that a professor or student has a gauge for assessing whether the objective is actually being achieved.

Outside that collection of articles, Brian Anderson suggests that most studies deal with internships that take place in major metropolitan areas or capital cities, which leaves unanswered

the question of what happens when students must undertake their internship in smaller towns. He concludes that these students can still benefit from high-impact practices including internships (Anderson, 2013). More recently, Wolinsky and Auerbach evaluate three different models of internships, including the traditional model, a research-based internship, and an internship specifically related to environmental issues. In fact, evaluation continues to be a key issue for internships (Wolinsky and Auerbach, 2022).

B. Experiential Education in Political Science.

A key aspect of the political science internship is the opportunity for the student to work in a non-academic organization related to political science, such as a legislative office, political campaign, law firm, or non-profit organization that deals with a political issue such as immigration or community development. The student may or may not be paid a salary but will earn academic credit for their internship experience. These arrangements, which date from the 1960s, (Van Vechten et al, 2021) have long been held in high regard for their role in preparing students for work rather than for education for its own sake or as preparation for graduate or professional school. The idea of connecting students to work experience with a chance to acquire professional norms and practices is often mentioned as an advantage of an internship.

Such experiences may look impressive on the student's transcript and resume, but my experience is that they are often overrated in description as compared to their reality. Drawing on my own experience as an internship coordinator, the most common problem is a meaningless internship, where the organization, prestigious though it may be, provides nothing more than a chance to answer the telephone or respond to email messages from constituents or clients. Additionally, with greater frequency than one might think, on-site internship supervisors treat the student intern shabbily, with little interaction and even, on occasion, mistreatment that ranges

from assigning the intern the supervisor's least favorite duties or sending them on personal errands. In my view, a carefully crafted set of guidelines would serve the student, the academic coordinator, and the on-site supervisor of interns.”

While the idea of providing students with a work-related experience to tie the academic and career together seems like an obvious one, it actually represents a major change in thinking about higher education. For centuries, the goal of higher education was knowledge and understanding for its own sake rather than preparation for career and work knowledge. That is no longer the case, as Pew Research notes that, “Americans’ views of what a college education should be tend to prioritize specific, workplace-related skills and knowledge rather than general intellectual development and personal growth (PEW, 2016). This change is also unusual, in that it occurred less incrementally but rather at a certain moment in time. Many scholars say that the change can be pinpointed to the comments of Ronald Reagan, Governor of California, who decreed on February 28, 1967, that there was no room in college for “intellectual luxuries” (Berrett, 2015). At least one article about this event called it the day the purpose of college changed.

Colleges now place great emphasis on preparing students for a career with many students and parents saying that the main purpose of college should be about preparing for a job and making a decent living. As PEW Research notes, “Half of Americans say that the main purpose of college should be to teach specific skills and knowledge that can be used in the workplace” (PEW Research Center, October 6, 2016). This preparation is, of course, closely related to the cost of a college education, as students and parents want to know whether it is worth their while to borrow for the college experience. They tend to look at the cost of college relative to the anticipated earnings they might make as a result of working in the field of the college major. The

modern question shifts from whether the student will know and understand more about the world or about themselves as the result of attending college, to whether it is a sound financial investment. Some students and parents are concluding that, no, coming up with tuition and other college expenses just does not serve their purposes. The important point, though, is tying college costs to making money and building a career rather than to the intellectual luxuries of philosophizing about eternal questions. In summer 2024, Gallup found that only 36 percent of Americans have confidence in higher education (Brenan, 2024).

Our most important professional organization, the American Political Science Association, acknowledged this reality in its recently issued report. According to the report, “Today we recognize external pressures to articulate “employable” or “marketable” proficiencies. Fortunately, the competencies that employers say they value most overlap significantly with the combination of skills required to succeed academically in the Political Science major, as well as the skills necessary to become an active and engaged citizen. We now perceive that teaching students how to market themselves and their aptitudes is part of our job as educators” (APSA, p. 17). The report goes on to say (p. 19) that “The skills required for effective citizenship coincide with skills that employers value most in the 21st century. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has identified career readiness as the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace (APSA, p. 19). We must conclude, then, that preparing students for a career is one of the most important, indeed, perhaps the most important goal for those of us who undertake the teaching of political science in American institutions of higher education.

We then move on to the question of whether internships are actually accomplishing the goal of preparing students for participation in the labor force, and the answer seems to be yes, at least to some degree. Internships may bridge the gap between academic life and career building, provide opportunities to network with professionals, and build a resume related to chosen job interests (Forbes, 2022; Lei, 2019; Van Derziel, 2023), and may be viewed as “a key steppingstone to post-graduate employment” (Silva et al., 2016). Relatedly, students are viewed as becoming more employable as a result of the internship that introduces them to the norms of professional conduct and working as a member of a team in the workplace (APSA, 2024, p. 23). Interning students will likely pick up techniques of effective communication and have a chance to practice those skills. Students may be able to make connections with potential employers, with a few also realizing that the career area they chose does not actually work for them. Finally, an internship is the kind of high-impact practice that “if well-constructed, promises(s) to foster in students the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for participatory democratic engagement” (APSA, pp. 25-26). Wolinsky-Nahmias and Auerbach (2022) provide an excellent summary of research on these benefits, citing many excellent resources. These potential benefits for students support the fact that “90 percent of four-year political science programs assign academic credit for intern experiences” (Van Vechten, Gentry, and Berg, 2021).

Are these fine goals being achieved by all of our political science interns? Even the most optimistic among us would have to grant that not every internship offers our students the opportunity to do so. Whether our intention is to provide skill-building opportunities for our students or to demonstrate how well we are preparing our students for careers or both, having a best practices guide to turn to would be helpful. In fact, such guidelines may be more important

than ever, given pressures coming from society in general and even from our own institutions to justify what we are doing to prepare students for careers.”

Clearly a successful internship has many advantages for the student. Still, internships are not without problems. And why wouldn't there be issues when there are about two million college students participating in internships every year, about half of which are paid and the rest are unpaid (Rogers et al., 2021).

Issues With Internships

As one would expect, numerous issues arise in the planning and assignment of internship opportunities for students. One of the most important and enduring is the relationship of academic requirements to the student's work. Van Vechten, Bobbi Gentry, and John C. Berg (2021, p. 1) discuss the contributions of Bernard Hennessy about the importance of an academic framework for internships, and note his contributions to the view that “laboring outside a theoretical frame and without critical reflection is simply work or volunteering, regardless of whether it is carried out on Capitol Hill, in state houses, or any other setting.” Hennessy's work dates from decades ago, but the discipline still does not have clear standards of what the academic framework or requirements should be, or indeed, whether there should be any at all. If one value of an internship is development of professional skills such as team building and communication, then the work experience *per se* does not require a research paper for the realization of those benefits.

Another important issue is whether internships should be paid or unpaid. With concerns about the costs of college and the desire to make sure that students are not denied internships because the only ones available are unpaid, this issue looms large. As Daniel Mallinson notes,

“Unpaid or underpaid internships can create serious practical and equity concerns for our students, especially first generation and low-income students” (Mallinson, 2021, p. 114)). Equity in the internship process is just one concern, however, as some research indicates that paid internships are actually better for students (Rothschild and Rothschild, 2020). Rogers et al., (2021) concluded that paid internships are better designed and more beneficial to the student. Mallinson observes, “Paid internships have many advantages; aside from providing an income stream that is usually indispensable, there is evidence that they lead to better career outcomes” (p. 115).

The Need to Operationalize Internship Objectives

At this point, we recognize that internships are held in high regard for their usefulness in preparing students to enter the professional workplace and also that there are issues such as the basis for awarding academic credit and whether and how internships should be paid. Still, they are general ideas and, as such, are lacking in particular indicators of operationalization. As a faculty coordinator for political science internships, my own experience has caused me to believe that there are several areas of the internship process and experience that would benefit both the student and the faculty coordinator if our frequently-stated objectives could be operationalized.

Before any such guide can be written, there must be general agreement within the discipline on learning objectives for political science internships, just as every academic activity must have learning objectives related to the overall experience. It seems clear that the Rethinking Political Science report provides useful objectives for this purpose. According to the report, “Research from AAC&U, based on employer surveys, has shown many of the skills that students develop in our political science classrooms align with the skills employers seek in job applicants (Finley 2021). Students must be able to think critically and have the ability to solve problems. To

that end, they need to be able to use knowledge, data, and facts while also being creative and original in their thinking. The research methods skills Political Science majors acquire are a means for developing problem solving and critical thinking skills. It seems reasonable that those overarching learning objectives should be generated from within the discipline as best practices” (APSA, p. 27). According to the APSA, “For outside the classroom experiences to be meaningful, they should attach to best practices, namely: offered for credit, tied to course material, and included in the learning objectives, with opportunities for group and individual reflection provided” (APSA, p. 25). These skills provide useful objectives that can serve as the base of an internship best practices guide.

The APSA Report includes both learning objectives and skills that students are expected to acquire through the undergraduate major. While the learning objectives seem closely linked to academic coursework, skills are somewhat different and may serve to inform the internship student of what they should gain in the larger sense from their internship. According to Rethinking Political Science Education, “political science students will demonstrate an ability to:

1. Analyze political phenomena and critique arguments in a theoretically and empirically informed manner.
2. Engage as citizens through problem solving, collective action, and collaborative decision making at all levels from local to global.
3. Identify, evaluate, properly use, and cite verifiable sources of evidence.
4. Engage thoughtfully and respectfully with competing values and perspectives.
5. Use qualitative and quantitative methods effectively and appropriately.
6. Communicate effectively in written and verbal modes to a variety of audiences.

In addition, the Rethinking Report suggests that political scientists do more to emphasize and teach the values associated with democracy: “Specifically, we recommend attention to fostering

the civic attitudes of political efficacy, empathy, civic duty, civic confidence, civic reflection, and an inclination to engage in dialogue across difference” (APSA, p. 27).

What then are some of the questions that might be addressed in such a guide?

Question #1: What are the parameters of a political science internship? This is a key question, as it describes the nature of an internship. As any experienced internship coordinator will tell you, assessing the suitability of a proposed internship is a difficult process. Among the concerns are whether it can be remote or partially remote, how many hours of work will be required, what tasks or responsibilities will the student have while at work, and similar questions.

Some departments, including my own, require that students find and arrange their own internship, with help and support from the faculty coordinator, and then the placement must be approved before the student is permitted to enroll in the internship class. Students, however, often have a calculus that is very different from that of the faculty coordinator, and things important to them are not so important to the coordinator and vice versa. For instance, the location of the internship and the commute involved are matters of great importance to the student and much less so to the coordinator. Another issue of great importance is whether the internship is paid or unpaid, already discussed in this paper. While coordinators want their students to have paid internships, payment may be of critical importance to the student. Also relevant is the type of work to which the student will be assigned, because we recognize that a great sounding organization may actually provide little in the way of learning experiences for the interning student. Knowing in advance the type of work the student will be assigned seems very important in assessing whether an internship is suitable for the student. Having a list of tasks in advance will also alert the cooperating organization that the student should be assigned substantial work,

as opposed to filing all day or just sitting, hoping for the telephone to ring or a message to pop up on the computer.

The existence of recommended guidelines (best practices) within the discipline would be a tremendous tool to have when students come forward with what they have decided on as a placement, as it would assist the coordinator in ascertaining whether the proposed placement is valid. Such guidelines would incorporate the overall view that the student must have useful work to do in an environment that provides learning opportunities. Such guidelines would also help coordinators deal with the potential complications that present themselves, including whether a student with a job already can simply sign up for an internship and count their regular work as their internship. They would simply be getting credit for something they are already doing and getting paid for, thereby raising ethical considerations. A best practices guide would make the allow the coordinator to apply the standards of the discipline.

Question #2: What work is suitable for an internship?

As faculty coordinators, we look for internships that will offer real work opportunities to our students, whether that be attending campaign events, summarizing legislative committee hearings, sitting in when clients are interviewed at the law firm, attending court hearings, conducting policy research, or other meaningful work opportunities. While some organizations make sure students get chances to go to court, meet constituents, work on policy issues, attend press conferences, and other events, some also ask students to answer the phone all day, make cold calls or neighborhood walks to raise money for candidates, or file whatever comes into the office. Even in Congressional Office internships, students often have very limited opportunities to learn, given that they are tied to answering the telephone all day or filing email messages from constituents, while other students, sometimes from their own university, get to attend committee

hearings and special events, with considerable variation from office to office. A best practices guide would provide protection for the student as well as assistance to internship supervisors at participating organizations as to what are acceptable work responsibilities for their political science intern.

Political science internships would continue to have tremendous variations, just as now. Such variation is in keeping with the differing interests of students, their various career goals, and even the kinds of opportunities available where the academic institution is located. The difference would be that the internship, wherever the placement is located, would meet the standards laid out in the internship guidelines. Both the interning student and the faculty internship coordinator could be confident that the internship provides the kinds of opportunities a political science internship should have, whether the intern is working in a Congressional Office, with the International Rescue Committee, or the office of a local municipal or county official.

Question #3: What are the components of an adequate support system for an interning student, whether the issues are day-to-day questions or more serious, even urgent, matters.

Most internships go well, but problems, even serious ones, arise from time-to-time. These problems can range from minor to serious, and may even include intimidation and harassment and even dismissal of the student from the workplace. It is appropriate, even essential, therefore, that students know how to contact their university coordinator if an issue arises. In my own experience, I know that serious issues arise with some frequency and the support system should be clearly spelled out for the intern. From my perspective, that means my interns need to know how they can reach me, night or day, when things go seriously wrong. The recent pandemic illustrated all-too-well the need to make rapid changes to plans, and to provide ways students can finish their course requirements. They also need to know that their campus coordinator has their

back even when they are fired from their internship, embarrassed or harassed by their onsite coordinator, or simply given nothing worthwhile to do day-after-day. That is why their faculty coordinator must supply students with contact information and, in addition, make sure to get the contact information for the onsite coordinator at the beginning of an internship. In addition to these basics, a best practices guide would spell out the legal protections provided the student by their department and their institution.

Question #4: What are the best practices for creation, assignment, and fulfillment of academic requirements related to the internship?

As often mentioned in the literature, merely working at an internship is not sufficient for academic credit. There must be academic requirements to support the learning taking place. Most certainly there must be a course syllabus that spells out these various requirements, but what constitutes suitable assignments? Are there to be research papers, regular discussions with other interns, frequent reports, or some other type of academic experience that takes place while the internship is in progress? A best practices guide would spell out the types of assignments that would meet the academic requirements of the internship for credit.

Question #5: What are best practices for the evaluation of an internship?

So once the suitable placement is found and the student has completed the internship with excellent learning opportunities, what accounts for their grade in the internship? Suppose the student has wonderful evaluations from the organization where they interned, having been a cooperative, responsible, and competent worker while there, but fails to provide any regular reports to the faculty coordinator and does not complete the assigned research paper.

Alternatively, what about the intern who sends detailed weekly reports and writes an excellent

paper about an important topic related to their internship, but is rated as Good or Adequate by their onsite supervisor rather than Excellent, along with a note about their unreliability or lack of attention to detail? Having guidelines endorsed by the profession would go a long way in answering this thorny question.

Conclusion

Internships are part of the political science major at most colleges and universities, and are valued for their contributions to students in the areas of professional development and as a bridge between their academic course work and their career development. Even so, some drawbacks have long been recognized, especially the awarding of academic credit for what is regarded as non-academic work. In the course of working with students in the planning of internships and carrying them out, many issues arise, requiring the faculty coordinator to make decisions about placements, tasks and responsibilities, and evaluation of students. With the publication of the important APSA report on political science education, it seems like the perfect moment to seize the opportunity to create and promulgate internship best practices to provide guidelines to the political science departments around the country that offer internships for their students.

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