

INTERNSHIP? COOPERATIVE EDUCATION (CO-OP)?

Internships and cooperative education experiences play a vital role in your professional development as each provides opportunities related to your academic interest and desired profession. Students who choose not to complete an internship or co-op work experience are often at a disadvantage when they pursue jobs after graduation because they have little work experience directly linked to their education or the career being pursued. Having relevant work experience enhances the degree and makes students more desirable candidates.

INTERNSHIPS

Internships and co-ops are very similar, but have some important differences. An internship is typically a short-term, one-time work experience related to your academic major or career field. You work in a professional setting under the supervision of a practicing professional or a member of that individual's staff.

You may or may not be required to complete an internship as part of your academic program. Check to see if your academic major requires you to do an internship, and then contact your advisor or the designated faculty member to be certain you understand what is expected of you. You may be required to get approval prior to accepting the internship, submit specific reports before, during and after your internship, and register using a specific course number. Don't wait until your senior year to look for an internship if you must complete this type of work experience before you can graduate!

Internships can be paid or unpaid. Be sure you know whether you will receive compensation for your work before you accept the internship offer. If you receive financial aid, check with your counselor to determine how internship earnings may affect your financial aid award.

Importance of Internships

An internship can help you decide whether the career path you chose is actually something you enjoy and something that challenges you. An internship gives you an opportunity to get real-world work experience. One of the most important advantages of an internship is the networking opportunities it gives you. When your work as an internship is done well, you may leave with both professional references and enhanced marketable skills. Internships allow employers to determine how you fit their needs. It is not unusual for interns to receive offers for part-time work while in school or a full-time job.

Having one or more internships shown on your résumé gives you an advantage over competitors who have no experience. If your academic program does not require an internship, consider pursuing this kind of work opportunity anyway.

COOPERATIVE EDUCATION (CO-OP)

Co-op is typically a full-time, discipline-specific work experience. It is a more long-term work experience than an internship. It is often offered to students who can alternate work semesters with semesters in school. An alternative is a co-op allows you to work-part time and attend classes during the semester. Even though a co-op can prolong the number of semesters it takes to complete your degree, it can be an excellent way to jumpstart your career.

Virtually all co-op positions are paid and the majority of them allow you to earn academic credit. If you receive financial aid, check with your counselor to determine how co-op earnings may affect your financial aid award.

Importance of Cooperative Education/Co-op

When you complete a long-term co-op, you may have the equivalent of two years of directly-related work experience in your career field. You can earn money and market yourself to a potential employer. You can develop professional relationships as well as networking contacts.

Having a co-op shown on your résumé is an excellent career booster. Also, companies often hire their co-op students and give them credit for their time as a co-op for vacation hours or other benefits. The employer will have invested time and money developing its co-op students, which creates a win:win outcome for everyone involved.

FINDING AN INTERNSHIP OR CO-OP OPPORTUNITY

Start looking for an internship or co-op during your sophomore year and get started as soon as practical. Juniors and seniors may not have enough time to find a high-quality opportunity before graduation. Choose an internship or co-op opportunity that will benefit you in the long run; that is, don't choose one unrelated to your major or future career goals.

Approach an internship or co-op much like you will pursue a full-time career position. Conduct research on the company or agency that interests you to develop a targeted résumé and cover letter. Ask about work opportunities and let the employer know how your skills and abilities match their needs. Consider your personal network – your friends, your friends' parents, your parents, your parents' friends, previous employers, members of your church or civic group, etc., and then let those contacts know you are pursuing an internship or co-op position.

MGA Career Services posts work opportunities, including internships and co-op opportunities. Go to <http://www.mga.edu/career-services> often to see current postings.

Before you accept

Be well informed before you accept a position. Know what you want from the experience. Ask about the kinds of projects you will work on and what will be expected of you. If the internship or co-op is required as part of your academic program, your advisor can help you with this step based on their previous experience with a particular employer.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR OPPORTUNITY

Treat the co-op or internship like a real job because it just that.

DO:

- Work hard, do what is asked of you, ask relevant questions, be willing to go the extra mile.
- Handle each task with professionalism and efficiency. This is a unique opportunity to show this employer and your co-workers you are reliable, enthusiastic, and competent.
- Be positive and remain eager to learn. Stay busy and productive.
- Be on your best behavior and show you are a team player.
- Take care with your work. Don't submit work with errors.
- Seek out extra work, new projects, and ways to make the jobs of your co-workers easier.
- Keep up with your coursework and manage your personal life carefully. Be careful about what you post on social media sites.
- Ask about part-time or full-time work available to you when you complete the internship or co-op.
- Follow up after the internship/co-op with a sincere thank you note to your supervisor and anyone who was particularly helpful.

DO NOT:

- Be late.
- Dress too casually. Ask what your employer expects.
- Leave your assignments undone.
- Wait for your supervisor to figure out when you need a new task.
- Overstep your authority.
- Use the telephone or the Internet for personal use. This goes for your cell phone, too.
- Seem uninterested in the profession.
- Be intimidated.
- Assume your degree and your GPA alone make you qualified for a position at the company/agency.

Contact MGA Career Services for additional information about internship and co-op opportunities as well as assistance preparing your résumé or cover letter.

Career Services

Middle Georgia State University
Suite 254, Student Life Center, Macon Campus
478/471-2714

<http://www.mga.edu/career-services>