

The Elements of Effective Experiential Education Programs

By Melanie Gold

Employers who treat interns and co-ops as valuable members of their organization stand out in the minds of students and career services professionals. They also stand to benefit by strengthening campus relationships, developing a talent pipeline, enhancing recruitment and retention outcomes, and ultimately improving their bottom line.



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Disney Worldwide Services (Disney), Enterprise Rent-A-Car (Enterprise), International Business Machines (IBM), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) are among the companies that were identified by NACE college members as having exemplary experiential education programs. Company representatives explained what criteria have made their programs so successful and, in the process, provided a list of the following best practices.

Best practice #1: Provide meaningful work experiences.

Employers say they invest in students—and their organizations’ futures—by immersing students in actual company projects, such as writing articles, managing franchises, creating computer programs, building satellites, and more.

Marie Artim, corporate recruiting manager for Enterprise, says the company considers interns and co-ops “real” employees from the outset. Accordingly, Enterprise teaches them the nuts and bolts of the organization and its values. Students go through the same training as full-time employees.

“We don’t want an intern to be a gofer,” she says. “We want them to learn how we run the business. We want to help them understand who we are, what our culture is, and how they can fit in. Students should be able to expect a career opportunity, not just an ‘experience.’”

According to Artim, employers have come a long way in this regard. Previously, she says, meaningful and demanding experiential education opportunities were reserved for technical students. But in the last decade, companies began rethinking their strategies and found that marrying their experiential and employment goals made good business sense.

“It’s an opportunity to validate the students’ career paths,” says Bill Ingerski, staffing programs manager for NASA. “If we disappoint them, they’ll either select another career or another employer. Our students work on actual projects. They have tangible, as well as intangible, evidence of their work.”

Ingerski adds that the agency doesn’t just pay lip service to providing mean-



ingful work. He reports that it has a new NASA Contracting Intern program that offers students formal training in the nation’s capital, on-the-job training at one of 12 regional sites, and after six months of experience with the agency, authorization to use NASA funds to finance their projects.

Marilyn Mayo, manager of cooperative education and internship programs within IBM’s university staffing function, says it’s critical for students to be aware of what’s going on in the company. To start them off on the right foot, IBM offers an orientation, handbook, and intranet that all offer a wealth of information.

Mayo says that approach is key to providing students with a realistic preview of the workplace, which can be mutually beneficial for the company. By actively engaging the nearly 3,500 interns and co-ops it recruits each year, IBM gets a realistic preview of students’ work habits and whether they truly fit the company culture.

“We provide a meaningful program rather than just a ‘meaningful work experience,’ because it is so much more than just a job,” says Kristi Breen, manager of recruiting for Disney. Breen says that Disney recruits a cadre of 8,000 students from 450 schools in the United States and Puerto Rico, interns who run the gamut from second-semester freshmen in the [introductory] college program who “aren’t sure what they want to do” to seniors in the advanced program whose internships are designed specifically to their major. Advanced program participants are predominantly alumni of the college program.

“We do just about everything and offer opportunities that fit with any major students can dream up,” she says.

Best practice #2: Guide students’ development through mentoring.

Some companies have policies for identifying their top teams and deliberately placing students within those teams to give students the best possible experience.

“Managers [within those teams or departments] must have demonstrated ability to mentor,” says Artim. She adds that Enterprise’s managers view mentoring not as a burden but an honor, and they’re often competitive about it. They want interns assigned to their departments.

NASA’s Ingerski says the agency’s approach to mentoring has changed over the years, mainly out of necessity.

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“Mentoring used to be done by supervisors,” he says. With “significantly” fewer supervisors to go around due to government downsizing, NASA turned to its senior employees (who are, according to Ingerski, the mentors students prefer). Selected employees are identified at each NASA facility—such as the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas—to receive mentor training. He says many mentors end up going to campus as recruiters and operate as the agency’s college liaisons.

“The worst thing to happen would be for [students] to be in a monotonous program,” he says, adding that mentors help to assure students that their education and development are priorities for NASA.

At IBM, students are mentored in a variety of ways, such as through the Student Development Plan. According to Mayo, managers work with students to identify specific things they’d like to be exposed to at the company. Students also get “personal opportunities,” such as one-on-one discussions with a company executive. Other options might include job shadowing, training opportunities, long-term or multiple work sessions, and school-to-work transition support. IBM also offers a specialized internship opportunity for students who are the “very, very top in computer science, engineering, and M.B.A. studies.” IBM calls the three-year program “Extreme Blue” and it selects 82 students out of hundreds of applicants for intensive training plus perks that other experiential students don’t get, such as fully paid housing and transportation.

In addition, Mayo says that IBM engages in activities that promote students’ civic and social consciousness. Co-ops may volunteer to answer phones for a public-television pledge drive, assist with the Special Olympics, or help build a home for a disadvantaged family with Habitat for Humanity.

“These kinds of projects build good corporate citizens, and the students learn more about their environment and the community. It makes for a more fulfilling experience,” Mayo says. Instead of promoting a purely

career-oriented experience, “we try to look at it as a total package.”

“As mentors, we’re working for what’s best for the students,” says Artim. “We emphasize personal achievement, and we counsel them not just on our own career opportunities, but other possibilities they can consider. At Enterprise, we do this to build the overall well-being of the people working for us, which is a positive reflection of the company.”

According to Breen, student development is a priority for Disney, too. “We want to emphasize how students can grow personally and professionally. We don’t want the internship to be just a job where they come in to work and then go home. For instance, by having zero tolerance for underage drinking, drugs, and overnight guests in our housing complex, our environment promotes responsibility. Some of our interns don’t make it through, but those who do gain a sense of confidence and focus. Some of these students achieve their first successes in the work environment. Some learn how to live on their own. They literally have life-changing experiences here.”

Best practice #3: Offer compensation and/or benefits.

Companies recognize that to attract experiential candidates, they need to offer something in return. In NACE’s 2001 *Experiential Education Survey*, employers reported paying virtually all experiential students (including summer hires) an average hourly rate of \$12.26 to \$14.43 (more for returning interns than new ones). They also reported offering benefits such as health insurance, relocation and/or housing assistance, and paid holidays.

“That’s a tough one for the federal government,” says Ingerski. “We can’t compete with private industry, so we have to look to other things to attract students.

“We have a terrific work environment, where students are able to work

with, in many cases, world-renowned scientists; we’re very diverse; we offer recruiting bonuses, relocation reimbursement, and sometimes repay student loans. We plan trips to sporting events, picnics, and other activities. It gives the students a chance to talk to one another and they don’t get lost in the organization.” Ingerski says he hopes that renewed interest in public service and the federal government will translate into even greater interest in NASA.

“We don’t offer the highest paying internships, but that’s not what our program was designed to do,” Disney’s Breen says. “We do offer fully furnished apartments with resident advisers, and we provide transportation and other services.”

“The day of working for nothing is gone,” says Enterprise’s Artim. “Students have bills too. We’re providing the experience, but they’re providing the support. It’s only fair, and it shows the students that we value them.” Other Enterprise perks include gift certificates, recognition luncheons, company T-shirts, and other gifts.

“Even when the students are back at school, we are there providing scholarships, publishing ads that say ‘job well done’ in their college newspapers, and sending them care packages of snacks and office supplies,” Artim says. “Interns help our company; we want them to know that we appreciate them.”

IBM pays students an hourly rate based on the number of credits they have earned toward their degrees, according to Mayo. She says the company’s focus on work/life balance also extends to interns. “Sometimes, they want to go home for a long weekend, so we offer them a four-day work week,” she says. “We have a flexibility to help them meet their personal needs.”

Best practice #4: Communicate promptly and frequently with stakeholders.

Artim, Breen, Ingerski, and Mayo concur that prompt and frequent

communication with upper management, career services, and students is critical to developing and maintaining a viable experiential education program.

First, they say, it's an economic necessity that program support begin at the top. Artim describes support for experiential education as a "hallmark of the Enterprise program. We found that it's absolutely imperative for a buy-in from upper management. Since we have so many locations throughout the country, buy-in also has to come from the top of each individual office."

Mayo says it's a mistake to look at the initial buy-in as automatic long-term support. Instead, she says, it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease from the executive office.

"People might be tempted to say, 'Okay, I've got my buy-in, now I can go on my merry way.' That's not the case. You have to follow up, take every opportunity to mention the program and how it's doing," she says. She adds that frequent communication with core schools also helps to ensure the viability of the college relations program.

For Mayo, students play a vital role in maintaining communication within and outside the company. By surveying students while they are in-house, she can communicate their expectations to upper management. In addition, students act as effective ambassadors for IBM when they return to campus. They become the "eyes, ears, and voice on campus when the recruiter isn't there," sending e-mails to other students, posting flyers, and more.

According to Breen, Disney focuses many of its resources on communicating with its interns through traditional and electronic communications. For instance, Disney posts networking opportunities on paper at strategic locations throughout the theme parks. Such weekly opportunities might include group lectures, one-on-one discussions, resume critiques, a leadership speaker series featuring respected business leaders, an advanced internship "trade show," and more. These programs give students a leg up on

permanent positions with Disney—or any other employer that they're considering.

"We get hundreds of resumes every week, and we scan them all," Breen says. "But networking is so important to us. It is very, very important for the student [who wants to work for Disney] to have done the networking, made the connections, and learned the program."

Best practice #5: Be consistent but flexible.

Employers with premier experiential programs say that consistency and flexibility aren't mutually exclusive. They suggest organizations maintain a consistent image on campus by regularly offering experiential opportunities and maintaining a solid reputation with the school, particularly with career services. They also say that flexibility with the students is a must, especially since for some of them, an internship is their first career experience and often in an unfamiliar town.

Mayo maintains that a consistent presence is required to be taken seriously by the school and the students and to ensure organizational growth.

"Having been through [a down economy] before, when IBM wasn't recruiting, we now have proof that vitality—new blood, new ideas, new grads joining our work force—is crucial to our long-term success," she says. "One-third of our university hires come from our internship pool."

Employers can build consistency with students by having a reliable and respectful hiring plan in place for both experiential students and full-time candidates. For Enterprise, recruiting for experiential candidates is conducted on the same calendar as full-time recruitment. The company has a special area of its web site dedicated to experiential opportunities. It screens students via a campus interview, which is typically aligned with career or internship fairs; informs students within one week whether or not they've made the cut for a second interview, follows up with

timely telephone or on-site interviews, and follows through with prompt offers, giving students ample time to decide.

"We try to keep things moving," says Artim. "With over 200 recruiters going to 700 to 800 schools, we put forward a strong effort to recruit in both fall and spring. Fortunately for us, we're still strong, stable, and can move forward with both interns and full-time hires."

"The first thing most students have to face [when they become NASA co-ops] is that they have to delay graduation," says Ingerski. "But they can come one semester, take another semester off [to return to campus], they can work summers, part time, or at night if they're local. We have maximum flexibility to tailor the work experience to their needs."

According to Breen, Disney is sensitive to the fact that students typically have to delay graduation to fulfill experiential obligations, so the company has created American Council on Education-approved college courses that students can take for credit—and graduate 'on time.'

"We provide an academic opportunity where students can earn college credits while they're here so that they don't delay graduation. In addition, we provide the 'lab,' where students can take what they've learned in class and apply it immediately to their working situations," Breen says.

Disney, Enterprise, IBM, and NASA, all large organizations, leave the experiential decision making to managers at each facility and have dedicated staffs on hand to provide flexibility and timely feedback for students. With on-site professionals to help students with homesickness, personal or professional problems, and other issues, they are able to sustain a consistent yet flexible relationship with students and their schools.

Says Breen, "We want to be visible on a consistent basis, on campus and in the community, 48 weeks out of the year." That kind of effort, she adds, would be impossible with a centralized recruitment plan.

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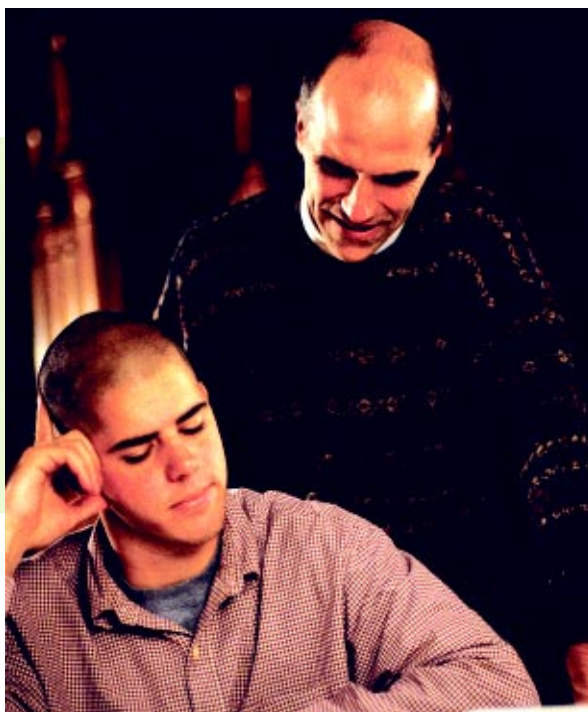
Best practice #6: Look for ways to improve your program.

Artim, Breen, Ingerski, and Mayo don't believe in resting on their laurels. They say they're constantly looking for ways to improve their programs, and one way they do that is by soliciting feedback from company managers, schools, and, of course, students. Following are tips from these experts on how to build a first-rate experiential education program:

- Establish and communicate expectations from the get-go. NASA provides colleges with written agreements for co-ops, so "everyone knows up front what's expected," and there's little room for misunderstanding, according to Ingerski.
- Don't underestimate the productivity of students. Mayo says most interns "dance rings around me" because their days aren't filled with telephone calls, e-mails, and meetings. She suggests having a list of "auxiliary tasks" for the times when interns finish their assignments ahead of schedule.
- Whenever possible, provide opportunities for a variety of majors. According to Artim, "Enterprise is looking for a person who enjoys people, marketing, and all the different aspects of running a business. That can be a business, marketing, or English major. We're looking at career goals rather than major."
- Use technology to your full advantage. Breen says Disney had to

"redevelop and redefine" itself when it communicated with students. The use of technology made a big difference in positioning itself among tech-savvy Millennials. The company ditched its marketing videotapes for DVDs and PowerPoint presentations, and also recycled its paper applications and feedback surveys and put them online.

- Embrace diversity. IBM holds 18 scheduled off-campus events for diversity recruiting. For instance, the company offers a recruiting event just for women and another



just for American Indians.

- Start small. Artim recommends creating a good program—with the all-important upper management buy-in—with a few good people. She advises companies without a program to model other companies' best practices, develop a program with specific goals in mind—ones that are aligned with the organization's business plan or mission—and consider how the program will add value to the

organization. "Create your own best practices, then work up," she says.

What's in It for You?


Employers have much to gain from effective experiential education programs. In addition to assessing each student's "fit" with an organization and getting a realistic preview of the student's ability, employers can seamlessly convert interns to permanent hires and significantly decrease their cost-per-hire.

All four employers indicate that the primary goal of their experiential programs is to create a candidate pool for permanent hiring.

In many cases, employers do convert interns and co-ops into full-time employees. According to NACE's 2001 *Experiential Education Survey*, employers extended offers to 67.2 percent of co-ops and to 56.9 percent of interns, with acceptance rates of 62.4 percent and 62.9 percent, respectively. Employers also reported that they achieved higher retention rates with co-ops and interns than with their inexperienced peers.

Approximately 90 percent of science and engineering interns convert to full-time employment at NASA, according to Ingerski, who equates a high conversion rate with a sound return on investment. "You have to look at the return on investment. Look at it as a long-range program," he says.

"We have roughly 1,500 interns companywide, and we hire over 6,000 management trainees each year," says Artim. "It is our goal to convert 50-75 percent of our interns who are graduating."

"Our program is designed to be a feeder pool for university hiring," says Mayo. "Our students are literally creating some of the next products to be offered by the IBM company. We don't want them to escape." 

Melanie Gold is associate editor for NACE.