



BROWN

# **Framework for Course Design and Award of Academic Credit for Internships**

## **Guidance from the College Curriculum Council**

**May 2018**

### **Overview**

This document seeks to establish a clear rationale and set of criteria for the College and academic units to use in determining when and how academic credit should be given for internships. In addition, it seeks to develop a basic curricular framework for faculty and departments/programs designing courses that involve significant experiential learning through internships.

### **Background**

Brown recognizes the educational value of internships and experiential learning in many ways. Most visibly, there is the University's commitment to provide at least one funded internship opportunity to each student at Brown across the course of their undergraduate career. A number of concentrations have capstone requirements that includes the option of an internship (Public Policy), a research internship (Geology), or significant field experience (Health and Human Biology). The professional tracks within Computer Science and Economics require two internships, noting that such opportunities provide "a chance to gain relevant experience, and they may also provide insights for subsequent courses and project work at Brown." The Engaged Scholars Program, a CCC-approved academic program currently offered through 16 concentrations, requires a (150-250 hour) practicum in a public agency or community organization. Finally, most academic advisors spend at least some time encouraging their undergraduate advisees to find appropriately challenging internships during one or more of their summers, often highlighting the opportunity to extend, deepen, and challenge concepts and skills learned in the classroom by seeking to apply them in a real-world context.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Internships, field experiences, and community-based learning (service learning) are widely recognized as high-impact educational practices associated with improved academic outcomes, civic engagement,

The educational importance of real-world learning experiences is reaffirmed in *Building on Distinction*:

“Consistent with our mission to serve ‘the community, the nation, and the world,’ learning that connects academic and real-world experiences is central to the undergraduate experience at Brown. As an established leader in this area, Brown is in a position to define the ‘second wave’ of integrative approaches to engaged learning. We plan to implement a suite of new programs that will provide Brown students with opportunities to work with faculty and community practitioners on pressing local and global issues and provide students with expanded access to summer internships and research experiences. We will also develop ‘Brown in the World’ courses that integrate coursework with international experiences. These programs will take advantage of the expertise of the Swearer Center for Public Service and be connected by an overarching Program in Engaged Scholarship in which participating students develop an integrated plan of curricular and off-campus experiences including Undergraduate Teaching and Research Awards (UTRAs) as well as paid and unpaid summer internships. We will consider changes to the academic calendar that will facilitate opportunities for students to conduct research or undertake internships away from campus in times other than the summer.”

Despite its recognition of the educational value of internships and experiential learning, Brown’s general policy - reiterated most recently in the accreditation self-study - is that “Brown does not typically award credit for experiential or non-collegiate sponsored learning.” The prima facie reasons for this policy are easy to understand. Internships can vary dramatically in their duration and quality, ranging from poorly managed and unchallenging paper-pushing jobs to rigorous, high-level research experiences with direct links to academic studies. Traditional internships do not involve a formal instructor and they lack a course plan and syllabus that articulates learning goals, an assignment structure, minimum hourly commitments, assessment criteria and evaluation methods, and other policies deemed necessary to ensure a well-structured and supportive learning environment. Finally and not insignificantly, especially at a leading liberal arts and academic research institution such as Brown, the idea of internships for credit evinces a fear of declining academic rigor and a creeping vocationalism.<sup>2</sup>

---

and personal and professional development. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) identifies “application to experience” as a key learning outcome for integrative learning, one in which the student “[m]eaningfully synthesizes connections among experiences outside of the formal classroom (including life experiences and academic experiences such as internships and travel abroad) to deepen understanding of fields of study and to broaden [one’s] own points of view.” Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2009). Integrative Learning VALUE Rubric. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/integrative-learning>. The literature about these practices, which is not reviewed at length in this proposal, is extensive.

<sup>2</sup> “The idea that addressing career development in the context of the major would ‘water down’ the curriculum is a powerful one, with deep roots. It reveals a common reaction in academia against anything that smacks of vocationalism or apprenticeship. What suffers, as a result, are things like hands-on learning, developing marketable skills, or ‘learning by doing’—exactly what internships can provide. Yet internships organized as learning activities can also encourage application of sociology concepts and methods to complex problems, critical thinking, strong communication and interpersonal skills, and personal and social responsibility.” O’Neill, N. (2010). [Internships as a High-Impact Practice: Some Reflections on Quality](#). *Peer Review*, 12 (4) , 4-8.

## Current Practice of Awarding Credit for Internships

There are, however, at least three significant exceptions to Brown's "no credit for internships" rule. By looking more closely at these exceptions we can discern both the strengths and weaknesses of current practice and tease out the elements of academically rigorous experiential learning opportunities that merit the award of academic credit.

1. Academic Internships: The Curricular Resource Center (CRC) has a rigorous proposal and review process for Academic Internships (AI), which allow students to couple academic study with an internship and earn course credit for this active learning experience. AIs must take place during the academic year. Students must complete the Independent Study Application, which covers Independent Study Projects (ISPs), Group Independent Study Projects (GISPs), and AIs, and requires significant planning, literature review, and sponsorship by a faculty advisor.<sup>3</sup>
2. Internship + Departmental Independent Study (DISP): A common practice that students use to receive academic credit for an internship is to register for an independent study in the fall semester following a summer internship. Not only is this practice highly inconsistent - with some faculty requiring structured reading and writing assignments related to the internship, some requiring little or no additional work - it is also, on the most basic level, pedagogically weak in that it introduces a time lag between the experiential learning and the structured reflections and assignments of the independent study. While the CCC does not propose moving toward awarding academic credit for summer internships through Summer Session courses, it does recommend that faculty who allow students to register for independent studies for internships adopt measures outlined in the recommendations section below.
3. Course-based Internships for Credit: There are at least two courses - POLS 1821J (Rhode Island Government and Politics) and PLCY 1823 (Brown in Washington Practicum) - in which student register for a course, participate in an intensive public policy internship in Rhode Island (8-10 hours/week) or Washington DC (25-30 hours/week), have structured assignments, and meet as a class to discuss their experiences and reflective work.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> "Academic internships (AIs) allow students to combine an independent study with outside unpaid work experience and receive course credit for it. In order to qualify for credit, the academic study and the internship must take place during the same fall or spring semester. A strong, rigorous academic component must complement the work experience, and the work itself must be unpaid. Participating students bear the major responsibility for both the planning and conduct of the academic internship. A faculty member advises the project and evaluates the student's work. An academic internship carries the same course credit as any other course offered at Brown." CRC Website.

<sup>4</sup> At the master's level, there are other examples of practicum courses, including for example SOC 2982 (Directed Research Practicum), which combine "a one semester course taken in conjunction with an on- or off-campus research internship. The course consists of a directed reading of methodological texts and research articles selected by the student and the faculty director that are directly relevant to the methodological issues/challenges encountered in the internship." Interestingly, the internship is here positioned as external to the academic course content, unlike in the other two cases where the internship experience is a part of the course proper.

The question then, is where and under what circumstances do internships meet the bar for the award of academic credit? What makes experiential learning not simply “complementary to” (and hence still external to) rigorous academic work but actually constitutive of that work?

## **Improved Framework for Awarding Credit for Internships**

Brown’s limited practice of awarding credit for internships can be improved, rendered more consistent, and potentially extended by focusing on the elements of best practice that are embodied to varying degrees in the exceptions listed above. These practices have also been validated in the extensive literature on internships, experiential learning, and service learning and community engagement.

In order to be academically rigorous and to qualify for course credit, five key elements ought to be found in internships and experiential learning opportunities:

- Connection to Academic Content
- Intensity and Duration
- Reflection
- Evaluation and Assessment
- Faculty Involvement

1. Academic Content: In order to be academically rigorous, internships and experiential learning opportunities need to relate explicitly to academic content. The experiential learning needs to be framed with respect to an explicit set of learning outcomes that link the activities undertaken outside of the classroom to specific research goals, concentration or discipline-specific learning goals, or other relevant academic content. Consequently, internships need to be carefully selected - and usually cultivated, through a series of conversations with a potential internship site - to ensure that the work to be undertaken is challenging and relevant to the student’s studies. The student, moreover, needs to demonstrate a clear understanding of the academic purposes of the internship or experiential learning opportunity *in advance of and during the learning experience*. This goal is best accomplished through a formal work plan and/or learning agreement developed by the student in consultation with the internship or experiential learning supervisor and the faculty advisor. (Both of the practices are embodied in Brown’s Academic Internship program and the Brown in Washington practicum course (PLCY 1823).)

2. Intensity and Duration: Improved learning outcomes from experiential learning is a function in part of the intensity and duration of the experiences. Internships, field experience, community engaged learning experiences are best constructed as continuous rather than episodic (i.e., with a single organization or field placement) and have minimum number of hours. In the context of Brown’s academic course credit structure, the 180 hour minimum for one course credit provides some guidance for thinking about the mix of hours in the field, assignments, and potential classroom/discussion time that might make up a course-worthy internship.

3. Structured Reflection: In an influential article, Hatcher and Bringle, drawing on John Dewey, David Kolb, and other learning theorists, define “reflection as the intentional consideration of an

experience in light of particular learning objectives.”<sup>5</sup> The most important dimension of an academically meaningful experiential learning opportunity is a set of structured activities that enable the student to reflect on the relationships between what is experienced in the internship or experiential learning opportunity (in the field, in practice) and what has been investigated through more traditional academic means (in classes, through readings, theoretically). The experiential learning, in this sense, becomes the text or data that is taken up and reflected upon through a series of written or other assignments, which may in turn involve supplementary readings. Active involvement by a faculty advisor, by a site supervisor, and by peers involved in similar experiential learning and engaged in the same reflective work, especially in the context of a cohort-based program, deepens the learning experience.<sup>6</sup>

4. Evaluation and Assessment: As with regular academic courses, experiential learning opportunities need to have an explicit evaluation and assessment framework that articulates expectations about learning goals, time commitments, and assignments and provides a basis for giving students critical feedback about their performance work in both their experiential and their reflective work. This practice can be deepened and rendered more meaningful through the involvement of internships/site supervisors in the assessment and feedback process. In most cases, experience-based course credits would carry an S/NC grade structure. However, one could develop an assessment rubric that enabled the assignment of letter grades.

5. Faculty and Mentor Involvement: Faculty and mentor involvement is critical to ensuring the academic integrity of experiential learning. Whether through the development of a course that incorporates the elements identified above (formalized in a syllabus) or in an independent study or Academic Internship, the faculty member needs to work with the student - and, whether directly or indirectly, with the partner organization - to build the strong connection to academic content, to frame out the reflective assignment structures appropriate to the experiential learning, and to articulate expectations and provide critical response and guidance to the student. This advising and mentorship role can and should, where possible, be extended to the internship or field supervisor, but the primary point of contact - where credit is involved - needs to be the dedicated faculty instructor or advisor.

## Recommendations

1. Academic Internships and course-based internships continue to offer students ways to receive academic credit for internship experiences and provide a mechanism for ensuring the academic integrity of those experiences. Faculty developing courses with an internship component should adhere to the general guidance provided by the College for course planning and syllabus construction, including a description of learning goals, assignment structure and

---

<sup>5</sup> Bridger J. and Hatcher, R. (1997). [Bridging the Gap Between Service and Learning](#). *College Teaching*. Fall 97, Vol. 45 Issue 4.

<sup>6</sup> “To apply knowledge productively in field-based settings, all students should experience in-depth questioning from faculty, staff, and other mentors about their assumptions, analyses, conclusions, and actions. Learners also need both guidance and feedback, from mentors and peers, as they probe the facets of a complex issue and test their own insights against both theory and the experiences of others.” Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2007). *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise*.

course expectations, assessment process, and academic policies and supports. See: Sheridan Center resource page, "[Creating a Brown University Syllabus.](#)"

2. Faculty sponsoring departmental independent studies for internships should adopt measures that improve the learning outcomes and academic rigor of that practice. These include:

- a. A written proposal from the student, in advance of the internship, that provides basic information about the internship and outlines the academic purpose and anticipated learning goals of the internship experience.
- b. A number of reflection assignments completed contemporaneously with the internship. For example, students can be assigned a series of reflection assignments to be written and submitted over the course of a summer internship. These can form a part and be evaluated in the context of the independent study taken in the fall semester.
- c. A syllabus for the fall semester independent study - drafted by the student in collaboration with the faculty member - that outlines the learning goals, assignments, and timeline for additional work to be completed after the internship.

3. Departments whose faculty sponsor a significant number of departmental independent studies for internships should develop department-level policies and resources to ensure the academic integrity of these credit-bearing experiences. Resources might include a standardized proposal form for credit-bearing internships that provides information about the internship site, description of internship responsibilities and work products, anticipated learning outcomes and their connection to academic studies, and writing or other assignments to be completed over the course of the internship. This should be reviewed and approved by a faculty sponsor in advance of the internship. (For a good example, see the [Project Proposal Form](#) used by Biology for independent studies.)