



Ryon, R. (2002). Not exactly scab labor: Undergraduate higher education internships in USA. *Workplace*, 9, 80-87.

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Not Exactly Scab Labor: Undergraduate Higher Education Internships in USA

In September 2000 the Internship Co-ordinator at the Perdue School of Business at Maryland's Salisbury State University contacted her colleagues on a listserv sponsored by the National Society for Experiential Education. She wanted advice. A student intern placed with a local company—probably an Eastern Shore poultry processor—had gotten his internship for pay extended in the midst of a workers' strike. The course for credit was completed but the student had agreed to continue to intern. Had the Salisbury State supplied the company a "scab" and was he now "crossing a picket line?" Should she and fellow internship co-ordinators, as well as colleges and universities that offered internships for credit, be concerned?¹

Actually, college student internships do fill a small niche in national and international labor markets but less as replacement work and much more as a form of flexible labor protected and legitimized by their recently won place in the college curriculum. This essay explores the origins of undergraduate student labor for credit, the experiential ideology which undergirds it, its place in an increasingly corporate influenced curriculum, and the responses which democratic reformers of higher education might make to it. This last will consider whether the internship could or should be molded for "progressive" purposes, i.e., for community, non-profit, and even leftist political activities, or whether it should be outrightly savaged. One could argue that this particular form of "academic labor"—merely part-time labor done by students in only a stint or two amidst many other academic courses—can or even should be paid attention to by a movement aimed to remold colleges and universities in the public interest. In any expose of corporate controlled universities, research, patents, and technology promoted and controlled by corporate interests seem to be the issues, and graduate students, out-sourced non-student workers, adjunct faculty, or faculty of any status seem to be the more important players. But student internship labor is a particular manifestation of a corporate presence in higher education revelatory of a few others and consideration of it pushes to the fore the issues of higher education's purposes and beneficiaries, issues reformers have to take into account as they/we consider how to change colleges and universities.

Undergraduate internships for credit are a hybrid of a century old co-operative education movement, but one that scarcely resembles its forebear. Early Twentieth Century engineering schools in the United States innovated alternating brief periods of work for pay within a student's field of study with semesters of full-time study. The co-op arrangements allowed students without financial means to secure a college degree over a lengthier period. Antioch College pioneered with more general work-mixed-with-study programs within the undergraduate curriculum, programs that were defended as practical application of classroom teaching but nevertheless functioned primarily to allow the less financially able to attend college.² The movement was importantly assisted by the Higher Education Act of 1965 which set aside funds for co-operative education and prodded schools to establish programs. There were 60 programs at colleges and universities within the United States in 1956, 225 in 1971, and by 1986, 1012.³ But co-

operative education atrophied in the 1980s and 1990s as private capital began to flow into higher education and an ideology promoted by private foundations to define student labor as educational experience began to flourish. Internships became a staple in business and communications departments in the 1980s, the percentage of students earning credit in internships in those fields soaring between 300% and 400%. By 2000, according to Pew foundation supported National Survey of Student Engagement, three quarters of college seniors within the United States reported having had or taking some type of internship, practicum, or field experience. Over half may have completed two.⁴

Professional organizations to defend and promote education outside of the classroom followed the influx money in the 1970s. The Society for Field Experience Education (1971) and the National Center for Public Service Internship Programs (1971) merged in 1978 to form the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education. The organizations won grants from the Ford Foundation in the 1970s and FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Secondary Education) in 1989.⁵ To promote internships as widely as possible in the college curriculum and beyond obviously for-profit clients, NSIEE added "serving the 'common good'" to its mission statement in 1989. "Experiential" being all-inclusive, "internship" was dropped from the association's name in 1992. Meanwhile, parallel organizations to bind client and institution together, such as National Association of Colleges and Employers, flourished in the 1990s.

The chief difference between the early co-operative education movement and late Twentieth Century "experiential" education as promoted by the professional organizations was and is the association of the latter with valuable, even superior, education to on campus, in-the-classroom pedagogy. In doing so, promoters drew on old stereotypes. Universities had long enjoyed a "splendid isolation" from the "real world." But the cost was irrelevancy and an out-of-date curriculum. Education without "experience" represented incomplete education. Hence, internships were to be considered co-curricular not extra-curricular and a necessary, not optional, component to classroom instruction. Inherently, the subject of study, the corporate firm (business), public relations organization (mass communications), museum (history), etc. was something best understood by participants, and by participants required or prodded by their educational institution to affiliate with it. Abstract and outside analysis, study, or critique, was a distinctly limited, inferior form of study. Students, the promoters also insisted, acquired not merely knowledge but values. The 1995 Bible for the NSIEE avowed that students' "ethical growth" was a "primary value" of internships, presumably through their Horatio Alger like lessons of diligence, responsibility, and attention to duty at the workplace.⁶ But to clients, the organizations in which interns were placed, the professional associations heralded financial benefits. The NACE reported in the 1990s that employers valued internships as a means of recruiting employees just behind on-campus recruiting and that employers saved \$6200 per employee via hiring through internships rather than other means of recruiting.⁷

As the internship became institutionalized in the 1990s, it seemed less and less distinguishable from other non-classroom student activities—volunteering or jobs for pay, service learning, field practica, cross-cultural/international programs. But the internship for academic credit, which tends toward pay in labor shortage areas and no or low pay in others, retained as its core feature its alleged relation to and preparation for a post-degree career. And a major part of the student's supervision was by the client institution and its officers, the company/firm/institution to which the student was assigned, not instructional faculty. Across institutions and programs, internships perhaps averaged 120 to 140 hours of labor for three credits.⁸

Experiential education in all its forms had a very minor place within the curriculum of higher education before the growth of corporate funding but its growth parallels the mounting corporate funding and investment in higher education thereafter. As the contemporary higher education systems were formed between 1940 and 1970 with their expansions to include community colleges and many more doctoral granting institutions, public support dominated. Appropriations from the Federal Government made up 4% of aggregate college revenues in 1939 but 37% by 1944 and public monies increased 12 to 14%

annually each year between 1953 and 1968. But since 1970 private corporate funding has made up a greater and greater share of University budgets. Industrial funding grew at an annual rate of 1 per cent from 1980 to 1998, even as Federal funding grew at a smaller rate and the share of the budget of state institutions provided by the state steadily declined.⁹ But the flow of capital into higher education as well as every other level of education was unprecedented in the 1990s and not unlike the influx into health industries a decade earlier. As Slaughter and Rhoades have pointed out, in the case of public universities, corporations can avoid some of the risks of ordinary private investment in that the public can be expected to bail them out. Also at public institutions, private investment has come to be seen as essential to a continuation of public investment. The Rand Institute's *The Fiscal Crisis of Higher Education* (1997) cautioned that if schools were to get money from the public treasury they would have to get "strong advocacy from the business community."¹⁰

Campus buildings and endowed chairs named for corporations and corporation COE's as well as the university as site and agent of consumption, via campus stores, banks, fast food outlets, are perhaps the obvious signs of corporate investment in universities. More covertly, higher education's governance has been changed. Traditionally, businessmen dominated boards of trustees of private institutions but since 1980 the governance of public and private institutions has tended to be interlocking directorates among planning commissions, foundations, business interest groups, university boards of trustees, and government agencies. As what Slaughter and Rhoades call "exemplars of liberalism," they assign markets central value and place a premium on technocratic planning and so-called cost-benefit accounting.¹¹

Soaring private capital in higher education in the late 1980s and 1990s increased tendencies toward curriculum change already in the process. Urged on by Ford and Carnegie foundations, and notably trying to reverse prior trends toward "mission creep," planners more and more defined "higher learning" as the activity for elite institutions with others to have a more standardized, trivialized, and vocationalized curriculum of transmitting information. The new curriculum was defended as meeting "the economy's" need for skilled workers, but promoters in the business-campus "partnerships" spoke from time to time explicitly of a "reservoir" or a "pool" of academically trained people, not just a sufficient supply.¹² The arts and sciences at all kinds of higher education institutions were diminished and courses within them developed a professional twist, for example, "Writing for Business" within English and literature departments. The new vocationalized curriculum had a significant gender bent as job preparation. Professional areas serving the public interest—education, nursing, social work, library science—tended to get a short shrift of funds while preparation for largely male fields received more funding even as women constituted a clear majority of undergraduates by the 1990s.¹³

Soaring private capital in higher education promoted and promotes new roles and functions for colleges and universities of which offering internships formed one part. Colleges and universities proclaim the campus—not the community apart from it—as the locus of for spectator and participatory entertainment (arenas, stadiums, bowling alleys and golf courses), for places to congregate (for-rent convention and meeting rooms), to live away from home (hotels and for rent dormitory space), and even exposure to nature and the outdoors, via a landscaped campus. Internships define the college/university as job placement center and employment agency. And as courses were added to the curriculum internship offices began to offer a full range of services, from resume preparation to "professional dinners" where students were coached on matters of dress, conversation, and table manners and use of multiple forks, spoons, etc.¹⁴

What could be called "function creep" has created a considerable diversion of funds away from faculty to new kinds of employees hired within colleges/universities. These include fund raisers, professionals in student "services" or student "life," campus-"community" liaison officers, assessment officers, and technicians and supervisors in computer services, assessment, and instructional technology transfers. In 1980 faculty accounted for two thirds of the academic profession employees in public institutions but by

the end of the 1990s faculty accounted for only slightly more than half of academic professional employees at institutions of higher education. The notorious quotas on tenured faculty and full time faculty of course accompanied the rise of "support professionals." Full-time faculty made about 78% of total faculty in 1970, about 57% in 1994, and smaller numbers thereafter.¹⁵

The institutionalization of internships within the curriculum has encouraged their spread and growth across the curriculum—from a few departments to the majority if not all departments, and from elective status to requirement especially in more vocationalized parts of the curriculum. They win a place within Freshmen Orientation programs to talk up enrollment ("Plan your schedule now to leave room for internships as juniors and seniors"); prod the Development Office to secure donors for endowed internships; and lobby budget makers within academic divisions of the academy for larger and larger shares of the academic pie. In the late 1990s internship offices undertook to make internships more available to part-time students by lobbying Federal authorities to relax requirements for enrollment of twelve credits per term in order to receive Federal loans. And faculty who serve as supervisors and coordinators appear increasingly to be entangled in conflict of interest arrangements, especially in business schools. The more internships which they approve and the more clients with which they work, the more frequently financially beneficial consultantships are available to them. Also, as internships became more institutionalized, employers began to expect more of University internship offices and these offices in turn shifted some of the burden of labor to students. Internship offices were asked to assume payroll functions of paid interns. Rather than locate internships for students, internship offices provided training in locating an internship and assigned part of the internship credit for locating the internship.¹⁶

Internships have the obvious financial benefit to clients big and small of reducing costs associated with recruiting workers. They give them access to an unpaid/low paid but relatively high skilled group of laborers with minimum expenses for advertising or on the job testing. Training and orientation is done at the institution's, the public's, and student's expense. But in a culture and tradition which long assume higher education's prime or even sole role as career preparation, one could reasonably ask: Could—or even should—a movement to democratize or mold education in the public interest challenge the recently entrenched role of internships in the curriculum?

Internships can indeed be challenged on diverse grounds. The data on job creation within the United States suggest that internships, as well as the vocationalized curricula generally, fail to allow students to climb an economic ladder, that is move into a higher stratum of the class structure. This is so because, according to the 1998-99 Occupational Outlook Handbook, 66% of all new jobs created through 2006 will not require a bachelor's degree or associate's degree at all. Rather the internship tends toward the formation of a pool of surplus workers.¹⁷ Judgments about the educational quality of internship must derive perhaps from the philosophical assumptions about higher education's purposes. A regard or vision of education as not merely preparation for paid labor, but as the self in all its dimensions defining knowledge and integrating it into itself finds the internship wanting. And so also is one that places a premium on critical thinking, such as that traditionally associated, with the humanities and arts and sciences. The internship thus is one more vocationalized part of the curriculum eating away at the space and time for study for other purposes.

Yet even on its own terms—skills acquisition and training and the transmission of information—the internship can be found wanting. The shortness of the labor stint encourages clients to require very repetitive work and, within large organizations, to limit a student's exposure to only one or a few work processes. (Queries by non-internship student workers to campus internship offices tend to confirm the repetitive, non-educational nature of internship work. Paid workers who learn that their work differs little from that of students who earn academic credit, petition to receive retroactive academic credit.) Of course, students may derive the normal educational benefit associated with new settings and new experiences of virtually any type. But the lesson of the internship within the curriculum and for

"academic" credit probably resides in its relationship to the curriculum. An internship legitimizes or teaches the inevitability of contemporary corporate values via an introduction to "flex labor" in one's "career" choice, not just as a summer job or ordinary student employment. The campus itself not just an outside place of employment is the site of employment negotiations that puts a premium on corporate welfare through technocratic planning, cost-benefit accounting, and scientific management. "Reflective" statements or essays or reading and study in addition to the work was supposed to distinguish them from mere labor at the internship site, but its place in the curriculum encourages the "content" to be labor alone. Within larger client organizations, internship managers tended to be corporate officers shuttled about within the organizations with little autonomy or ability to create internships that placed a premium on education. Thus, on the job supervisors place a premium on the work, internship coordinators place a premium on good relations with the client, and contact with the teacher is scant or non-existent.¹⁸

Internships represent yet another academic experience within higher education—along with television-satellite courses, distance education, and so-called independent study programs, and large lecture courses—of teacher-less education or with minimum interchange and contact with instructors. Within academic disciplines, internships as well function as a kind of weight on the rest of the curriculum. As faculty become entangled within internship supervision they are less and less available for new courses of instruction. Internships contribute to a toll of low college enrollments and increased drop-outs. The not uncommon imposition of clocked hours and the costs and time associated with transportation to internship sites eat into time available for other kinds of course work and encourage lighter course loads and thereby time extensions for degrees. And in the case of non- or low paid internships they necessitate more labor at other kinds of work for pay, labor that is further encouraged by the declining number of Federal Pell grants since the 1990s. Where internships are optional within the curriculum they encourage a kind of class divide within the student population in that the less financially able forsake internships deemed useful for their careers to maximize earnings as students.

As higher education for undergraduates is challenged for its other forms of exploitation of labor and curricula innovations—miserly pay for adjuncts and graduate assistants, large classes, distance learning, etc.—can it be challenged also for its exploitation of undergraduate student labor via internships for credit, and for the inferior education they foster? Actually, student laborers even as an unorganized workforce already constitute an obstacle to the growth and further entrenchments of internships within the curriculum. Capital investment in higher education is dependent on an ever expanding supply of students which notoriously has prompted many other curricular developments—reducing requirements, liberalizing course enrollment and withdrawal rules, waiving of pre-requisites. Where internships are not required student enrollments in internship "courses" lag as students count the costs in money and time and a delay in graduation. Where internships are required students avail themselves of well-established mechanisms to waive requirements. In other words, students boycott and strike with their feet.¹⁹ But for structural change, we could consider the matter at two levels, the first, what modest benefits students might attain in pay and/or an improved education within the present class-based higher education system, and the second, the place internships might hold in an alternative vision of higher education. This latter would be one that presupposes higher education to be the servant of human clients and of democratic society.

There are perhaps few players within the academy to undertake the former. Traditionally, full-time tenured faculty determine curricula, their authority undermined in recent decades by corporate controlled governing bodies and councils which have indeed innovated the very changes which account for the exploited labor and inferior education. But even unencumbered by outside interference, tenured faculty notoriously collaborate in laissez-faire decisions over curriculum. Innovation apart from one's own turf gets generously tolerated in exchange for the rights to protect and innovate within it. Internships, or service learning, or distance learning, can take its place within the curriculum so long as a seminar in cultural studies has its own. And as for how movements for living wages, and for recognition and benefits and pay for full-time laborers, impact internships, these also seldom challenge the curriculum any more

than auto workers, for example, challenge a mode of transportation dependent on the internal combustion engine. Nevertheless, certain kinds of reform may require effort short of a full fledged "movement" and are therefore worthy of exploration: (a) pay for every kind of student internship should be a goal. Internships actually hold a tenuous legal position within the curriculum because of provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which require that exemptions to the minimum wage provisions be labor in which the primary benefit is experience for the laborer not service to the employers. But the more internships become entrenched and required the more evidence and testimony from students mounts as to the "make work" and "routine-ness" of internship experiences. To the extent that campus reform movements may tap liberal foundations for grants, legal challenges to at the least the most egregious cases of no-pay internships are possible, and legal victories could well be publicized throughout the networks of the professional organizations to either drop the internships or pressure clients for pay. To the extent that organizations of full-time campus workers appeal to students for support, they gain credibility as they articulate a vision of any labor on or associated with the campus as deserving of compensation. The appeals hold promise because even as such innovations as internships as well as a high tech curriculum have been promoted as a gateway to career success, colleges/universities are as always plagued by public suspicions of a frivolous curriculum. (b) Where campus movements have participants or friends within the institutions of shared governance of the academy, these should be voices for limiting the expansion of internships but also broadening their definitions. The mystique of higher education continues to uphold the role of the professorate in determining curriculum, and internships can be challenged, especially as requirements, on some of the very grounds by which higher education justifies itself. If education is to be "lifelong" because of an ever-changing nature of work and workplaces, how could training in a soon-to-be-obsolete employment justify itself? Steve Parks in a recent issue of *Workplace* reported on ways in which "service learning" courses could be structured to broaden students conceptions of communities, and indeed to immerse them in communities, institutions, and activities beyond those provided by most internships: student-prisoner dialogues, work among and with the homeless, and the like.²⁰

Opportunities should be sought to similarly broaden the internship. And "alternative" internships should include all forms of political activity, on and off campus. Indeed, there may have been students at Seattle or Genoa whose way was assisted along by academic credit for an internship in international politics or organizing set up by a wily professor!

But might an alternative vision of higher education allow for a remolded, recast internship? Probably not. An alternative vision of higher education would surely be rooted in very considerable respect for the autonomy, freedom and time of whoever is to be educated within the academy. And such respect would call into question a great deal of what the academy presently requires. In that regard the most "progressive" form of service learning, or community service, or internship for credit within an endeavor for social justice or democratic reform, would have to be found wanting. These "alternative" internships continue to be forms of alienated labor, responding to the needs/power of others not originating with the self. And they presently constitute a form of the exploitation of the young. Whatever the value of service or inter-connectedness of humans to humans, these forms of alienated labor do not indeed allow the regard for oneself to be included among that humanity. And so in place of internships, the more general curriculum innovation will be toward a curriculum that allows for critique of society and that responds to the curiosity of individuals in all its dimensions, and not narrowly confined to that of paid labor activities for the future.

An alternative vision of higher education will also probably prompt reformers to concern themselves with the finances of higher education, in much the way health care reformers, such as advocates of universal, quality health care reform, of necessity must consider costs and finances. As it is currently structured, higher education which is in the service of academic capital and (perhaps only for the short run) of upper income strata, competes with budgets for health care, unemployment, energy saving infrastructure budgets, etc. To promote only reform of the internship indeed allies reform with the wastefulness and the

class bias of higher education and against the larger public interest. But a movement for higher education in the public interest can begin to agitate for monies directed for services for the clients, making distinctions among various kinds of expenditures. Reform would speak up for education monies for educational purposes, making distinctions between "normal" course and internships, and for classes with teachers: It would speak about the "right to a teacher" and "No aid for teacher-less classes" and open up for dialogue and critiques such higher education functions as recreation, pupil retention, and distance learning, correspondence and e-mail education. Such a movement could be based around ideas that money saved could now be used to educate more. It would point to the growing numbers of people who are, under the present system, under-served. Internships would likely resume their roles as frills.

Would such an alternative vision allow for a college/university job placement center? Perhaps so, but in a form whose viability remains utterly untested in the present college/university. One could envision it as an information gatherer and disseminator and one to be used or dispensed with as the students who are at the college/university for other purposes so choose.

Notes

1. Linda Moore, <csllm@eiu.edu> "Re: Interns at organizations on strike," 26 Sept. 2000, <nsee-intern-1@lists.messiah.edu> 25 Oct. 2001.

2. Dorothy E. McNutt, "Faculty in Co-operative Education = Excellence in Education," *Journal of Co-operative Education*, 25 (1989): 23-4; see also James T. Godfrey, "What Created the Climate for the Growth of Co-operative Education," *Ibid.*, 25 (1989), 30-5.

3. Untitled, n.d., <<http://www.ceainc.org>>, (25 August 2001).

4. See data in Clifford Adelman, *The New College Course Map and Transcript Files: Changes in Course-Taking and Achievement, 1972-1993* (National Institute on Post-Secondary Education, 1995), 236, 238, "The College Student Report, 2000: Excerpts," <http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/acrobat/report-2000.pdf>, 23, 12 Nov. 2001; and Michael True, <mtrue@messiah.edu> "Re: Internship statistics," 7 Feb. 2001, <internship-net@lists.messiah.edu> (9 Sept. 2001).

5. Untitled, n.d., <http://www.nsee.org>, 26 Oct. 2001.

6. National Society for Experiential Education, *The Internship as Partnership: A Handbook for Campus-based Co-ordinators and Advisors* (Raleigh: NSEE, 1995), 1 ff.

7. Michael True, mtrue@messiah.edu, "Internship Stats," 6 Dec. 2000, internship-net@lists.messiah.edu (8 Oct. 2001).

8. Ronda McLean, rmclean@mail.wsu.edu, "Summary: hours per credit," 18 May 2000, *Ibid.*, (5 April 2001).

9. Barbara A. Scott, *Crisis Management in Higher Education* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 44-5; <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/03/press.htm>

10. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, "The Neo-Liberal University," *New Labor Forum* 6 (2000): 74; Quoted in Marilyn K Neimark, "If It's So Important Why Won't They Pay for It?: Public Higher Education at the Turn of the Century," *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 51 (1999):

22.

11. Slaughter and Rhoades, 73; Scott, 75 ff., 114, 120 ff.

12. Scott, 130-1.

13. <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/03/press.htm>, Slaughter and Rhoades, 75.

14. Michael True, mtrue@messiah.edu, "Etiquette Dinner," 12 Dec. 2000, internship-net@lists.messiah.edu (10 Oct.2001).

15. Rhoades, *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 131.

16. McNutt, 27; Janette Brown, jcbrown@usc.edu, "College invoicing the company for contract work," 11 July 2001, internship-net@lists.messiah.edu (8 Sept. 2001); Ann Casey Ann.Casey@valpo.edu, "Internship Prep," 10 July 2001, *Ibid.*, 10 Oct. 2001.

17. Neimark, 26; Scott, 130-1.

18. Mona Martin, martin@towson.edu, "Re: Retroactive Credit," 29 Aug. 2000, nsee-intern-l@lists.messiah.edu, 5 July, 2001; see also J. Dudley Dawson, "Educational Outcomes for Students in Co-operative Education," *Journal of Co-operative Education* (25 (1989): 18.

19. "Michael True," mtrue@messiah.edu, "Re: Declining Numbers," 2 Feb. 2001, internship-net@lists.messiah.edu, 6 June 2001.

20. Nicole Meyenberg and Steve Parks, "Getting Started: Creating Coalitions at the Local Level," 3.2 (2000).

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