Internships and co-ops: Experiential learning through Career Services

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“When should I do an internship?” “Why do some people call it a co-op, while others say an intern?” “Is it worth my time?”

We often hear questions such as these from students. The answers to the first and second questions may depend upon a student’s major. Some majors require that an internship be undertaken by an upper-class student following a certain amount of advanced coursework. Ambitious students begin working in their field earlier, often during the summer before their senior year in college, in order to gain experience and gather strong references before they start a job search and compete to enter the work force.

At Western, for many majors, there is no real difference between the words “internship” and “coop.” In fact, even though a student may be enrolled in a co-op, he or she may be referred to by an employer as an “intern” simply because the word has long been used as a generic descriptor for any student worker hired with the goal of providing experiential learning, paraprofessional training, and college credit.

Some majors at Western do have different criteria for their co-ops and internships, while others make no substantive distinction. Most, however, allow students to enroll in a 389 class, technically a co-op. An internship is numbered 483. Whether or not a co-op student is referred to as an intern on the job, the following things usually apply in co-ops:

- The job must be related to a student’s major so that it offers a “real” setting in which to apply classroom or other “academic” knowledge.
- A faculty member in the department, our career services liaison, must approve the co-op. We provide students with coop proposal forms and job description forms in Career Services & Cooperative Education.
- If a student receives pay, then (s)he will perform 300-400 hours of work to receive three hours of academic credit. If a student volunteers, then 150-200 hours must be completed.
- Midterm and final evaluations, faculty oversight, and a five-page paper offer structure that guarantees reflection and learning.

Even though the junior year may be an ideal time for most students to co-op, they should know that Western allows them to receive up to 15 hours of elective credit in cooperative education between the time they achieve sophomore status and graduate. Successful students will begin this type of career exploration early, sometimes gaining responsibility in successive co-ops with the same employer or broadening their horizons by trying different settings.

Regardless of major, employers look for initiative and experience – the type gained during an internship or co-op. To answer the third question, “Is it worth my time?” – ABSOLUTELY!