

To Intern or Not To Intern, That Is The Question!

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What are your plans for this summer? If nothing immediately comes to mind, why not consider applying for an internship. You know you are going to get a job anyway – why not make it count towards your future career? (And even receive credit for it too!)

At WCU Career Services, we have found that employers expect students to get work experience related to their major before they graduate from college. It's not just any job that counts anymore; directly related experience to your major is definitely preferred. Western Carolina University promotes experiential education in the form of internships, cooperative education, and service learning as ways of gaining that experience related to your major. Co-ops and internships are offered for credit, and service-learning projects can be connected to credit-bearing courses. Students can work full time or part time in these programs depending on the requirements of their major and whether the experience is paid. It's important for you to know that co-ops and internships are not just opportunities to gain related experience. Many employers use them to train and recruit students for full-time employment with their organizations after graduation.

Although internships and co-ops can be completed during any semester, most students opt for a summer session where they can work 40 hours/week and stay at home or with a friend or relative. However, employers usually need interns every semester, and depending on your major, you could be asked to come back for more than one experience. Additionally, co-ops and internships are everywhere! Students have co-oped/interned in Charlotte, Raleigh, Washington, New York City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Orlando, London, Australia, their hometowns, and even Cullowhee (just to name a few)!

To receive the credit attached to internships and co-ops, you register for the appropriate course within your major. Yes, you are getting credit for working, but you may be required to do a few "academic" things too, such as keep a weekly journal of your experience or write a reflection paper on the experience or about a project in which you participated. You might even be able to gain enough exposure through an internship to create a portfolio – great things to have in building your resume and preparing for your future employment!

So, that leads me back to my initial question: What are your plans for this summer? If I've raised your interest level at all, you might be wondering when would be a good time to apply. Depending on the employer and the major, you could apply for and participate in an internship/co-op as early as your second year in college. However, employers usually prefer interns and co-ops to have completed at least one full year in their major before applying for these opportunities. Thus, students might need to wait until after their third year to intern. In some majors, a required internship might actually be scheduled for the last semester. Regardless, if you're thinking this summer might be the right time for you, don't wait too long to apply. These positions are competitive and many are filled before April. Ask your adviser about an internship or co-op in your major, or visit the Career Services Office and website at careers.wcu.edu for more information.