Connecting the Classroom with Real-World Experiences through Summer Internships

Lisa Gavigan, senior associate director of career services, Wheaton College (Massachusetts)

At Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, summer is a time for learning, a time for connecting the classroom with experiences that inform post-graduate career paths. It is a time to explore industries, build workplace skills, and gather information from professionals in the field. For one student, summer learning takes place while working at a camp for children with cancer. For another, an interest in water use leads to a summer spent at the Nile River Basin researching the potential for conflict among the countries that share the basin. At Wheaton, a student does not sit alone in front of a computer and select an internship from a database. Instead, it’s a collaborative process with a career adviser who helps the student to not only recognize the opportunities that are available, but also possible because of the college’s commitment to funding these summer experiences.

Wheaton feels so strongly about the value of the “connected” summer experience that the college dedicates more than $400,000 for student internships, research, and travel each year. Students annually receive summer funding through Wheaton’s Merit Scholar, Mars Student/Faculty Research Partnerships, Wheaton Fellows, and Davis International Fellows programs. These programs provide students with $3,000 to $5,000 to undertake unpaid, non-credit-bearing summer learning experiences ranging from internships and service placements to independent student-initiated research with members of the Wheaton faculty or on campuses around the world. These stipends motivate students to think outside the box when designing internships, and enable the staff in Career Services to assess student learning outcomes. For more than twenty years, we have been supporting and tracking students’ summer experiences—linking them to successes in admissions, retention, donor satisfaction, and student postgraduate achievement.

HISTORY

Wheaton students have been exploring “career fit” since the late 1970s Oil Crisis. In an effort to conserve energy during the oil shortage, Wheaton closed for an extended winter break. Students were encouraged to use this time to investigate possible career choices by arranging for January internships with organizations across the United States. Alice Emerson, president of what was then a women’s college, was eager for young women to be exposed to both the nonprofit and corporate worlds that awaited them. Sharon Howard, executive director of Alumnae/i Relations and Annual Giving and then assistant to the president, remembers, President Emerson seized the moment as an opportunity for Wheaton women to gain critical experience in the world of work. The Office of Career Planning was charged with the exciting task of working closely with young women, first-year students, as well as graduating seniors, to design internships suited to their potential career interests. The program was an instant success. Internships were designed in local and national legislative and congressional offices, in corporate and not-for-profit settings, in human services and the health professions, as well as in law offices and social service agencies. Not only were alumnae approached to serve as intern sponsors, but many offered space in their homes for a month in cities across the country, not limiting the students to their own geographic area.

Hannah Goldberg, Wheaton’s provost in the early 1980s, continued the college’s commitment to the idea that students should understand the connection between their academics and the world of work. A major result of this commitment was changing the Office of Career Planning and Placement to the Filene Center for Work and Learning—Goldberg’s intention being “to educationalize work, not vocationalize learning.” A $400,000 grant from the Charles A. Dana Foundation enabled the new center.
to sponsor students for both summer and January stipends. Subsequent grants from corporations and trusts as well as a string of alumnae/i donations earmarked for summer stipends guaranteed fifteen to twenty-five Wheaton Fellow awards a year. The Davis International Fellows program, established in 1994, came out of one alumna’s deep desire to link her dedication to globalization with experience-based learning. Dan Golden, former Filene Center director, comments, “The Davis investment in global learning put more students than ever before out into the world for a wide range of learning activities that link to our curriculum, our institutional values and to the aspirations of a cohort of imaginative, dedicated, and thoughtful young people.”

For more than twenty years, the Merit Scholarship program has enabled Wheaton to recruit and retain some of the best and brightest high school graduates each year by also providing summer stipends for out-of-classroom learning experiences. Members of this cohort are followed by their academic and career advisers and guided through the summer planning process. Across campus, there is a team approach in helping these students connect the in- and out-of-classroom experiences that will facilitate graduate studies, the attainment of national fellowships and scholarships, and career satisfaction. And as the ranks of successful, satisfied graduates grow, so too do the ranks of alumnae/i who want to make similar experiences possible for current students, either through financial donations or by providing internship positions.

**FACULTY INVOLVEMENT IN CAREER SERVICES**

Incorporating the Filene Center into the provost’s division of the college began a beneficial partnership with the faculty. The faculty were brought into the summer internship planning process when a grant from the Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education sought to bring the “work and learning” message to the academic departments. Faculty fellows worked collaboratively with career services staff to develop off-campus ‘learning sites’ and designed ‘learning guides’ to be used by students as a tool for academic and career reflection. This tradition of the faculty fellow continues, and was solidified in 2007 when the Filene Center for Work and Learning was renamed the Filene Center for Academic Advising and Career Services. The work of these fellows has helped to integrate experiential learning components into more than sixty courses in the Wheaton curriculum.

Grace Baron, the first faculty fellow, says,

Ask a colleague to name the moment they knew they really loved their chosen discipline, first felt the tug toward their eventual career choice, or could first envision their future professional selves. Most often, the moment is a classroom field activity, an internship or research adventure. With continued respect and even awe of traditional scholarship, we faculty know the value of actual engagement with the material and methods of our disciplines to enliven learning, spark career choice, and live life well. It is the same for our students. Our teaching comes alive when our students experience the disciplinary translations of liberal arts learning into action...in the lab, in the field, on the job and in service to others. Increasing student experiential learning opportunities is a goal shared by the faculty and career services, making collaborative efforts between the two groups very successful.

**FOUR YEARS, THREE SUMMERS**

At Wheaton, career success does not happen by accident—it happens by design. Each new class brings with it a diversity of backgrounds, interests, talents, and career goals. It is our job as career advisers to help students reflect upon their skills, talents, and interests, search for experiences that will inform their academic and career decisions and, ultimately, begin to build career paths for which a liberal arts education serves as the foundation. How do we do this? Like many colleges, we have a four-year plan. Wheaton’s Career Curriculum maps out a set of learning goals and expectations for each year.

We work closely with students through one-on-one conversations over the course of four years, asking them over and over again, Why? Why do you like that class? Why did you choose to be a biochemistry major? Why did you dislike your internship at the hospital? We pepper the student with questions until she is able to understand and articulate her learning style, preferred work culture, applicable skills, passions and career goals. In some circles this is called reflection, in others, self-assessment. Regardless, it is a simple concept: urge students to think about who they are, what work they want to do and why they want to do it. Some students simply fall into majors and then again into jobs. We encourage students to go through these steps with intentionality. Says Aaron Bos-Lun, a senior, “I am a big believer in experiential learning and one of the main reasons I was drawn to Wheaton was the Filene Center and Wheaton’s institutional emphasis on internships, enriching one’s education through practical application and personal exploration.”

Wheaton’s four-year Career Curriculum strongly encourages students to use their three summers to “try on” potential careers, to see what fits and what doesn’t. The first summer might be used to explore a new interest, the second summer to connect an academic interest to a related field, and the summer between the junior and
A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Wheaton is not alone in providing funding to students for summer internship experiences, but it is unique in its mission and methodology. Students are not given stipend checks in the junior year and told to find internships or placed in slots for existing internships. The genesis of the funded fellowships came out of an educational philosophy that rather than “getting” an internship, students need to identify opportunities, apply and interview for those positions, and design proposals for why they should be awarded the funding. This proposal process requires that students think about career aspirations, articulate what they hope to learn specifically from their internship experiences, and demonstrate their ability to learn.

When planning these experiences, students are encouraged to look beyond the summer itself and think of ways in which the contacts and practical experience can help them later. Anna Schulz, a 2002 graduate, competed for and received a Davis International Fellowship as she was finishing up a study abroad semester in Switzerland. The Davis Fellowship enabled her to use contacts she had made in Geneva during her junior year to set up an internship in Africa focused on the Nile River Basin and the potential for conflict among the countries that shared the basin. She traveled to Zambia, got practical experience and access to pertinent documents, and returned her senior year to write an outstanding thesis on the water use conflicts in the Nile River Basin. She was then successful in not only being awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Zambia to study cross-boundary water rights, but afterward was accepted to the premier master’s program in the United Kingdom to study under one of the preeminent world scholars on water use. Currently, Anna is a doctoral student at the Fletcher School for Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. She is today on the fast track to becoming a superlative world scholar on global water use issues. These summer experiences are not disparate parts of a student’s education, but connected in very individualized ways.

From the very start, Wheaton’s summer funding programs are a collaborative effort of student, staff, faculty, and often alumnae/i. Cross-campus conversations are ongoing. It is common practice for faculty members, academic deans, and career services staff members to pore over students’ fellowship applications, noting exceptional promise in particular fields and shepherding students to reach their highest potential.

When students decide to take advantage of these stipends, they are encouraged to work closely with career advisers, faculty members, and writing tutors. As career advisers, we know that developmentally, students can be very concrete in their thinking, not able to see all of the possibilities open to them. How many of us have met with the history major who loves history but doesn’t want to be a teacher—the only vocation, in the mind of that student, open to history majors? It is up to us, through a series of one-on-one conversations, to tease out students’ academic interests, workplace skills, preferred work environment, to name a few, and help them weave these components into a short-term career plan. It is up to us to help history majors learn not only about related careers such as historic preservationist or museum curator, but also tangentially related careers like lawyer or urban planner. We help students to see the major as a foundation for the future, not a label that will define them or their career path.

THE PROCESS

Once students have secured summer experiences, they are asked to submit a well-written, persuasive statement of interest in which they articulate what they propose to do. The essays should contain evidence of the students’ strengths, qualities, and the skills they bring to the proposed experience as well as how these have been developed through coursework, prior internships or jobs, and cocurricular activities. They are asked what they expect to learn and how this learning will occur throughout the summer experience. The students also need to present convincing rationales explaining why these particular experiences are important to them at that particular time in their Wheaton education,
to their academic learning, and/or to their developing career interests. Applicants who plan to engage in an overseas experience must also demonstrate language and cultural competency as well as a rationale for their specified region of the world.

Each year, an average of 120 students enters the competitive stipend process. Copies of the student essays are distributed to a group of eight staff and faculty members who then choose approximately forty recipients. Although the students have access to the money in the beginning of June, this is not the end of their commitment to the process. The students are strongly encouraged to keep a weekly journal of their experiences. Although most students see internships as entries on resumes, we help them to understand that these summer experiences are so much more than that. Internships, study abroad experiences, summer jobs, and independent research projects are intended to provide opportunities for reflection on one’s values and interests. When students engage on a deeper level with a field of study and reflect on these experiences, they can process this new information and think about how their interests and values may shift and change. Some of the prompts the students are given:

1. What was your most exciting experience or learning that occurred? Why?
2. What activity engaged you fully, made you feel more energized? How did this activity connect with your values?
3. What activity were you doing that you disliked and frankly would never choose to do again?
4. Did you surprise yourself with how good you were at a particular task? What was that task? Did you enjoy doing that task? Why?
5. What challenges did you face? How did you handle them? What did you learn from the experience? Knowing what you know now, how would you handle things differently?
6. What skills have you utilized? What skills are you in the process of developing?
7. Are you meeting people who could serve as possible mentors? What qualities do you admire about them?
8. What observations have you made about this particular culture (workplace and/or living environment)? How have your encounters with this culture changed your perspective about yourself and this culture? Have you changed any of your preconceived ideas?

**REFLECTION**

We encourage students to periodically review their log and highlight important or recurring themes, ideas, or thoughts. This log is a beneficial resource for further discussion with career and faculty advisers as students make decisions about future courses, internships, and career options. When the students return to campus for fall semester, they are required to write a reflection essay on their experience and to participate in our Internship Showcase. The Internship Showcase is an opportunity for students to share their summer experience (occurring on six continents this past summer) with the Wheaton community as a whole. The faculty have a chance to see what their students are doing outside the classroom and how they are connecting their learning to the world of work, parents get to see their students’ practical application of a liberal arts education, and fellow students are motivated by their peers’ experiences.

Last year was Wheaton’s first showcase, so we are still learning and assessing. We used our fairly large physical office space as opposed to the more often used student center. Our intention was to bring students who do not access our services to the Filene Center and reinforce the connection between the Career Services office and these wonderful student experiences. One of our biggest challenges was in getting faculty members to attend the showcase. To meet this challenge, we scheduled the event on the same day as a faculty meeting and requested that the meeting be relocated to a lecture hall in our building. The showcase became almost inescapable, as members of the faculty were able to meander through the showcase on their way to the meeting.

Of the forty students who participated last year, we had everything from poster presentations to short films to a fashion show put on by Hispanic studies major Griffin Patria, a junior. Inspired by his first-year seminar, Fit for a Queen, Griffin researched powerful women and created dresses based on what he learned. “I spent the summer researching Eva Perón, Jackie Kennedy, Grace Kelly, Marie Antoinette, and Queen Elizabeth to figure out what they wore, and how they got to power by using their feminine images. I improved my sewing skills immensely and I learned a lot about period costume and historical fabrics and patterns.”

**THE VALUE ADDED**

The value of the internship experience coupled with the reflection piece cannot be understated. It is really the only opportunity for students to “try on” a career, to apply and strengthen what they have learned in the classroom, to validate a chosen major or career path and, sometimes most important, to reflect and change directions while time allows.
Recently, an economics major who interned with a microfinance organization in South Africa said, “I need to take a chemistry and a geology class before I graduate because scientists from those two disciplines were on every project we developed.”

The faculty understand the value of and encourage summertime experiential learning opportunities—especially those who benefit from students engaging in summer research. “Summer research experiences are an invaluable part of a Wheaton experience, especially for our students with graduate school plans; for many, this is the first time that they work on a project that demands correctness—that matters! Summer projects expose them to a graduate research school environment as they participate in and present actual work,” says Marc LeBlanc, a computer science professor. The Wheaton community as a whole recognizes that with the integration of academics and field experience, we can accomplish so much.

Many summer funding recipients would not be able to engage in such learning experiences without financial support. Those students who do not have summer stipends have to choose between summer jobs and internships or have to divvy up their summer hours to meet both financial and academic needs. Professor of political science Darlene Boroviak says,

Political science and international relations majors over the years have received summer support via Davis International Fellowships, Wheaton Fellowships, and the Merit Scholar programs. This support enabled them to take risks and do things they normally would not have been able to do, if they had to think only about earning money in the summer. In some cases, the experiences they were able to have were life-transforming experiences, opening new career paths or enabling a student to pursue a research interest. In all cases, students returned from the challenging internships that they were able to undertake because they had summer support from Wheaton with an enhanced self-image, more self-confidence, and both academic and practical skills that contributed to their on campus academic work and helped them as they defined what their life after Wheaton might be.

In the past ten years, Wheaton students have won more than 121 highly competitive scholarships and fellowships. Seventy percent of these award winners had the benefit of at least one funded summer experience. We recognize that funded summer experiences have given Wheaton the chance to “grow” many of our national scholarship winners, including Rhodes, Fulbright, Truman, and Watson winners who came to the table of international competition with superior field experiences. Miles Sweet, a 2002 graduate, for instance, was more competitive as our first Rhodes Scholar because the Davis Fellow summer stipend enabled him to research at the Marie Curie Institute in Paris. For Megan O’Sadnick, a 2009 Fulbright Scholar, funded summer experiences contributed greatly to her understanding of the field of glaciology and the building of a career path in that field. Megan spent her sophomore summer in Alaska at the Juneau Icefield Project and the following summer at the Center for Remote Sensing of Ice Sheets at the University of Kansas. A research scientist at the Norwegian Polar Institute where Megan will be spending her Fulbright year comments, “Megan’s previous experiences... put her in an excellent position to assist our work, and provide valuable cross-fertilization with our goals for this project.” Of the rising seniors who, at the time of this writing, are intent on entering this year’s national award competitions, all have benefitted from a funded summer experience.

MOVING FORWARD

The term “program” has been used loosely throughout this article because for many years the priority of the funded summer was the student experience. More recent demands for assessment and outcomes in all areas of higher education have motivated our office to see the connection between our work and the larger issues of student admissions, retention, and success. We have begun to pull numbers from across campus, working closely with Alumnae/i Relations, Student Life, and Institutional Research to compile and assess reports detailing the correlation between summer experiences, graduate school acceptance and national award winners. We have realized we will not reach every student, but we can improve our services to the ones with whom we do work, and that the summer funding programs provide a captive audience. Of these students, we can expect participation in career-focused workshops they may not have otherwise attended. We can require that students inform us of their summer plans (sometimes the black hole of career-planning offices), and we can anticipate that students will be reflective learners in these out-of-classroom experiences. We know that we have all the components of a successful internship program. Our goal now is to tie it together such that our services are more visible to the Wheaton community, that students recognize the added value of working with our staff early and often, and that soon, our Career Curriculum, inclusive of three summer experiences, is seen as inescapable by our students. Student success should not happen by accident, it should happen by design—their design.