**Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is an integral part of the mission of SUNY Cobleskill, and to state it simply “Real Life, Real Learning” is experiential learning. In terms of recruitment, hands-on practical learning options stimulate students to apply to programs which best suit their learning style. Students and parents of prospective college students are concerned with experiential learning opportunities offered because they know these experiences help prepare students for future employment.

According to Penny Loretto in the About.com Internships Guide, (Loretto, n.d.):  
The importance of completing an internship prior to graduating from college cannot be stressed enough. Recent statistics repeatedly show that employers prefer new hires who have gained relevant work experience through internship or co-op experiences and make full-time job offers based on these experiences. Many organizations have set up internship programs within their organization for the purpose of training and hiring interns as full time employees. It has also been proven that retention rates of new employees are considerably higher for those who have completed an internship with the organization.

As a result of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2008 Experiential Education Survey, Marilyn Mackes, NACE’S Executive Director, said:

Employers say they extended job offers to nearly 70 percent of their interns; in 2001, they offered jobs to 57 percent. Nearly 90 percent of employers who use their programs to hire say they are very or extremely satisfied with their interns, and employers consistently name the internship program as one of the most effective tools they have for hiring new college graduates. Employers see results with these programs.

A recent study released by the Vault.com shows that college students are listening: almost 9 out of 10 (86 percent) college graduates reported completing at least one internship, and more than two-thirds (69 percent) reported completing two or more internships (Randall S. Hansen, n.d.).

In addition to internships, experiential learning is available to college students through a variety of programs including: service learning, independent study, laboratory and research projects and study abroad experiences. Faculty members often embed experiential learning opportunities into our existing courses to allow students to apply knowledge gained in a meaningful way.

In terms of retention, experiential learning promotes the continued education of technically focused students who excel in the modality of experiential learning. Many students have a basic understanding of the academic material taught in the classroom but their strength lies in applying this learning in real world settings. At SUNY Cobleskill we seek to accommodate students with multiple learning styles, thus facilitating recruitment and retention of students. Student success is tied to engagement with learning and experiential learning provides opportunities for students to analyze, synthesize, evaluate and apply new learning both inside and outside of the classroom setting. Experiential learning will also help to gain national recognition for the college. Experiential learning opportunities appeal to potential donors who want to make meaningful contributions to student programs, thus investing in the future of SUNY Cobleskill.

Cornell University (Cornell, 2009) developed these guidelines for experiential learning:

Experiential learning occurs when students are placed in a real world environment where they utilize vital skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and teamwork to collaborate with others.

* The experience should be purposeful by being planned in advance with explicit goals and intended   outcomes.
* The experience should provide opportunities for reflection.
* The experience should be supervised, with ongoing faculty involvement in all phases.
* The student’s work should be evaluated, with grades based on learning, and the number of credit hours predetermined.
* Learning should, as much as possible, occur in or simulate a real world context.

Options could be enhanced or further enriched by meeting one or more additional criteria.

* The experience should present a continual challenge to the student
* The experience should incorporate active learning, with the student an active participant in all stages of the experience from planning to evaluation.
* The experience should be enriched, with access to materials, resources and support systems.
* There should be adequate opportunity to learn, with adequate time and quality of opportunities.
* The learning experience should involve the application of concepts/knowledge learned in the student's regular course work.

**OUTCOME 1:           Students will benefit from strengthened and expanded internship opportunities.**

**Strategy 1:** Creation of a committee to assess feedback provided by Site Supervisors, faculty and students for all credit bearing internships.

Measure: Experiential Learning Committee (ELC) in place by September 2010.

**Strategy 2:** Develop a protocol to outline committee actions to be carried out at the close of each semester.

Measures: Protocol and committee actions in place by December 2010.

ELC will meet and request a random sampling of Internship Evaluation forms at the close of each semester and make recommendations back to each School.

First  sampling/evaluation to take place at the end of spring 2011.

**Strategy 3:**      Enhance shareholder satisfaction through the evaluation of all credit-bearing internship experiences.

Measure:          Development of standardized campus assessment tools.

**Strategy 4:**     Review "best practices" on other college campuses with renowned and/or long standing internship programs.

Measure:          List of “best practices.”

**Strategy 5:**      Delineate key competencies for all experiential learners to develop during their internship.

Measure:          Internships will include competency assessments and universal outcomes by spring 2011 regardless of major.

**Strategy 6:**      Development of a campus-wide online internship evaluation form to be completed by site supervisors, faculty supervisors, and students to provide feedback about credit-bearing internships.

Measure:          Online and active by spring 2011, resulting in two-way communication for shareholders.

**Strategy 7:**      Creation of a process to ensure that Faculty Supervisors and students meet together and/or have regular contact during the internship and, upon completion, to review feedback from the internship evaluation form.

Measure:          Tie faculty internship stipends to contact/feedback.

**Strategy 8:**      Work with IT/IR to develop an online experiential/internship evaluation form and a system of data collection to allow for the collection of longitudinal data.

Measure:          Online and active by spring 2011.

**Strategy 9:**      Evaluate student performance through a review of the data (evaluations) from IR after each academic semester and summer.

Measure:          Student performance will increase as a percent from baseline. By spring 2011 a campus wide competency level will be developed that every student will reach, and hopefully exceed, during internships

**OUTCOME 2:           Academic programs will be enhanced by integrating experiential learning opportunities for students including:** service learning, independent study, laboratory and research projects and study abroad experiences.

**Strategy 1:**      Programs and courses will be reviewed and, when necessary, modified to include "real life, real learning" or an experiential learning component for students.

Measure:          Percent increase in programs and courses offering experiential learning.

**Strategy 2:**      New course proposal form will include an option for experiential learning.

Measure:          Percent increase in experiential learning opportunities from baseline.

**Strategy 3:** ELC will review all experiential learning opportunities other than internships. available within each school to ensure that all schools have experiential learning opportunities available for their students.

Measure:           ELC will establish an open-ended form to provide faculty and students an opportunity to evaluate these experiences and reflect on the learning.

Works Cited

Cornell. (2009). *Cornell University Experiential Learning Subcommittee*. Retrieved March 2010, from Experiential Learning Report, Executive Summary: http://www.eas.cornell.edu/cals/teaching/elr/index.cfm

Loretto, P. (n.d.). *About.com Internships*. Retrieved March 29, 2010, from http://internships.about.com/od/internshiptip1/a/hiringinterns.htm

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