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MINI-INTERNSHIPS—A METHOD FOR PROFESSIONAL IMPROVEMENT, ORIENTATION, AND RECRUITMENT

Bobby G. Johnson

In the rapid expansion of the profession of Student Financial Aid Administration — workshops, clinics, and other mass orientation methods appear to be rampant. Literature on programs or documentation of relevant research pertinent to more personal types of professional improvement, orientation, and recruitment is extremely scarce, if not non-existent in the profession. The face to face (one to one) relationship which apparently has been subjugated by mass teaching-learning methods in our educational processes seems to be an area completely unutilized until the neophyte joins the ranks. The one to one relationship of on-the-job type situations has been accepted as a valuable teaching-learning method for decades. For centuries, many professionals have necessarily served an internship or apprenticeship prior to admission to a profession. In our busy, mobile, and dynamic society, we often have observed quality diminish in a quest for quantity to fill the ranks of a growing, stabilizing profession. Why should the rush, rush atmosphere of our society deprive our profession of this proven teaching-learning method?



Mr. Johnson is Student Financial Aid Administrator at Texas A&M University. He also served as Scholarship Supervisor for several years prior to becoming Student Financial Aid Administrator.

The first and foremost rebuttal of professionals is invariably, "It takes too much time." But in the academic environment in which we function, undergraduates aspiring to enter the teaching profession are required to practice teach as a part of their curriculum. Graduate students in most advanced programs related to education are being scheduled for a semester or more of internship or practicum as a degree requirement. Why shouldn't this method be implemented as a primary method of recruiting and training future Financial Aid Administrators?

This type of program would require the staff to obligate valuable time from their already over-loaded schedules. Identification and selection of interns would divert time and effort from more pressing obligations. To accomplish this end, understaffed Student Financial Aid Offices would definitely have to curtail other important functions to the students they already serve.

Why?

At Texas A&M University, the Student Financial Aid Office and Student Personnel Services have joined Dr. R. R. Reilley and the Department of Educational Psychology in offering a graduate level student services oriented course — Professional Internship in Student Personnel Work. The context of the course includes two or three mini-internships during the semester of each student, which complements the student's class work. Each thirty hour mini-internship is spent in an area of the student's choice in actual participation in the every day functions and daily routine of the operation. The pre-selected students who enroll in the course are either completing their master's degree or are Ph.D. candidates. These students either have previous experience in some phase of student personnel services or administration of higher education, or have indicated that they intend to enter one of these areas upon receiving their degree. The interns learn the mechanics of specialized services by actual participation and experience administration responsibilities under the supervision of professional practitioners. The course emphasizes semi-independent functioning of a student at a professional level in specialized student personnel areas. Some of the areas currently available for mini-internships include student financial aid, admissions, counseling and testing, administration (student oriented), and student residence hall programs.

In Student Financial Aid, the mini-internship has been developed to provide experiential knowledge in all phases of the University's operation. The student, upon assignment, is counseled by the Director of Student Financial Aid to allow latitude in the mini-internship to fit the student's class schedule and individual needs, plus facilitate maximum exposure to the world of student financial aid. The basic schedule for interns is as follows:

STUDENT FINANCIAL AID
Schedule for Interns

Approximate # of Hours	Subject
1	General Orientation to Student Financial Aid
1	Student Financial Aid Office in the University Structure
1	Student Financial Aid Office — Internal Organization
10	Awards Section — Organization, Programs, Functions
10	Loans Section — Organization, Programs, Functions
5	Student Part-Time Employment Functions and Procedures
2	General Review with Questions and Answers Period

The mini-internship is concentrated on the three basic financial aid elements — awards (scholarships and grants), loans (long and short term), and part-time student employment. Approximately three hours, depending upon the student's prior knowledge and background, are devoted to a general orientation which is usually conducted by the Director. The orientation is a general overview of the profession, plus how the office relates and coordinates with various segments of the institution and the institution's community.

The intern spends approximately two-thirds of the internship in the loans and the awards sections of the office. About one-half of this time, or ten hours, is devoted to each major section. Depending upon the section's workload, an intern might enter either section after the orientation sessions. Likewise, the intern could first participate in the employment section, if it is warranted by the student's schedule or the office's work-load. For example, the student might have a week of examinations in other course work. While actually participating in a section, the intern is scheduled for a minimum span of time of two hours. The average time span for any one day has been three hours, with a maximum of four hours or one-half of a working day. The length of time necessary to complete the mini-internship has varied from four to six weeks. This has also facilitated infusion into the office routine with minimum adjustment. With these built-in coordinating factors, the office personnel can regulate their schedules in order to provide the intern a more meaningful and beneficial experience without undue stress on any of those involved.

Financial need analysis and calculation of need is introduced early in either of the major office sections. If the first exposure is in the awards section, reinforcement is accomplished in the loans section or vice versa. Thus far, it seems advisable to schedule the sections as previously outlined.

In the awards section, the intern is familiarized not only with the University's programs, but with other awards programs such as National Merit Scholarships, Educational Opportunity Grants, and other university related programs. The methods and records necessary for coordinating these programs throughout the office and the University, to ascertain if a student's indicated financial need is being properly met, fulfills a large segment of this time. The intern is given an overview of recipient selection procedures and of the criteria utilized in various award programs — academic, curriculum, geographically or financially need based. The determination of the possible number of vacancies and amount of stipends is integrated into this phase. Counseling sessions with prospective students and/or parents are audited, as well as various sessions with individual students already enrolled at the University.

Briefings in the loans section include federal, state, and institutional programs. The intern participates in counseling sessions and receives instruction pertaining to the policies, procedures and mechanics of available programs. Practical exercises such as completing a loan application are implemented as an additional teaching method. Actual participation by the intern is encouraged wherever feasible in the over-all process.

The student part-time employment orientation contains approximately five hours. On-campus and off-campus job opportunities and situations are investigated. Necessary forms and procedures for on-campus employment are examined. The qualification requirements for such programs as the college work study program are included. The utilization of part-time employment, to provide all or part of a student's financial need is explored, and the intern gains practical experience in coordinating this type of aid with other programs in fulfilling a student's need.

A portion of the remainder of the internship, approximately three hours, is taken up with a familiarization of applications and reports necessary for federally funded programs. At least one hour is reserved for a questions and answers period for the intern to possibly "fill in any gaps."

Although in some respects the program may still be considered a fledgling program, several positive results have been noted. One student, after completing his mini-internship, expressed a genuine desire to enter the profession as a full-time practitioner. This becomes significant due to the fact that he is currently involved in another phase of student services at the college level. After observing several interns, a student of senior academic classification, who was employed in the financial aid office, requested a similar type of internship for himself. His future plans definitely include entering the field of student financial aid after his graduation. This type of internship is also planned for each new office staff member in the future.

A montage of candid comments from interns seems to further validate the method — "Very revealing" — "I didn't realize there was this much counseling done" — "This is a really interesting and rewarding profession."