DESIGNING LEARNING CONTRACTS
FOR
ENTREPRENEURIAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL INTERNSHIPS

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(Year 2000 edition)

These materials will help professionals in both academia and business provide direction and structure for internship students in entrepreneurial positions. The challenge of this situation is to design a learning contract that ensures the academic integrity of the experience, providing stated learning outcomes, adequate documentation, and answers to the question of supervision. To achieve this requires creativity, adaptability, and a commitment to both academic principles and the student involved.

Our students are slowly, but surely, adding a new dimension to the way we have traditionally viewed cooperative education. This new generation of students is determined not to sit by and wait for things to happen. Rather, they are seeking their own opportunities, creating their own work, and then presenting the assignment for possible participation in a credit-bearing program.

This scenario presents several challenges for the traditionally run Cooperative Education / Internship program. Normally Co-op / Internship positions are developed by a job developer and an employer, and qualify students apply. But, in the case where a student has found his own job, or even is working in her own business, the academic office is put in a more reactive position. As with anything unfamiliar, one's initial response to an entrepreneurial student may be a bit tentative. But, it is in the best interest of the student, the school, and the economy, if these pioneering young people are encouraged in their independent pursuit of meaningful work experiences. Furthermore, it is critical that Co-op / Internship offices be prepared to assess non-traditional work experiences, examine the learning potential of the position, and be willing to include a wider variety of work situations under the experiential learning umbrella.

Clearly, any position to be approved for Co-op / Internship credit must not threaten the academic integrity of the program. Therefore, it is important to conduct a thorough review of non-traditional positions before assigning experiential learning credit. The materials included in this booklet are designed to guide professors and student services professionals through an assessment of non-traditional work assignments. Suggestions for documention, evaluation, and supervision of students in non-traditional positions are also provided.

WHAT IS A LEGITIMATE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY?

The questions below can help you determine if a student is presenting a legitimate learning opportunity for consideration for experiential learning credit.

1. Will the student have sustained exposure to new information over a specified period of time?

2. Will the student have sustained involvement in the application of academic theories over a specified period of time?

3. Will the student be involved in specific activities with definable outcomes?

4. Will the student be able to demonstrate what he/she has learned?

5. Is there a mechanism by which the student's learning can be evaluated?

6. Is there a person or group of people to whom the student is accountable for the duration of the assignment?

If the answers to these questions is "yes," then you are looking at a work opportunity that deserves to be examined for academic credit.

EVALUATING POTENTIAL COLLEGE-LEVEL LEARNING

The key to evaluating a position for potential credit is to determine if new learning is occuring. Is the student doing something that they haven't done before that involves the application of college-level concepts?

FIRST STEP: INTERVIEW

A brief interview can help determine if the non-traditional work assignment a student presents has the potential for college-level learning. Here are some guidelines for the interview:

1. To find out if new learning is occurring, ask:

   "What is your business and how long have you been in operation?"

   "What are your responsibilities?"

   "Normally the best opportunity for new learning is in the first six months of a job. After that learning can drop dramatically. Do you have a recent project or responsibilities that are new for you?"

   "Project yourself four months in to the future. What do you want to accomplish in your work? What do you need to know how to do to reach your goal that you don't know already?"

2. It is important to identify the student's responsibilities, and to distinguish these from an overall effort in which others may be involved.

   "Can you describe how you will spend you time?"

   "Which of the tasks you just described will you be directly responsible for?"

3. Have you taken any course(s) that apply to what you'll be doing?

If the student is able to discuss these items confidently and clearly, and the position seems promising, then the student can be invited to submit a learning proposal.

SECOND STEP: THE LEARNING PROPOSAL

Many Co-op / Internship programs require applicants to submit a learning proposal before a final decision to approve the work assignment and a final determination of academic credit is made. Because non-traditional work assignments normally are not pre-evaluated by job developers, and because they involve a certain level of independence for the student, a learning proposal is critical to assure the academic integrity of the program.

FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE LEARNING PROPOSAL

1. Position Description: This should be written in the student's own words and decribe the general responsibilities of the position.

2. Specific activities to be conducted during the work assignment. This part should give a good picture of how the student is spending his / her day, what tasks are being completed, and what resources are being used to get the job done. If possible, an indication should be made of the time demands of each area of responsibility, especially if some duties do not require a high level of skill.

3. Learning outcomes to be achieved through work assignment. This should outline what will be learned from the activities in part two. In order to translate activities into learning, the student can consider the goal(s) of the assignment, then identify what he / she will need to learn in order to accomplish that goal.

4. Time spent on the work assignment. Here the student should indicate how many hours a week will be spent on activities outlined in the proposal, and how long the assignment is expected to last. In the case of self-employment, the work may be on-going, so it is important to identify a finite period of time for the work assignment, in which specific tasks will be accomplished.

Depending on school policies, the proposal can be evaluated by the Co-op / Internship office or by an academic department.

THE LEARNING CONTRACT

A well-written learning contract is especially important for self-employed students because it articulates exactly what will be expected of them in the work period. It also specifies how their work will be documented and evaluated. The model below is easily adapted to non-traditional work opportunities. It consists of four parts: 1) the goal for the work assignment; 1) the objectives; 3) the demonstrations; and , 4) the evaluation methods.

PART I: THE GOAL

The goal should briefly state what the student hopes to accomplish during the work period.

Example: To develop a thorough understanding of the selling cycle, from developing leads to closing the sale, by representing a specific product in the marketplace using a direct selling channel.

Example: To devise effective marketing strategies to increase the market share of Janitorial Services clients by 2 % in Prince George's County.

PART II: THE OBJECTIVES

The objectives are the specific steps that the student will take to reach the goal. There may be several objectives, each with their own demonstration and evaluation (see below).

Using Example 1 above:

Objective 1: To develop a minimum of 100 prospects through personal referral within the first two weeks of the work period.

Objective 2: To conduct a minimum of 10 sales calls per week, with an average contract of $125.

Using Example 2 above:

Objective 1: To develop a features and benefits marketing piece for direct mail to Chamber of Cammerce members.

Objective 2: Conduct a comparison response evaluation of direct mail, mailer coupons, yellow pages ad, and personal referral by collecting survey information on how prospective clients heard about the service.

THE LEARNING CONTRACT (CON'T)

PART III: DEMONSTRATION

Each objective should have its own demonstration, or method by which the student will show what's been done.

Objective 1: To conduct a minimum of 10 sales calls a week, with an average contract of $125.

Demonstration 1: Provide prospect list with phone #'s, copies of orders taken, and commission statements.

Objective 2: Conduct a comparison response evaluation of direct mail, mailer coupons, yellow pages ad, and personal referral by collecting survey information on how prospective clients heard about the service.

Demonstration 2: Written report of survey results and analysis of the various marketing strategies with recommendations.

PART IV: EVALUATION

The evaluation method is specified here for each objective so the student will know exactly how performance will be judged, and by whom.

Objective 1: To conduct a minimum of 10 sales calls a week, with an average contract of $125.

Evaluation: Review and spot check of prospect list and commission statement. To be evaluated by sales manager.

Objective 2: Conduct a comparison response evaluation of direct mail, mailer coupons, yellow pages ad, and personal referral by collecting survey information on how prospective clients heard about the service.

Evaluation 2:   Adherence to accepted survey design methods, and sound analysis and substantiation of results. To be evaluated by Professor Brown, Marketing Department.

The learning contract should be signed by the student and a school representative, but in the case of self-employment, who is the supervisor? This important question is addressed in the next section.

SUPERVISION

Adequate supervision is important in all work assignments, and can be even more critical to students who are taking the risk of self-employment. It may appear that a student who is a independent contractor, or who works as a computer consultant "reports to no one." In reality, that is far from the truth. What is required for the integrity of the Co-op / Internship program is that the student be *accountable* to someone for their actions, and has someone to give them guidance in their work.

While we like to think that most students on Co-op / Internship assignments have daily, "I'm just down the hall," contact and interaction with their supervisors, we all know of cases where this doesn't occur. Even in the most "plum" assignments, a student may go to lunch with her supervisor on the first day, only to find she's perpetually unavailable during the rest of the work period. Because the self-employed student is on the line every day for his / her income and the success of the business, they often get more immediate and direct feedback about their performance than the more traditional Co-op / Internship student.

What is needed is an open, creative, but no less demanding, definition of supervision for students who have non-traditional work opportunities. Let's look at some possibilities:

For the student who runs their own business:

- Completion of an evaluation form by a specified # of clients who report on their satisfaction with the service / product.
- Credit report from banker.
- Report from Better Business Bureau.
- Written letters from clients or suppliers.

For a student who is an independent consultant:

- Completion of an evaluation form by the client(s).
- References from mentors or former employers who are providing guidance.

For a student working as an independent contractor or sales representative:

- Completion of evaluation by sales manager to whom they report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of the material presented here was accumulated during my tenure in the Co-operative Education office at the University of Maryland University College. The concepts in this document are derived in large part from that program's philosophy regarding experiential learning, along with its commitment to academic integrity.
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