

CHAPTER 7

Constructing a Research Internship Program To Promote Experiential Learning

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Whereas most traditional undergraduate internship programs have allowed students to gain valuable work experience, the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California (USC) expanded its internship program to include a distinctive research internship program in which students work with professionals from both the private and public sectors on specific public policy issues. As students engage with outside research internship providers, they become more expert in policy areas that are relevant to the public at large. In-depth research combined with on-campus professionalization components allow interns a unique experience that serves them well upon graduation.

INTRODUCTION

Although most undergraduates tend to think of internships programs as being the same across institutions, varying goals, tasks, and expectations can yield dramatically different experiences between institutions and even among students on the same campus. This chapter explores a unique research internship program at the University of Southern California (USC) that incorporates close interaction between students and internship providers, in-depth student research based on a structured research agenda, a series of professionalization workshops, and work that culminates in a student-led professional presentation to internship providers and peers. The combination of these elements has proven to be a highly effective instructional strategy for the students and genuinely rewarding for the internship providers.

The Value Of Research Internships

University training programs have relied on internships to immerse students in real-world experiences for over a century (Lehman and Quick 2011; Kelly and Bridges 2005; Kelly and Gaedeke 1990; Kim, Kim, and Bzullak 2011). Experiential learning programs can operate as a bridge between theory and practice, as Fry, Bottoms, and O'Neill (2005) acknowledge in their definition of internships:

A well-designed internship expands the knowledge and skills of candidates while also gauging their ability to apply new learning in authentic settings as they contend with problems that have real-world consequences. Built right, an internship becomes a sturdy vessel upon which new practitioners can navigate the swift, unpredictable currents that separate classroom theory and on-the-job reality (Fry, Bottoms, and O'Neill 2005, 3).

In addition to traditional internships, research is also considered essential to the undergraduate experience, enabling students to master core competencies of higher education, developing attributes that every graduate of every degree will possess (Barrie 2007; Partridge and Sandover 2010). Engaging students in meaningful research has been shown to improve student experience and retention (Brew 2010; Locks and Gregerman 2008; Partridge, Lee, and Sandover 2010), and can lead to the development of research skills that pave the way to postgraduate studies. Whether students are working within an office addressing real-world issues or at home conducting in-depth academic research on the very same issues, the advantages of a policy research internship program are well substantiated. In light of the multiple benefits of both undergraduate research and the value of traditional internship programs, it made sense to combine these into one program, the California Research Internship Program at USC.

California Policy Research Internship Program

The California Research Internship Program stemmed from the traditional internship program that is offered through the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics. For several decades, the Unruh Institute has facilitated political internships in and around the Los Angeles area. Staff assess the students' experience and interests, and then match the students, based on their qualifications, to internship providers who partner regularly with the Institute.¹ After résumés and cover letters are prepared by the students, with staff assistance as needed, the Institute applies to one or more internships on behalf of the students. After a brief interview and acceptance by a provider, students are then enrolled in the internship class and can receive academic credit for their on-site and academic work.

Whereas this model works for many students, over time the faculty and staff at the Institute came to recognize that some students' educational needs were not being met. Specifically, many hoped to conduct intensive research in a public policy area such as education, the environment, or criminal justice, among others, and most had neither the ability nor interest to travel away from campus to fulfill a traditional internship.

A number of additional factors were considered when weighing whether to create such a program. First and foremost, a research internship program would require external internship providers who were willing to work with our students. Finding internship providers did not pose a problem as there were several hundred associated with our traditional internship program that we could draw on, many of whom were alumni or were connected to the university through its long history in the Los Angeles community, and the prospect of receiving 500–600 hours of research on their specific area of interest created a powerful incentive for participation. We contacted a sample of our providers and they expressed significant interest.

The second consideration was faculty involvement. In 2010, this challenge was met when the Department of Political Science agreed to assign a faculty member to run the Institute's internship programs—both the traditional program and the planned research program—within their teaching load. Faculty participation ensured that rigorous research agendas would be created in coordination with internship providers and that there would be a mechanism put in place for supplying routine guidance to participating students throughout the semester.

The final element of success was staff support. In order to create robust internship programs, the Institute agreed to hire a dedicated staff member both to place students in traditional internships and to help coordinate the research program. Today the staff member monitors the progress of students' research, tracks their research hours, and communicates information about upcoming meetings and events. Ultimately, the strong combination of student and internship partner interest with faculty and staff support has allowed the research internship course to flourish.

The Internship Providers

The first major step in creating the research internship program was to identify one or more internship providers who would be willing to work with our students on intensive research projects over the course of a semester. Initially, the answer to this question was quite simple. In 2009, USC was approached by Project Vote Smart (PVS) to have USC students assist in their research.² For 18 months, the partnership met the needs the Unruh Institute wanted to fulfill, but the relationship came to an end when PVS staff were recalled from the USC campus as a means of consolidating their organizational resources. The search for a research internship provider resumed.

The following year, the Institute reached out to California Strategies, LLC, to gauge their interest in partnering with USC. The Institute had a long-time relationship with several persons at the firm, a lobbying outfit with offices in Los Angeles and throughout the United States. Their work covers a number of policy areas including energy, environmental regulations, green technology, health care, land use, and water use. After a series of conversations, California Strategies agreed to come on board as our sole research internship partner. Three of the firm's principal partners would work with three groups of student interns (five students per group) on different policy areas. The idea was that the partners would meet with their students on a monthly basis for progress checks, and students would have continual access to their partners via e-mail and/or phone conversations. Students and partners would hold an initial meeting to craft a research agenda, and a faculty member would join in. This structure was followed for the 2012–13 academic year, but at the end of spring 2013, the model was slightly altered out of concern that the program was overburdening California Strategies as our sole research partner.

For AY 2013–14, it was decided that California Strategies would remain a policy research partner and that two more would be added. The first of these was Parent Revolution, a nonprofit that works to transform underperforming public schools by empowering parents to advocate for their children's education. Parent Revolution was a good fit for our program as education policy is a popular policy topic among USC students. The second was the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO). NALEO is a non-profit organization that works to facilitate the full participation of Latinos in the American political process, and their work includes issues such as civic engagement and immigration reform. Working with three advocacy groups not only has enhanced the diversity of policy issues that students can explore but also has avoided overburdening any one provider by rotating them as needed. Thus, the current model allows for greater long-term sustainability.³

Selecting the Interns and Setting the Research Agenda

The research internship program accepts applications from students during the first three weeks of the semester. Students are selected based upon several criteria, including: area of interest, year in school, grade point average, and availability to meet for designated meetings. In the application, students are asked to rank their policy interests in order to help the staff place them into one of two research groups, which usually consist of five to six students apiece. After students are selected into the program and accept their policy group placement, they are permitted to register for the class. Students are able to register for two, three, or four units: the larger the number, the more research hours and length of the final policy paper. For 2 units, interns must do 100 hours of research and complete an eight- to ten-page policy paper; for 4 units the intern must do 200 hours of research and write a 12- to 15-page policy paper.

In week four of the semester, interns are required to attend a research skills seminar run by the staff at one of the USC libraries.⁴ The librarians discuss various on-line search engines and other library resources that the students can use during their research internship. Since the students are already aware of the policy area in which they will work, they are able to ask relevant questions. Interns also conduct field research as part of their research agenda. Research partners will often connect students to policy experts in regulatory agencies and/or within a particular industry. Thus, the combination of traditional library research, on-line sources, and additional resources supplied by policy partners lays the foundation for research skill development.

The first face-to-face meeting between the partners and the students occurs shortly after the research skills seminar. The partners plus faculty member, staff, and students come together to collaborate and craft a research agenda for the semester; creating a full research agenda actually takes place over several weeks through continuing consultation among them. The overarching goal is for students to conduct individual research that helps answer a broader research question. As noted above, students' research agendas often include a field research component, and they are afforded latitude to design their field research as they and the internship provider see fit; typical methods include personal interviews or large-scale surveys. After the initial student-and-partner meeting, students then consult with the faculty member and Unruh staff twice a month to refine the research and ensure that adequate direction on the project is being provided. At these meetings, each student gives an update both orally and in writing about their progress, and participation in the semi-monthly research meetings counts towards a portion of the students' course grade. Approximately halfway through the semester, the partners and students

meet a second time at the Mid-Semester Exchange. At this gathering the partners hear about the progress of the research being conducted and offer additional suggestions and direction for the students.

Final Presentation and the Final Policy Report

As the semester nears its conclusion, students prepare to make a final presentation of their research and accompanying policy recommendations. To prepare, each research team undertakes two formal run-throughs with the faculty member and Unruh staff. The final presentations are conducted in a professional manner, with student teams collaboratively preparing 30- to 40-minute lecture slide presentations in which they summarize their research to an audience that includes their internship provider, advising faculty member, the other students in the program, and the Unruh staff. It is not uncommon for research partners to invite special guests to the presentation, particularly persons for whom the research may be relevant, and audience members are encouraged to pose questions that students answer during the final 30 minutes. Students also prepare a two-page synopsis for audience members.

In addition to the final presentation, students individually are required to write a final policy report that includes an abstract, introduction, findings, and conclusion (i.e., policy recommendations). Students also integrate their individual research into a comprehensive policy report, which counts for a separate portion of the students' grades.

Professionalization Components of the Course

Research interns not only conduct research on their respective policy areas, but also they are required to participate in several professionalization events to help prepare them for life after graduation. Initially, the research interns were required to participate in two workshops that were mainstays of the traditional internship program. The first was an interview skills workshop in which professionals from political offices, political consulting firms, and non-governmental organizations were invited to sit on a panel to discuss the process of interviewing. After a 30-minute moderated discussion, a short series of three-minute mock interviews took place between the professionals and the students so that the students could get a sense of how interviews are actually conducted. By the end of the evening, every student had undergone two mini-interviews in which they received feedback on each. This process successfully provided a look into the process of real-world interviewing.

Students were also required to attend a mid-semester Jobs Forum Workshop in which professionals from various employment sectors interacted with interested students in an intimate setting. Following a 45-minute (in-person) moderated panel discussion, the participants would break out into different parts of the room where students could ask questions and have them answered in an informal and comfortable environment. The overarching goal was simple: to educate students about how to gain employment.

In 2018, additional professionalization workshops were created to give students greater choice. Today, in any given semester, five to six workshops are offered and the students are required to attend any two (including those described above). Students can more easily accommodate this flexible structure, and it better meets the needs of those who have taken the course in prior semesters.⁵

A third element of professionalization is our mentoring program. The Unruh Institute is fortunate to have enlisted many professionals from both the public and private sectors who volunteer to work with our students. These individuals often participate in panel discussions on campus regarding various political issues of the day; they also mentor students in small group settings and talk about their work. The Unruh staff distribute lists of professionals and accompanying biographies to both our traditional and research interns, and the interns choose the top three they would like to meet. Then, three to four students are selected to meet with each fellow and the time and location are coordinated. Nothing more is required of the students other than to speak with the professionals for 30 minutes and learn from them about pursuing post-graduation employment.

Finally, interns are required to attend two political events during the semester and submit a short memorandum on each event regarding the nature of the topic, who spoke, what was said, and their personal perspective about what they heard. The Center for the Political Future,⁶ as well as other campus organizations, sponsor numerous lunchtime and evening political events with panelists who discuss and debate issues of the day. The research interns are permitted to attend any political event on campus as a

means of exposing them to topical issues. Students whose schedules cannot accommodate any on-campus events are free to attend off-campus events. The goal is to ensure that students are not learning solely within the classroom but are engaging live policy issues that affect them and others.

THE VALUE OF RESEARCH INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

Student evaluations have revealed a number of notable features of the research internship program.⁷ The evaluation form was administered fall 2018 through spring 2020 and examined various aspects of the class, including design elements of the course, development of skills such as critical thinking and communication, and application of the course to students’ academic or career goals. Reported results are based on responses from 14 out of 53 interns who fully completed the evaluations over five semesters, for an overall response rate of 26.4%.

Regarding course design, students were asked about their level of agreement with three statements: (1) “The course objectives were well explained”; (2) “The course assignments were related to the course objectives”; (3) “I understood what was expected of me in this course.” On a four-point scale where “0” represented low agreement and “4” represented strong agreement, students gave the course design high marks, ranging from 3.17 (mean score in spring 2018) to 3.89 (in fall 2019). The overall impact of the course was estimated through respondents’ level of agreement with three other statements: (1) “I learned perspectives, principles and practices that I expect to apply in new situations”; (2) “This course challenged me to think critically and communicate clearly about the subject”; (3) “This course provided me with information that may be directly applicable to my career or academic goals.” Again, respondents generally agreed that the program is achieving these learning objectives (mean score of 3.33 from fall 2018 through spring 2019, and 3.67 in fall 2019 and spring 2020). Taken together, these data suggest that the program is designed well and that students find it creates the potential for applied learning in both the short- and long-term.

The responses to open-ended questions were further enlightening. In particular, nearly every evaluator commented that the most valuable aspect of participating in the research program was the opportunity to conduct in-depth research on a particular policy area. Undergraduates are often asked to conduct research on a number of topics during a semester, but the research program allowed students to focus on a policy area of their choice for the entire semester while employing a variety of research techniques. Table 1 lists several of the research projects that have been completed in recent years along with the types of research utilized in each.

Table 1: California Policy Research Internship Program Projects, 2018–2021

Academic Year	Internship Provider and Team Project	Online Research	Survey Data	Personal Interviews	Field Work
Spring 2021	California Health Project: “Depolarizing America”	X	X	X	
Fall 2020	Crown Castle 5G: “Conquering the Digital Divide”	X	X		
Spring 2020	Los Angeles DCFS: “Creating a Culture of Success”	X			
Fall 2019	Nature Conservancy: “Managed Retreat, City of Long Beach”	X		X	
Spring 2019	Los Angeles Mayor’s Office: “LA Urban Biodiversity”	X			X
Spring 2019	California Strategies, LLC: “California High Speed Rail”	X		X	

Table 1: California Policy Research Internship Program Projects, 2018–2021

Fall 2018	LA Councilmember Mike Bonini: “Reimagining District 11”	X			X
Spring 2018	LA Councilmember Paul Krekorian: “Homeless Crisis in Los Angeles”	X			
* Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services					

To elaborate on one of these projects, in the spring 2021 semester, USC students were asked to tackle one of the most challenging issues of our time: depolarizing the American populace. We partnered with the California Health Project (CHP), a non-governmental organization that strives to produce constructive engagement across political divides to promote the democratic process. The research agenda required USC students to create and deploy a survey, to which over 100 USC students ultimately responded, and to conduct in-depth interviews of undergraduates about how polarization might be resolved. The survey, developed in partnership with CHP, will serve as a template for future projects.

In the course evaluations, students also commented on the value of the professionalization workshops. In particular, both the networking events and the résumé workshop were identified as particularly helpful. The benefits of the networking events are clear, as students are able to connect with practitioners in an informal setting and also acquire tools to connect effectively with other professionals. The résumé workshop helps students refine critical documents, increasing the likelihood of finding a job after graduation.

In addition to the course evaluations, the research internship program undergoes annual review by faculty and staff in an effort to make changes as needed. Such a revision took place after the program had been operating for several years: in response to student evaluations, as noted above, the menu of workshops was expanded. The program continues to be refined in response to feedback from students as well as providers.

CONCLUSION

As with any new program, its creation invites challenges. First, success relies on those who are essentially willing to volunteer their time. In our case, we must lean heavily on internship providers to satisfy core program requirements, which include building and executing a manageable research agenda every semester; meetings with and mentorship of a group of students; and shepherding of projects that are time-intensive. For anyone attempting to set up a program, an inadequate supply of partners limits the range and scope of projects available to students.

Second, insufficient support for faculty and adequate staffing can also pose insurmountable hurdles, especially for resource-stressed campuses that may be unable to compensate a coordinator for such an undertaking. Third, student interest in a research internship program might be lacking. Given the evidence that both research experiences and internships have the potential to improve student gains, especially among historically underserved groups (Kuh 2008; Kuh et al. 2007), universities have incentives to pursue undergraduate research programs like ours.

The research internship program at USC offers a great deal more benefit than simply having students conduct research. Undergraduates embrace the opportunity to interact with working professionals on public policy issues that are relevant to the public at large and also satisfy their curiosity. Students not only gain the experience of making professional presentations based on their research but also offer meaningful policy recommendations that are beneficial to the internship providers. Perhaps one of the greatest advantages of the research program is that students assume an active role in designing and carrying out the research, activities that foster ownership of their work. As we know from our graduates, the unique experiences enabled by the California Policy Research Internship Program are ones that will stay with students long after graduation.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Unruh Institute works with over 200 internship providers in the Los Angeles area alone.
2. PVS is a non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works to educate the American public about the political stances of candidates running for public office, in essence fact-checking the truth behind candidates' statements by comparing these to their records.
3. In fall 2017, it was decided that the program would be reduced to two research groups (five to six students apiece) due to limited faculty and staff time. The Unruh staff work to accommodate students' top choice of research group, but that is not always possible.
4. Only the research interns are required to attend this seminar (i.e., not the traditional interns).
5. Students in the traditional internship program can take POSC 395 for up to 8 units. Many students elect to take the course as a series of two-unit classes in order to expand their internship experiences.

6. The Center for the Political Future (<https://dornsife-center-for-political-future.usc.edu/>) was founded at USC by Professor Robert Shrum and Mike Murphy in 2018, “combining rigorous intellectual inquiry, teaching, and practical politics as a means of advancing civil dialogue and research that transcends partisan divisions.” The Unruh Institute is a component of the Center that focuses on experiential learning for students.
7. The use of anonymous student course evaluations was approved by the USC Institutional Review Board on September 9, 2020, study identification number UP-20-00844. The statistics reflect evaluation forms submitted by fourteen respondents out of 53 interns who participated in the program over five semesters (spring 2018 through spring 2020).