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Views

Protect Unpaid Internships

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By **Joseph E. Aoun**

Under [new regulations proposed](#) by the Department of Labor, unpaid college internships are preferable if the intern “performs no or minimal work.”

That’s right: Even as many colleges and universities are expanding experiential learning, federal officials are issuing guidelines that would water down this powerful approach to education.

In April, the Department of Labor crafted a six-part “test” that employers, students and colleges must satisfy to ensure that unpaid internships qualify as legal. Among the six criteria is the following requirement: “The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern.”

Whether or not the Labor Department’s proposal would have a direct impact on most college internships is the subject of debate. Defenders of the policy argue that it is simply a more stringent application of the longstanding Fair Labor Standards Act. Their goal is laudable: to protect students from being used as free labor, particularly by for-profit companies.

However, just the threat of increased regulation could have a chilling effect on the willingness of employers to offer internships -- paid or unpaid. With experiential learning on the rise, through co-ops, internships and other approaches, the country cannot afford to create disincentives for employers to play a valuable role in the educational enterprise.

Why is American higher education heading in the direction of experiential learning? The value proposition is clear: According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers’ 2010 Job Outlook Survey, 75 percent of employers prefer job candidates with relevant work experience. More than 90 percent prefer to hire interns or co-ops who have worked for their organization.

But the real benefits of experiential learning go far beyond the practical advantage it affords students entering the workforce. Educators are increasingly realizing that the integration of study and practice is a more powerful way to learn.

Perhaps more than ever before, this generation of graduates will need to navigate the unknown. They will need to be nimble and responsive to change, and become leaders of change. A strong foundation in their

field of study is essential, but less tangible skills will be just as important: confidence, poise, adaptability, and the ability to work collaboratively. These are the foundations of leadership.

When students participate in well-developed internships or co-op experiences, they immerse themselves in professional settings, ranging from multinational corporations to small not-for-profits. They bring their experiences back to the classroom, enriching the curriculum for themselves and their peers. They gain knowledge that will serve them for a lifetime.

Rules that encourage student interns to perform “no or minimal work” are antithetical to the premise of experiential learning. Under these rules, internships or co-op positions would deteriorate into job shadowing, a pale imitation of true experiential learning.

We all share the Department of Labor’s concerns about the potential for exploitation, but the role of determining the educational value of an internship or co-op should rest with educational institutions. Colleges and universities must continue their active monitoring of experiential learning programs, and place students in secure and productive environments that further their education.

A sustained commitment to experiential learning includes developing a strong network of employers who regularly provide employment opportunities for students. Through this network, institutions cultivate partnerships and work closely with students to find the best fit for both sides. Schools can and should require employers to provide detailed job descriptions that set clear expectations. In addition, employers should outline the learning outcomes students are expected to achieve upon completing their experiences.

An interesting consequence of the Labor Department’s proposal is that it may create more demand for overseas internships. At Northeastern University, where we just celebrated 100 years of cooperative education, we believe the second century of experiential learning will be global. This is vitally important for today’s students, who are more likely than previous graduates to live and work abroad. A co-op or internship in another country is, by definition, more than academic tourism; it is true global education.

But we don’t want international expansion to come at the expense of what we’re doing here at home. In [a recent letter](#) urging the Labor Department to proceed cautiously, Sen. John Kerry underscored the importance of experiential learning to the country as a whole: “Be it through internships, fellowships or co-op programs, this symbiotic relationship helps foster economic development and a competitive workforce.”

As we invest in our future by investing in higher education, we should look for ways to expand, not diminish, the impact of experiential learning. We owe this to our students, our economy, and our society.

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