To help students launch careers in business and accounting, we, a Cooperative Education professor (Marie) with a strong commitment to and extensive record of placing students in internships, and an Accounting professor (Angela) with recent work experience in Big Four accounting firms and an investment bank, have developed a partnership based on shared goals. We want to prepare students to perform at exceptional levels on demanding internship assignments that require functional skills as well as personal and professional competencies. Knowing that internships are widely recognized by undergraduate and graduate programs in business as an essential part of business education and that internships can also lead to students’ first full-time jobs, we want to use internships to prepare students to continue their educations and find rewarding employment in their chosen fields.

Cooperative Education finds the theoretical bases for complementing workplace practice with classroom learning in John Dewey’s statement that “all genuine education comes through experience” (5) and in the experiential learning model of David A. Kolb, who argues “that while experience is an essential element, it is not a sufficient element for learning” (132). Learning, particularly deep-level learning, relies on the student’s ability to reflect on work. Guided reflection on work is central to the department of Cooperative Education’s seminars, which complement students’ internships. The seminars include Critical Reflection and Learning at Work (CPA041), Fundamentals of Career Advancement (CPB041), and The Future of Work (CPC041).

We see the internship experience as particularly crucial for LaGuardia students who are largely low-income and working-class. According to the 2008 Institutional Profile issued by the LaGuardia Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, in 2007, over 54 percent had annual household incomes of $25,000 or less (6), and 57 percent of new students work, with 40 percent of them working more than 20 hours per week (ix). Many LaGuardia students and their family members spend long hours in low-paying, labor-intensive positions. LaGuardia students want opportunities to work with organizations that can offer them the potential to move up the economic ladder by providing them
with compensation packages that can dramatically change their families’ incomes and, thereby, their lives. The story of Bob, a LaGuardia student who, with his family, emigrated to the United States from a rural area of China over three years ago, speaks to this desire. Bob’s father and mother worked sixteen hours a day in a local restaurant as chef and waitress, respectively. Aspiring to transfer to a four-year college, Bob was motivated by his father’s advice: “We have been working so hard to support you for full-time college study because we hope some day that you will wear ‘shoes’ and not the ‘sneakers’ that we are wearing now.” To Bob and his parents, “shoes” symbolize white-collar office jobs while “sneakers” represent blue-collar, low-wage, and labor-intensive jobs.

Between the fall of 2002 and the summer of 2007, 1,235 business and accounting students from LaGuardia Community College, Bob among them, were placed on 1,748 internships in accounting/finance and business positions in 500 different New York City workplaces, including banks, pharmaceutical companies, cultural institutions, health providers, and social service agencies. Many students’ internships turn into their first full-time positions with a salary range of $30,000 to $45,000 per year, health insurance coverage, 401(K) pension plans, employee stock-purchase plans, and tuition reimbursement (Sacino, and Wu).

Let us take a closer look at how the partnership between Marie and Angela works. The following is a typical e-mail from a corporate manager, listing qualifications for an internship and tasks that the intern will be required to perform. The e-mail provides a job description and qualifications:

• Prepare quarterly trial balance
• Prepare general ledger analysis and reconciliation report
• File supporting documents
• Working knowledge of MS Excel is required; MS Access is a bonus
• Positive attitude
• Ability to work well in a team
• Detail-oriented
• Strong communication skills
• Initiative – willing to assist with small tasks – copying, making binders – work that is a little bit less than fun
• Professional and personable attitude
• Flexible to work overtime.
The corporate manager adds this note: “The project will be interesting and also very fast-paced. We are looking for your best and brightest.”

As collaborating faculty, we are well prepared to respond quickly to such requests, knowing that speed is important if we wish to secure this opportunity for a LaGuardia student and additional opportunities for others. We have conferred on how we will prepare our students in two of their second-semester courses, Principles of Accounting II (AMA112) and Fundamentals of Professional Advancement (CEP121), to meet both the functional and personal/professional requirements of this internship. In the accounting class, students learn the financial reporting and Excel modeling skills required by many internship assignments. Our shared familiarity with e-mails from managers alerts us to the meaning behind the manager’s request for the “best and brightest.” We know that many organizations have a minimum GPA requirement of 3.60 for interns.

We respond to this e-mail by first identifying students whom we might recommend for this internship. We speak with those students to explain the requirements of the position and respond to their questions. We assist students who are interested in pursuing the internship with final revisions to their resumes. We rehearse them for interviews, posing questions that we know will be asked. At least three student resumes are sent to the employer for every position that exists. The employer generally interviews all three candidates; interviews are often conducted by two or three managers. We encourage students to provide examples of their knowledge and skills by referring to their work in Angela’s class – individual presentations, team accounting projects, and research on selected companies.

We also use e-mails from corporate managers and our knowledge of the requirements of internships to educate students in both the Accounting and Cooperative Education courses about the requirements of the internships they desire. The impact of this double dose of crucial information is often quite pronounced. Understanding that GPA may have an impact on their internship eligibility, students often make changes in attitude and performance to move into the category of “best and brightest.” They complete readings and hand assignments in on time; they move more quickly to begin team projects. Knowing that good grades are essential, students can begin to make changes to raise their GPA sooner rather than later, and faculty from both areas can work with students to discuss study skills, time management issues, and positive behavioral changes.
Our partnership provides students in Angela’s accounting classes with the opportunity to work with Marie prior to the internship cycle. These early meetings are crucial for successful internship placement. For example, Marie recently met one of Angela’s students who had returned from military service in Iraq. The student had a high GPA – a wonderful accomplishment, especially considering that he has a young family and works part-time. Marie had an opportunity to get to know the student – his interests and goals, his plans for senior college, his dreams for the future. When several positions came in from a major Wall Street organization, we knew that this student would be best suited for the treasury department, as opposed to banking operations or reinsurance. His goals were to work in finance or trading and funding. The internship in the treasury department was the closest match to his interests and skills. The student interviewed successfully for the position and was delighted to begin his internship.

We see our work with individual students as crucial not only to the successful placement of students in internships but to the role we occupy in students’ lives as college professors. Research conducted by Robert Winston and his colleagues clearly demonstrates that greater faculty-student interaction promotes higher levels of student satisfaction with the college experience. As Michael Scott Cain notes, “The teaching faculty is the key to the community college’s work. Other factors in the system, such as support staff, administrators, politicians, and students, might help draw up the route for the trip, but it is the faculty members who drive the bus” (47). The faculty members can serve as the professional mentors and role models that may not appear anywhere else in a student’s life. Because the faculty members are in such a position, their influence over students can be very significant. In a frequently-cited study of student retention, Astin concluded, “Next to peer group, the faculty represents the most significant aspect of a student’s undergraduate development” (410).

We receive frequent calls from internship supervisors who commend LaGuardia interns for their intelligence, skills, knowledge, work ethic, and energy. A manager of an intra-company accounting area in a major financial firm recently stated that he would rather have a LaGuardia intern than an intern from any other college. Corporate managers keep coming back to us seeking more LaGuardia interns. We recommend that faculty in many disciplines partner with colleagues in Cooperative Education to promote increased engagement in students’ academic and career development. We see this type of partnership as
crucial to building the connection between classroom work and student advancement beyond LaGuardia. Internships are a point of entry to careers that have often motivated students to enroll at LaGuardia; we believe it is our responsibility to help students achieve the goals that brought them to us.

WORKS CONSULTED


