

Make the Most of Your Internship or Research Experience

Experience is a necessity for today's college students. Employers and graduate programs seek candidates who have tested the waters and who have demonstrated skills and experiences. There are numerous reasons to seek independent research with a faculty member, or do an internship with an outside organization.

The reasons fit into two main categories:

1. Gain skills relevant to your career goals to make you more marketable;
2. Gain experience to determine and refine your goals.

In doing independent research students gain valuable skills - problem solving, hypothesis testing, familiarity with research designs and methodologies, specific research techniques, familiarity with research equipment, and perhaps more experience using statistics and computer packages. These skills are transferable (and necessary) when applying to graduate school in research fields, but also potentially for employment in a variety of jobs in business, education, health and science fields. Communication skills, both written and oral, may also be enhanced and honed through chances to publish and present. Working closely with a faculty member gives you the opportunity to work side-by-side and learn from an expert in their field much like you will in graduate school.

It's difficult to argue against the value of gaining experience outside the classroom to enhance skills and marketability no matter what your goals. However, don't do research, or an internship, because you think it will be less work than a class. Expect more work, more responsibility, greater independence, higher expectations of you, and sometimes a little ambiguity. With all of those, though, comes great potential for growth!

Important Note: Some graduate programs may look upon research more favorably than an internship, and visa versa. If you have particular graduate programs in mind, research what expectations they might have - talk to faculty in your department here at Muhlenberg and talk to institutions to which you are thinking of applying.

Helpful Hints:

- Understand the expectations of your supervisor. If you don't understand them, or have questions, ASK.
- Pay attention to instructions, and write them down. Try not to ask the same question twice.
- Understand the timeline- discuss it with your supervisor. If you are looking at a large project or research assignment, break it down into small components for yourself, and give yourself due dates for each part of the project.
- Arrive early (never be late).
- Demonstrate a positive attitude and a willingness to do the job, however small or large.
- Force yourself beyond your comfort zone.
- Ask questions.
- Keep track of your accomplishments.
- Ask for clarification if something is unclear.
- Show initiative, offer to help with other projects during your down time.
- Show courtesy, enthusiasm, and interest, ALWAYS...even with the menial tasks.
- Read your supervisor's unspoken cues. For example, learn when to interrupt her and when not to.
- Keep samples of your work.
- Don't use business or lab time for personal tasks.
- Model professional behavior expected of full-time employees.
- Don't get involved in office or laboratory politics.
- Periodically review your learning contract - are you accomplishing your goals?
- Talk with your supervisor about who you can network with.
- Ask for a letter of recommendation before the end of your internship or research.
- Have fun, but not too much fun.

Dr. Kathy Harring (Psychology) and Dr. Bruce Wightman (Biology) contributed to this list.