



UB ADVOCATES: Students making a difference...

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Experiences – Field Experiences

Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs

Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggest that UB students are less likely to participate in field experiences than are students at peer institutions. The purpose of our research with *UB Advocates* (trained student volunteers) was to examine students' motivations for participating in these experiences, as well as barriers which might prevent participation.

Two focus groups were conducted to collect data from 14 participants. An additional 28 *UB Advocates* who were unable to attend a focus group session participated by completing an on-line survey which contained questions parallel to those asked in the focus groups. The data presented here are based on the responses of the 42 participants.

Most of the participants are female undergraduates, and over half have been involved as UB Advocates for at least one year. Ten of the twelve UB schools/colleges are represented among the participants: Architecture and Planning, Arts and Sciences, Engineering, Education, Management, Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, Nursing, Public Health, and Social Work. Of the 31 domestic students, 18 identify as white, 3 as African American, 2 as Asian, 2 as Hispanic, and 6 as other or unknown. The international students are from China, Ghana, India, Korea, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Tunisia.

Based on students' responses to our questions, we can conclude the following:

- Nearly all students believe field experiences to be important for their educational and career goals, but only half actually complete such an experience;
- When talking about characteristics of an “ideal” field experience, students suggest that the quality of the experience is the most important factor in making an experience ideal;
- However, tangible benefits, such as academic credit, pay, and networking opportunities, are also important characteristics of an ideal field experience;
- The university can encourage greater participation in field experiences by establishing a more centralized approach to field experiences, improving advertising, and ensuring that students receive tangible benefits.

In an ideal world, field experiences would be available for all programs of study. All students would be required to enroll in a field experience prior to graduation, and they would receive academic credit and/or pay for completing the experience. By the beginning of the sophomore year, a centralized offer would provide orientations relating to field experiences and would help match students with sites where their assigned tasks would mirror their career goals.

BRIEF: Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Experiences – Field Experiences

As described in an earlier brief¹, results from the spring 2008 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) indicate that UB students score lower on the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark than students at comparable institutions due to lower rates of participation in co-curricular activities, community service and volunteering, practical and field experiences, and study abroad. This brief describes research efforts to examine more closely student perceptions of and participation in field experiences.

Based on results of a paper questionnaire administered earlier in the fall (October)¹, most respondents (87.8%) agree that UB offers opportunities to participate in field experiences, but participation levels do not match perceived opportunities. Around 50.0% of students see field experiences as very important to educational goals and nearly the same proportion have participated during their enrollment at UB. We designed focus groups to explore students' motivations for participation in field experiences, as well as perceived barriers to participation.

Participants and Procedures

*UB Advocates*² participated in either one of two focus group sessions (14) or via a web survey (28, 42 total). Most participants (30) are female, and most are undergraduates (35): 6 freshmen, 5 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 15 seniors. Of the 31 domestic students, 18 identify as white, 3 as African American, 2 as Asian, 2 as Hispanic, and 6 as other/unknown. The 8 international students come from China (2), Ghana, India, Korea, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Tunisia. Ten of the 12 schools/colleges are represented: Architecture and Planning (2), Arts and Sciences (18), Engineering (6), Education (1), Management (5), Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (3), Nursing (5), Public Health (4), and Social Work (1). Over half of the participants (27) have been involved as *UB Advocates* for at least one year. On average, undergraduate participants began the semester with a QPA of 3.26, and graduate/professional participants began with a 3.49.

When focus group participants arrived, they were asked to brainstorm words and/or phrases which describe the “ideal” field experience. Discussion began with their responses. Facilitators then asked students about their participation in field. The web survey contained open-ended items parallel to questions addressed in the focus groups.

Results

The Ideal Field Experience

Exactly half of our participants had completed a field placement prior to the current semester. However, our first question concerned students' perceptions of the “ideal” field

experience. In Table 1, students' words and phrases describing the "ideal" field experience have been organized into themes and sub-themes, and exemplar responses are included to better illustrate the meaning of the theme. The most important characteristic of an "ideal" field experience is the quality of the placement, mentioned 41 unique times. The preferred experience is one where students can gain real-world, hands-on experience. Tangible Benefits are also important, however. Students would prefer to earn more than just experience in their chosen profession while competing the experience: they want the hours to count for course credit; they would prefer to receive pay; they want to gain knowledge and experience in the field along with other job skills, such as confidence and independence; and they would like the position to involve networking opportunities and opportunities for future paid employment. Based on the number of times they were mentioned, the themes of Flexibility and Convenience and Support Available appear to be less important than the quality and tangible benefits of the experience.

Table 1: Descriptions of Ideal Field Experiences

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Sub-Theme</i>	<i>Exemplar</i>
Flexibility and Convenience (8)	Accessible (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of transportation • Close to school
	Flexible (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to search for preferred work • Scheduled around class time
Quality Work Environment (41)	Challenging (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demanding • Provides a challenge
	Expert Mentors (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get to work with various people in field • Working with masters in the field
	Positive Atmosphere (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional • Friendly atmosphere
	Practical/Hands-On (26)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience real life • Practical experience/"hands on"
	Other (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Renowned organization/company • Out-of-country experience • Diverse courses related to field
Support Available (6)	Connection Between UB and Site (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership between UB department and employee in the field
	Site Support (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisor who is understanding • Helpful co-workers
	UB Support (1)	With professors
Tangible Benefits to Students (24)	Academic Credit (5)	Departmental credit toward a degree
	Future Employment Opportunities (3)	Ability to transition into full-time job or help with job placement
	Knowledge/Experiences (3)	Educational
	Networking Opportunities (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community engagement/networking • Opportunities to network
	Pay (6)	Paid
	Other Job Skills Development (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence • Independence • More comfortable

Note: The frequencies (noted in parenthesis) are based on the number of times a theme or sub-theme was mentioned in the brainstorming activity and not on the number of students who mentioned each theme.

Increasing Student Participation in Field Experiences

Suggestions made by students for encouraging greater participation in field experiences are shown in Table 2. The most important thing the university can do to encourage greater participation in field experiences is to increase advertising of available opportunities. This advertising should be done in conjunction with the academic department and major professors and should be discipline-specific. In addition, the advertising should be directed to students earlier in their academic careers (i.e., sophomore level) so that they can begin to plan their programs around a field experience. Many students complain that they did not realize how important field experiences are to their résumé until it was too late. To that end, a sophomore orientation which includes information about field experiences is seen as a helpful option by participants.

Table 2: Suggestions for Encouraging Greater Participation

Theme	Sub-Theme	Exemplar
Ensure Students Receive Tangible Benefits (8)	Academic Credit (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equate 3 hours of internship credit to 3 hours of course credit • Have more credit incentives
	Emphasize Importance (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show students how important these experiences are to résumé building • Educate about the importance of professional development and experiential learning.
	Pay (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students find paid internships
Greater Structure and Support (6)	Centralized Facilitation (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate the matching process centrally • Better communication between different departments and the career services center.
	Require for All Students (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require for all majors
Improved Advertising (22)	Use Professors/Departments (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professors can advertise opportunities in their lectures • One thing that they can do is try to let the opportunities be known a little better through fliers, e-mails, or through departments. • Advisors should force feed
	Develop Discipline-Specific Advertising (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor information; make it specific to major • Make relevant to the majors
	More Advertising (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make it more well known at an earlier time • Advertise more for them
	Make Requirements Well Known (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the school need to be more open about requirements
	Sophomore Orientation (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sophomore year orientation • Encourage sophomores to start interning

Note: The frequencies (noted in parenthesis) are based on the number of times a theme or sub-theme was mentioned and not on the number of students who mentioned each theme.

In addition to better advertising, another factor that may encourage student participation in field experiences is ensuring that students are receiving tangible benefits when they complete a field experience. This factor is related to the idea that students would prefer greater structure to the process of identifying and registering for field experiences. Perhaps a central office could help students identify opportunities, fit the experience into an academic plan, and ensure that the student is receiving appropriate course credit.

Conclusions

The students who participated in this research offer some valuable insight into participation in field experiences at UB. While most students recognize that a field experience is important to their educational goals, several students indicate that they have not planned ahead in order to be able to fit one into their academic program. More information, early on, about the importance of field experiences, along with assistance in identifying opportunities would be appreciated. In fact, students suggest that, in an ideal world, field experiences would be available for all programs of study. All students would be required to enroll in a field experience prior to graduation, and they would receive academic credit and/or pay for completing the experience. By the beginning of the sophomore year, a centralized office would provide orientations relating to field experiences and would help match students with sites where their assigned tasks would mirror their career goals.

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¹ The brief is titled, *Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Activities: Co-Curricular Activities and Community Service* and is available at:

<http://apb.buffalo.edu/reports/briefs/studentexperiences/EnrichingEducationalActivitiesI.pdf>

² UB Advocates are student volunteers who meet each semester to discuss campus issues with trained facilitators. Since students self-nominate into the UB Advocates program and those who attend a particular session do so based on the scheduling of the session, as well as their interest in a particular topic, they may not be representative of the entire population of UB students.