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## High School Internship Fundamentals

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About 70 percent of US high schools offer work-based learning, according to the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE).<sup>1</sup> Internships and other workplace programs for high school students come in many different shapes and sizes. For some schools, internships focus on preparation for a career, like baking or auto maintenance. At others, internships are a strategy to address a student's problems with attendance or study habits. At others, internships focus on encouraging participation in STEM fields.

A recent report by NRCCTE lists some elements of successful internships, among them that students reflect on their learning, that they complete a project that demonstrates learning, and that there are measureable outcomes of the internship.<sup>2</sup> This article describes the internships program at the five high schools in San Diego's High Tech High public charter school network. At these schools, project-based learning is central to the curriculum and students work intensively within a highly structured internship design. Within this structure, students have freedom to find workplaces and choose activities.

### Internships as College Prep

At the five High Tech High schools, internships are an integral part of the curriculum. The junior-year internship is a graduation requirement for all students. Internships are not just for students who do not like school or who are not going on to college. They are not exclusively for students interested in STEM careers. Rob Riordan, a cofounder of High Tech High in 2000, identifies the inclusive nature of internships as central to the school's philosophy: "All High Tech High students end up in internships where they and their advisers think they will grow. Everyone has the opportunity to benefit."

And while "college prep" could be defined as a particular group of courses in the high school curriculum (biology, chemistry, physics, three years of a foreign language, etc.), the High Tech High experience shows that internships, too, can prepare students for

college. Research has found that among the challenges for first-generation college students is the initial feeling of not fitting in or of being ill-prepared for college work. Many High Tech High students, reporting on their internship experiences, describe overcoming initial fears or feelings of inadequacy. For example, Angel Mazzeo wrote in the 2015 student-published book *Ampersand*, "Over the course of a month, I had become far more confident about what I did and learned a valuable lesson to always be positive, no matter how bad things looked or seemed."<sup>3</sup>

### High Tech High's Intensive Approach

At High Tech High, all juniors complete three- to four-week, full-time internships at workplaces including schools, hospitals, retail stores, restaurants, churches, media and marketing firms, fire and police departments, law firms, and research labs. Students receive course credit for their internships.

High Tech High is unusual in that mentors at the workplaces receive training in mentoring. Of 12 internship programs studied in the NRCCTE report mentioned above, High Tech High was the only program to include mentor training and a handbook for mentors as part of the program. There are specific expectations for mentors, for example, that they help the student plan a substantive project, including a formal proposal, within the first week of the internship.

Although the school has some recurring placements that about half the students use, many students find their own internships. Doing so prompts students to think about their networks. Students are guided to think about their connections through family and friends. They practice cold calls and informational interviews, which in turn helps them build new networks—for example, by cold calling a store at which they have shopped or a business in which they have an interest.

Chris Shannon, deputy director at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, works extensively with the Boston Fed's high school interns. She cited this aspect of High Tech High's program as potentially challenging for students, but also said that students could benefit from the freedom it gives them: "When students believe they have made a choice, they are more likely to succeed."

As is the case with many internship programs, High Tech High's internships are connected to the classroom. Classroom teachers, not internship coordinators, monitor students' activities and visit work-sites. Back at school, students reflect on their experiences within an academic framework. While internships often are seen as an entry point for STEM subjects, teacher Randy Scherer points out that there are many opportunities to connect internship experiences to the academic study of history and literature, for example, with readings about the early-20th-century labor movement. Students report on formal interviews with their mentors, create an internship portfolio, and use journal entries to create long-form, written work and the student-published book, *Ampersand*.

It is unusual for a high-school internship to involve full-time work. In the past, High Tech High internships followed a fairly typical model for high schools in the United States. Students worked at job sites two afternoons per week for a semester. But under that model, when students wrote about their most important high school experiences, internships did not come up. Instead, they tended to cite short, intense experiences. "We found this was not a life changing experience," Riordan said. So, in 2010, the school changed to the full-time, month-long intensive model.

Since then, students have had more opportunity to dig in to more complicated projects, to see projects through to completion, and to connect their experiences to their futures, Riordan says. Because the internships are full-time work, they are expected to produce substantive results, and students present what they have learned at the conclusion of the project. Students have transcribed interviews for attorneys, designed surfboards, presented results of medical research, and assisted in elementary school classrooms.

For example, Raul Saldivar interned with the High Tech High athletics director. He helped manage a soccer tournament:

"There were a lot of teams and a lot of coaches coming in to register their teams, so that meant a lot of people. I had to go through the coach's roster and medical forms of each kid to ensure that they were eligible to play. As the day went on, I had a number of different tasks—I moved boxes around, I used golf carts to deliver soccer balls to each station (because the tournament was huge—it had 22 soccer fields), and I helped with trophy presentations."<sup>4</sup>

Kush Kakaiya interned at Stalwart Communications, a public-relations company. He researched two clients:

"I researched practically everything there is to know about those companies. I had to research what each company is, what product they are selling, who their competitors are, and how can their social media platforms improve."<sup>5</sup>

## A Portal into the Adult World

The educators at High Tech High emphasize that the school's internships are not about making a career choice or getting a start on a career. "Internships provide students with a glimpse of what life may be like beyond high school and a chance to develop a sense of agency in their identity and education," Scherer says.

One important goal is helping students understand the sometimes meandering path that people take to arrive at career satisfaction. As part of the formal interview with their mentors, students may find out that their mentors had never expected to go to college, or that they changed majors more than once, or that a first job out of school proved disappointing. "Students realize it's OK to go to college and not know exactly what they want to major in," Scherer says. "They also realize there are more careers than lawyer, doctor, police officer,

firefighter, and teacher. They get a glimpse of the different lives that might be out there."

In the Spring 2015 volume of the student-published book *Ampersand*, students Tyler Carter and Lea Ortiz described the power of their mentors' stories:

• Tyler: "Hearing my mentor, some[one] that I looked up to, say that they wished they went to college made me think that it was something I should rethink."<sup>6</sup>

• Lea: "This is something my mentor taught me: we all take different paths and make our own decisions. But at the end of the day, you have to chase what you believe in."<sup>7</sup>

Brianna Gomez, now a senior at Boston University, learned from her internship in a mayor's office that she was not interested in politics. "I'm more into human services. Even though politics isn't what I want to do, my internship helped me understand what I did want to do."

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— Lea Ortiz



## Internships for Everyone

Research reported in the spring 2016 issue of *Communities & Banking* found that in summer 2013 and summer 2014, teens from affluent families were more likely to find summer employment than teens from low-income families.<sup>8</sup> At High Tech High, 46 percent of students receive subsidized or free school lunch, compared to the 2012–2013 statewide average of 55 percent.<sup>9</sup> These are students who, were they not attending High Tech High, might not have had the opportunity for an internship, with all the benefits an internship brings. "We are not teaching students to be architects," says Scherer. "We are helping students to see that they belong." Internships for everyone have the potential to level that playing field.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Corinne Alfeld et al. "Work-Based Learning Opportunities for High School Students" (report, National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, February 2013), [http://www.nrccte.org/sites/default/files/publication-files/nrccte\\_work-based\\_learning.pdf](http://www.nrccte.org/sites/default/files/publication-files/nrccte_work-based_learning.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Angel Mazzeo, "Burned!" *Ampersand: The Student Journal of School & Work 7* (Spring 2015): 48.

<sup>4</sup> Raul Saldivar, "The Responsibilities of an Athletic Director," *Ampersand: The Student Journal of School & Work 7* (Spring 2015): 108.

<sup>5</sup> Kush Kakaiya, "Internship, a Hope for the Future," *Ampersand: The Student Journal of School & Work 7* (Spring 2015): 46.

<sup>6</sup> Tyler Carter, "Oh, You're Going to College," *Ampersand: The Student Journal of School & Work 7* (Spring 2015): 28.

<sup>7</sup> Lea Modelo Ortiz, "Don't You Think It's Time for a Change?" *Ampersand: The Student Journal of School & Work 7* (Spring 2015): 50.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Harrington and Ishwar Khatiwada, "US Teens Want to Work," *Communities & Banking* 27 no. 2 (Spring 2016): 9–11.

<sup>9</sup> Motoko Rich, "Percentage of Poor Students in Public Schools Rises," *New York Times* (January 16, 2015), [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/17/us/school-poverty-study-southern-education-foundation.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/17/us/school-poverty-study-southern-education-foundation.html?_r=0).