

Experiential education at its best: The case of the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme

Increasingly universities are embracing the use of experiential education as a way to improve employability skills, to better prepare participants for their transition to work and to give them “real world” experience. Many programs adopt such approaches and work to embed new pedagogy and learning into their curriculum. While most programs are moving quickly to experiential education models, we are only starting to consider how to measure the success of these efforts; more work needs to be done to evaluate such programs. In this article, the author reflects on 25 years of offering internships, practicums and experiential education. He uses the Ontario Legislature Internship Program (OLIP) as an example of a best practice and to inspire additional thinking about the improvement and sustainability of such programs.

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Introduction

At the heart of every internship program should be a desire to provide participants with four important things:

- First, more and better information about the workplace or the profession so participants can make informed decisions about career choices.
- Second, exposure to real, hands-on learning or experiential education. This is the opportunity to learn differently and to begin to practice what participants are learning. Participants do, pause, reflect on their experiences, develop lessons and takeaways, and then apply their learning.
- Third, a real and formal emphasis on learning outcomes to ensure that experiences are aimed at knowledge and skills that are relevant and transferable. Getting experience leads nicely to enhanced employability skills that will assist in transition to work.
- Fourth, experience in the workplace that introduces participants to many new contacts and helps them build a network. Often, participants have a chance to impress potential employers with their initiative, skills and potential. This burgeoning network can lead to further employment. After all, internships can be viewed as trial periods where both sides find out about the other.

Many universities are moving towards doing more of this kind of learning and training as part of a mad dash to convince participants and parents that theirs is the program to take. One example of a great success is the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP). This article will highlight the key components of the structure and processes related to OLIP and provide some reflections.

History of OLIP

The Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP), established in 1975, is administered by the Canadian Political Science Association and supported by a financial grant from the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. OLIP is a non-partisan organization and is not associated with the Government of Ontario or any political party.

The Programme is designed to provide backbench Members of Provincial Parliament with highly qualified assistants. In addition to providing practical experience with the daily workings of the Ontario Legislature, OLIP provides Interns the opportunity to supplement their university training through regular academic discussions and by writing an academic paper on a topic of their choice. Interns also visit other legislatures to ensure a comprehensive knowledge of the legislative process through a comparative lens.

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The 2018-2019 Ontario Legislature Internship Program participants.

Non-partisanship

At the heart of the OLIP program is a commitment to non-partisanship. This allows the participants to see and experience multiple perspectives, and specifically to work for both a government and opposition member of the Legislative Assembly. The interns are engaged in the real work of an MPP's office and have an opportunity to participate as a member of the office staff. This typically involves constituency work, support of the member's committee duties as well as their work in the chamber.

Recruitment

Attracting the best quality candidates means ensuring that there is wide circulation of information on the programme. This includes a number of approaches:

- First, use of traditional methods such as information posters and in-person information sessions held on university campuses.
- Second, electronic mail to political science and public policy and administration programs, as well as other relevant programs helps to ensure potential candidates are aware.
- Third, social media and a robust website are important.
- Fourth, word of mouth is invaluable. The rigor of the selection process ensures a very strong cohort that results in a consistent quality of participants and ensures the reputation of the program is maintained.

Deep investment in orientation and training

Ten candidates are chosen for the 10-month programme. Considerable effort is made to invest

in their knowledge and skills through five weeks of orientation and training, along with an ongoing rigorous academic program. Moreover, this education is accompanied by the opportunity to meet with as many as 100 prominent officials, politicians, and professionals. The programme includes a mixture of lectures, workshops, experiential education exercises, team-building exercises and meetings with key officials in the legislature.

The design of such a program works backwards from expectations in the workplace. At the heart of the orientation program are simple questions: "What do interns need to know? What skills do they need to have to be prepared for the workplace so that they cannot only survive but also thrive?" Working with alumnae – both recent and from earlier cohorts – along with MPPs themselves, we position our interns to hit the ground running in an environment where there is little time for a rather steep learning curve.

Learning by doing

The best way to build leaders is to give them a platform to experiment and practice. Our interns lead the work of the group. They agree on their program and decide what they want to focus on and learn. They are expected to plan and arrange events, meetings and study tours. Each intern chairs a committee that focuses on different aspects of this agenda and reports on their progress each week. The chance to come to a consensus and set an agenda, to prepare and implement operational plans and to be held accountable for their performance is crucial to helping them develop leadership skills.

Selection of OLIP Alumni



Tim Murphy

1980-81 - John W. Wright - Pollster, Angus Reid / Ipsos

Interned for Sheila Copps (Lib) and John P. MacBeth (PC)

1982-83 - Timothy John “Tim” Murphy, MPP; Chief of Staff, Office of the Prime Minister

Interned for James A. “Jim” Renwick (NDP) and Alan Robinson (PC)

1983-84 - Annette M. Boucher - Chief Clerk of the House, Nova Scotia Legislature

Interned for Don Boudria (Lib) and Robert c. “Bob” Mitchell

1983-84 - Cheryl Diane Mitchell - Senior Counsel, Department of Justice

Interned for William M. “Bill” Wrye and Philip A. “Phil” Gillies (PC)

1992-93 - Jonathan Peter “Jon” Malloy - Professor at Carleton

Interned for Sharon M. Murdock (NDP) and Jim Wilson (PC)

2011-12 - Craig Ruttan - Director, Policy at Toronto Region Bd of Trade

Interned for Mike Colle (Lib) and John Yakabuski (PC)

2012-13 - Gillian Hanson - Issues Advisor, Office of the Prime Minister of Canada

Interned for Helena Jaczek (Lib) and Steve Clark (PC)

2012-13 - Leanna Katz - Law Clerk, Supreme Court of Canada

Interned for Mike Colle (Lib) and Christine Elliott (PC)

2013-14 - Mitchell “Mitch” Davidson - Executive Director of Policy, Office of the Premier of Ontario

Interned for Mike Colle (Lib) and Ernie Hardeman (PC)

2013-14 - Vanessa Dupuis - Strategic & Operations Advisor to the Auditor General of Ont.

Interned for Bas Balkissoon (Lib) and Laurie Scott (PC)

2016-17 - Rachel Nauta - Executive Assistant to the Speaker, Ontario Legislature

Interned for Daiene Vernile (Lib) and Ernie Hardeman (PC)



Annette Boucher



Jon Malloy



Leanna Katz

Solid partnerships

OLIP's success is based primarily on the relationship the Canadian Political Science Association and the Ontario Legislative Assembly have established and built over time. Further, the relationships developed between the program and MPPs over the years has also been critical to its lasting success. But two more relationships have also proven to be key – the alumni and the sponsors.

The alumni provide a valuable network of insight and assistance to help interns realize the full potential of their opportunity and to support their exposure to the various careers available to interns after OLIP. The sponsors, private companies and associations, are there to help support the program financially. Specifically, they fund their study tours and receptions. The sponsors also meet with the interns and provide them with valuable insight into their issues and aspirations that helps to better understand government and public relations. Increasingly in all sectors of society, these partnerships are the new normal. OLIP provides the opportunity for interns to realize the value of partnerships as a way to tackle opportunities and challenges, and gives them the opportunity to tend to existing one and build and maintain new partnerships.

The placement process

The interns get to interview the MPPs and then express their preferences for the two placements they have. A lot of thought goes into ensuring that the right fit occurs. In some instances it has to do with the two personalities; other times it has to do with the work of a particular MPP and sometimes with the potential for growth. For example, an intern who has mostly grown up in and lived in an urban centre may get more out of a placement with a MPP who represents a rural riding. This also puts interns – often for the very first time – on the opposite side of the interview table. The perspective of what interviewers think about and how they conduct themselves is also very informative. There is a great potential for revelations as interns

work through this process; it is not uncommon for pre-existing thoughts about a candidate to change substantially over the course of an interview.

Clear and well established learning outcomes

One of the best ways to deal with difficult decisions that may arise relating to competing interests is to keep the learning outcomes front and centre. These desired outcomes help guide the decision. Further, evaluating performance is also made easier when there are clear goals and objectives guiding these learning objectives. Ongoing assessment, both formal and informal is critical to ensuring continued success.

As one of the fundamental operating principles of OLIP is to share knowledge from one cohort to the next, two things are guaranteed to occur. First, traditions emerge and best practices are shared from one year to the next. There are many aspects of programme operation that are the same as they have always been, because they work. Second, adjustments and new approaches also emerge. Since each cohort leads the work of the programme, they lean on best practices and traditions while also adding or testing new elements to reflect the interests and talents of the new cohort and the changing context (such as advancements in technologies).

Conclusion

We now know more about teaching and learning. As we think about what we want participants to gain from an internship program, it is not enough to simply place them in the workplace and hope they learn. New ideas about experiential education help us to understand what key elements are necessary to have a successful experience for all participants. If we are going to continue to work to inspire young people to take an interest in government and public service, we must continue to think of ways to invest in their learning, to provide the opportunity for real experiences. The OLIP programme provides a good example of such an approach and can serve as a model for such internships.