1. Definition and Overview

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) definition states: “An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.”

Internships can be completed in either academic or non-credit contexts. The same is true for paid and unpaid experiences if each role of the internship experience is defined and adhered to. The roles of an internship experience are: Student Intern, Experience Provider (sometimes referred to as the “employer”), Faculty Sponsor, and, in most universities, an office with internship advisors that arranges and oversees internships. This office insures safety, legality, policy compliance, learning for the student, good partnership for/with the provider, and evaluation/assessment. At CU Denver, this office is the Experiential Learning Center (ELC). Each student internship is required to be documented using an online Internship Learning Agreement through the ELC.

2. Best Practices Guidelines

The minimum standard features of an Internship according to the NACE’s definition are as follows:

Course-embedded: “a learning experiences that provides for applying the knowledge gained in the classroom”;

Learning-driven: “There are clearly defined learning objectives/goals related to the professional goals of the student’s academic coursework”

Supervised: “there is supervision by a professional with expertise and educational and/or professional background in the field,” an Experience Provider who provides “routine feedback” to the student

Resourced: “There are resources, equipment, and facilities provided by the host employer that support learning objectives/goals”

Transferable: “the skills or knowledge learned must be transferable to other employment settings”
Also refer to the National Society of Experiential Education’s “Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities” and to NACE’s “15 Best Practices for Internship Programs.”

The U.S. Department of Labor recommends that all parties involved be aware of these six criteria for insuring that the internship is truly educational:

1. The internship, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to training which would be given in an educational environment;
2. The internship experience is for the benefit of the intern;
3. The intern does not displace regular employees, but works under close supervision of existing staff;
4. The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern; and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded;
5. The intern is not necessarily entitled to a job at the conclusion of the internship; and
6. The employer and the intern understand that the intern is not entitled to wages for the time spent in the internship.

3. Learning Outcomes for Internships

As guided by the Federal Department of Labor’s Fact Sheet #71 concerning internships and their relationship to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), learning outcomes for each specific internship should be delineated and agreed upon prior to the beginning of the experience. This is the responsibility of the Faculty Sponsor, though it is advisable that they consult with the Experience Provider and the Student Intern, who should define at least three learning outcomes of their own. ELC staff are trained and available to assist with both the faculty and student portions of this process.

At a broad level pertaining to all internships, national best practices suggest that they deliver the learning of one and ideally all of these Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs):

- Program Solving
- Teamwork
- Integrative and Applied Learning
- Foundations and Skills for Lifelong Learning.

In addition, as the faculty and student judge appropriate to the discipline, profession, and specific learning outcomes of the internship, one or more of the other ELOs may be useful as guiding learning outcomes:

- Civic Engagement
- Creative Thinking (including innovation)
- Critical Thinking
- Ethical Reasoning
• Global Learning
• Information Literacy
• Inquiry and Analysis (research)
• Intercultural Knowledge and Competence
• Oral Communication
• Quantitative Literacy
• Reading (professional-level reading)
• Written Communication.

The internship course may reference and use the VALUE Rubrics for one or more of these ELOs (linked above) and integrate these general outcomes into the discipline-and-profession-specific learning outcomes for the internship. The ELO should be expressed in the terms of that discipline or profession and serve the delivery of the relevant skills and knowledge.

4. Suggested Resources
