



Bald



Van de Water

## **Helping Students Thrive in the Global Job Market**

Joachim Bald  
Co-Director  
Oregon International Internship Program  
Oregon University System  
Jack Van de Water  
Dean of International Programs  
Oregon State University

**C**olleges and universities in the United States operate in an environment in which the accelerated pace of change is challenging the traditional roles of many institutions. In fact, it is already evident that we in higher education are engaged in a process of reclaiming our relevance to our states, our stakeholders, and ourselves. This process is taking place in a new context, one that has seldom been a primary concern of U.S. higher education. The context is global.

In its 1988 report, *Educating for Global Competence*, the American Council on Education very clearly identified globalization as one of the foremost challenges facing higher education today:

America's future depends upon our ability to develop a citizen base that is globally competent. Our nation's place in the world will be determined by our society — whether it is internationally competent, comfortable, and confident. Will our citizens be competent in international affairs, comfortable with cultural diversity at home and abroad, and confident of their ability to cope with the uncertainties of a new age and a different world? (p. vii).

It is not just the global marketplace that dictates change. The global context for U.S. universities reaching out to partners around the world has many dimensions. Today, knowledge is generated on a worldwide basis as faculty members collaborate with colleagues in

their academic disciplines around the world. The mobility of knowledge and new ideas has removed any pretense of boundaries for learning. We are now preparing students for borderless careers by providing them access to information and educational opportunities that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

The challenge to keep pace with the rate of change in the global environment is the focus of this essay, which describes a recent initiative of the Oregon University System. *Global Graduates, the Oregon International Internship Program*, is a cooperative education program aiming to equip students with international experience that is quickly becoming the price of entry into the global job market.

### Global Graduates — the Oregon International Internship Program

Cooperative education programs are an excellent way to improve graduates' chances of being hired and to collect valuable employer feedback that helps to keep the academic curriculum aligned with the requirements of the workplace. Global Graduates strives to take the cooperative-education concept further by combining professional experience with international competence. An overseas internship offers a capstone experience that builds on the study of foreign languages on campus, the internationalization of the curriculum, and the "traditional" study-abroad programs. Global Graduates offers a large network of worldwide internship opportunities that span the full spectrum of academic disciplines.

With generous seed money provided under the defense conversion act, the Oregon University System was in the fortunate position to establish a professionally staffed statewide internship infrastructure. In less than three years, Global Graduates developed an inventory of more than 150 internship sites throughout Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa and has to date placed 450 students in individually arranged work assignments. These placements cover the full range of academic programs and include internships as diverse as sampling tree species in the Brazilian rain forest, organizing the world handball championship tournament in Japan, and teaching social science at a German vocational-training school. The important federal investment in the initiative enabled Global Graduates not only to arrange the placements but also to provide substantial scholarship grants as a supplement to regular financial aid and stipends offered by the employer. To date, these scholarship grants amount to a total of nearly \$1.3 million.

### Finding Start-Up Funds

No ready answer exists to the most common question asked by colleagues in the field, which is, of course: Where can one find sufficient funding? Clearly, the favorable circumstances that led to the award of the federal start-up capital would not be easy to duplicate elsewhere. In fact, now that the funding for the initial four years of the program is nearing its end, it becomes clear that the

only sustainable fiscal basis is an equitable sharing of costs among the constituents who benefit from this activity. More specifically, a substantial personal investment is required from the student, as are a commitment of resources from regular university budgets, and stipends or in-kind support for interns from host organizations that receive their services.

The good news is that millions of dollars in resources are not required to begin such an internship effort. By concentrating initially on one geographic area and a limited number of academic disciplines, one can succeed with fewer than the three full-time internship scouts employed by Global Graduates. However, without at least one full-time administrator, it will be difficult to get an international internship program off the ground. The complexity of work permits and immigration regulations alone is frustrating enough to thwart half-hearted attempts at international internships.

### Benefits of International Internships

The benefits of an international work experience for the student are obvious. A challenging assignment overseas provides an important opportunity to hone professional skills and offers a rewarding cross-cultural experience. Foreign-language proficiency generally improves dramatically when the intern is immersed in a non-English speaking environment. Most students also are able to establish valuable professional contacts that enhance their employment prospects back home.

Overseas employers often participate because of special business interests in the United States and the Pacific Northwest region. Many see the internship as a way to establish valuable links with future American leaders in their industry. The presence of a United States intern also helps to improve English-language skills of the local employees and offers an opportunity to benefit from a fresh perspective on the organization's activities. While an internship always represents a substantial investment in training and mentorship, most employers are able to derive an immediate, tangible benefit from the carefully designed internship project.

For the Oregon University System, the existence of such a high-profile capstone program has become an important argument in student recruitment and retention. The program also is regularly cited as evidence for the system's effort to be more responsive to the human-resource needs of the globalizing business community in Oregon. Moreover, Global Graduates has had a measurable impact on the way students throughout the state view the quality of the public university system as a whole.

Unfortunately, although the benefits to the overseas employer are real, they are not quite as obvious as are those that accrue to students and the university. This explains why some overseas businesses may be initially reluctant to accept interns. Placing students in international assignments requires a major marketing effort that draws on resources throughout the entire university community.

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## Strategies for Connecting with Employers

The obvious places to start in reaching out to potential internship providers are existing international connections that can be leveraged to yield exclusive opportunities for students. Such linkages include:

- faculty research and consulting activities overseas,
- foreign born faculty with ties to businesses in their home countries,
- international alumni,
- study-abroad programs and exchange agreements, and
- American university staff stationed overseas.

Most faculty and alumni are eager to help and feel honored to assist in this effort. Global Graduates offers modest, cost-effective grants for travel and telecommunication expenses to contributing faculty.

## Internship Exchanges Versus Direct Selling

An alternative approach to developing internship sites that deserves serious consideration consists of reciprocal agreements with partner universities overseas. Here, the outreach to international employers is left to the partner institution, while the U.S. university commits to placing foreign students in internships at home. This approach is appealing because the partners focus on their respective strengths and mobilize their existing cooperative programs to the mutual benefit of their students at little incremental cost. Global Graduates' existing partner universities actually have a limited capacity to place students in internships.

After some initial consultations, it became clear that the existing international exchange partners of the Oregon University System actually have a limited capacity to place students in internships. Most traditional partner institutions follow a less advising-intensive university model, where students rely on individual efforts to find internships. There are, indeed, institutions of higher education in most target countries that operate in accordance with an application-oriented training mission and that generally have excellent links with local employers. Politically, however, cooperating with these institutions can alienate traditional university partners, who, in terms of compatibility of academic programs, are still considered to provide the better overall match for the Oregon University System. Regardless of the identity, affiliations, or mission of a foreign university partner, using a local intermediary in placing interns always results in a significant loss of control over the quality and relevance of the internship assignment. Most likely, the intermediary will impose an additional set of rules and deadlines, which risks complicating the framework for arranging an internship to such degree that few candidates will actually prevail.

At the same time, prearranging internships for foreign candidates simply on the basis of their paper files would have been a

difficult challenge for the Global Graduates staff. Given the fierce bottom-line mentality of American business, there exists little willingness to invest in candidates who are not eligible for permanent employment in the United States, most certainly not without a prior personal interview. Thus, Global Graduates decided to try to "sell" Oregon interns directly to employers overseas.

In addition to leveraging existing international faculty and alumni contacts, Global Graduates also made a great number of "cold calls" in areas of high student demand but few existing links to employers. The success rate here was less than 20 percent, as potential partners asked the typical "Now, where is Oregon?" and "Why should we hire someone from Oregon, if we have all these local students besieging us for summer jobs?"

### Working with Domestic Employers

Ideally, Global Graduates had hoped to develop a greater proportion of its overseas internships from domestic contacts that have international affiliations, such as foreign subsidiaries and joint ventures or state agencies with overseas offices. Riding piggyback with Oregon's international trade flows would have accentuated the economic-development dimension of the Global Graduates program and would automatically align the program priorities with Oregon's role in the global economy. Involving more Oregon employers in the internship development would provide an ideal basis for leveraging financial support for the interns and for lobbying the state legislature for sustainable funding.

Although there have been some individual successes, the overall record in regard to the cooperation with Oregon employers has been disappointing. The tight fiscal restraints in social service and government agencies generally do not allow any cost sharing, while private-sector employers tend to focus exclusively on cooperative programs that serve the immediate objective of hiring deficit talent in technical areas. Despite the globalization rhetoric, broader international approaches are simply not a priority in the U.S. business community.

### Finding the Right Candidates

In general, host organizations' expectations of American interns are quite high. Almost everywhere in the world, students are keenly pursuing opportunities to study or work in the United States and the limited number of such openings typically is awarded in a rigorous selection process. This explains why employers routinely expect elite credentials from American candidates seeking overseas internships. A candidate profile typically calls for a combination of fluency in the local language and advanced industry-specific skills at a level that few U.S. undergraduate students can offer.

"Selling" undergraduate students to overseas employers who have free pick of highly qualified local students is a challenge. It is essential to emphasize those particular qualities where U.S. undergraduate students shine in international comparison. Most overseas counterparts readily concede that they have much to learn from U.S. students in terms of computer skills, customer-service attitude, and a positive "can-do" approach to work. But how do you find these high achievers with advanced foreign-language skills and motivate them to invest in an international experience when looming financial-aid obligations exert pressure to graduate quickly and obtain employment? To the surprise of our university colleagues overseas, an international internship program does indeed require active student marketing. For that purpose, we funded a campus coordinator at each member university to identify potential interns, interview candidates, network with faculty, and supervise the academic component of the internship. In evaluating a candidate, Global Graduates attempts to stress not just academic achievement but the entire qualification profile, including life experiences, interpersonal skills, and employment history. The objective of the evaluation process is to achieve the best overall fit with the internship assignment and the organizational culture of the employer.

### Intercultural Communication Skills are Crucial

Despite the emphasis foreign partners generally place on the job-specific credentials, it is extremely rare for a student to be terminated or receive negative evaluations because of lacking "hard" skills. In almost all instances, failures can be attributed to inappropriate behavior and lack of intercultural sensitivity.

For this reason, we began to supplement the selection process with an increasingly elaborate orientation procedure that stresses basic skills of how to adapt successfully to a foreign culture and how to navigate the minefield of cultural expectations. All participants are required to attend a three-day orientation seminar at a retreat facility to work on their intercultural-communication skills with a team of professional trainers. Although many interns balk at the "touchy-feely" nature of this experiential learning approach, it is indeed the personal undercurrents that almost always determine the success of an internship project.

### Program Assessment

A program of the scope of Global Graduates must report back to its constituents — students, employers, and the university community — within a clear framework of accountability. This requires defining a set of objectives and measurable indicators that can capture the value added to the students' education, the benefits derived by the employer, and the impact of the program in terms of the public image of the university system. The data for the systematic program assessment are compiled from a great number of sources, including

the student's application dossier and internship report, the formal interview, behavioral observations at the orientation retreat and during the internship, as well as the formal employer evaluation and informal feedback from the host organization.

Now that an increasing number of graduates of the program are beginning their professional careers, Global Graduates has also begun to track the long-term career impact of students' international experience via an alumni newsletter and a periodic alumni questionnaire. The wealth of data generated by the assessment activity will establish a credible basis for demonstrating that this form of international outreach is indeed worth the investment.

### Summary

An international internship program should be part of any comprehensive international outreach agenda. By definition, internships are a student-centered activity. They deliver tangible benefits to student stakeholders and provide the international competence that has become essential for a successful career in any profession. At the same time, marketing students to employers overseas forces the higher-education system to move beyond traditional university contacts and define its role in the global marketplace. ■

### References

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### About the Authors

Joachim Bald is co-director of the Oregon International Internship Program for the Oregon University System. He worked for Commerzbank AG, Frankfurt, Germany, from 1990 to 1995 and last served as assistant area manager for the former Soviet Union. Bald is a certified management accountant and holds a graduate degree in business from the University of Dortmund, Germany. In 1995 he received a doctorate from the School of Economics and Business Administration at Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany, with a dissertation on the economic transition process in Russia.

Jack Van de Water is dean of International Programs at Oregon State University and assistant vice chancellor for International Programs of the Oregon University System. He has served as president of the Association of International Education Administrators, received two Fulbright awards, and was an American Council on Education Fellow in Academic Administration. Van de Water completed his graduate degrees in international relations and comparative and international education at Syracuse University after finishing undergraduate studies at St. Lawrence University.