Working For Free: The Benefits of Internships
-- by Kay Peterson, Ph.D.

College isn't the only way to prepare for a career. New grads need to offer something extra to prospective employers. That's where an internship comes in.

An internship is an employment situation in which a student works (often for free) in order to gain hands-on experience. Internships offer valuable work experience; they help you develop marketable skills; and they beef up your resume. Best of all, they can help you land a job after college.

But internships can also help you throughout your college career. Here are a number of things internships help you do:

**Get Your Foot in the Door**

For the most competitive careers, like journalism or theatre, internships are essential. In a crowded job market, an internship provides:

- **Experience.** Studying a major is one thing; applying that knowledge to 'real world' situations is entirely another. In an internship, you learn to back up your smarts with action.
- **Contacts.** Working with professionals, you tap into a network that can offer references, advice and information about new job opportunities.
- **A future job.** Many companies use their internship programs to bolster their recruitment efforts. Working with interns gives them the chance to try out motivated, ambitious students before employing them. If the intern makes the grade, the company may make a permanent job offer.

**Develop New Skills**

Internships can also help you diversify your background and experience. While it's good to have an area of strength - a focus for your career - more diverse skills in a variety of fields can make you more marketable to a potential employee. This type of internship is especially important for liberal arts majors. Adding some practical job skills to your academic expertise makes you a much better candidate for any job.

**Do Some Comparison Shopping**

Use an internship to sample various fields before choosing your major. You may not need specialized skills to do this sort of internship; many organizations rely on interns for projects that require only general skills and a good work ethic. This sort of internship gives you important insights into the typical workday in this company or field. Exploring careers in this way can help you choose a major - and a future career. So you see, there are different kinds of internships for different phases of your college career. Not merely resume builders, internships can play a crucial role in every stage of career planning. The time to think about applying for an internship is now - plan early, and use these 'experimental careers' as a means to pave the way to a bright future.