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FIELD EXPERIENCE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS MANAGEMENT

THE MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY APPROACH

Lester V. Manderscheid and Bernie Ferres

The concept of earning academic credit for career related work performed outside the classroom has many names. Internship, cooperative program, field placement, experiential education, work-study program, and field experience are the more common names for such activities. In our program at MSU we have chosen to use the term "field experience" and this term shall be used throughout this paper. In a session at the 1974 annual meetings dealing with the advantages and disadvantages of field experience Milton Snodgrass presented as part of his paper the historical background of field experience and included a definition that is still appropriate. "Defined broadly," Snodgrass wrote, "the concept encompasses any off-campus work or study experience with a private business or government agency which is organized by the university for which academic credit and/or pay is received by the student." [4] Formal programs incorporating field experience into the curriculum have been in existence for over 70 years. The merits of academic credit for field experience are still debated by many academicians and undoubtedly will continue to be argued. Ultimately, the decision to incorporate a field experience component into an agricultural economics curriculum relates to the faculty's definition of education and the value placed on field experience as an integral part of education.

In the Department of Agricultural Economics at MSU we have concluded that field experience is an academic credit worthy endeavor. In

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this paper we shall describe how the field experience program evolved, the guidelines for doing field experience, how it is managed, the benefits to the student and the Department, evaluation problems we have encountered, and recommendations for establishing a field experience.

Background

To place the field experience in perspective it is necessary to give a brief background of the Department major. In 1969 the Department faculty renewed their commitment to undergraduate education and designed two new undergraduate majors: Food Systems Economics and Management (FSM) and Public Affairs Management (PAM). Both majors, of course, are based on the discipline of economics. The FSM major resembles a traditional undergraduate Agricultural Economics major except that it takes a system approach to food that encompasses production of food at the farm level to consumption of food at the table. Graduates of this major generally obtain employment in the private sector with firms that form part of the vast food system. The PAM major is more innovative and indeed many students are surprised to find such a major in a College of Agriculture. The impetus for designing such a curriculum arose from the observation and experience of many faculty members that indicated the need for educated people to work in local governments, particularly in rural areas, in state government, associations dealing with government, and in organizations serving the agricultural community. Certain faculty felt that prospective employees and potential administrators in these areas would benefit from a curriculum that incorporated applied economics and political science. Graduates of PAM could be expected to obtain employment in the public sector at all levels of government. Indeed, two of the

graduates in the early 1970s, just as the new major was being implemented, served as prototypes: one young man became the representative to the Michigan legislature from a rural area and the other became executive director of the Michigan Beef Industry Commission after managing the legislative campaign of the other student.

As enrollment in the PAM major began to grow the need for a supervised work experience in governmental agencies became apparent. Students were raising questions about how information they were acquiring in the PAM core courses fit into actually working in a governmental position. Faculty members teaching core courses were presenting enticing case studies and examples based on their own experiences with government. Another stimulus for establishing a field experience component in the curriculum was the very tight job market in 1973-74 and the emphasis placed by employers on relevant work experience. In fact, one PAM student felt that field experience was so essential in the curriculum that he wrote a 60-page paper (for independent study credit) describing the theory, rationale, and structure for the development of a field experience program.

During 1974-75 the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources was developing a College-wide internship program for students to gain career related experience for credit in a supervised setting. The expectation of the 13th Term Program, as it was called, was that a student would work full-time for one term in the private or public sector, be paid a salary, and would earn up to 10 term credits. Efforts to utilize the 13th Term Program with government units were frustrated by Civil Service rules and the lack of funds available for paying students in such a program. A great deal of advance work was necessary to develop paying programs in

government and obtain commitment by an agency to such a program. Many students were unwilling to take a whole term away from the classroom for such an experience, despite its relevance and potential payoff. Other factors that dampened enthusiasm for the College program were the higher registration fees and the increased costs if the student had to move away from the campus area. However, in the 1974 fall term a placement was secured with a local township government for a student who was willing to do a 20 hour/week field placement. Both the student and the township supervisor spoke highly of the experience. In the 1975 winter term the undergraduate academic adviser in the Agricultural Economics Department was able to secure a part-time placement for another student with the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission to work on a transportation planning study. This involved 12 hours of work/week for 10 weeks for which the student received three academic credits. The student received no money for her work and the credit was earned under PAM 480: Supervised Independent Study. The student gained valuable insights into the working of a regional planning commission and contributed significantly to the completion of an important study for which there was an urgent need. Because of this student's work experience with the Regional Planning Commission and her outstanding academic performance, the academic adviser was able to arrange a full-time, paid placement for 1975 spring term with the Michigan Department of State Highways and Transportation located in Lansing. In this placement the student served as a staff member in the Rail Planning Section and made an important contribution to a state rail plan that was mandated by recent federal legislation. A quote from an 11-page summary paper submitted by the student as part of the evaluation

process indicates the kind of learning that can take place in such a field experience:

I believe the value of my internship is that I have begun to develop a real understanding of the attitudes and strategies I must develop if I hope to be both an effective professional and be satisfied with my own performance. Although I had been made aware of the pressures and games which exist within the system in some of my classes, seeing it firsthand and being affected by it every day gave me an understanding of its importance which I did not have before.... In order to be effective and productive you must fend off all the extraneous struggles, pressures, and hassles with a minimum of your time and energy.[1]

In the fall of 1975 the academic adviser was able to arrange a 16 hour/week field experience in the Michigan Department of Management and Budget, Office of Intergovernmental Relations, for a young man who worked on analyzing retirement and pension programs for local government employees. This student was subsequently hired by this office as a permanent employee and is making his way up the administrative ladder.

These forays into arranging field experience opportunities for students demonstrated three things:

1. the actual learning that could take place in a supervised field experience;
2. the benefits obtained by student and agency;
3. the amount of time required by a University representative (academic adviser or faculty member) to arrange work experience of high quality and worthy of academic credit.

An important consideration following from this third point is whether a Department can justify the investment required to develop a field experience component in a curriculum. Fortunately, from a Department budget perspective, the State Department of Civil Service in Michigan was in the process of developing a program whereby university and college students in Michigan could gain experience working in state government. The Michigan Government Education Internship Program (MGEIP) was established in 1975 with a one-year grant from appropriations under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act. A person was hired as an internship coordinator in the Department of Civil Service and a major part of his time was to be spent working with all the departments in state government to identify internship opportunities for students. Learning-service agreements were worked out which specified the kind of work to be done by the intern.

The development of this state program coincided with a rapid increase in the number of PAM majors and an expressed interest in gaining field experience. The policies of the Michigan Government Internship Program were complementary to expectations that had evolved in our limited use of field experience. Selected statements from the state policy are quoted here:

The Michigan Government Internship Program shall be based upon the manpower needs of government and the academic requirements of the participating institutions of higher education and students.

A position description will be developed for each internship position.... In all internship positions the duty assignments will not involve routine assignments, clerical, or custodial tasks.

The academic merit of an internship program will be adjudged by the College or University concerned.[3]

Development of Guidelines for Field Experience

To formalize the program we developed a set of guidelines which described the procedure for obtaining a field experience placement, for selecting a faculty supervisor, for determining academic credit, and for evaluation of performance. The students enrolled for field experience credits under PAM 480: Supervised Independent Study. They were expected to work for the agency a minimum of four hours/week for 10 weeks for each credit earned. Thus, 16 hours of work/week were worth four academic credits. Most students opted for a four or five credit field experience. As a Department, we set nine credits of field experience as the maximum number that could be counted toward the 180 credits required for graduation.

Under PAM 480, grading was on a numerical scale or at the student's option, credit/no credit. The vast majority of students chose to receive a numerical grade. The only bases for grading were the required summary paper evaluating the experience and a daily journal of activities.

Table 1 shows the participation of PAM students in field experience since winter term 1976. To date, we have not had one negative experience in over 60 placements. Agency supervisors who are generally mid-level civil servants or higher have indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the work of the students placed in their offices. The students have responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to practice their skills and apply their knowledge in a professional work environment. All of them have rated the time spent in a government agency as a valuable learning experience. Faculty members have reacted favorably to their

Table 1.

<u>Field Placements - W 1976 - SS 1978</u>					
	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>	<u>Total</u>
1976	5 (2 W, 2 B)	11 (3 W, 2 B)	5 (4 W, 2 B)	2 (1 W, 1 B)	23
1977	4 (0 W, 2 B)	11 (5 W, 3 B)	9 (5 W, 4 B)	1 (0 W, 0 B)	25
1978	5 (3 W, 1 B)	9 (6 W, 2 B)	5 (4 W, 2 B)		

W = Women; B = Black

supervisory role in the field experience and to the additional insights that "experienced" students bring back to the classroom.

Management of Field Experience

The vast majority of students doing field experience arrange them through the Michigan Government Internship Program. A few students either through their own efforts or with the assistance of the academic adviser or a faculty member perform field experience in other government agencies. In addition, this year we have had two young women participate in the Foreign Agricultural Service's Cooperative Educational Program in Washington, D.C. and another working in Chicago city government. These three experiences have been processed through the College 13th Term Program since the work experiences are full-time, paid employment and away from the campus area.

Developing a field experience program for our PAM majors has been facilitated by our proximity to the state's capitol. Most of the state government offices are within a 15-minute car or bus ride from the campus. The fact that the Michigan Department of Civil Service created an internship coordinator position also made the development of a field experience program much easier. If we had had to make all of the agency contacts ourselves, we would not have been able to encourage the broad participation that has occurred. We still occasionally make personal contacts for particular students or placements. Our PAM graduates now working in state government have helped promote field experience within their units and facilitate new placement opportunities.

Problems with Evaluation

Throughout the existence of the field experience program the faculty supervisors have been somewhat uneasy about giving a numerical grade for field experience. And it did not seem desirable to ask the agency supervisor to award an academic grade since they would have little basis for establishing such a grade. Thus, about a year ago we initiated the necessary paperwork to offer field experience under its own course number with grading to be done on a PASS or NO PASS basis. The request was approved at all levels of the University and starting this summer students enrolled for field experience under PAM 490: Supervised Field Experience. We initiated this request for several reasons. One was to identify field experience on the student's transcript so that employers would be able to separate it from other types of independent study. Another reason was to eliminate the tendency to award a 4.0 (an A grade) for field experience because of the difficulty in assessing an appropriate grade. The PASS/NO PASS grading system is consistent with field experience evaluation in other departments at MSU. Some other departments, however, are more liberal in the credits they allow for field experience. Two majors require a full term of field experience for graduation and the students receive 15 credits. Two require 12 to 24 credits of field experience for graduation while others allow essentially no credit for field experience. We have no plans to make the field experience a required part of the student's academic program. To do so could impose a real placement burden when we do not control the number of majors. Additionally, there are a few students who do not wish to pay or

use academic credits for field experience. Furthermore, most faculty do not deem field experience as important enough to make it mandatory.

Specification of Learning Goals

As our experience with the program increased, we felt a need to structure the learning to some extent. Participation in a University-wide task force on experiential education helped provide a framework around which to add structure and to focus the learning experience. A new set of guidelines has been developed and is being used, effective this summer. Six categories of learning goals have been identified [2] and examples given of concrete learning outcomes that might be involved. These goals and a brief description of each are:

1. Specific Job Competencies: Particular understanding or work skills you would like to learn.
2. Career Exploration: First-hand observation of the daily routine of professionals in an area of interest. (Direct involvement in the types of work involved in a field, knowledge of job opportunities that might be available, familiarity with occupational literature and organizations.)
3. Broadening Horizons: Understanding how the legislative process and the bureaucracy works or fails.
4. Interpersonal Skills: Learning how to deal with pressure and tension in work relationships and how to communicate what you know.
5. Taking Responsibility: Learning how to organize a complicated job so that a tight schedule can be met.
6. Research Skills: How to relate academic knowledge and seek new information to meet the demands of a particular job.

Prior to the start of the field experience the student is asked to rate the importance of each goal and to list specific learning objectives he/she may have. With this exercise it is hoped the student will begin to assume more responsibility for his/her own learning. About the middle of the term the student meets with the faculty supervisor to discuss progress made in meeting the objectives. Again at the end of the term the student and faculty supervisor discuss the field experience in terms of the learning objectives originally specified. We expect that these goals will also help structure the daily journal and the summary paper required of each student.

Some Conclusions and Suggestions

We now have over three years' experience with field experience and feel comfortable offering the following conclusions and suggestions:

1. Field experience is a valuable learning environment especially for students with no prior work experience in that environment.
2. Work experience may or may not be a significant learning experience. Some structure to identify and evaluate educational outcomes is necessary.
3. Field experience can lead directly to full-time employment.
4. Development of field experience opportunities can be costly in terms of faculty time.
5. Grading on a PASS/NO PASS basis reduced the pressure on faculty to award a numerical or letter grade.
6. Field experience probably should not be required of all students.

References

- [1] Caswell, Julie, "Internship Report: Rail Planning Section - Michigan Department of State Highways and Transportation," unpublished field experience summary paper, Michigan State University, spring 1975.
- [2] Duley, John and Sheila Gordon, College-Sponsored Experiential Learning - A CAEL Handbook, Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, Columbia, Maryland, 1977.
- [3] Michigan Department of Civil Service, Michigan Government Internship Program, brochure, 1975.
- [4] Snodgrass, Milton M., "Interfacing the Classroom and the World of Work," Am. J. Agr. Econ. 56:1153-1162, December 1974.

Footnotes

Lester V. Manderscheid is a Professor and Bernie Ferres is an Under-graduate Academic Adviser in Agricultural Economics, Michigan State University.