

Students Pursuing Passion: Internships, Exploration, and Discovery

There is no shortage of pressure for students today. As a society, we tell these young minds that they need to be thinking of college from earlier and earlier ages, and even students in elementary school are being moved down this path. This creates a significant amount of stress for students because amidst all of this, they are trying to figure out who they want to be and what they want to do with their lives.

Our work is based on the voices of the students, and when we listen we often hear about the difficulty of finding passion in the environments set up by academic institutions. They feel trapped by the breakneck pace they need to move at, just to keep up, never mind standing out. College admissions are rising, and students are ever more mindful of differentiating themselves from their peers. However, actually doing so is a full-time job, and doesn't leave much room for the exploration and reflection needed to find a true passion.

So we asked the question: what if we gave students the opportunity to dig into areas they find interesting and to guide themselves through the learning and discovery process? Do students develop flexible skills while finding meaning in their work?



We believe they do, and through our internship program we have been collecting the data to prove it.

About the internship program

For a little bit of context, our internship program functions differently from most. We ask students to pitch ideas to us of a project they want to do, find them an industry professional to serve as a hands-off mentor and guide, and then have them carry out the project. We have seen students make video games, virtual reality apps, mobile apps, films, websites, custom garments, robots, souped up PowerWheels cars, paintings, 3d models, and more. Each student, in their own way, explores an industry that they think they might want to pursue as a career.

The program is a hit, and roughly 50% of our interns re-apply for another internship. Where this gets interesting is when students explain the design of their next project with us. This is where we start to see the development of passion as students isolate qualities they liked about a certain project and extrapolate where they want to go next. Sometimes this leads them deeper into an industry, and other times it leads them to a new field entirely. Whatever the case, these students are developing a specialized skillset that is congruent with who they want to be and highly transferrable wherever they may go.

As we mentioned before, our work is dedicated to listening to the voices of students. So, enough about us, let's hear from them.

Discovery

The untold story of passion discovery is the process of ruling out those areas that are not quite right. When we first began our internships, we were examining the role of structure in learning. After six weeks of intense work for the first set of interns on their projects, we administered the midpoint interviews and were surprised to find that roughly 25% of them had now re-evaluated their desired career path.

"I want to say that it is a major focus that I would like to pursue. Maybe not video games, but something that involves programming and may branch off into other fields. It might not be video games, but it would use those sorts of skillsets"

This student initially came in wanting to make games, but actually doing that work he realized that it might not be for him. It was clear, though, that there was value in the experience because he identified what it was about programming he liked. Other students found themselves enjoying a subject they had not expected: *"Until I did this I was not interested in video games at all... I was interested in visual storytelling through film-making... I'm more interested in it now; this made me think of video games as something to do in this future."*

Since then, we have had students returning to us to further explore the passion areas they discovered through past internships. Game makers coming back for music production or animation, film directors returning to get deeper into editing or drone design (for filming), and robotics specialists applying for

automotive tech; we have seen a wide breadth of shifts, but each has a reason and skills that they can bring from past internships into their new ones.

Transfer

"I'm learning a lot from it...it's a super cool project; the CAD modeling is huge; it's not just for this project, in this day and age CAD modeling is a big part of engineering which is what I want to do."

One of the challenges of affording students the chance to find their passion is ensuring that they are still developing the skills they need for both the immediate and long-term future. Students need to pass classes, memorize information for standardized tests, and be competent in each of their school subjects if they want to have a shot at selective, post-secondary schools.



Yet today, we see the educational discussion moving towards the concept of both 21st century skills, like teamwork, time-management, leadership, and critical thinking, as well as teaching advanced technical proficiencies. In any event, these are the skills that students take with them wherever they go, and we see them in the interns:

"I think the one thing that surprised me is in the end I stood out as a leader, I was always the one to get back on track. [The team] would check in with me, and I felt like I was the leader in the group and I didn't expect that."

"For me it was more about being involved in a group and having something accomplished by collaborating."

It is extremely difficult to communicate the importance of these skills in a classroom environment. They cannot be immediately applied to solve a problem, but anyone who has worked in a professional environment knows how critical they are.

Students need exposure to all of the options available to them as well as a base understanding of the standard host of subjects. However, as they gain clarity about their desired path in life, having a solid foundation of these 21st century skills and technologies will enable them to then gain the specialized knowledge they need while remaining effective in the workforce.

We believe the very best way to teach these skills is to give students access to the same real-world experiences that forged them in ourselves.

Drive

One thing that has been fairly universal in our internship program has been motivation and drive. It is easy to think of teenagers as apathetic, but our experience has shown anything but that. In fact, when given the opportunity to explore without the pressures of grades and ominous tests, our interns have transformed their learning into a journey, rather than just a destination. When every step of the process holds something exciting and meaningful, the students dive right in.

Imagine being a student and told that this test, this grade, will someday factor into a decision, made by a person you will probably never meet, that will determine your future. Fear is, as humans well know, only an effective motivator with regards to immediate situations. Passion, on the other hand, is about the long-haul, the incremental gains that are self-driven and create greatness; students do not just recognize this, they embrace it.

"I'm really passionate about this. I don't think I've ever wanted to see something succeed more than this project."



When students design their own projects and have the opportunity to try different things, this type of motivation is an inevitability. The pressure they feel is not the result of fear, but rather of excitement and a desire to show that they can achieve whatever goal they set for themselves.

Conclusion

Being totally focused on future outcomes is an easy problem to find in education. Learning is a process that is continually building on itself, like a pyramid, yet solely results-driven education is far easier to track and standardize based on a few test scores or other metrics. There is a place for those results and tests, but they just do not paint the full picture and they turn learning into a chore for many students.

Our internship program has shown the importance of the journey, and that there is value in allowing students the ability to explore their passion areas. Just like adults, though, students can be prone to seeing only their desired outcomes, rather than reflecting on the process. This is where we see guidance by mentors and teachers being critical to student success.

Traditional classroom education is not going anywhere, we know this and believe it is important for student development. Our goal with this is to express the importance of exploration and encourage educators to introduce a bit more exploration and journey into their classes. Projects open to multiple

expression forms, multi-media exploration, and an emphasis on student voice can all help young learners to feel comfortable finding their own paths.

While it might not be as measurable on a scantron form, approaching learning like a journey puts power in the hands of the students and empowers them to take hold of their futures.