

Providing Internship Guidance to Nontraditional Students

Spotlight for Career Services Professionals

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At Old Dominion University (ODU), a sizable segment of students are outside of what the school considers a “traditional” college student—a full-time student in the 18- to 24-year-old range.

“We have students who have worked or served in the military,” explains Alice Jones, the Old Dominion University Career Management Center’s associate director of student and alumni programs and liaison to the College of Arts and Letters. “Many of our nontraditional students have families. They may be in our distance learning program or are international students.”

The career management center has even had an 82-year-old student. With a high population of students who commute to campus, one of the main challenges for career services in providing them assistance with their internship searches is that these students tend to only come to campus for classes. These and other nontraditional ODU students are often balancing multiple responsibilities, such as duties associated with having a family, a full-time job, or more. Still others take classes at one of the university’s distance sites.

“Nontraditional students often don’t keep traditional hours,” Jones says. “And many of these students have important decisions to make, such as whether to take an internship for credit or to continue working in the job that they use to pay for school. They tend to know what direction they want to go, but they need us for guidance and to help them make sure that their window is clear.”

Use the following tips to assist nontraditional students with their internship searches:

- **Make career services convenient**—To meet the needs of nontraditional students, you may want to reconsider how and when your career center offers its services and events. For example, if you don’t already, consider offering evening hours for appointments, conducting mock interviews by video, archiving webinars online so students can access them when their schedules permit, and more.
- **Manage student expectations**—Some nontraditional students have the view that career services does the work for them or that because they have some work experience, they’re going to go from college into an executive-level position. Help them to realize the realities of the internship process and of the professional world.
- **Check your assumptions**—Don’t assume nontraditional students know how to conduct an internship search because they have had extensive work experience. Or don’t assume all students are looking for career advancement. A student might be learning for personal fulfillment and an internship might be a requirement.
- **Build a relationship**—The best way to manage student expectations and check your assumptions is to build a relationship with each student. Give honest feedback. Communicate your role in a student’s search for an internship, and identify the barriers—for example, overcoming stereotypes—he or she may face. You may need to refocus their efforts and set more realistic goals.
- **Market the student’s experience and skills**—Identify the student’s experience and skills that would translate well to the internship he or she is seeking. For example, a military veteran might have strong leadership and negotiating skills, know how to work as part of a team, and speak a different language. These are certainly skills that would be attractive to a potential employer.
- **Work with the right employers**—Communicate to employers the differences in and benefits of recruiting nontraditional students for internships. Seek employers that are flexible and are willing to allow for alternative work schedules.