

Marilyn Wilson heads the Academic Internship Program at UCSD

August 19, 1981

When Marilyn Wilson was in college in the 1950s there were no such things as internship programs. But that didn't stop the woman who now runs the Academic Internship Program at the University of California, San Diego.

"I was a political science major at Michigan State," explained Wilson. "We didn't have internships in those days but I had an intense need to get involved. So I convinced my department to let me work on a political campaign and do reports and papers. That was my first taste of actually trying practical experience for academic credit."

Today Wilson dishes out healthy servings of work experience to UC San Diego students. Her interns are serving at such diverse placements as the government of Kenya, the San Diego Zoo, Senator Ted Kennedy's office, Defenders Inc., the Los Angeles Times, Bank of America, and the Uganda Mission to the United Nations.

"An internship is a way to earn academic credit by working in your major field. It provides an opportunity for a student to integrate all of the theory they learn in their classwork with the practical aspect of the real job," stated Wilson.

"But it isn't just work experience. The university does not give credit for work experience," added Wilson. "The students work with a faculty advisor with expertise in the field. They must do a research paper that allows them to integrate the theory and practice."

Started in 1975 with 12 students, the Academic Internship Program now handles 350 students a year. Although some students formulate their own internships, most find placements through the extensive job site files Wilson has built in her 4 years as coordinator of the program.

"We have a contract agreement in each case," said Wilson. "The contract sets out the training, orientation and the job description. The contract must be discussed between the supervisor and the student and signed by both of them."

With today's tough employment climate and the fierce competition to get into top graduate schools, Wilson believes the advantage an internship gives a student can not be stressed enough.

"I look at this primarily as an academic experience but there is no question it has very strong practical advantages for students. It's practically impossible to get into medical school or a job in communications without some kind of internship or volunteer experience. I think the intern experience is preferable because it does have the academic component."

After an internship, Wilson finds students are clearer on career goals and "they come back to school with a lot more enthusiasm and interest in their school work." But what about the students who discover they are in the wrong field?

"I love it when that happens because I saved a student three years of law school or who knows how many years of medical school," said Wilson. "I think it's just as valuable to find out this isn't the right field for you."

Wilson discovered first-hand what it is like to be in the wrong field. After earning her B.A. at Michigan State and her master's degree in political science at UC Berkeley, Wilson married and took on the full-time job of raising a family.

"Finally I decided to come back to work, which is not easy after twenty years. I am the classic person they write all the how-to-find-a-job books about. Through my husband's law office experience I knew probate very well. So I created a position for myself at Bank of America as a trust officer. Once I got there I found out I didn't really like banking," recalled Wilson.

"I was incredibly lucky to find this," said Wilson of her UC San Diego post. "There are so few jobs like this that combine my two loves--the university and the business world."

Wilson views her students as a "bridge" between UC San Diego and the business community, a "cross fertilization tremendously valuable" to both parties.

"When students go out on internships, they are representatives of the university. I think the business and professional people in the community are extremely pleased. The students have been excellent ambassadors for the university."

Employers who would like to learn more about acquiring a student intern should contact Marilyn Wilson, Academic Internship Office, UC San Diego, Q-022, La Jolla, CA, 92093 or phone 452-4355.

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(August 19, 1981)