

Internships for Graduate Students: Myth vs. Reality

MSU BEST

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Broadening Experiences in Scientific Training

About MSU BEST:

The MSU BEST program is a cohort program with two parts: 1) A full year of professional development training (workshops, seminars, guest speakers, etc.) and 2), Two separate internships. These are expected to be short- to medium-term, professional immersion experiences (not merely job shadowing or site visits) and are often based around a project.

Myth: “But international students can’t do internships! They’re not allowed!”

Reality: There are restrictions, yes, but it is possible.

MSU BEST serves all eligible biomedical graduate students and post docs, including international students. To successfully navigate the visa challenges of an internship, we partner closely with our campus colleagues. We run everything past those with expertise in student visas, to make sure any internship experience aligns with visa restrictions, and fill out the necessary paperwork when relevant (i.e., the Curricular Practical Training or the Optional Practical Training programs).

We also partner closely with different offices to offer internship experiences on campus for our students with challenging visa restrictions. Examples include projects to work on scientific communication skills with campus communication officers, teaching development with our office of faculty development, public science with our office for outreach and engagement, and others.

Tip: Valuable internships happen in a variety of places, not just private industry.

Myth: “It will take longer to finish if I let trainees try new things.”

Reality: BEST Trainees report the program to be motivating them to finish sooner.

At MSU BEST, we emphasize that our goal is for our trainees to be an active part of the decision-making process: to choose to do a post doc (or not), to choose to pursue a faculty career (or not). Our trainees use the internship experience as a catalyst—they often report the experience to give them a goal to work for! Instead of languishing in their lab, they are motivated to finish, to start a career they’re excited to pursue!

Tip: Find out what kind of data your institution has on time-to-degree. You might be surprised to see that your colleagues who support internships and co-curricular programs have their students finish more quickly!

Myth: “Internships are a waste of time for biomedical scientists and engineers.”

Reality: They’re a valuable use of time for most students.

Our BEST internship program has proven that BEST trainees use their internship to enhance their research, to develop a renewed vitality for their study, and to explore how their strengths and skills can contribute to their home lab environments. Experiencing project management, developing business acumen, and other experiences have made our trainees more likely to bring those skillsets back to the lab.

Also likely? Trainees are using their internship experience to rule out what they don’t like as much as reaffirm what they do—sometimes realizing that academic science IS their goal and where their strengths lie.

Tip: Support a variety of goals for students. Successful mentors realize that not all students are after the same career goal; using one’s skills and connections to help all students where they want to go? That’s GREAT mentoring.

Myth: “Full-time internships are the only useful kind of internship.”

Reality: Shorter term, or project-based, internships are useful, too.

Most of us working in science and graduate education realize the challenge of students working in full-time internships. That doesn’t mean that we take an “all or nothing” approach. At MSU, we find that short-term or project-based internships are useful: they can be coordinated with a trainee’s research training to complement the work underway without disrupting the lab excessively.

Tip: When you think of internships as project-based assignments, you start to see opportunities for students to expand their skillsets in different environments.

Thinking of starting an internship program for your graduate students?

1) **The PI SHOULD be involved.**

The BEST Trainee is not expected to figure out how to make it work alone, and by communicating openly, the trainee and PI can make sure to honor the time needed to be successful in an internship. Graduate students often imagine their PIs to be less flexible and supportive than they actually are. Plus, it's a bad idea to encourage students to "hide" professional activity from their PIs, advisors, or mentors. Find ways to bring everyone together around an idea to overcome any confusion or resistance!

Tip: Actively encourage the trainee takes the lead on determining the scope of work and the time, and shares that (for feedback, if necessary) with the PI and internship host.

2) **Expectations and guidelines should be clearly articulated:**

When will the project or internship start? How many hours will be expected? Is work done in person, or remotely? Who is supervising the intern? Clarifying these details early, helps avoid problems later on. Make sure the trainee, PI, and internship host are all clear!

Tip: Encourage frequent communication between the trainee and his or her PI and internship host. Ask what's going on, and how you can help?

3) **Think in terms of projects, and don't get caught up in terminology.**

Most people hear the word "internship" and think of a three-month, summer gig in private industry. Think more broadly--about how long, where, and who you know that could host a student and provide a meaningful professional experience.

We found at MSU that many people initially balked at the idea of a graduate students "intern," but when we explained that these were graduate students who wished to find new ways to engage with science and would be interested in doing a project with their office or organization, they started to get excited about what "cool" opportunities they could explore.

Tip: Don't fixate on what it's called: Focus on what you can help build together.

4) **Experimentation is valuable...even in careers. Even for graduate students and post docs.**

It's common practice on many campuses for students to enter their graduate studies and to rotate through labs, to find the research and mentor that connects to their skills, interests, and goals. Internships provide students the same opportunity: to explore different contexts that match their skills and interests.

Tip: Think of internships as an experiment!



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