

## The Impact of Ministry Internships at Saint Louis University

### Proceedings from the 2006 Institute on College Student Values

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#### Abstract

A goal of the VOICES Project at Saint Louis University is to create supportive communities through which students are better equipped to discern and develop their vocations and leadership qualities in light of their faith commitments and spirituality. VOICES has created ministry internships for students of any faith. Interns working in diverse faith settings have the opportunity to understand new cultures, engage in questions of justice, and respond to the particular needs of the community.

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#### The VOICES Project

As members of the Saint Louis University community, we demonstrate conduct and performance consistent with the University's mission—the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity. We strive always to do what is right for our community and for each other, with an overall goal to work toward the common good. The University's mission compels us to honor human dignity as we promote the common good by becoming men and women for others in everything we do.

The VOICES Project is funded by the Lilly Endowment at Saint Louis University to promote a sense of purpose and calling in all members of the university community. The project overall concerns itself with three elements of wholeness for students:

- Interiority
- Community
- Engaged service/works of justice

The name VOICES means:

**VO= Vocation, calling or purpose of one's life**

**I= Interiority** – In order to understand our calling, our purpose, one must take time to pray and/or reflect on the purpose and direction of our life.

**C= Community** – We build communities of faith, where faith can flourish more fully; and we promote professional communities, where we can model an integrated professional life for one another.

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**ES= Engaged service and works of justice** - Our communities of faith and our professional communities must send us out to repair the world and build structures of justice.

There are three goals for the Project:

- A. Promote reflection as a life habit for all members of the university community in order to bring about a more vibrant faith or spirituality among persons of faith in our university, as well as a fuller sense of humanity in every sector.
- B. Create supportive communities through which students are better equipped to discern and develop their sense of calling and leadership qualities in light of their faith commitments and spirituality, their academic and professional pursuits.
- C. Create challenging communities for faculty and staff in which these adults can nourish one another's callings, integrate their spirituality and faith with their professional lives, mentor and model for students the Jesuit charism of being women and men for others.

#### VOICES Project Internships

Among the mission-oriented programs at Saint Louis University, one where students best discover meaning and purpose, is the VOICES Project internships. These internships are designed for students specifically interested in ministry. The internships provide opportunities in praise and worship, youth or senior programming, religious education, community organizing, direct service, and more. In the course of their work, many students are learning to address the societal needs of specific groups including the economic poor, immigrants, and widows. The internship program is open to students from all academic disciplines and faith traditions. Students apply for positions in the spring for appointments during the following academic year. Interns work alongside ministerial staff and serve youth, seniors, immigrants, and the economic poor.

Through their work in nearby places of worship, students develop leadership skills, specifically the skills needed to create and implement programs in a faith-based setting. In addition, students develop a greater understanding of the importance of service. Students have a first-hand view of a church staff that works with many people, serving in numerous capacities, where every little bit can make a difference. Students are able to experience working in new surroundings, often drastically different from their own place of worship in terms of population and socioeconomic background. The VOICES internship experience gives the intern the opportunity to understand new cultures, engage in questions of justice, and respond to the distinct problems and needs of the community. While reflecting on her experiences, one student observed, "My internship made me more comfortable with going places that are different than my world, and I have also realized my own personal strengths and weaknesses a little bit better."

VOICES provides a mentor from Saint Louis University who coordinates projects with the ministry sites and leads the interns in small-group activities as well as individual spiritual direction. During the academic year, interns work approximately 10 hours per week at their sites where they meet with their mentors for ministry assignments, spiritual direction, and prayer. In addition, interns meet regularly with a mentor at Saint Louis University. On campus, at least twice a month, all interns participate in small-group meetings for faith-sharing and peer support. Students are able to learn "best practices" from one another and discuss challenges in ministry with their peers.

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Often interns develop a close relationship with their mentors, which not only provide ministry training, but also serve as models of strong moral character engaging in works of charity and justice. One expected outcome is that students involved in the VOICES Project will develop a commitment to respond to God's call and will carry this commitment outward to the communities in which they live and work, as well as the larger world. Specifically, students involved will be open to the possibility of full-time or volunteer ministry as a result of their experiences.

The VOICES Project looks for students who are committed to their personal faith lives and are able to interact well in a diverse setting. In addition, the interns should not be afraid to take initiative and be willing to respond to the needs of the community. After interns are selected for the program, they are placed in a religious congregation. The placement of interns [is](#) based on the following criteria: the interest and experience of student interns, the ministry needs of the sponsoring site, the religious affiliation of intern and site, and schedule availability for all involved.

#### Assessment

**I**t is the hope of the VOICES Project that the internships help students to find purpose and direction both in college and life after college by providing opportunities for prayer, reflection, spiritual community, and service specifically to congregations in their faith tradition.

As the internships were designed, planners raised the following questions:

- Does prayer bring wholeness?
- Does theological reflection provide a sense of purpose and direction to students?
- What are the measures of wholeness?
- How can you observe the increased sense of direction or enlightenment that a student experiences?

The VOICES Project has a small research team that is in place to ask and answer these questions. The research team meets a couple of times a month to consider the evolving programs and how to assess them. At the inception of the project, there were several specific outcomes VOICES wanted to see from the project as a whole; some of those outcomes were quantified, while others were not. Three of those outcomes were selected for the internship program. VOICES expected that the internship program could achieve these outcomes.

The VOICES Research Team decided to ask the students themselves what changes they have experienced around the big issues of wholeness and purpose. For two years, the team interviewed each of the 20 student interns at length. More recently, toward the end of their internships, students were interviewed in small groups, focus group style. But are student reports a good measure (or the best measure) of impact? Will the students tell us just what VOICES wants to hear, exaggerating the impact of the program on their lives? The Research Team quickly discovered that as a group, students are pretty willing to tell staff the brutal truth. Students are generally not shy about complaining and they do not seem inclined to say what they might think the project staff would like to hear.

VOICES tries to foster openness; making sure supervisors are not present when the student interns are interviewed. VOICES provides a climate of no party line, an expectation that no program is perfect, that evaluation can improve this program.

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The questions the team asked them have evolved and hopefully improved. In the two recent rounds of interviews and focus groups, the team began by asking interns to describe a remarkable experience from their internships. Some of the other questions asked included:

- Tell us a story of something remarkable that happened to you in your internship? What is the meaning of this story for you?
- How has your experience as an intern affected your spiritual life or thinking?
- What impact has it had on your academic or career goals?
- Are you open to the possibility of full-time or volunteer ministry in the future?

The VOICES Research Team distributed the questions to the individuals in advance to give them a chance to reflect on their experiences in advance of the interview or focus group.

### Findings

Through the internship program, students have the opportunity to understand new cultures and respond to the distinct problems and needs of the community. One student noted, “it’s made me feel more comfortable with going places that are different from my world, and I’ve also realized my own personal strengths and weaknesses a little bit better.”

In addition, students have gained opportunities for career exploration. VOICES interns have expressed interest in working in ministry full-time, whether in a place of worship or a faith-based agency. Some have gone on to seminary programs. Students have grown spiritually, through their ability to spend time in individual and communal prayer and reflection. In addition, their on-site mentors provide students many opportunities to grow in their faith. Similar to other internship programs, VOICES students acknowledged the appreciation for gaining “real world” experience in their work. In addition, interns have expressed that they have grown by doing something that makes a difference. One student summarized, “A big part of my choice in going into teaching is wanting to live out my faith and values in my professional life, in all aspects of my life . . . be sort of a holistic person in that way.”

Over and over our student interns experienced a familiar lesson about **service**: that they themselves are served by their experiences. One said: “it’s made me feel more comfortable with going places that are different from my world . . . and I’ve also realized my own personal strengths and weaknesses a little bit better.” Another said: “Working at the school has just been remarkable . . . It’s a community over there . . . It has been really good, really enriching for me. Having this community has been really neat.”

### Challenges

Over the past few years, the VOICES Project Internship Program although influential in students’ vocational exploration and spiritual growth, is not without challenges. Naturally sustainability is an issue. The VOICES Project is working to make the internships available for course credit, by working with academic departments across campus so that students can have the ministry experience while working toward their degree requirements. Finding appropriate sites for our students is somewhat of a challenge. It is ideal when the site has a mentor that can spend time with the students on a consistent basis, and that the student has an appropriate amount of structure in the ministry setting. In addition, students are placed in settings where they often times do not know anyone. It is in everyone’s best interest for the student interns to become comfortable in their settings as soon as possible. The quick immersion into the faith community fosters better communication, spiritual growth, and an overall more meaningful ministry experience for the students.

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