

THE AMERICAN CONSERVATION EXPERIENCE: INTERNSHIPS AS EXPERIENTIAL
LEARNING

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Introduction

The agricultural industry faces many natural resource challenges, and these will only grow as climate change exacerbates their impacts (Yang et al., 2024). Future generations must be equipped with the proper tools to create sustainable solutions. This is why an experiential education is vital. Students who directly participate in conservation can mobilize themselves to become agents of change for a sustainable future (Natori et al., 2025). The future agricultural workforce must be equipped with natural resource conservation management skills to ensure that we can feed communities for years to come without further land degradation. Encouraging students in agriculture and natural resource departments to pursue environmental internships can transform them into land stewards equipped to maximize outputs while conserving natural resources. Emphasizing experiential learning opportunities can foster deep learning, stimulate critical thinking, and promote long-term retention of concepts by creating meaningful connections between theory and practice (Alabi, 2024). Internships like the American Conservation Experience (ACE) Emerging Professionals in Conservation (EPIC) offer experiential learning opportunities that can transform students and equip them with the resources to build a sustainable future.

How It Works

Students should apply for internships such as the ACE EPIC program, which connects students with national and local agencies and organizations that safeguard natural resources and promote sustainable land management (American Conservation Experience EPIC Program, 2025). Summer breaks during the school year can provide learning opportunities for students if necessary guidance is provided. Emphasizing the importance of applying for internships like ACE EPIC during the school year can offer students opportunities to learn about and engage in the conservation of natural resources.

Students apply for a position with an agency or organization through ACE and go through an interview process via ACE, and the organization/agency specified in the application. Some of the organizations and agencies that collaborate with the ACE EPIC program include the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and others. Once students receive an acceptance update and their participation is confirmed, they are provided with the resources necessary (airfare, housing, equipment, stipend, etc.) to live within a 25-mile radius of the organization/agency's local headquarters. The ACE EPIC program assigns members to a professional mentor to learn about ecosystems, the sources of their degradation, and how to steward the land to improve its condition. Once the participant's paid service term concludes, they are once again provided with resources from ACE to return to their institution before the school year starts. Students may also extend their service with the approval of their instructors, ACE, and the host agency/organization.

Institutions can support these opportunities by allowing educators to accept experiential learning internships as course credits. They can build a formal experiential-learning pathway around an existing internship provider, such as ACE, and a participating agency. A university can designate a faculty or staff contact, advertise the opportunity, help students identify funding and academic-credit options, establish a pre-departure checklist, and require a post-internship reflection or presentation.

Implications and Results to Date

This experiential learning experience introduces participants to water resource management, soil conservation, invasive species removal, agroecology, best management practices, and much more. The ACE EPIC internship program reinforces classroom learning, reemphasizes students' commitment to natural resource conservation, and gives participants a newfound sense of confidence, enabling them to play a direct role in creating a more sustainable future. This program helps students develop professionally and establish connections with national and local agencies across the United States, providing them with an advantage in their post-graduation careers. Encouraging students studying natural

resources to pursue internships that prioritize experiential learning can transform their self-perception and their role in natural resource conservation in the agricultural sector. If internship opportunities are promoted as experiential learning, students will be encouraged to apply and become agents of change to build a more sustainable future.

I was assigned to work alongside the BLMs Eastern Interior Field Office (EIFO) in Fairbanks, Alaska, in the ACE EPIC program. This position enabled me to reinforce my classroom knowledge and apply natural resource conservation principles that I can utilize in my future career. I developed species-identification skills that help me distinguish between invasive and native flora and fauna. I gained skills to identify stream geomorphology and restoration techniques necessary to improve surface water management. I learned to conduct soil tests to analyze nutrient levels, organic matter, pH, and determine the next steps to achieve soil fertility. The ACE EPIC program reinforced my beliefs that anyone can play a role in natural resource conservation and land stewardship. This program reiterates the notion that experiential learning allows students to apply their textbook knowledge, gain life-long skills, and become more confident in themselves.

Pursuing this experience took me out of my comfort zone. I saw snow for the first time, I swam in glacier-fed rivers, camped in the backcountry for weeks at a time with no prior experience, and was separated from familiarity. This experience transformed me and provided an invaluable opportunity for experiential learning that emphasized the importance of natural resource conservation, land stewardship, and my role in creating a sustainable world. Programs such as ACE EPIC provide the resources to transform students into agents of change. Experiential learning internships can help agricultural students understand their role in conservation and sustainable land management. Institutions can facilitate enrollment in experiential learning internships by collecting student reflections, on-site supervisor feedback, skill-development measures, and implementing student learning outcomes.

Advice and Resources Needed

University professors, advisors, and career development staff in Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources should encourage their students to pursue internships, such as ACE EPIC. This opportunity should be advertised to students to advance their professional development and provide meaningful experiential learning. To incentivize students to pursue these opportunities, course credits can be offered during a participant's service term. Cooperation among ACE, the institution's administration, and instructors is needed to implement the EPIC program as an experiential learning initiative. After completing a service term, participants should have the opportunity to share their experience with others to promote the possibility of internships as experiential learning. The costs of student participation are outlined:

- Airfare (up to \$1,000 for a round-trip ticket)
- Housing (\$500-\$1,000 per month)
- Equipment (\$100 for boots or clothing)
- Transportation (\$100 for a bike)
- Groceries (\$60 a month)

Participants receive a weekly stipend of \$800. The ACE program reimburses any of the above costs incurred, except for groceries. Institutions interested in collaborating with experiential learning internships, such as ACE EPIC, will need resources to advertise opportunities, coordinate academic credit, identify potential funding, advise students, and support students pre- and post-internship.

References

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