The American Conservation Experience: Internships as Experiential Learning

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Introduction

The agricultural industry faces growing natural resource challenges as climate change intensifies their impacts (Yang et al., 2024). Experiential education can prepare students to develop sustainable solutions and become agents of change (Natori et al., 2025). Future agricultural professionals need natural resource conservation skills to protect land while maintaining productivity. Environmental internships provide valuable opportunities to connect theory with practice, strengthen critical thinking, and improve long-term learning (Alabi, 2024). Programs like American Conservation Experience's Emerging Professionals in Conservation (EPIC) can help prepare students to become effective land stewards.

Image 1. ACE members, alongside a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) scientist, conducting soil analysis.

How It Works

Students apply for ACE EPIC positions and interview with ACE and host organizations, including the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service. ACE provides airfare, housing, equipment, and stipends while participants gain experience through professional mentorship. Universities can support these opportunities by promoting internships, helping students identify funding and academic credit, preparing students for departure, and requiring post-internship reflections or presentations to connect experiential learning with academic goals.

Implications

Institutions should establish formal experiential-learning pathways that integrate conservation internships into agricultural and natural resource curricula. Universities can partner with organizations such as ACE, provide academic credit and funding support, and designate faculty mentors to guide students before, during, and after their internships. Institutions should also assess student learning through reflections, supervisor evaluations, and skill-based outcomes. By formally recognizing conservation internships as part of students' academic development, universities can increase participation, strengthen workforce preparation, and cultivate agricultural professionals committed to sustainable land and natural resource management. 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.

Results

The ACE EPIC experience introduces participants to water resource management, soil conservation, soil testing, and invasive species removal. agroecology and best management practice, stream geomorphology and restoration, and species identification.

The author's ACE EPIC experience reinforced classroom knowledge and provided hands-on skills in species identification, stream restoration, and soil testing. It also increased confidence and strengthened commitment to conservation and land stewardship.

Advice and Resources Needed

University faculty, advisors, and career staff should promote ACE EPIC as an experiential-learning opportunity. Institutions can incentivize participation through academic credit, funding, advising, and pre- and post-internship support. Estimated costs include airfare (up to $1,000), housing ($500–$1,000/month), equipment ($100), transportation ($100), and groceries ($60/month). Participants receive an $800 weekly stipend, while ACE reimburses eligible expenses except groceries. Institutions should also encourage participants to share their experiences and promote future participation.

Acknowledgements

This initiative was partially funded through USDA NIFA NLGCA Award No. 2023-70001-40987.

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Image 2 (Left). A soil pit showing soil horizons and the water table.
Image 3 (Right). ACE member analyzing water quality using a LaMotte test kit.