

# Experiential Education Internships outside your field open worlds of opportunity



Baylor intern Larissa Vogelaar with Sophia, a member of the family Vogelaar lived with during her stay in Ukraine.

surroundings. "I had to adapt to cultural differences. Things moved a lot slower in the Ukraine because it is a third-world country. Government officials were very slow and not very cooperative. Working with a translator and making sure she had enough work to keep her busy was a constant challenge."

In August, armed with preliminary knowledge from her first five weeks in the Ukraine, Vogelaar traveled back to the United States and spent a month writing financial support letters and material for foster parent training programs. She flew across the Atlantic again in September to train foster care workers, translate training materials and promote the foster program. The next two months of Vogelaar's internship were spent between the United States, where she continued fund-raising efforts, and the Ukraine, where she helped three parents complete training programs and made sure the foster care system was ready to hand over to the Ukrainian workers. This presented challenges of its own, but carefully woven between the obstacles was the tiny voice of pure willpower that Vogelaar never expected.

By Amy Keilers  
CAREER SEARCH

It took Baylor University senior Larissa Vogelaar a month to make her decision. Sure, the opportunity wasn't exactly a stop on her path to becoming an occupational therapist, but she accepted the internship anyway.

When most students were donning their business best and flocking to career fairs to get face time with recruiters and land that coveted intern position, Vogelaar took a different route to gain work experience. Over the course of eight months, she would do absolutely nothing related to occupational therapy, but would cross the Atlantic several times, immerse herself in a new culture and test her diplomatic skills to establish a foster care system in poverty-ridden area of Ukraine.

Vogelaar interned as a foster care coordinator for New Hope International, a missionary organization founded by her father and dedicated to mobilizing churches and outreach ministries in Eastern Europe. New Hope had been exploring the possibility of establishing a foster care system in the Ukraine for several years, but when Vogelaar accepted the internship, it was up to her to design and implement the system.

The internship began in May 2002 as Vogelaar worked alongside case workers at Buckner Orphan Care in Dallas. She followed the workers on home visits, made notes and gathered resources, and after she had enough information, she flew to Ukraine. There she lived with a family involved in New Hope and, without any established guidelines, devised an approach to organize the foster care system.

"I traveled to meetings with government officials, church pastors and families interested in fostering," she said. "I did not have specific requirements, so I had to set up guidelines and goals for myself to get my major task accomplished."

The challenge laid not only in building a social system from scratch, but in the unfamiliarity of her

"There would be days where I felt like I was hitting a brick wall, and then we would have a big breakthrough. The whole process taught me to persevere, and I was amazed by how much I was capable of," she said.

"There would be a huge task to accomplish, and I would wonder how I was going to get it done, but somehow I was able to look back a few days later and not believe that I had gotten through an important meeting with a government official, or taught training sessions to foster parents, or written up training materials, or even fired a social worker."

Vogelaar said the firing incident was definitely the low point in her experience. She had no one else to fill the vacancy, but the person appointed to the position just didn't meet the demands of the job.

"I had to hire a person to take over the foster care program, and the first person that we hired I had to fire. This was just a difficult decision that I had to make and take full responsibility for."

But hidden between the thorns, Vogelaar was able to see the fruits of her labor.

"The best part of the whole experience was the last week in the Ukraine when I visited two of our foster parents at their homes and saw them with their foster children. It was so rewarding to see that my eight months of hard work had paid off."

For Vogelaar, the internship had real-world benefits. She came away with leadership, management, administrative and public speaking skills — things Marti Boerema, the associate executive director at Texas A&M University's Career Center, said are an important part of any intern experience

"Learning goes beyond the academic scope to practical skills of being an employee within an organization, or what the industry refers to as 'soft skills,'" Boerema said. "Those include oral and written communication, presentation skills, interpersonal communications, the ability to work in teams, cultural awareness and the ability to work with diverse populations, flexibility, initiative and leadership."

Vogelaar has even spoken to student organizations, challenging others to step out of their comfort zones and accept opportunities that provide these skills even though the work environment may be a little less traditional.

"I have always perceived internships as being cut and dry, but college is a time for testing the water," said Rhiana Titus, a Baylor University junior who heard Vogelaar speak at a Campus Crusade for Christ event. "Experience doesn't just come from sitting behind a desk. I can choose the adventurous over the practical and still reap the benefits of an internship."

While Boerema, who has worked in career services since 1989, advocates any opportunity that allows students to gain work-related experience, she said international experiences provide their own benefits.

"With the emphasis on the global economy and diversity in all forms, experiences that demonstrate intercultural awareness such as international internships or study abroad are becoming more valued by employers," Boerema said.

Brad Collet, the assistant director of experiential education at A&M, also stressed the important of internships, both traditional and nontraditional.

"Our recruiting employers tell us that relevant work experience is one of the most important things they look for when they are evaluating a potential candidate," Collet said. "What better way to find out what people with your major do than to actually experience it firsthand."

Collet also stressed that students can learn pertinent skills even if their internship experiences venture outside of the scope of their major.

"In fact, (students) may have an opportunity to learn even more because they can often times be given more experiences. (Nontraditional internships) may not be as structured as a 'traditional' internship, but they can offer at least as many benefits," Collet said.

So, hobnobbing with investment bankers in a prestigious firm may be the route for some. Others may prefer thrashing around the set of a Hoobastank video like the MasterCard intern. But Larissa Vogelaar chose to leave her impression on Ukrainian soil. By the end of 2003, 13 children found homes with the first 10 New Hope foster families, and 10 more families were preparing to open their homes to orphaned children.

Sure leaving school for a semester had its costs, including putting occupational therapy on hold, but accepting a challenge and causing change. Now that is truly priceless.

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— Rhiana Titus, Baylor University junior



By Jeremy Osborne  
CAREER SEARCH

During a job interview, the old adage holds true: You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

An interview is your one opportunity to make a positive, lasting impact on a prospective employer. How you present yourself and answer certain questions can be the difference between "You're hired," and "Thank you for coming."

Despite the high stakes of this process, there are simple steps you can take to make an interview less stressful and more successful.

First, always arrive early for an interview. Studies show the first five minutes of an interview are the most important. If you are late, you miss this crucial time.

"If you're early, you're on time. If you're on time, you're late. And, if you're late, never mind," Samantha Wilson, Career Center assistant director said.

In order to be early, find the location where you are interviewing in the days before the interview. Have everything prepared, and allow plenty of time to reach your destination. Once you have arrived, your demeanor is especially important.

"Haldane's Answers to Tough Interview Questions" advises being enthusiastic and exuding confidence. Greet the receptionist with a smile, announce your arrival and wait patiently.

When greeted by the interviewer, introduce yourself and give a firm handshake. Follow him or her to the interview room, and wait for the interviewer to ask you to sit down.

During the interview, the Career Center's site suggests you sit up straight, maintain eye contact, and remain positive and confident.

In addition to friendly and confident behavior, your appearance must be professional.

# Knock Their Socks Off!

## Answering the 10 toughest questions interviewers pose

Dale Pratch, Texas A&M Career Center assistant director, said men should wear single-breasted, navy blue or charcoal suits with white, long-sleeved oxford shirts and solid ties. Women should wear single-breasted, dark-colored pantsuits or skirted suits with skirt length just above the knees.

Men and women should wear minimal cologne or perfume, and they should limit jewelry and accessories. Interviewees should wear only one ring per hand.

Avoid trends and distracting clothing, Wilson said.

"You want interviewers to remember you, not your clothes," she said.

Your grooming is also important.

"Your hair should be styled and your nails should be manicured. Make sure your clothes are pressed," Pratch said.

"This makes your appearance impeccable." Before the questioning begins, interviewers often break the ice with small talk. This is an opportunity for them to test your ability to engage in conversation as well as your knowledge of current events.

"They will ask you," Wilson said.

"Watch the news, read The Wall Street Journal and be up on current events."

But don't step on anyone's toes.

"Stay out of conversations on politics and religion," said Dr. Wayne Terrell, associate director of the Texas A&M Career Center.

Once you and the interviewer are comfortable, the interview questions begin. "Haldane's" said tough questions will often focus on career goals, motivations, experiences, strengths and weaknesses.

Terrell said you should anticipate certain questions and practice responses.

Interviewers ask questions for two reasons, Terrell said.

"They ask a question to get info to supplement what they already know about you," Terrell said. "A second thing they're looking for is style — how you go about organizing your thoughts and articulating them."

### Question 1

**Tell me about yourself.**

Interviewers usually begin with this request to put the interviewee at ease, but

this can be a difficult question to answer.

"They (interviewers) don't want you spending 30 minutes going back to your birth date chronologically mapping out every event that happened in your life," Terrell said.

Instead, you should focus on the information that is relevant and pertinent to the job. "Haldane's" suggests emphasizing a pattern of interests, skills and accomplishments. Focus your response around a common theme.

"As a rule of thumb, no answer should be longer than two minutes," Terrell said.

### Question 2

**Why should we hire you?**

"Haldane's" suggests preparing a one- to two-minute summary of why you are the perfect candidate.

Highlight your skills' compatibility with both the position available and the company. Enthusiastically point out how much you feel the company is a great place to work and allow the interviewer to know how much you want the job.

### Question 3

**What is your greatest weakness?**

Employers will almost always ask prospective employees to list one or two of their greatest weaknesses. Terrell said there are two ways to respond to this question.

"At the very worst, you want to give a response that's kind of neutral," he said. "They don't really see that as a negative or positive. Another way would be to take something pertinent to that particular job you list as a negative, but they might see as a positive."

Terrell used the example of an accounting firm interviewing for auditors. He said listing over-attention to detail would be considered an asset to these companies.

Listing weaknesses we all have, such as time management, can be endearing to interviewers, Terrell said.

"Haldane's" suggests not mentioning weaknesses that might directly affect job performance. Rather, list a weakness upon which you have improved.

### Question 4

**What is your greatest strength?**

This is an opportunity to accentuate some of the points on your resume.

Terrell said you can prepare for this question by taking your resume and writing a 15-minute speech about yourself. Then, memorize the key selling points you want to present in the interview.

"Haldane's" suggests you give examples of how this strength has affected your effectiveness on the job. You can cite specific skills and statistics.

### Question 5

**Describe a situation in which you faced a problem. How did you solve it?**

This question will often be asked during a behavioral interview, one in which a

## 10 Toughest Interviewer Questions

- 1 Tell me about yourself.
- 2 Why should we hire you?
- 3 What is your greatest weakness?
- 4 What is your greatest strength?
- 5 Describe a situation in which you faced a problem. How did you solve it?
- 6 What are your salary requirements?
- 7 Do you work well as part of a team?
- 8 What did you like the most/least about your previous job?
- 9 Where do you see yourself in five years?
- 10 Do you have any questions for me?

profile of desired behaviors is determined, with questions designed to measure your compatibility with the company's profile.

"It is believed the greatest predictor of future performance is past performance. In the absence of that observation, questions are designed to measure your ability," Terrell said.

A Career Center brochure details the "STAR" acronym. It is a formula for answering this type of question. It said to "describe the situation in which you were involved. Describe the task to be performed. What was your approach to the problem? What were the results of your actions?"

### Question 6

**What are your salary requirements?**

You should not discuss salary unless the interviewer directly asks you about it. Then, you should attempt to make them offer a number.

"You don't discuss salary or benefits until they've made you an offer," Terrell said.

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