

Choosing and evaluating courses and internships for a career in academics, government, or business and industry

Whether you wish to pursue a career in academics, government, or the private sector, it is important that you choose courses that will best prepare you for the job market, and it may be important to pursue internships for a variety of reasons.

The EDGE project has collected the views of recent graduates and employers working in academia, government, and for profit and non-profit private businesses on what types of knowledge, skills, and abilities are most important for geographers in each sector. These insights can help graduate students plan a course of study and training that will best prepare them for entering the job market.

General observations

In almost all cases, having a balance of coursework in different areas of geography will be very useful in addition to the specific skills that are required for a given job. Several employers emphasized that while technical skills may be essential for a particular position, a broad understanding of geographic concepts is equally important for data validation and analysis. Many employers expressed a need for employees with strong analytical and research capabilities, and they also placed a high value on fieldwork experience. In short, while each employer is looking for certain specific qualifications, such as skills in GIS or remote sensing, they also want broadly trained geographers who are more than just technicians. Some employers also suggested that an interdisciplinary background could be particularly advantageous to a job candidate, depending on the nature of the position. Thus, following a balanced program of study, while maintaining an emphasis in a particular specialty, is very important no matter what the career path.

In addition to coursework, it will be useful and perhaps necessary to gain some work experience while pursuing a graduate degree. Nearly all employers, especially those representing governmental and private-sector organizations, stressed the importance of basic job skills, especially communications skills and the ability to conduct presentations. Outside of academia, on-the-job experience is often best obtained through internships. In the academic world, the doctoral program itself ideally should serve as a sort of extended internship.

In addition to simply looking good on a resume, there are several important benefits to doing internships:

- 1) **Identify and build job skills.** Through working and observing others in a real work environment, you will be able to identify the skills that are necessary to perform the job in the “real world.” A good internship will help you build important job skills through practical experience.

2) **Learn how organizations work.** It is important to understand the internal hierarchical structure of an organization, and an internship can provide insight into the mechanics of how a business functions at multiple levels.

3) **Networking.** An internship can introduce you to a wider range of people in your chosen field. It can also provide you with additional job references that will be able to attest to your qualities as an employee. In some cases, internships may even lead directly to full-time employment after graduation.

4) **No-risk trial.** An internship provides an opportunity to evaluate whether a particular career path is right for you. It is a relatively risk-free way to see a business from the inside, and it can help you decide whether or not to pursue work in that industry. Conversely, an internship is also a way for a business to see if you will make a good employee, so it is important to approach the work in a professional manner.

There are also some general considerations to keep in mind when looking for an internship:

1) **Can you afford to work for free?** While some internships pay a modest wage or stipend, others pay nothing at all. Some organizations will gladly accept interns but may not have any funds to pay them. The experience itself may be worth it, but depending on your situation and the location of the internship, this may be an important consideration.

2) **What is the job description?** Some interns will have the opportunity to do interesting project work, but many others will spend much of their time on mundane tasks like making photocopies. That is not necessarily a bad thing, because the benefits listed above may still apply, but it will be good to know what to expect.

3) **Don't rely solely on ads.** If you know of a particular organization where you might like to work, call or write and ask if there are internships available. Sometimes internship positions are not advertised widely or at all, and other times an office may have the flexibility to create an opportunity. It is almost always easier to create a temporary intern position than a full-time one, and an office just might need a short-term employee to work on a specific project. Of course, it will be helpful if you have a contact or acquaintance inside an organization. Ask professors or other acquaintances for help with referrals.

Below is some additional information on each job category:

Academia

The vast majority of positions in the academic sector require a Ph.D. or similar doctoral degree. Ideally the doctoral program itself, including advising, should prepare the student for an academic career. While most academic positions at universities involve

teaching, some institutions have also created a tenure track for employees who are strictly researchers. Additionally, there is the possibility of working in university administration.

Government

Government agencies at the local, state, and federal levels hire geographers of all backgrounds. At the federal level, geographers are often hired for positions in defense, scientific research, GIS and remote sensing, and international relations. In the federal government, knowledge of a foreign language combined with a regional specialization can be an advantage for a job candidate. At the local and state levels, geographers are often employed in urban planning, environmental management, and other similar types of positions. Government agencies frequently offer internships, and these can be an excellent way of preparing for a future career as a civil servant.

For-profit private industry

For-profit private enterprises hire geographers with a variety of backgrounds, but the greatest demand is for people with skills in GIS, remote sensing, and imaging analysis. Participants in the EDGE focus groups noted that job candidates with security clearances often have an advantage over other applicants. As with government, there are many internships offered in private industry.

Non-profit organizations

Non-profits also hire geographers with a wide range of specialties, but it is important to note that oftentimes employers are not specifically seeking geographers, but rather researchers with a certain set of skills that geographers often hold. This is also the case for many government and for-profit positions. In cases where non-profits specifically seek to hire geographers, they typically look for candidates with skills in areas including GIS, landscape planning, ecology, biogeography, mapping, analysis of geographic data, surveying, cartography, and computer modeling, according to focus group participants. Like both government and for-profit private industry, non-profit organizations may offer either paid or unpaid internships.