One reason that I am so passionate about the importance of internships is because of the role that my seminary internship played in my life. I came to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth after working for the Boy Scouts of America for a couple of months after college. Reflecting back on my own seminary experience, I do not think that I “engaged” my academic pursuits as fully as I should have the first year of my studies. Part of that was that I was fresh out of college and was enjoying some of the freedom of living in a big city (Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex). Part of that was that I was newly married (my wife and I got married two weekends after graduating college together). Part of that was that I was not sure what God was doing in my life at the time or what my ministry direction should have been. My confession is that I floated through my first year or so of seminary with little focus.

However, all of that changed into my second year of seminary. With the prospects of having to do an internship looming ahead of me, I began to investigate my options. While I would later recognize it as God’s providence, on what I considered a whim I participated in a campus interview for an internship working with college students in Georgia. Now, I had enjoyed my college experience and especially my ministry exposure at my college church. Therefore, I thought that I would just check things out with this interview to find out what is involved with internships. In my mind, I did not intend actually to follow through on this opportunity and I sure was not going to move to another state to do my internship. As a native Texas boy, I would have never seen myself moving to the land of sweet tea and pork barbeque.

Well, as you can probably guess by now, God had other plans. The interview was a fantastic experience and I was offered an internship working with college students at the University of Georgia. My wife and I had no hesitation in the move. Moreover, what was supposed to have been a nine-month internship with this campus ministry turned into over six years of ministry to college student on that college campus. This Texas boy fell in love with Georgia. Moreover, in the process of my internship “stretching,” I discovered that I was passionate about working with students on an academic campus. While my campus setting has changed (moving from a large state university to a non-denominational seminary), my passion has remained. My internship experience was the kick-start for my recalibration for ministry. My internship experience was truly a life-alternating season in my life, my family’s life, and my ministry direction.

Now I have the wonderful pleasure of being the “internship guy” on a seminary campus. I get the privilege of talking to students about God’s movement in their lives on a daily basis. Moreover, when I have these conversations, I see students who are exactly where I was when I started out with the same questions, uncertainties, and anticipations.
Purpose of Theological Education Debate

For most of the last fifty years, theologians, ministers, and congregations have debated the purpose of theological education institutions in one form or the other. At the heart of the debate is this one question: Is the purpose of the Bible college or seminary to train theologians or practitioners? Indeed higher education at large questions the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Is the purpose of formal education for you to think critically or practically?

On one side of the debate on theological education are those seeing the role of these schools to “theologically capacitate” students to think biblically and critically rather than simply be a “how to” school for particular pastoral skills. With respect to leadership development, these proponents would contend that theological education should focus on creating theologically minded students and should encourage students to learn other practical aspects of their ministerial training in other venues. These venues would include both secular and religious settings. In addition, they would argue that the primary location for leadership development is the local church rather than the formal classroom.

Scholars on the other side of the theological education debate see the role of these schools as the education of the professional leadership of the church. Most of the “popular” focus of this debate in evangelical circles has centered on a very vocal coalition of church leaders who voice the concern that the training received by ministers-to-be in the evangelical Bible colleges and seminaries is obsolete for the real world. These church leaders strongly believe that theological education needs to make a more “concerted effort” to educate future leaders who can lead both inside and outside the local church.

Some critics have gone so far as to call for and even create their own church-based theological education, bypassing accredited seminaries entirely. An unfortunate result of this debate has been the sometimes-damaged relationship between the local church and some seminaries.

Need for Balance in Theological Education

In reality, the Bible college or seminary has to do both. Part of the role of theological education is to theologically capacitate students to think biblically and critically. Too much ministry that takes place in today’s society that severely lacks strong theological roots. At the same time, the theological education school is still a how-to leadership development school for future ministers. You must be able to take the vast theological knowledge from the classroom and soundly engage in ministry in a variety of modern contexts.
Nevertheless, the local school cannot do it all. The education of the classroom can only take a student so far. Internships serve as a link between theory and practice. Instead of learning taking place in the isolation of the classroom, an internship makes learning happen within the “normative worshiping community of faith” as you minister in a ministry context and reflect on that experience.

Role of Field Education Internships

Many Bible colleges, seminaries, and professional organizations call the internship program “field education” because it is literally education that takes place on the field of service. In his classic study on theological field education, Carl H. Morgan defines field education as “any form of supervised activity outside the formal classroom program which may provide the ministry student with laboratory experience significant for training in the work to which he is called.”¹ An internship is not busy work or cheap labor but is instead a fundamental element to the intentional educational development of a future leader. A great internship experience can place you in an environment where God can work through you in the lives of other people and (more importantly in some ways) where God can work in your own life to develop your calling, your character, and your competencies.

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Standards quantify requirements related to theological field education throughout all of the major sections dealing with theological scholarship, theological curriculum, faculty standards, and individual degree plans. ATS reports that 94.6 percent of all masters-level students had some type of internship or field education experience during their academic career. In surveying graduating ministry students, ATS found that 82.9 percent of all graduating masters-level students found their internship experience important for their development. Of these graduating ministry student respondents, they said that the internship experience helped to improve their pastoral skills, to better understand their

strengths and weaknesses, to instill more self-confidence, and to provide greater vocational clarity. These comments include value for any student to experience.

Formal education, observation, and real world experience all play a part in leadership development. Generally the more practical the lessons that the student needs to learn, the more the educational experience must be integrated into real life through field-based educational and personalized instruction. Much of the practical instruction, which a minister needs, is best learned on the job.

The leadership laboratory of ministry is a vital collaborator with academia in developing leaders. Exposure to a particular ministry field, understanding organizational culture, learning real world skills, sharpening people skills, decreasing the ministry learning curve, and identifying potential areas of downfall are all practical lessons learned in an internship.

Educators see internships as helping to overcome the inability to create real world learning experiences in the formal classroom setting. Many times when an internship does not work out for a student or for an organization, it is because this educational element of the internship actually is forgotten in the busyness of serving. However, when the school combines its formal education with real world experiences and mentoring, true leadership development can take place.

The academics of theological education can help to lay the foundation for a biblical worldview and develop the basic tools of the ministry trade, but the theoretical must be married with the practical in the leadership laboratory in the field. God calls students to schools to learn, but a school’s values and curriculum need to reflect this balance between theory and practice. When Bible colleges and seminaries continue to collaborate with the local church and ministry organizations in developing the next generation of leaders, they develop leaders who are sound doctrinally and practically.