

## VCU Department of Forensic Science

### **Statement of Legal Policy: Student Internships/Directed Research & Independent Studies**

Virginia Commonwealth University sends many students out each year to perform "field" work for academic credit. Many academics feel that these experiences are critical to the learning process, providing engaging, real-life, hands-on experience for the students. In Forensic Science, this type of immersion experience also provides networking opportunities and contacts for students, which are often crucial for future career development. The VCU Forensic Science Graduate Program Directed Research program is a required, 300 hour, 3 credit (minimum) experience. Additionally, Graduate students have the option of enrolling in independent studies as elective credit. At the Undergraduate level, internships and independent studies are both elective opportunities, with varying credits and associated hourly obligations. For either program, student pay is not required and is provided entirely at the discretion of the laboratory.

There are two legitimate legal issues for laboratories to consider when accepting either paid or unpaid students: liability and pay (Fair Labor laws).

#### Liability

Students who are placed in an off-campus NON-VCU laboratory pursuant to a course and/or a degree program requirement are covered for acts of negligence and general liability under the Commonwealth of Virginia Risk Management Self-Insured coverage. If there is an incident where liability is at-issue, the affected laboratory should immediately contact either the Program Director or the Department Chairperson so that the process can be initiated with the VCU Real Estate and Insurance Services Department.

#### Pay

Students participating in **unpaid** field work are required to earn academic credit due to federal employment laws and liability issues. The U.S. Department of Labor's Fair Labor Standards Act states that all workers must earn a minimum wage for work performed **OR** be enrolled in a bona fide trainee program such as a university Internship or research program. As a general rule, only non-profit public service, charitable, religious, and/or humanitarian organizations are eligible to accept "volunteers".

Both of these aspects (liability and pay) require that the student be registered for credit in a course that is required or otherwise fulfilling a degree requirement.

We (the Department of Forensic Science) do not support or approve **unpaid** student field work unless students are actually fulfilling a requirement and enrolled *for credit*. In order to assure all parties that registration is required and that the experience is fulfilling a degree requirement, we have both the laboratory representative (research mentor), the student, and the Program Director sign a form indicating when and how much credit will be earned. Further, we actively caution laboratories against accepting unpaid student volunteers that are not receiving academic credit for their work.

All of this information has been generated with the assistance of the VCU Office of General Counsel - specifically with Associate General Counsel Susan T. Ferguson.

Inquiries regarding this policy can be addressed to:

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