This experiment in intellectual entrepreneurship connects course work to students’ goals through internships.

After amassing a large number of semester credit hours, university graduates often don’t have a clue about how what they’ve learned will help them to get where they want to go. This problem is especially significant for underrepresented minority and first-generation students, who often want to put their educations to work by making connections between academe and the communities in which they live. Too many undergraduates leave universities not fully appreciating how disciplinary expertise can help to solve real-world problems. We can help undergraduates discover how their own interests can serve as a compass for navigating a complex university and point them toward a meaningful career.

Many students enter college uncertain about what to major in. For these students, career and professional development opportunities come far too late in the game, at the back end of an undergraduate education. To address this potential problem, the Intellectual Entrepreneurship (IE) Consortium at the University of Texas at Austin established a pre-graduate-school mentorship program that invites students, as early as their sophomore year, to see the relevance of their course choices to given careers. We try to help students see their course work in terms of the direction in which they want to take their lives.

The IE program offers internships that give students the chance to take charge of their education, discovering how to leverage knowledge for social good—to be “citizen-scholars.” In this article, we share the story of one IE intern, Ana Lucia Hurtado, a co-author of this article. Her experience mirrors that of dozens of others and will, we hope, encourage others to follow our example.

Ana Lucia’s Story
When Ana Lucia Hurtado was four years old, her parents left their home country, Peru, because of overwhelming political turmoil. Ana Lucia studied hard in school in the United States. Toward the end of high school, she began exploring engineering and medicine through her magnet school’s medical rotation classes and through structured outreach programs at Stanford and Baylor universities and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. After enrolling at Duke University, Ana Lucia worried that she would never find her vocation. But she continued with her premed track as was expected; one of her sisters was already a physician, and the other was in medical school.

Ana Lucia probably would have become a physician had she not confronted the greatest challenge of her life: becoming a mother. Facing an unintended pregnancy, she knew she could no longer approach her future passively. The search to find her “calling” resumed in earnest, and she began exploring the possibility of a career in law.
Ana Lucia transferred to the University of Texas and stumbled upon the IE Consortium and its pre-graduate-school internship. Largely self-directed, the internship was unlike any other. Ana Lucia’s work at the Children’s Rights Clinic at the university’s law school encouraged her to think like an intellectual entrepreneur—to study herself, her knowledge, and the career she envisioned.

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