ABSTRACT: Experiential education may be viewed as a process of enculturation; a student explores the work culture in depth and learns how to develop the personality characteristics prized by the culture. Implications of a cultural viewpoint for selection, training, and evaluation of students in an undergraduate internship in a psychiatric residential treatment center for adolescents are examined. One ritual of enculturation, the peer evaluation meeting, is discussed and recommended for its benefits to experiential education as a tool for training, providing staff identity and psychological support, and affirmation of the values of the institution.

Experiential education is a cultural process; more specifically, it is a process of enculturation. The student exploring a career should have the opportunity to experience the work culture in depth, to explore and develop those personality characteristics prized by the culture which will enable him to work in the field. Adoption of a cultural viewpoint has implications for the selection, training, and evaluation of students in experiential education. The purpose of this paper is to explore cultural analysis as a tool for planning an experiential program (here, an undergraduate internship), and to examine one ritual of enculturation, the peer evaluation meeting, as useful to an organization which provides pre-professional or experiential education.

The Constance Bultman Wilson Center, a residential treatment center for adolescents, offers several six-month internships to college students wishing to explore careers in mental health. The primary function of the intern is to be a role model for adolescents. The importance of identification as a healing process has been well
documented. Although there are many significant models for the adolescent to choose, the intern is an excellent choice because of his youth, dedication, and availability. The intern lives with the patients in the dormitory. Since he is not a paid employee, his motives for working with patients are rarely suspect.

The selection and training of interns is not an easy task. It has been helpful to view the selection process as the tentative meeting and exploration of two cultures—the culture of the treatment center and the culture the candidate brings with him: family, school, related life experiences.

The culture of the treatment center is not visible enough for us to make a checklist of the qualities the institution values and the characteristics the individual possesses and put them together for a match. The representatives of these two cultures must look each other over in a series of personal interviews and see if they can predict a successful meshing.

To see selection as a cultural process makes it more humane. It also alerts us to the necessity of interpreting our culture for the candidate and those who recommend him. We should be able to explain to the candidate we reject that our decision has more to do with our prediction of his or her morale in working in our institution than it does with his or her future competence in life or career. We know, for example, that a student who can't directly express his anger can be demoralized and frustrated at the Center since there will be many situations each day that absolutely demand it. Yet the college world does not always value this ability. A student who found it rewarding to be “mellow” or laid back” in college may be too passive or too easily manipulated in our milieu.

Since academic achievement is one of the prized characteristics in the college environment, we must be careful to interpret our culture for professors. Academic achievement is not extremely important in our milieu, and we do not necessarily seek students with excellent academic records. Those good solid people with average academic skills can do well in our program. This is not to deny that the very able student often seizes the opportunity to put his or her managerial skills into operation in the milieu, but because this is a new culture where there is a great deal to be learned, each student will face many failures. A student who has responded too fervently to the college achievement ethic and has not faced or resolved a failure will be demoralized.

The culture of academia and that of the treatment center met dramatically one 90-degree day when an eastern college student arrived for his interviews in a three-piece suit, speaking extensively