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# Internships: Experiential Learning, Academic Connection and Assessment

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## **ABSTRACT**

Experiential learning is an old tradition, from apprenticeships of the ancient and modern world to internships and practicums for today's students. This paper reviews the current literature on internships and examples of the impact internships have for students. For example, according to Gault, Leach, and Duey (2010) interns who exceeded employers' expectations were offered a 9.2% higher salary than other non-intern alumni counterparts. Information provided by business students from a small liberal arts university was gathered concerning how an internship affected their careers. This was the first time a student outcomes survey had been conducted at the institution although internships have been part of the curriculum for many years. Employers of students who complete credit internships are required to respond to a questionnaire about the students' work. However, like many other universities and colleges, students were not required to complete formal surveys of their internship.

An overview of the student surveys regarding their experiences and academic associations to internships is discussed. The benefits of this electronic documentation for outcomes and assessment is explained.

**Keywords** student interns, academic requirement, employer selection, course connection, student perceptions, assessment

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Educational institutions have increasingly offered some manner of experiential learning for students to ensure that they find a comfortable fit for future employment. Through forms of temporary anticipatory socialization work assignments, such as cooperative education and internships, the student can transition and connect classroom concepts to actual work experience (Callanan & Benzing, 2004). A google search on internships returned over fourteen million results that included terms from universities, dictionaries, government departments, American Psychological Association (APA) and career sites. Some shared elements are professional experience, active learning, supervision, hands on, experiential and on the job training.

## **2 INTERNSHIP MODELS**

There are internship models that include stages. For example, Inkster and Ross (1998) described six stages:

1. arranging and anticipating
2. orientation and establishing identity
3. reconciling expectations with reality
4. productivity and independence
5. closure
6. re-entry and practical application

From the excitement of first achieving the internship through its ending that may mean a continuance in the workplace and with associations or a discontinuance of both, the final stage can be re-entry to school work with the benefit of practical application. This development model is also noted on the Carson College of Business, Washington University, Vancouver website

(<http://business.vancouver.wsu.edu/internships>) taken from the book by Inkster and Ross (1995) "The Internship as Partnership: A Handbook for Campus-Based Coordinators and Advisors," Sweitzer and King, M. (2013). The successful internship has five stages. 1. anticipation 2. disillusionment 3. confrontation 4. compensation 5. culmination. Kiser (2011) narrowed it down to four stages: 1. pre-placement 2. initiation 3. working 4. termination.

## **3 WHY INTERNSHIPS**

Over twenty years ago, the Institute on Education and the Economy (IEE) published a brief on "Designing Effective Learning Environments: Cognitive Apprenticeship Model (Berryman, 1991) that purported to explain much of school learning was ineffective. As education's goal is to ready the student to be a contributing part of the society outside of school, passive receivers (students) who are exposed only to lectures do not learn how to transfer learning from one situation to another or even from one discipline to another. Controlling teachers and curricula can actually stifle students' development of cognitive management skills, including goal-setting, strategic planning, monitoring, evaluating and revising capabilities for effective learning" (Berryman, 1991, p.1). The IEE brief further described a 'cognitive apprenticeship model' that went beyond the historic apprentice by sequencing and relating learning with increasingly complex tasks and problem solving.

Yet, Michael Hergert (2009) almost twenty years after the IEE brief, reported that it was rare for a business program to require an internship. This is not to say that business schools were devoid of internship experiences because, as Malcolm Coco (2000) noted, 92% have some version of internships. An Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

(AACSB) survey of 133 AACSB United States' institutions reported that only 26 required an internship for business majors: 14 required it for some business majors and only 12 required it for all business students (Updyke & Sander, 2005).

Admittedly, the Business Administration major of my school did not have a required internship for many years. A previous Chair was resistant to requests to include it as a required part of the degree with concerns of limited available locations. However, internships were strongly encouraged. Thankfully, internships for Business Administration majors were approved and required by the Business Studies and Economics Department in 2011. The 2016 graduating class will be the first class required to complete an academic internship.

#### **4 SCHOOL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM**

Students in many programs of this small private liberal arts university in the Northeast benefit from experiential or experience-based learning and some majors or minors require internships as one of those experiential components. This exploratory study focused on the Business Studies and Economics Department which has a three credit internship course, MGT491, required for Business Administration, Finance, Healthcare Administration, Marketing majors, and for Sports Management minors. An internship is also required for Accounting majors but as the curriculum has no room for added credits, it is done without credits in addition to their coursework.

For years, internships were coordinated by a full time faculty member with the three credits counting toward his/her teaching load. As the Business department grew in student population but diminished in faculty through retirement or other losses, full time faculty were overwhelmed with additional business courses.

In 2013, an Internship Coordinator was hired part time to assist in acquiring and monitoring internships but not allowed to teach the academic course. In 2014, the Internship Coordinator was put into a fulltime salaried position that allowed her to both network with organizations on behalf of needed internships as well as teach the academic component of the course.

Most students who complete internships are juniors or seniors with the occasional exceptions for motivated sophomores. Students can acquire the internship through the Internship Coordinator, with the Career Development office or on their own. It could be accomplished in Fall, Spring or Summer sessions and must include:

- . 120 hours of work over a 14 week period
  - completion of concurrent weekly logs
  - 10 page referenced reflective paper and
  - presentation with slides to a class of business students.
- The course has scheduled meetings in the semester and online in the summer. It uses a learning management system (LMS) in Canvas for supportive information including syllabus and activity logs.

The student intern presentations to a class are scheduled by the Internship Coordinator with faculty who have mostly freshmen or sophomore students in courses such as Management and Organizational Behavior or Principles of Marketing. If the internship is in the summer, the student will present to a class in the Fall.

#### **5 GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

Whenever the internship takes place, there is special attention to the details for an academic credit internship that meet the NEASC (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) Commission on Institutions of Higher Education's expectations and regulations (NEASC, 2011). Another guideline is from the Council for the Achievement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2011) that clarifies parts of an internship program:

1. Mission
2. Program
3. Organization and Leadership
4. Human Resources
5. Ethics
6. Law, Policy and Governance
7. Diversity, Equity and Access
8. Institutional and External Relations
9. Financial Resources
10. Technology
11. Facilities and Equipment
12. Assessment and Evaluation

The Council's guidelines focus on academic credit internships as those not done for credit are under the auspices of the organization rather than a faculty and/or an internship coordinator. When there is a distinction of pay or not for pay internships, coordinators are aware of the Department of Labor guidelines that interns in the for-profit sector follow the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

and "who qualify as employees rather than trainees typically must be paid at least the minimum wage and overtime compensation for hours worked over forty in a workweek." To qualify as a trainee, the intern must fit six criteria including that his/her work "does not displace regular employee." (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010).

The National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) was formed in 1978 as a merger of the Society for Field Experience and the National Center for Public Service Internship Programs that were developed in the early seventies to provide guidance, information, and any policy issues especially as it pertained to projects with state or federal projects with college students. This trend toward students applying theoretical knowledge into outside the classroom supervised experience to help society was in response to sixties' era protests of the many disputed methods of government and business (CAS, 2011).

The NSEE takes a strong stance on educational organizations encouraging and coordinating paid internships:

An institution should have a policy to favor paid work positions for students whenever pay can be arranged in work environments that have the potential for meeting the student's goals. Outdated policies that prevent students from being paid for their work if they are receiving college credit are discriminatory because they often preclude participation by low-income students. Credit is for what students learn; pay is for what they provide to the field sponsor. The two are neither mutually exclusive nor conflicting (NSEE, 2014).

## 6 POSSIBLE SUBSIDIES FOR INTERNSHIPS

Providing paid internships is certainly a win/win for the students. In some states, the Department of Labor may have options for organizations to subsidize payment to interns. For example, in Rhode Island, a special grant in the 'Work Immersion Program' under the Governor's Workforce Board (2015), reimburses employers 50% of the amount paid to college interns or recent college graduates. It can be for credit or not, must increase the employability of the intern and covers from 45 - 400 hours per intern. An illustration is an accounting firm that applies for this program at the start of fall/spring semester and summer terms and submits amounts paid at the end of the internship program. The state funding is then distributed to the employer. The wages must be, at the least, the minimum wage (now \$9.00) and a maximum of \$20. So for a 120 hour internship, an employer pays a student, at the least, \$1080 and is reimbursed \$540. An amount as nominal as \$540 for an internship could enable even a small organization the ability to pay (and attract) a college intern. The challenge is finding out about the programs so working with Career Development, state workforce boards, Department of Labor and Training becomes essential and having a dedicated internship coordinator is pivotal.

## 7 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

For many years, supervisors of interns have been required to complete a form that documented the work of the interns. It was first done on paper and then through an electronic survey as a required component of the internship. However, there was never any formal process to document any student perceptions. In classroom presentations and informal discussions, students described valuable experiences or, in some cases, poor management and disappointment. Internships are a critical part of students' active engagement of their academic learning and their perceptions should be recognized. Previous research (Moghaddam, 2011) has depicted positive responses from students regarding the value of business education and preparation for future careers. In a longitudinal study by Cook, Stokes, and Parker (2015), students reported that an internship helped them to relate classroom theories to the workplace and also to "become more mature individuals" (p 108).

## 8 SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Two previous studies' instrument were reviewed and adapted for this survey. Items from the Division of Technology, Engineering and Mathematics' student post-

internship survey from Bossier Parish Community College (2014) and some items from Western Illinois University's department of Communications (that notes it is a required part of the internship) were adapted for the current survey instrument. The authors of the surveys were contacted for permission and the adapted survey instrument was submitted to Internal Review Board (IRB) of the author's school.

The Internship Coordinator, the former Internship Coordinator who is also a full time faculty, another faculty member, also the former Department Chair, who teaches Research Methods, the Director of Career Development and the Coordinator of the Center for Business Outreach reviewed and offered suggestions for edits and additions. For example, rather than a negative to positive scale, it was changed to positive to negative. Some items such as how the internship was acquired, paid or unpaid and questions regarding perceptions of employability were added. There were a few graduates who have completed internships who were also surveyed.

The Internship Coordinator and a former faculty coordinator were very supportive of a student based survey. The school has International Assembly of Collegiate Business Education (IACBE) accreditation and having more assessments of student outcomes is a critical component of accreditation.

## 9 METHODOLOGY

The survey was created in Survey Monkey and distributed by e-mail with the link to students who have completed internships for credit or not for credit. For credit students were sorted from the last five years by the internship course code thorough the Registrar's office. The Accounting students, juniors and seniors from the past two years who had contact e-mail were all sent the survey. It should be noted that Business Administration majors have only been required to take internships for the last academic year but have always been strongly encouraged to do so. Also, the school closes all student e-mail accounts six months after graduation so maintaining contact can be problematic. Some were contacted by their phone listing and requested their current e-mail for the survey.

## 10 RESULTS

The survey is in its initial stage and was given to previous and current student interns. It will now be used for all graduates. Of the past interns surveyed 26 responded (16% of the total) and found concepts and principle learned in business classes most applicable but not theories (see Table 1).

Table 1. How course lessons applied to internship.

	Very Applicable	Applicable	Somewhat Applicable	Not Applicable
Concepts	19.2%	53.9%	23.0%	3.9%
Principles	19.2%	38.5%	38.5%	3.9%
Theories	11.5%	30.8%	50.0%	7.7%

Overwhelmingly, the internship was perceived as a valuable experience (see Table 2).

Table 2. Student review of internship

	Definite ly Agree	Somewhat Agree	No Opinion	Somewha t Disagree	Definitely Disagree
This experience gave me a realistic preview of my field.	42.3 %	53.9 %	0.0 %	3.9 %	0.0 %
The work environment encouraged me to provide feedback and input.	61.5 %	34.6 %	3.9 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
I was treated with the same professional level as the other employees.	53.9 %	42.3 %	0.0 %	3.9 %	0.0 %
The work I did was challenging and stimulating.	34.6 %	34.6 %	11.5 %	19.2 %	0.0 %
My supervisor showed and explained to me other areas of the business.	57.7 %	30.8 %	0.0 %	7.7 %	3.9 %
I feel I am better prepared to enter the world of work after this internship.	38.5 %	50.0 %	3.9 %	7.7 %	0.0 %
I feel comfortable talking to my supervisor regarding problems encountered at work.	53.9 %	46.2 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %
I feel a permanent job offer will develop from my internship experience.	23.1 %	23.1 %	30.8 %	11.5 %	11.5 %

	Definite ly Agree	Somewhat Agree	No Opinion	Somewha t Disagree	Definitely Disagree
I feel I can get a good reference from this company/organization.	92.3 %	7.7 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %

## 10 CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that internships are useful experiences for students and can result in lucrative jobs. In a 2000 study, interns who exceeded employers' expectations were offered 9.2% more salary than other non-intern alumni counterparts (Gault, Redington & Schlager, 2000). One of the big four auditors, PricewaterhouseCoopers, recruits 70% of its new fulltime employees from internship positions (Burnsed, 2010). Organizations get to preview employees, students acquire valuable work skills and possible employment, schools develop links with more businesses and the community and earn renown for successful programs (Cook, Stokes, & Parker 2015).

Students connecting and applying their academic experiences to internships may increase their opportunities for employment or entrepreneurship. Continuing to survey interns online can help track the results and possible needs for specific classroom preparation. The accumulated documentation could also be used for accreditation assessment of the program and department. Student and employer survey results, internship logs and grades can provide influential material for accrediting bodies such as regional associations of schools and colleges, IACBE and Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

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