

# THE ROLE OF INTERNSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Jeanne Radigan  
[jeanne.radigan@farmingdale.edu](mailto:jeanne.radigan@farmingdale.edu)  
Farmingdale State College  
Lupton Hall - 109  
2350 Broadhollow Road  
Farmingdale, NY 11735

**Abstract:** Internships have become a key component in curricula at many institutions of higher education. This paper examines the role of internships in regards to the value they have to students, to the institution and to the industry (employers). Designing and implementing an effective program will be addressed as well as the importance of evaluating internship programs on an ongoing basis. Findings in this paper conclude that internships have fast become an integral component of many academic programs, offering benefits to all participating parties: students, schools and employers. However, care must be taken in the design and implementation of such programs and evaluations should be conducted on a regular basis to ensure that the internship program and academic curricula are meeting industry demands.

**Key words:** internships, experiential education, work-based learning

## Introduction: History of Internships

“The practice of gaining supervised practical experience is nothing new” [1]. Internships as part of a formal education program can trace its roots back to the Middle Ages where it was common practice to learn a trade under the direct supervision of a master craftsman. Apprentices often had to agree to “pay back” their employer by agreeing to work for a certain period of time once they were considered fully trained. In the early days, most, if not all of the training was done on the job, with little formal theoretical education.

By the early 1900’s, experiential learning had established itself at institutions of higher education in several fields. The clinical training programs for medical students were recognized as a key component in becoming a qualified medical doctor. Engineering programs acknowledged the benefits of having students participate in outside work environments on projects that reinforced the theory and concepts taught in the classroom. However it was not until the 1960s that colleges and universities broadly supported the expansion of these opportunities to be incorporated into their institutions’ curriculums [2].

Today internships have exploded in popularity with three out of four college students participating in an internship program before they graduate, up from one in 36 in 1980[3].

## Value of Internships

Internships have grown in popularity over the years for several reasons. They are often considered a win-win-win situation for students, the university and for the employers.

### *Value to the Student*

Internships are the link between theoretical knowledge and concepts learned in the classroom setting, and real time industry applications. Internships have long been regarded as an important component in preparing undergraduate students for the entry-level job market [4]. Internships provide students with valuable opportunities for growth through the shadowing of mentors, attendance at meetings, and actual performance of duties [5]. Students who have participated in internships have reported better time management and communication skills, higher levels of self-discipline, increased initiative and have higher self-image concepts [6].

Students participating in internships were found to have a significantly higher sense of career preparation over students without such experience in five skill areas: computer applications, creative thinking, job interviewing, networking, and relationship building[7]. Working alongside a seasoned professional allows students to take on meaningful tasks with real responsibility. Technical competencies are reinforced, analytical skills are improved and the students are able to experience firsthand the constant need for adaptability and creativity required in today's world [8].

Students who have interned may obtain more job offers and offers at higher starting salaries than those students without internship experience. Typically 30% of graduating seniors can expect a job offer before graduation. This number jumps to 58% for graduating seniors with intern experience [9]. The average overall time for interning graduates to obtain their first job offer was found to be significantly less than for non-interns at 1.98 months compared to 4.24 months [10]. However another study revealed that students with intern experience did not have significantly more offers than those without it, yet they did receive significantly higher starting salaries and higher satisfaction levels on their new jobs [11].

### *Value to the University*

Internships provide the university with a powerful marketing tool [12]. Ongoing surveys and focus groups have identified well developed internships as the single most effective college recruiting strategy [13]. These programs are one way colleges and universities can attract high caliber students desiring real-world experience as part of their education [14]. Students and their families are facing ever increasing tuition rates and want to be assured that the student will be leaving the institution fully marketable. Internships can play a vital role in assisting colleges with student placements [15] and can be a valuable tool in validating and updating college curricula to meet the demands of industry [16].

Personal connections between the community and the university are greatly increased with the penetration of interns into area businesses. These connections can represent an increased potential for corporate fund raising efforts for the university. These relationships can also yield access to guest lecturers and student field trips [17].

Some in academia do not view internships in such a positive light. They see these programs as nothing more than part time jobs in exchange for an easy "A". They believe internships detract from the students' academic pursuits. They argue that generally speaking, intern programs lack sufficient oversight and can actually diminish a university's image, leading to diminished funds [18].

Overall research does suggest that internship programs offer significant rewards to universities and that care should be exercised in ensuring that such programs are viewed with positive perceptions [19].

### *Value to Industry*

Internships have sometimes been described as a four month interview. Employers are given the opportunity to evaluate the “new hire” over a several month period rather than the standard interview procedures. The company is not under any obligation to hire the student, and is therefore able to evaluate these potential employees virtually risk-free [20]. Work ethic, technical competence and attitudes can be more easily assessed over a semester or summer as compared to a one hour interview. Employers are able to offer jobs to those that have proven themselves to be a good fit for the company [21] and often at a greatly reduced hiring cost. “The average cost of hiring a college recruit that has had internship experience is almost half that of hiring an experienced individual” [22].

Student interns that are properly placed are typically highly motivated. Student interns provide companies with inexpensive, competent assistance. If the internship involves a paid position, it is usually at a much lower rate and without the additional expense of fringe benefits. Interns also provide relief for the full-time employees from many of their routine tasks, freeing them to take on additional higher level tasks [23].

### Design and Implementation of an Effective Internship Program

It is universally agreed that the purpose of any internship is to bridge the gap between classroom learning and its application in the real world. In designing effective internships, a number of areas including the role of the internship in the overall educational program, site placement, and activity selection must be considered in order to ensure the best possible experience. An important element in developing the program is to ensure that the intern has ample opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding and working knowledge of the routines and daily tasks associated with the position [24]. A successful program is dependent upon the competency and motivation of all parties: the student, the university and the employer [25].

The student selection process is based on matching the student’s skill set with the organization’s specific needs. Extracurricular activities are important, as they can provide insight into a student’s leadership potential. Perhaps the most important sought-after trait is a winning attitude, which is considered the key to success and “gauges an intern’s motivation, energy and leadership potential” [26].

Student placements should ideally seek to broaden the scope of work related experiences rather than assigning tasks based on the student’s existing knowledge base. More time should be dedicated to active experiences rather than passive observations as the internship progresses [27]. Students assigned to challenging tasks requiring a substantial level of responsibility are motivated to perform better than those students assigned busy work [28].

Host companies play a role in the degree of success an internship program enjoys. A mentor should be assigned to directly supervise the intern and hold them accountable for project deadlines. Training should be provided and only projects that are accomplishable should be assigned to the intern. Successful internships involve the intern in the project planning stage and explain the rationale behind each task assigned to the intern [29].

The university must have a contact point for the employer. Most often a faculty member has the primary management responsibility, but some schools have an internship director or placement officer in charge of overseeing the program. Faculty are compensated in a variety of ways for managing interns, with 31% of them awarded teaching load credit for managing the program, 23% with extra pay and 13% with course load reduction. 28% of faculty overseeing an intern program reported no reward or extra compensation [30].

There is no national data on whether the majority of internships are paid or unpaid [31]. In one research study, paid internships accounted for only 25% of the total positions with the average rate just above minimum wage [32]. This puts many students from lower income levels at a disadvantage. Many colleges, particularly small private institutions, are making the internship option viable to a more diverse population by offering modest grants. However this is viewed by many as a way of enabling employers to continue what they consider to be an exploitation of students' labor. To further exasperate the problem, some employers require that the interns receive academic credit so their company is shielded from labor laws. This puts many students in the position of having to pay to work as an intern. For many college students, internships are viewed as a critical career move and they continue to line up and compete for these unpaid positions, believing that they will reap future dividends [33].

### Evaluating the Internship

Evaluations of students by their employers can be a valuable tool used by campuses to revise their academic programs to better meet industry needs. Colleges and universities struggle to keep pace with employers demands and are constantly revising curricula to improve educational value. By surveying employers for their level of satisfaction with interns, colleges and universities obtain an overall assessment of how well their programs are meeting real world demands. Strengths and weakness are identified allowing the university or college to capitalize on its strengths and improve in their areas of weakness [34].

It is critical that the learning goals of the internship are specified and that measurable outcomes are identified. Internships can be a key component of an educational program provided the goals of the student, college and employer are all identified and paired correctly. Evaluation of the assessment tool itself should occur on a regular basis to ensure that the results are reliable and provide a means of practical curriculum revision [35].

### Conclusion

Internships are gaining in popularity for good reason. A well designed internship program that is properly implemented reaps benefits for all parties involved. Students are given the opportunity to reinforce and practice the theoretical concepts taught in school, thus bridging the gap between the classroom and "the real world". In addition to having technical skills reinforced and practiced, internships offer the opportunity for students to improve their interviewing and time management skills. Internships also offer students the opportunity to develop a network of contacts in their industry, an invaluable asset to possess upon graduation. Students who intern typically land their first job faster than non-interning students and at higher starting salaries.

Many universities have come to use internship opportunities as a valuable recruitment tool. Internships provide an excellent tool for evaluating curricula and ensuring that the programs being offered are up to date and relevant to industry. Internships strengthen the relationship between the school and industry by providing increased access to guest speakers, potential field trips for students and increased fund raising alliances.

Industry benefits by having access to interns that are typically motivated, inexpensive workers. To be effective, it is critical that internships are designed and implemented properly by both the school and employer. Internships are likely here to stay. Their role in higher education is summarized well by Coco as follows:

Universities see internships as a means of validating and updating their programs and as a catalyst for placing students after graduation. Internships are a win-win situation for everyone and the synergistic effect of the relationship among student, host company, and university benefits all participating parties. All indicators from students, industry and universities point to an escalating importance and frequency of internships [36].

## References

- [1] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [2] Forest, J., & Kinser, K., *Experiential Education, Higher Education in the the United States: An Encyclopedia* (p. 207). Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2002.
- [3] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [4] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [5] Berry, J., *A Study of Leadership Preparation through the Internship*, *Georgia State University*, 2007, 1-150.
- [6] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*. *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [7] Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T., *Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are they Related?*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 45-53.
- [8] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [9] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [10] Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T., *Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are they Related?*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 45-53.
- [11] Taylor, S. M., *Effects of College Internships on Individual Participants*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1988, 393-401.
- [12] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [13] Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T., *Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are they Related?*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 45-53.
- [14] Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T., *Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are they Related?*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 45-53.
- [15] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [16] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [17] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.

- [18] Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T., *Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are they Related?*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 45-53.
- [19] Gault, J., Redington, J., & Schlager, T., *Undergraduate Business Internships and Career Success: Are they Related?*, *Journal of Marketing Education*, 2000, 45-53.
- [20] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [21] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [22] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [23] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [24] Berry, J., *A Study of Leadership Preparation through the Internship*, *Georgia State University*, 2007, 1-150.
- [25] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [26] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [27] Berry, J., *A Study of Leadership Preparation through the Internship*, *Georgia State University*, 2007, 1-150.
- [28] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [29] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [30] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*, *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [31] Lipka, S., (2008). Subsidizing the Internship. *Chronicle of Higher Education* , 18-19.
- [32] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*. *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.
- [33] Lipka, S., (2008). Subsidizing the Internship. *Chronicle of Higher Education* , 18-19.
- [34] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [35] Verney, T. P., Holoviak, S. J., & Winter, A. S., *Enhancing the Reliability of Internship Evaluations*, *The Journal of Applied Business and Economics*, 2009, 22-34.
- [36] Coco, M., *Internships: A Try Before You Buy Arrangement*. *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, 2000, 41-47.