Infusing NACE Career Readiness Competencies with Internship/Co-op Courses

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In the fall of 2015, an opportune moment existed for a complete internship program redesign at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). This was the first semester of a newly approved 0-1 credit Professional Internship Course. This course expanded the experiential course offerings at FAU and allowed students that previously were not engaged in a formal experiential education program to participate. The stage was set and then a timely new announcement was made. In November of 2015, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) released the seven career readiness competencies identified by employers as most often sought in future employees. Three semesters later outcomes are being analyzed and further refinements are being made.

Setting the Stage

Before dissecting the internship program progressive redesign, it is helpful to understand the previous state of experiential education at FAU. FAU is a relatively new university, founded in 1961. It has grown to 30,000+ students over a six-campus network. There are ten colleges and over 180 majors represented. Experiential education at FAU is decentralized. Departments at the various colleges coordinate internship programs that are credit bearing and tied to specific majors. Additionally, the FAU Career Center manages co-op courses on behalf of some of the colleges and these courses provide students with upper division elective credit. With the introduction of the Professional Internship course, a third option emerged. Through this course, students could receive transcript notation for their experience as well as the guided reflection of an experiential education program **without** having to pay for the course or earn excess credit hours. The Professional Internship course has a requirement of 60 minimum hours during the term (much less than the credit bearing options), which allows registration to occur on an ongoing basis throughout the majority of the semester. Additionally, with no GPA requirement, many students can take advantage of this opportunity.

With an increase in the number of students participating across the university, it was essential to standardize the course components as well as the outcome reporting that could be derived and disseminated. Previously, learning outcomes across placement sites were inconsistent, which did not allow for any aggregated data to be reported by major or college. Additionally, while data was collected, it was not shared nor used for program improvements. Programmatic changes were needed.

Spring 2016 Pilot Program

We were extremely excited about the transparency behind the seven NACE career readiness competencies: **critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, information technology application, leadership, professionalism/work ethic,** and **career management**. These soft skills were readily understandable and generalizable to all students from all majors engaged in all types

CRITICAL THINKING/ PROBLEM SOLVING

ORAL/WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

TEAMWORK/ COLLABORATION

INFO TECHNOLOGY APPLICATION

LEADERSHIP

PROFESSIONALISM WORK ETHIC

CAREER MANAGEMENT

of experiential learning. However, there were key questions that needed answers: How will we assess the competencies in a way that can show growth? How can we elicit supervisor feedback that contributes to student learning and provides outcome data?

The pilot program was launched with a total of 74 students registered for either an internship or a co-op course. There were four key engagement aspects with the students to monitor their successful completion of their experience. All students had an individual registration appointment during which they were introduced to the seven competencies and completed a pre-experience self-assessment pertaining to each competency. Internship Specialists advised students on developing learning outcomes tied to the soft skills identified as essential in being "career ready" and students determined these in consultation with their site supervisors. Students developed seven learning outcomes — one per competency. Upon the conclusion of the term, students completed a final self-assessment pertaining to the competencies and supervisors rated the students on the same competencies. Students then had a reflective session with their Internship Specialist to review their evaluations, unpack areas for future exploration and development and identify next steps. Each of these aspects is explored in greater detail.

Pre-Program Self-Assessment

Prior to spring 2016, students were not asked to assess their skill set prior to their internship or co-op experience. They had a registration appointment, in which they were told about the midterm and final evaluations to come, but were not completing any self-reflection or given guidance on skills they would be developing over the course of the term. During the registration appointment, an Internship Specialist introduces the seven career readiness competencies to the student and the student completes a pre-experience self-assessment pertaining to those competencies. They self-rate on each of the seven competencies to establish a baseline score. The intent is to compare the student's pre-assessment with his/her post assessment to show growth. The assessment was built and collected information pertaining to a student's major allowing aggregated data reporting by college. In this assessment students self-rate their current level of competency according to a three-point scale: Still Developing, Achieving in Most Areas, and Mastery of Content. To assist students in self-assessing original language was developed around each competency and levels were identified to help students picture themselves. Figure 1 is an example of how that looks pertaining to the Teamwork/Collaboration competency.
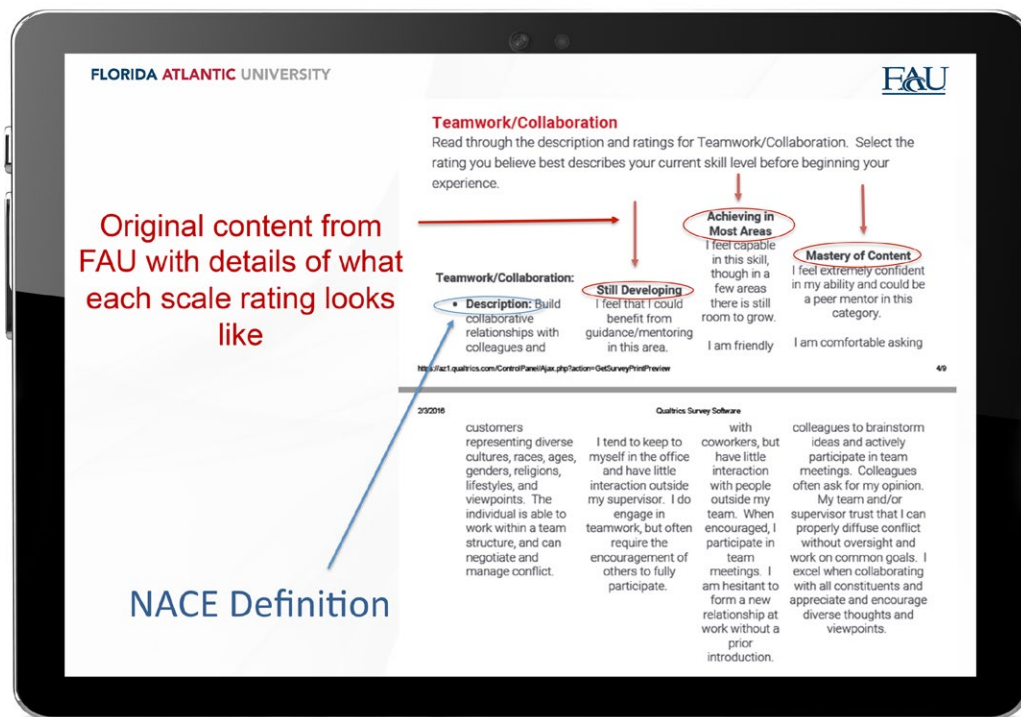
figure 1

Midterm Evaluation

The midterm evaluation has historically been a part of the program. Prior to spring 2016, students completed midterm reports where they identified, in consultation with their internship supervisor, three learning outcomes they hoped to achieve through their internships. These outcomes were submitted via an on-line link to the Career Center and, were reviewed with the Career Center providing guidance if there was additional information and/or detail required. Beginning in spring 2016, the learning outcomes became more intentional. The revised midterm, like the pre-assessment, was built in qualtircs. Students are provided with a specific framework they should use when writing their outcomes and they now identify an outcome for each of the seven career readiness competencies. Internship Specialists review the outcomes, provide feedback, and offer assistance with revisions. As with the pre-program self-assessment, figure 2 is an example of how that looks pertaining to the Teamwork/Collaboration competency.

Final Evaluation

Interns and supervisors previously completed final evaluations but they were extremely long and were used merely to determine a grade of satisfactory/unsatisfactory for individual students. They were not designed to allow aggregated reporting based upon major that could shape future program design and identify opportunities for increased learning and skill development. Students and supervisors were given two weeks to complete the evaluations through an on-line link to the Career Center.
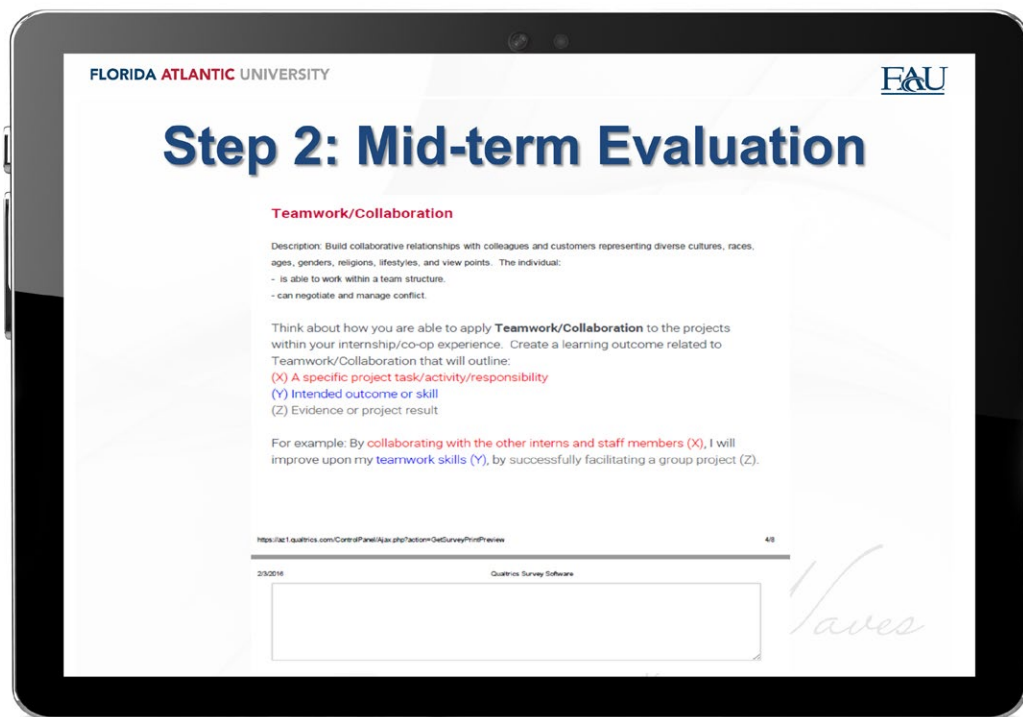
figure 2

In the revised final evaluations, students self-assessed on their post experiential education proficiency in the seven career readiness competencies. They are asked to reflect on their midterm objectives and share how they progressed as a result of the experience. In addition to selecting a rating they are asked to provide a detailed example, which demonstrates why they selected that rating. As with the other evaluations, figure 3 a screen shot to further illustrate how this looks.
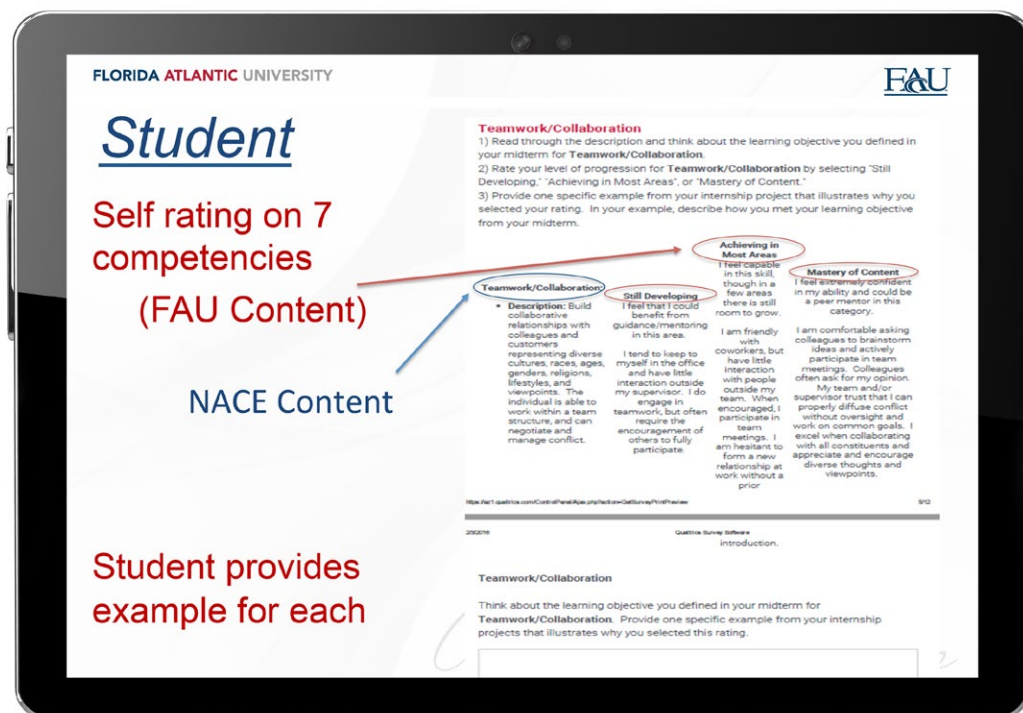
figure 3

The spring 2016 student final evaluation also asked for students to select their level of agreement with the following statement: As a direct result of this internship experience, I know what career field or occupation I want to pursue after graduation and/or future internship. Students are asked to choose from: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. Lastly, students are prompted to report if they have secured another internship

The updated supervisor final evaluation was also redesigned to align with the seven career readiness competencies. This will allow a comparison of the intern's self-assessment and the supervisor's evaluation on each of the seven competencies. This evaluation was the first time the supervisors were introduced to the competencies — this will be an area that we will come back to later in this program overview. Additionally, we asked the supervisors if they would consider the student for employment and to rate their level of agreement with relation to the student's performance on tasks and quality of work. Figure 4 is a screen shot of this matrix.

figure 4

Grading

The final evaluations were reviewed and graded either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. If additional specificity was needed an Internship Specialist would reach out to the student and/or supervisor to gain the information. The student evaluations were

loaded into their blackboard accounts. A decision was made to not upload the final supervisor evaluations and instead use them as an incentive to encourage the students to meet with their Internship Specialists for reflection and debrief.

Aggregating and Sharing Data

These new evaluations have a consistent framework for all students across all colleges and majors, and the Career Center is now able to aggregate the data and share these findings with key constituents. As more students complete this program the data set will grow, allowing for further refinement of reporting. The goal is to be able to report this data not only by college, but by major as well, and then further splice it by other factors such as on vs. off campus internship, paid vs. un-paid internship, etc.

For the spring 2016 pilot, quantitative analysis of the competencies was completed on the individual student level and aggregated by college. The pilot program data was impressive. Greater than 90% of the students, across all colleges, self-reported growth in at least one career readiness competency as a result of their internship experience. Supervisor evaluations of growth consistently matched student evaluations for all majors. Information was compiled and shared with the colleges eliciting further dialog about the importance of soft-skills and the Career Center's role in contributing to holistic student development. Here is a snapshot of some items reported pertaining to demographics, growth in career readiness competencies, and consistency when comparing supervisor and intern perceptions. It should be noted that the student self-perception and the supervisor reports were 100% in alignment (figure 5).
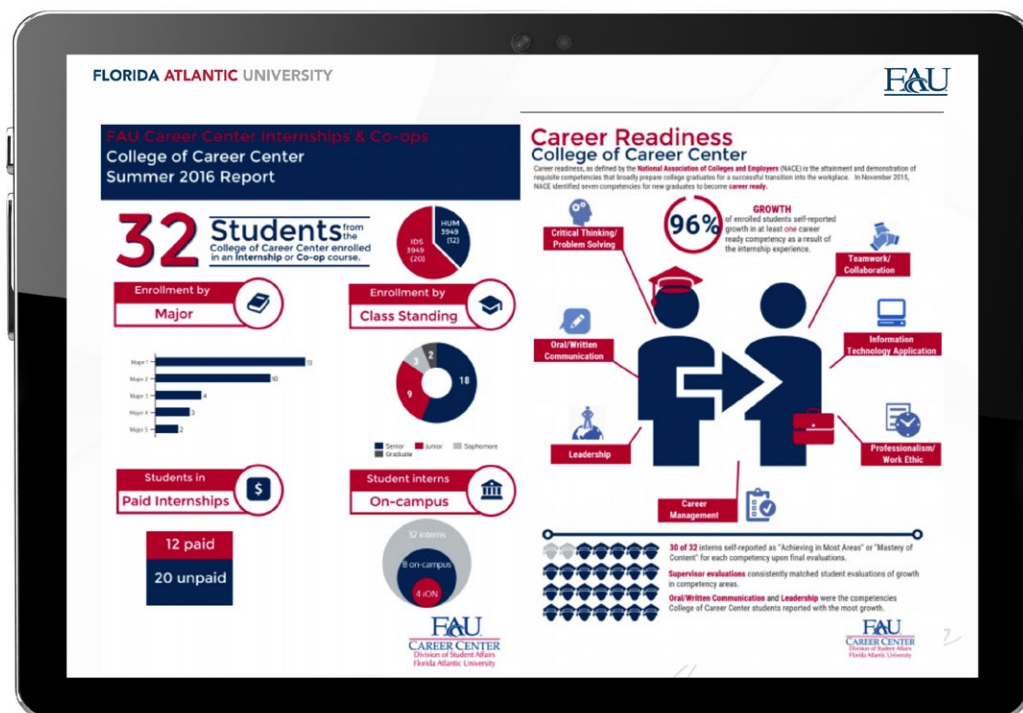
figure 5

Summer 2016 Review and Enhancements

The spring pilot program was considered a success — as students benefitted from the soft skills structure provided by the career readiness competencies. This helped them frame reflective conversations with their Internship Specialists as well as identify areas for future growth. As with any program, improvements can always be made. For the summer we implemented a few new aspects and made a couple of tweaks to enhance program communication and data reporting.

Increasing Supervisor Awareness

When we launched the program in the spring, we were very focused on ensuring that students understood the competencies and how they could benefit them. This was essential in enabling them to draft their learning outcomes, which they were to work on with their supervisors. For the summer 2016 term we recognized the importance of providing internship supervisors with the same level of awareness of the career readiness competencies as we do with the students. As we discussed previously, in the spring, supervisors were formally introduced to the competencies at the end of the term, when they were asked to rate the students on each of the competencies. In the summer, we introduced a welcome packet that was sent to supervisors when their interns registered for a course. The welcome packet provided supervisors with information explaining the seven career readiness competencies. It offered recommendations for how the supervisors could support their interns in relation to each competency. Additionally, it outlined the key dates for the program and the expectation that the supervisor would assist the intern in drafting learning outcomes tied to the career readiness competencies that would be submitted in the student's midterm. We also offered to be an ongoing resource for supervisors throughout the term.

The additional communication was sent to supervisors at the time of the student's midterm evaluation. Previously our office communicated only with the student at the time of the midterm and put the onus on the student to involve his/her supervisor in writing learning outcomes. This summer we emailed the supervisors, letting them know that the interns had received their midterms and that they will be reaching out to their supervisors for assistance in developing the learning outcomes. Additionally, we offered to provide the supervisors with a copy of the evaluations for their records. The increase in midterm communication with supervisors, as well as the welcome packets, were well received and strengthened the relationship between the supervisors and the Career Center.

Student Evaluations 2.0

For the summer we endeavored to enhance our ability to capture student growth pertaining to the career readiness competencies. In order to achieve this, we changed the scale from three fixed points (still developing, achieving in most areas, mastery of content) to a ten-point sliding scale. We came to this decision after the interns had taken the pre-assessment, therefore only the final evaluation for the students and the supervisors reflected this change in the summer. In the fall 2016 term, all evaluations will be moved to the ten-point sliding scale.

We also added additional questions to further hone in on student growth. In the spring, we calculated growth based upon pre-assessment scores and post-assessment scores. In the summer we added a question asking students to reflect on the competencies and provide their perspective on how their career readiness level changed since the beginning of their internship. This was created as a ten-point sliding scale and we wrote language to help students identify where they fell on the scale (figure 6).

figure 6

A second question was included that asked students to rank the seven career readiness competencies. Interns were asked to indicate which competencies they grew the most in and which ones they grew the least in. (figure 7).
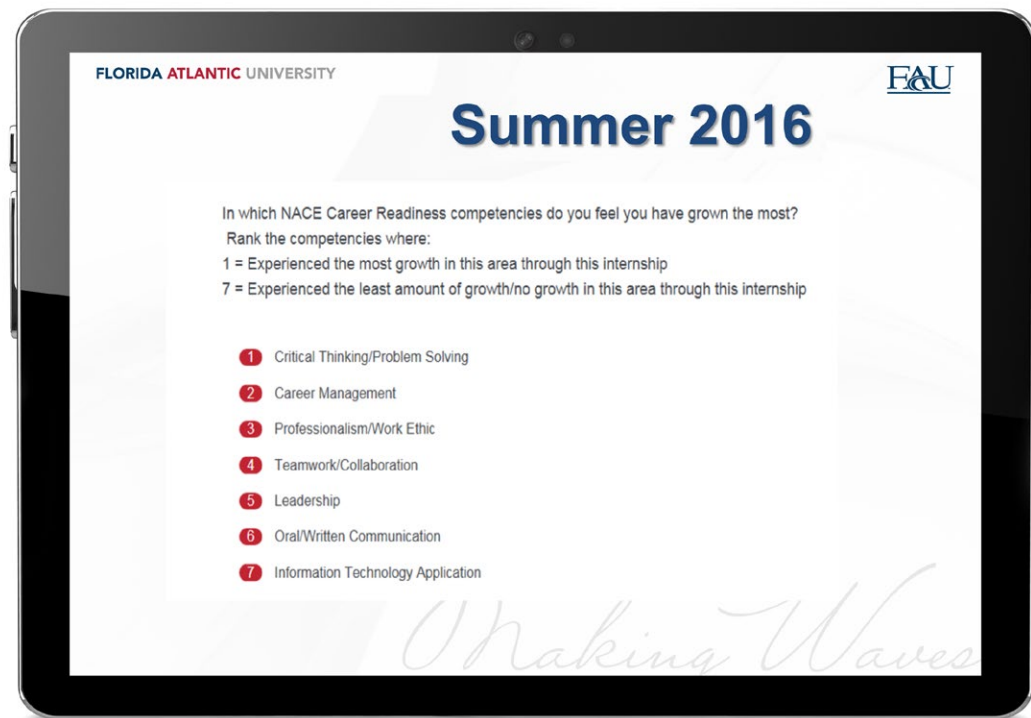
figure 7

Having three data collection points pertaining to growth allows us to analyze this aspect in greater detail.

Not only did we enhance our questions pertaining to student growth, but we also tweaked how we framed our reflection questions pertaining to the competencies. In spring 2016 we asked students to think about their learning objectives that they provided in their midterm evaluation and construct an example as to how they achieved the outcome. Student responses were not always as robust as we would have liked. Thus, in the summer, we took a different approach. Instead of asking for an example, we reframed this question as an interview scenario. Students were asked to report on their competencies as a response to an interview question. Our responses greatly improved by asking students to think about it from a job interview standpoint. An added benefit of this format is that it helps students prepare for future interviews (figure 8).
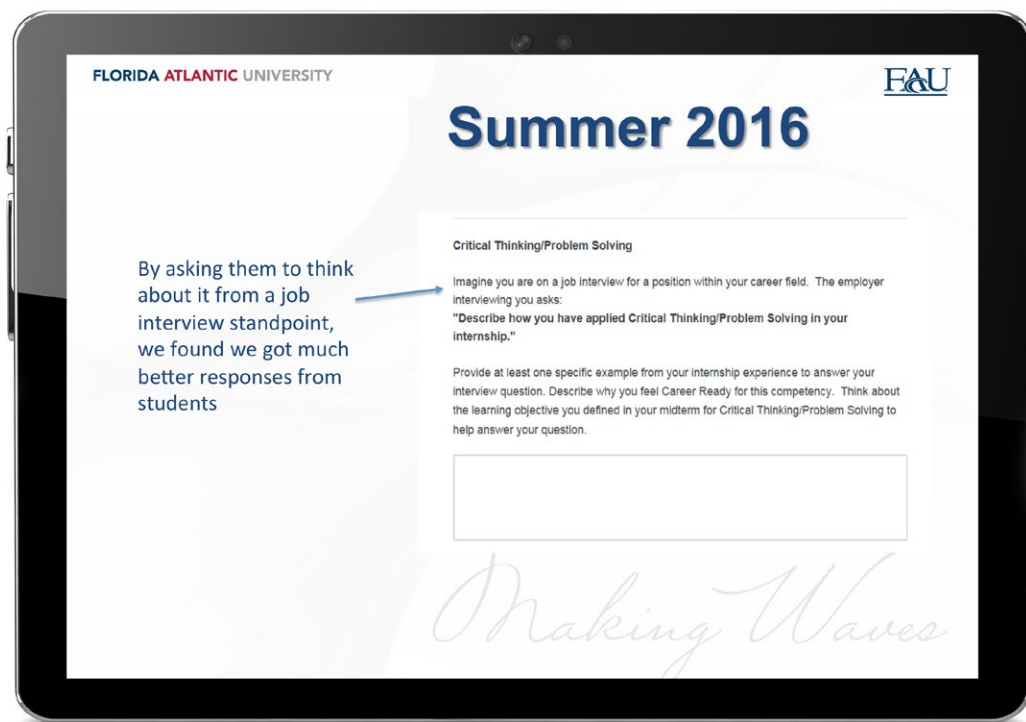
figure 8

Supervisor Evaluations 2.0

As with the student final evaluations, we enhanced the supervisor final evaluations with question redesign and additions. The supervisor final evaluations were changed to a ten-point sliding scale increasing their options as far as rating the student's level of competency. Additionally, similar to the growth question in the student evaluation, we asked the supervisor to report on the intern's level of growth for each competency viewed during the internship experience. We did not assess the supervisor's perception of growth previously (figure 9).
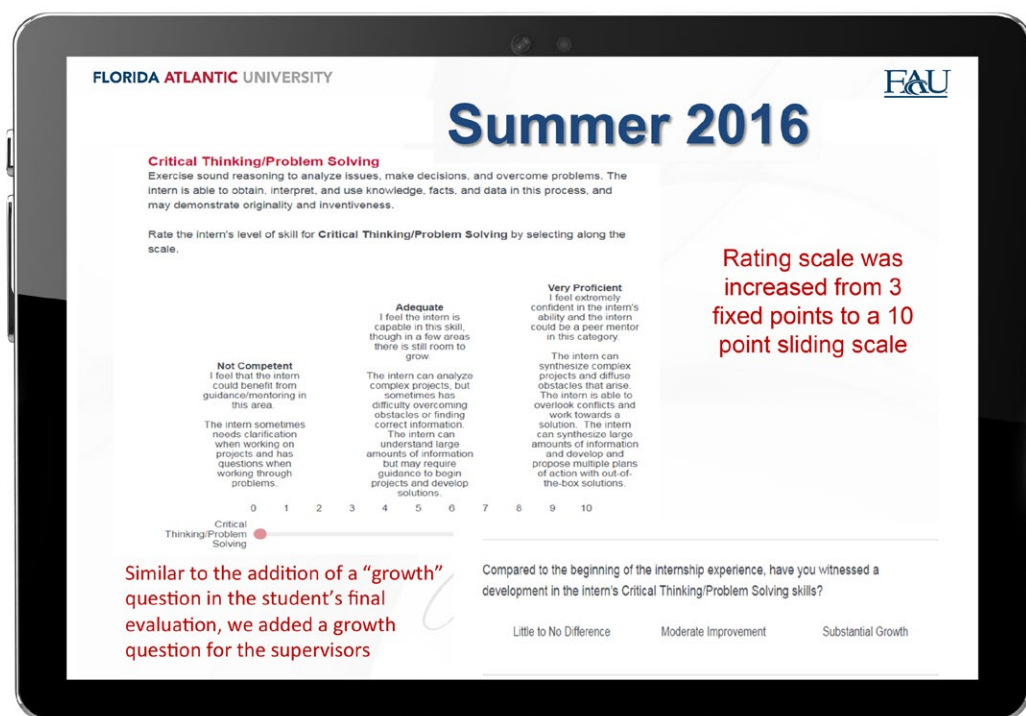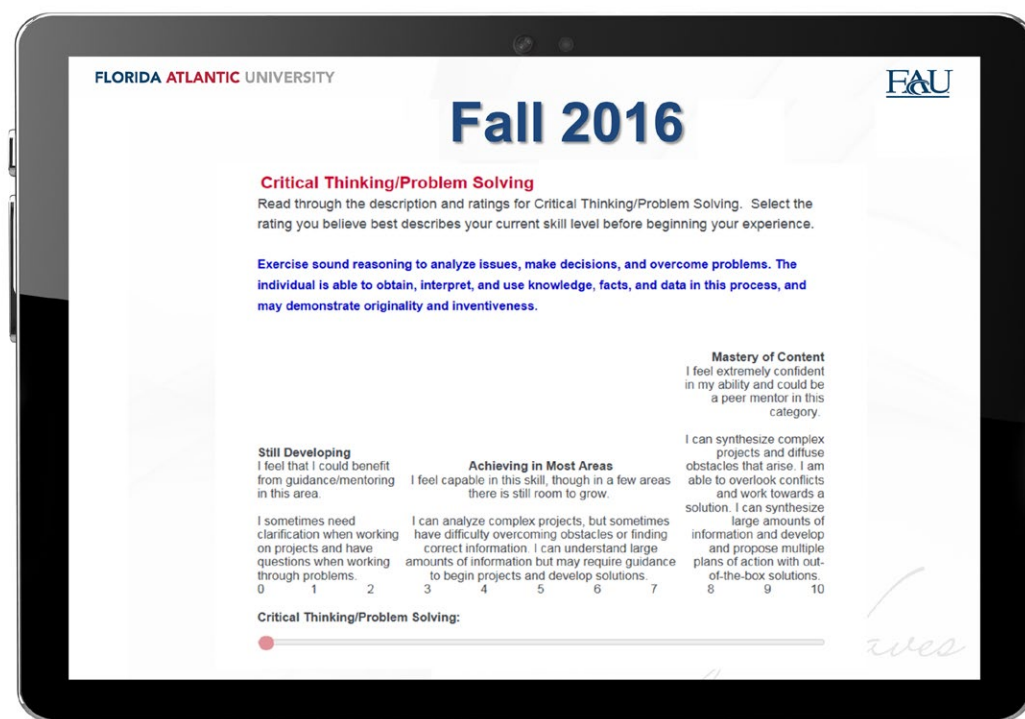
figure 9

When we reviewed the supervisor final evaluations we became curious as to how supervisor ratings may relate to their experience with supervising interns. To investigate this, an additional question was added. Supervisors were asked if they ever previously supervised an intern as well as prompted to clarify if it was with their current organization or a previous organization. Our summer 2016 data found that over 80% of the supervisors had previously supervised an intern with 63% having supervised an intern previously at his/her current organization.

Fall 2016 Continued Refinement

Ten-Point Scales

We are excited to review how students grow in relation to the competencies at the close of the fall term as this is the first term where all evaluations are built with a ten-point sliding scale. Now we will have the ability to calculate growth on a ten-point scale and analyze it in conjunction with the questions that ask students and supervisors to report their perception of growth (figure 10).

figure 10

Program Enhancement

Our goal was to increase the support and guidance provided to students pertaining to the career readiness competencies. Thus, the internship team decided to send weekly emails to interns with multimedia aspects pertaining to the competencies. The first week, interns were emailed a welcome letter and a refresher on the competencies. This refresher is helpful as some of them registered weeks prior to beginning the experience and may not have remembered all aspects they discussed with their Internship Specialists. Each of the next seven weeks was tied to an individual competency, such as week two relating to Critical Thinking/Problem Solving. During the week, students receive an email with either an article, video, TED talk, etc. that offers them an additional perspective on the competency. We look forward to seeing what students think about this new addition.

Supervisor Experience

We continued to look for ways to better understand supervisor evaluations of students. This fall we included a question that asked supervisors how many interns they are currently supervising. Supervisors could select from: 1, 2-4, and 5+. We are interested in the response to this question to see if there are any observations we can offer when looking at this information in conjunction with how they assess their interns.

Outcomes Reporting

Our prior student evaluations asked the students to let us know if they secured another internship and our previous supervisor evaluations asked supervisors if they would consider the student for an additional position as an intern or full-time hire. With the increased importance on outcomes reporting, this question design fell shy of providing a complete picture. For the fall 2016 evaluations, we incorporated skip logic questions to better assess the outcomes of the experiences. First, students are asked if the organization extended them an offer of full-time employment. If they select "Yes," they are then asked if they will be accepting that position. If they select "No" to that question they are asked to explain why. We also included a question to determine if a second internship offer was extended. Students are asked if the organization extended them an offer to continue their internship. If they select "Yes" they are then asked if they will be accepting the position. If they select "No" to that question they are asked to explain why.

We also added questions to the supervisor evaluations to confirm the outcome data. Supervisors were asked if their organization offered a full-time offer of employment to the student. If the supervisor indicates "No" to that question he/she is asked if

there was a full-time offer to extend. This will hopefully help us to determine if there are opportunities that our students are not securing and explore how we can assist them. If the supervisor reports that they did extend an offer to the student, he/she is then asked to confirm if the student did or did not accept or if the intern has not yet responded. We look forward to seeing this outcome data at the conclusion of the term.

What a Year!

The internship program underwent many changes that strengthened student learning, relationships with supervisors, and outcome reporting. Figure 11 shows a consolidated table detailing the evolution of the program thus far.

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

FAU

	Spring 2016	Summer 2016	Fall 2016
Pre-Assessment Rating Scale	3 Dimensions (Fixed)	3 Dimensions (Fixed)	10 Dimensions (Sliding Scale)
Final Student Self-Assessment Rating Scale	3 Dimensions (Fixed)	10 Dimensions (Sliding Scale)	10 Dimensions (Sliding Scale)
Final Supervisor Assessment Rating Scale	3 Dimensions (Fixed)	10 Dimensions (Sliding Scale)	10 Dimensions (Sliding Scale)
First Supervisor Career Readiness Info. Communication	In Final Evaluation	Welcome Packet	Welcome Packet
Student's Perception of Self-Growth	N/A	Included for Each Competency	Included for Each competency
Student Rank's the Competencies in Order of Most Growth	N/A	Included	Included
Supervisor's Perception of Growth	N/A	Included	Included
Gathered Info. about the Breadth & Depth of Supervisor's Internship Experience	N/A	One question added to Final Evaluation	Second question added to Final Evaluation
Outcome Data	Minimal	Minimal	Expanded

figure 11

The future is exciting! The FAU Career Center intends to collect and aggregate data across terms, which will increase sample size when compiled at the college level. Longitudinal data analysis will be conducted to investigate how students participating in an internship or co-op course grounded in the NACE competencies fair in relation to persistence and employment post-graduation statistics when compared to their peers who did not participate in one of these courses.