

Perceptions of the Role and Structure of Internships in Undergraduate Business Education

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Abstract

Internships have become a common feature in undergraduate business education programs (Hergert, 2009; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008) with 92% of business schools offering internship experiences (Coco, 2000). This increased focus has drawn more attention to the expectation that internships not only provide meaningful and career relevant experiences, but also structured environments (Stirling, Kerr, MacPherson, Banwell, Bandyaly, and Battaglia, 2017, p. 28). By providing structure, institutions and employers are better able to customize programs unique to their organizational needs.

This qualitative, single case study examines the role and structure of internships in undergraduate business education at an AACSB accredited business school located at a research 1 institution. The Grant University College of Business is the pseudonym that was assigned to this institution. Administrators and employers were asked questions related to how they describe the internship program within the College, specifically for their academic area/industry, and how they perceive internships in business as a whole. Interviews with eight administrators (*including two deans*) and six employers along with several document reviews were used to provide insight into this topic. The analysis of the administrator and employer perceptions of the role and structure of internships in undergraduate business education surfaced the following themes: (1) internships expand the boundaries of business knowledge and (2) internships should be customized.

Keywords: experiential learning, career development, professionalism, and higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Employer demand and a push by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) to increase experiential learning in both local and global practices of business have

been significant factors in the growth of experiential learning in postsecondary business education (Griffis, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2008; Sciglimpaglia & Toole, 2009). A poll by

Hart Research Associates (2008) found that employers preferred practical experience to traditional classroom lectures as a method of learning. Therefore, the need for an enhanced curriculum becomes more evident as business schools work to produce the employees that employers seek while meeting and maintaining the standards that their accrediting agency requires.

AACSB accredited business schools are required to participate in a self-evaluation and a peer review to ensure that they uphold standards that fall under the following four categories: (a) strategic management and innovation; (b) students, faculty, and professional staff; (c) learning and teaching; and (d) academic and professional engagement (AACSB, 2016; Dumond & Johnson, 2013). Standard #13 specifically addresses the need for business schools to provide experiential learning opportunities.

For any teaching and learning model employed, the school provides a portfolio of experiential learning opportunities for business students, through either formal coursework or extracurricular activities, which allow them to engage with faculty and active business leaders. These experiential learning activities provide exposure to business and management in both local and global contexts... They... may include field trips, internships, consulting projects, field research, interdisciplinary projects, extracurricular activities, etc. (AACSB, 2016, p. 38)

Since the AACSB recommendation to increase experiential learning in business education, internships have played a significant role in addressing this directive (Hergert, 2009). In recent years, employers have expected interns to come into the workplace trained while students

expect employers to provide the training (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000; Hurst & Good, 2010). With this knowledge, many in academia have recognized that students with real-world work experience are more desirable to employers because they often require less training and less supervision (Birch, Allen, McDonald, & Tomaszczyk, 2010; Gault et al., 2000; Hurst & Good, 2010; McDonald, Birch, Hitchman, Fox, & Lido, 2010). These findings have elevated internships as a necessary component in the undergraduate business curriculum with more business schools increasing their focus on various forms of internships (Birch et al., 2010; Gault et al., 2000; Hurst & Good, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

This research is most closely aligned with the viewpoints presented by Sharan B. Merriam. Merriam (2009) follows a constructivist tradition that views qualitative research as a form of study that embraces an individual's ability to create their own reality through interaction with the surrounding world. She posits that "there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9) and that qualitative researchers are fascinated by how people make meaning of the world around them. Therefore, qualitative researchers "do not find knowledge, they construct it" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9) by developing another interpretation of their findings based on "others' views filtered through his or her own" (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). Multiple theories of learning follow the constructivist perspective; however, I used situated learning to assist in my analysis and interpretation of the findings in this case study.

Situated Learning

Situated learning is a “social-cultural process” (Zhang, Kaufman, Scheell, Salgado, Seah, & Jeremic, 2017, p. 3) centered around making gradual connections within communities that later lead to full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) posit that the connections we make within the community demonstrate how important our environment is to our ability to create new knowledge. They believe that learning is a naturally occurring action deeply rooted within activity, context, and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situated learning shifts the learning process from an individual focus to a participatory focus (Quay, 2003). “Of prime importance in situated learning is the conceptualization of the intimate connection between participation and the social and cultural world within which that participation occurs, a viewpoint often missed in many models of learning in experiential education” (Quay, 2003, p. 107). Situated learning theory provided an essential framework to analyze the structure of internships at companies that recruit Grant University College of Business interns. I also gained insight into how employers engage interns in the social, cultural, and professional life of the organization.

During an internship, students make connections with mentors, supervisors, and potential colleagues. Employers make connections with potential employees and administrators make connections with industry professionals able to provide professional opportunities for the students they serve. The process is cyclical and as these connections are made, they continually demonstrate the value of situated learning by showing how important our communities are in our ability to create new knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

The college under study is a 67-year old AACSB accredited institution with more than 6,000 students, six academic departments – accounting; business analytics, information systems and supply chain; finance; management; marketing; and risk management/insurance, real estate and legal studies, and ten undergraduate degree programs. I chose this college because of its current standing as an AACSB accredited business school, its size, and its concentrated efforts to incorporate internships into the curriculum. Participants in this study were administrators employed within the Grant University College of Business and employers that provide internship opportunities to business students within the College.

Participation was completely voluntary using the purposive, or purposeful, sampling strategy. The selection of administrators was driven by the fact that each department has a role in the development of internship guidelines and requirements for their respective area. In addition, these administrators interact in some capacity with the internships office staff to assist students and employers in making quality internship connections. The selection of employers was driven by the fact that each company consistently provided internship opportunities to students in each of the six academic departments. I conducted individual interviews with eight administrators and six employers using the semi-structured, or guided, interview approach. This allowed me an opportunity to develop a standard set of questions for each participant while still providing flexibility to modify questions and the order for the purposes of probing more deeply while clarifying key points (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this study, I collected a variety of documents that included internship course syllabi, student internship policy and procedures manual, employer policy and procedures manual, the college's strategic plan, the employer recruiter guide, and the internship office staff training manual. Hammersely and Atkinson (1983) found that such documents provide rich descriptions, are easily accessible, and help minimize ethical concerns. Website content was also reviewed and analyzed to broaden the scope of the investigation. The purpose of selecting these sources for review was to validate data received from interviews.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously in an effort to minimize the difficulty in deciphering large volumes of material (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, reviewed, and shared with each participant for the purposes of member checking. Coding was completed manually using a notepad and post-it notes. Once participants confirmed and/or made modifications to their transcript, I was able to analyze each document individually to determine primary themes from each interview question. Significant thoughts were written down as themes began to emerge. As recurring themes emerged, I also maintained memos to document what was heard, observed, and how the findings were interpreted. By creating memos after each data collection procedure, I was able to compare findings and better prepare for subsequent interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009).

RESULTS

An analysis of administrator and employer perceptions of the role and structure of internships in undergraduate business education yielded

the following themes: (a) internships expand the boundaries of business knowledge and (b) internships should be customized.

Internships Expand the Boundaries of Business Knowledge

The Grant University College of Business website recognizes their mission to “be a leader among public business schools, expanding the boundaries of business knowledge and providing exceptional educational experiences for our students.” To fulfill this mission, the college's 2017-2022 strategic plan notes that internships have become an important approach used to involve students in relevant industry experiences designed to prepare them for career success. This plan also emphasizes the college's hope to become a leader in both academic and professional growth by increasing the number of internships completed, the percentage of students who participate, and the number of industry-related activities. During my interviews, administrators and employers shared valuable insights into their perceptions of how internships can expand business knowledge through skill development and experience.

Administrator Perceptions. By encouraging employer internship development and student internship participation, the Grant University College of Business uses collaborative techniques to provide academic internship course credit and promote professional development through unique learning opportunities (Internships and Career Services Staff Training Manual, 2018). While the program specifically targets business majors, services are also rendered to non-business majors seeking academic credit for business-related internships. Overall, internships are considered a complementary approach to business education; however, administrators

have a shared vision of enhancing the academic and professional skills of each student while making them more marketable as they leave academia and enter today's competitive workforce (Internships and Career Services Staff Training Manual, 2018).

Currently, the College of Business only requires internship participation for students majoring in professional sales; however, all students are encouraged to participate in order to gain valuable work experience. When asked about the role of internships in business education, the majority of administrators saw internships taking on a more prevalent role in business education than in years past. Mary, an accounting professor, shared:

Internships have become much more critical and significant than they were back when I was a student. I feel like in the last ten years, our students feel that if they don't have an internship, they're not going to end up with a full-time job. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

Donald, Dean of the College, said "we have so many students who have very little professional development experience. Therefore, the role of the internship, to me, is crucial moving forward" (Donald, personal communication, December 11, 2017). Although internships are not required for all students in the College of Business, they are strongly encouraged. Each department has an internship course that can be taken as elective credit within the major or as general elective credit toward graduation hours. All administrators interviewed agreed that the implementation of these courses and the creation of a designated internship office are prime examples of the important role that the College has placed

on internship participation as a supplement to the traditional business courses being offered in business schools worldwide.

Whether or not internships should be required in business education has been a topic of discussion in many business schools. Size of the college and location of the institution are just two areas that play a significant role in a college's decision to require college-wide internship participation. While administrators unanimously agreed that internships are a great way for students to gain professional experience, not all agreed that internships should be required. Jason, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs, shared the following:

Alumni are of the opinion that internships are something that benefit absolutely everybody who goes through. I'm not sure that I agree with that. I think it benefits a large number of people, but I also think that there are many students who are mediocre students translated into mediocre interns. (personal communication, December, 11, 2017)

In contrast, Thomas, a professor in the marketing department, felt that internships should be a requirement of every degree program within the College. He said:

I feel it's the counterbalance, or the matching piece, to academic learning because you've got to put everything you do in perspective. A lot of what gets taught in a college of business is related to theory, based on sound, factual information. I feel it should be a requirement of every degree. (personal communication, November 20, 2017)

According to Ingrid, a management information systems professor, "internships have to be

an integral part of an education” (personal communication, December 6, 2017). Frank, an associate professor of Finance, shared that this is the first work experience for many students; therefore, they are being exposed to valuable lessons on how a business operates. Matthew, a management professor, said that “students are going to be much more prepared to be competitive in the marketplace if they have that supplemental experience that takes what they learn in the classroom and puts it into a more applied setting” (personal communication, December 8, 2017).

A report from the National Association of College and Employers (2017a) found that “employers anticipate hiring 3.4% more interns in 2017 than they did in 2016” (p. 1). Forty-one percent of employers polled indicated that they would increase intern hiring in 2017 while 42% would maintain (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2017a). Only 17% mentioned a decrease in intern hiring (NACE, 2017b). The fight for talent continues to increase, and administrators interviewed for this study agreed that internships are becoming more attractive to employers and are creating more competition for students. Abigail, a professor in risk management and insurance, shared:

If a company can get an intern, earn their love and respect, they've got an employee that they've already test-driven and can hire at a reduced cost and know what they're getting. With this war for talent, there are hundreds of thousands of jobs in my industry waiting to be filled because the boomers are leaving. (personal communication, December 1, 2017)

Business knowledge includes personal know-how and the accumulation of various skills and experiences. Overall, administrators agreed that business knowledge is enhanced when students seriously engage in meaningful internship experiences that transcend the traditional business concepts learned in the classroom.

Employer Perception. All employers interviewed felt that internships are helpful in developing professional skills necessary for success in the workplace. Gavin, a financial advisor, recounted the story of a former intern who later pursued a different career path and now serves as a Chief Financial Officer for a large company. When asked if he regretted his decision to complete the three-month internship with Gavin’s company and instead do something more relevant to his current field, the former intern said no. Gavin said, “Although he did not pursue full-time employment with our company, he made it clear that the skills he learned as an intern were directly transferable to what he’s doing now in the business world” (personal communication, December 18, 2017).

Four of the six employers interviewed agreed that networking skills are essential in business and that internships are a great way to improve those skills. Two employers mentioned specifically how internships help build a student’s work ethic. Jeffrey, a tax accountant, shared that students learn the importance of being punctual, honest in their communication, and flexible in their willingness to take on extra tasks. Amanda, a realtor and executive assistant, also mentioned the importance of workplace decorum and getting acclimated to the company culture while Paul, a corporate communications and outreach director, shared that the profes-

sional skills of their interns are often tested even before they are offered an internship within his organization. He said:

Our first vetting process is that they follow instructions. If they don't, then they're out. It's just pretty basic. If we ask for a resume and cover letter, but you only provide us with a resume, then you don't get past level one.

(Paul, personal communication, January 3, 2018)

Daniel, president of a market research firm, asserted that most businesses that offer internships are going to help students develop professional skills.

In class, the whole point is for you to learn and for me to show you that you learned. In business, the point is that I want you to learn, but I want you also to help my company at the same time. It's not a show me thing; it's a mutually beneficial thing. (Daniel, personal communication, December 14, 2017)

Employers overwhelmingly agreed that internships not only immerse students in the day-to-day functions of an organization but also expand their knowledge through the development of soft skills often learned outside of the classroom but considered necessary for employee success.

Internships Should Be Customized

To increase the value of internships, Hergert (2009) suggests that each experience is structured and combined with the academic knowledge that students learn in the classroom. Creation of a universal internship template that all schools and businesses should use may be impracticable; but a customized structure has the

ability to reduce limitations and produce positive learning outcomes for student participants (Hergert, 2009; Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013; Saltikoff, 2017). While all internship programs share similar components, administrators and employers interviewed for this study overwhelmingly agreed that internships should have structure and be customized to the institution, industry, and/or company involved. The following section shares administrator and employer perceptions of the value of structure and customization for internships in undergraduate business education.

Administrator Perceptions. All administrators interviewed expressed support and concern over the structure of internship programs in academia and industry. Four of the eight administrators interviewed elaborated on the need for structure in an industry while the remaining four shared extensive thoughts on the structure from within the college. For example, Thomas, a professor in the marketing department, said, "Internships are an investment for an employer. If companies are really going to commit, it has to be structured" (Thomas, personal communication, November 20, 2017). Abigail, a professor in the risk management/insurance, real estate and legal studies department, shared that a lack of structure has been a concern of hers for years as she works with employers. To combat that problem, she volunteers to help. "When there is a new internship or somebody setting up something new, I always offer to share resources and help them develop a structure (Abigail, personal communication, December 1, 2017).

While participants unanimously agreed that structure is important, four administrators

shared that it can also be difficult to facilitate in a college with more than 6,000 students. Jason, the associate dean for the college, shared, “There are so many students who come through here, and for us to put any kind of structure on the internship process, we would have to dramatically increase the staff and their limitations of financial and personnel resources” (personal communication, December 11, 2017). Mary is an accounting professor who is heavily involved in internships for her department. She shared that structure is crucial especially for larger accounting firms. She also noted that internships are critical to their recruiting process and she doesn’t see that changing any time soon. “I feel like there does need to be some structure in internships,” said Mary, “but it can’t really be the same for all firms” (Mary, personal communication, December 5, 2017). All eight administrators agreed that structure should be customized based on the organization and not a one-size-fits-all template. “We’re all different,” said Donald, dean of the college (personal communication, December 11, 2017). “Every school has a different way of approaching industry, even across departments in our own college” (Donald, personal communication, December 11, 2017). He also shared, “it would depend on how you define experiential learning. I could see a situation where some of our departments might have some experiences that were much more focused on research” (Donald, personal communication, December 11, 2017). Jason, associate dean for undergraduate programs, added:

I never believe in templates where everybody should follow. You have to adapt it depending on the situation. The situation facing students in an urban area can be radically different

from those facing students who are in a suburb and rural university. The situation facing students who are preparing for a particular career like accounting or financial services or professional sales were radically different than for a student who’s going to take a generalized degree in marketing or management or even areas like finance.

(personal communication, December 11, 2017)

He also shared that across-the-board structure would be difficult especially in fields like human resources, but he noted that it would ultimately depend on the industry and the major.

For example, financial services professionals in another state may do a mix of hardcore finance and advising, planning, and financial planning. There, those firms could be so alike that they could get together and create a standard across all the firms that each could modify. In other areas, I just don’t think it’s a possibility. (Jason, personal communication, December 11, 2017)

Donald elaborated by adding that the structure of an internship program also depends on the mission, or set of values, that a company, organization, or individual has established. He said:

If there was a template for internships, you’d have to customize. All business schools participate in shared learning, and all business schools have certain criteria they have to meet for their faculty qualifications. There’s enough wiggle room in there that you can make it your own, it all depends on your mission. (Donald, personal communication, December 11, 2017)

All administrators agreed that structure is necessary, but customization should be specific to the needs of the institution, its students, and employers. Business schools have often been criticized for focusing too much on theory and abstract concepts (Hergert, 2009; Hodge, Proudford, & Holt, 2014); however, Hergert (2009), noted that structured internships could help address these criticisms while providing substantive experiences to the students being served.

Employer Perceptions. All employers interviewed for this study agreed that internships play a significant role in helping students gain valuable work experience. However, five of the six employers felt that the structure of the program should depend on the needs of the student and the company. John, a manager for a logistics provider, shared that the basic components of his organization's internship program are very structured. He also said, "This allows us to ensure that students are quickly able to learn the basics of the business within the first four to five weeks on the job" (John, personal communication, December, 14, 2017).

When asked about intern orientations, all employers agreed that some type of orientation is necessary to acclimate new interns to the company culture. However, the content of these sessions should vary across industries. Gavin, a financial advisor, mentioned that their orientation is ongoing throughout the semester and focuses heavily on what they call 'joint work.' Joint work is having a senior adviser show an intern the financial advising process first hand. The remaining five employers noted that their orientation typically takes place during a dedicated timeframe at the beginning of the in-

ternship providing students with an overview of the company, expectations, and learning outcomes.

When asked about the role and structure of internships employers agreed with administrators that structure is important and should be customized to the institution, industry, and/or company involved. Gavin shared that their internship program varies by semester and that the length of a term can impact the structure of the experience. He said:

Unlike summer, it's a little bit more intense since students tend to take fewer credit hours. But generally, it's Monday through Thursday, two hours every morning; first hour tends to be focused on training, understanding different financial concepts. For instance, the difference between different types of life insurance, disability insurance, or the difference between tax treatments on different accounts. The training can be very specific.
(Gavin, December 18, 2017).

John shared similar thoughts and noted that the structure of his program is often based on the students that they recruit. "We prefer to hire students right out of school. That allows us to train them and get them up to speed as quickly as possible" (John, personal communication, December 14, 2017). He also noted that his internship program is used as a way to build relationships with the university in order to improve their success in hiring quality candidates. When asked specifically what a typical internship program at his organization looks like, he said:

The first four to five weeks of the internship are spent in operations. They really have to learn the business and the nuts and the bolts

of the shared operation and then from there, they usually transition into either a carrier side or the customer side or sales. (John, personal communication, December 14, 2017)

Daniel, president of a small market research firm, noted that duties are often ever changing for his interns because of the size of his company. Because he works for a small business, interns and employees are often asked to perform varying tasks. He shared:

Sometimes we have a meeting and everyone has their responsibilities, and it goes on how it's supposed to. Other times, everyone has their responsibilities then we get the email from the client at 10:00 a.m. and now everyone's responsibility is whatever that issue may be. Our interns fit into their role within the machine. Along those lines, they get taught how to do what they need to do. (Daniel, personal communication, December 14, 2017)

A study conducted by Rothman (2007) in the early 2000s asked 402 undergraduate business students if they had any suggestions for employer improvement to existing internship programs. "Sixty-four percent of the students suggested improvements or changes and foremost among the suggestions was the need for more structure on the part of the host company with regard to the internship itself" (Rothman, 2007, p. 141). The fact that all six employers interviewed for this study agreed that structure was important demonstrates how internships have evolved over the years and that student concerns have not gone unnoticed. Varying degrees of structure exist among each participant, yet all felt that the structure they maintain continues to provide a mutually beneficial experience.

CONCLUSION

While exploratory in nature, this study helped me to gain a better understanding of the role and structure of internships in undergraduate business education. The majority of administrators and employers believe that gaining work experience through internship participation is a critical component of business education. While classroom knowledge is of extreme value, they all felt that internships serve as an important complement to the traditional business school curriculum. Administrators and employers also felt that internship programs should be customized and structured; however, this customization should depend on the institution and/or company. This study found unanimous agreement among administrators and employers that all internship programs share common features, but how each program is designed and administered should be based on the organization's mission, vision, values, and culture. As administrators and employers continue to examine the role and structure of internships in undergraduate business education, new ideas that embrace the creative exchange of information will continue to emerge.

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