

Internships Provide an Important Bridge between Education and the Job Setting

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Abstract

Internships are increasingly important in the world of business education. Colleges and employers seek a strong link in assuring students are properly prepared in the application of academic learning in a business setting. In addition, students, schools & employers benefit from the internship perspective derived from this transitional learning experience. 360 degree feedback from student intern field experience provides insight into the effectiveness of the internship experience in developing key business skills. Utilizing input from students, faculty, staff and employers, I compiled and analyzed certain data about internships at Florida Southern College (FSC) in the Barney Barnett School of Business and Free Enterprise (BBSOBFE) over five academic years (2011 - 2015). Student scores on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), text analysis of survey responses by employers & students and qualitative data indicate internships positively impact student skill sets and self-confidence, thus, providing a bridge between education and a job setting.

Introduction

Internships are a major focus in business education. This paper analyzes the impact of internships from the specific to the generic. I examined the impact of internships at Florida Southern College in the Barney Barnett School of Business and Free Enterprise (BBSOBFE) for five academic years (2011-2015) utilizing input from employers, students, faculty, staff and other sources. At BBSOBFE, the data on internships illustrates the positive impact on student skill sets and self-confidence. Results indicate internship provides an important bridge between education and a job setting.

Recent studies point to a significant gap between job skills and education. Recent college graduates believe they are prepared to enter the real world, but, surveys of management in organizations reveal a much less optimistic answer. "When it comes to the skills most needed by employers, job candidates are lacking most in written and oral communication skills, adaptability and managing multiple priorities, and making decisions and problem solving"(The Chronicle of Higher Education [The Chronicle], 2012, p. 12). The gap between new graduate perception and employers is sizable, for example "while 59% of students said they were well prepared to analyze and solve complex problems, just 24% percent of employers said they had found that to be true of recent college graduates (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2015, p. 12). Faced with this large perceptual gap, and the mission of business schools to prepare students for the real world, what tactics work? What are employers looking for to help close the gap between college and business ready new graduates? Internships are the number one item employers are seeking when they review candidate resumes. "Employers place more weight on experience, particularly internships and employment during school vs. academic credentials including GPA and college major when evaluating a recent graduate for employment" (The Chronicle, 2012, p. 11).

Methods

The analytic approach to examining internships at BBSOBFE

I examined key dimensions of internship performance as indicated on our statistical base of data from employer evaluations of student interns as well as student survey data. Examination of the data will draw statistical and qualitative inferences on key questions: How do students perform across key performance indicators (KPIs)?

Do students have marked differences in performance within select KPIs? Are some KPIs stronger than others? Are there distinct levels of performance among KPIs? What does the evaluation data indicate about hard skills (functional/technical) and soft skills (behavioral/emotional intelligence)? Do employer comments on evaluations offer further insight on the internship bridge to employment? What do students conclude about the impact of internship in post-evaluations? Are students and employers agreed in the value of the experience? Can we infer any implications about the generally strong performance of BBSOBFE interns about our pedagogical approach in methods and practices? BBSOBFE is a recognized institution for our approach to experiential, engaged learning (small class size, team based projects, living case studies, oral and presentation requirements in testing/evaluation). Does the experiential, engaged learning approach benefit outcomes in internships? Beyond the specific answers, this BBSOBFE internship examination discusses outcomes in the broader context. A review of the most recent NACE Internship survey illuminates how BBSOBFE fits in the national internship picture. Does BBSOBFE experience align with the national trends?

The case study of BBSOBFE internships and consideration of the broader questions, lead to powerful indications of the positive, bridge building value of the internship experience in higher education. The experience complements the classroom and campus experience of today's college business student. Internships provide an opportunity for both students and employers to benefit from a rich experience, explore capabilities and interests, build relationships/networking and gain important perspective on issues of culture and fit. The perspective gained by the students is invaluable as they take their first steps into the business world beyond college.

BBSOBFE Situation

BBSOBFE at Florida Southern College is an AACSB accredited program located in Lakeland, FL. BBSOBFE has a long history of business education in Accounting, Business and Economics. In the past ten years Florida Southern College (FSC) leadership has strategically increased the focus on BBSOBFE as a premier program of the college, through investment in faculty, staff, curriculum, physical plant, resources and AACSB accreditation. In addition, as part of an award winning college for experiential education and engaged learning, BBSOBFE has increased focused on internships. In 2010, FSC began a "guaranteed internship" program for all students with good academic standing. BBSOBFE faculty and staff heartily subscribed to the program and began a push to build a stronger culture of internship in the business program. Number of interns in the business program increased dramatically in the 2011-2015 period. This is notable in light of significant course requirements (66 credit hours) for the business administration major. Internship is a business elective. As an outcome of the increased focus and participation among business students, BBSOBFE has assembled a data set of internship evaluations. Also, my focus on the three "Ps" of internship (Preparation, Promotion and Perspective) has benefited students and employers. Each student works with the FSC Career Center and Internship Coordinator on the important elements of preparation (resume, cover letter, interview skills, research et al) in advance of actively promoting internship interests among employers. The self-promotion skills (research, networking, applications, interviewing, follow up & closing) are critical for the long term. Finally, the perspective gained in the internship experience is the payoff for our students. They fulfill a 'field tested' experience, gain self-awareness and learn how their interests align with the reality of the job. BBSOBFE gets overwhelmingly positive response among students and employers. Also, the program seeks opportunities for continuous improvement through our formal and informal feedback mechanisms.

The BBSOBFE student intern profile is dominated by upperclassmen & assignments range across industries. BBSOBFE has Business & Accounting Interns and they predominantly (over 90%) are of Junior/Senior status. The program achieves a broad sample of internship assignments across industry groups and job functions as well as global geography. Firms & job functions encompass accounting firms, financial services, marketing & advertising organizations, NGOs, healthcare, manufacturing, distribution, retail & agricultural businesses. Examples of firm intern placements include Publix, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), Lockheed-Martin & GEICO. Minimum work requirement for students to earn four academic credits at BBSOBFE is 160 hours. Also, less than 10 percent earn 2 credits for 80-160 hour assignments. Students have reporting/feedback requirements to coordinators in addition to evaluations. Summer session interns generally have significantly more hours of experience than fall/spring interns due to availability & geographic flexibility. Coordinators encourage a summer internship experience and have a large number of students in the field across the US and Continents in the summer months.

BBSOBFE Feedback/Evaluation Methods

Employers file midterm and final evaluations for each intern. Employer midterm and final evaluations offer us valuable quantitative, statistically valid feedback on our student interns. The evaluation tools are consistently applied and required for each intern as part of the grading process. Also, faculty and staff regularly communicate with both employers and students on the internships. Finally, students have post internship survey input, journaling and final oral presentations where they reflect on the experience and provide feedback to instructors.

Evaluation Measures offer a 360 degree view of the internship experience:

- Employer intern evaluation ratings across 10 KPIs (Appendix)
- Employer Survey comments & qualitative feedback.
- Student surveys, final orals, journals, coordinator meetings
- Qualitative input from Faculty, Coordinators & Career Center Staff

Results

Evaluation Results Indicate Positive Outcomes

Employer statistical input. Employer evaluations demonstrate extremely positive results. The evaluation instrument has four performance choices for employers to rate students: superior, very good, average and low. Instructors provide guidelines for employers for each rating. For example, superior is equivalent to employee performance at a high level deserving of promotion and/or merit increase. The scores are on a sliding point scale for grading purposes. Superior is 10, very good is 9, average is 7 and low is 6. The scalar point approach is easy to apply and readily converts to a letter grade. Overall, intern midterm and final evaluation scores are high, superior rating by employers across key measures is the most frequent rating. Statistical analysis allow us to tier the key evaluation measures at a 95% confidence due to the benefit of our sample size (n= 215). The chart below illustrates the statistically different tiers of performance on the KPIs seen in employer evaluations. Scores are determined based on the average rating for each KPI. (see Appendix for statistical detail).

Table 1: Employer Evaluation Student Scores on KPIs by Tier

Employer Evaluation Scoring Level By Statistical Tier	Key Performance Indicator Dimensions (KPIs)
Tier 1	Ability to Accept Supervision, Organization & Planning, Reliability & Dependability
Tier 2	Progress Toward Goals, Quality and Quantity of Work, Evidence of Self Confidence
Tier 3	Oral & Written Communication, Skill Level

Tier 3 level skills retain strong overall ratings, but, are the statistically lowest average dimensions. These scores may indicate a need for further academic development. Or, it may take more time for students to acquire skill in business vernacular and business communications style & methods.

Differences in Behavioral versus Technical Elements. Looking across the evaluation scores we see the strongest performance in behavioral measures (accepting supervision, on time/reliability/dependability, organization, goal orientation). Technical/functional scores are statistically lower (albeit at a high level of performance). Oral and written business communications, skill level, Quality and Quantity of work are all a notch lower than the higher attitudinal/behavioral scores. These scores can be reasonably expected in a new work environment as a natural function of the learning curve. They evidence learned/acquired job skills as opposed to attitudinal measures which are “bring to the party” behavioral skills. Evidence of self-confidence is the one behavioral dimension in the tier with the weaker technical measures. This is likely attributed to the experience reaching beyond the student’s comfort zone into a new professional work environment. There is only directional improvement midterm to final, but, verbatim and qualitative feedback indicate these measure will rise in line with the learning curve. Midterm to final scores exhibit directional progress on all 10 key evaluation measures.

Two measures stand out as statistically valid improvements from midterm to final at the 95% confidence level (see Appendix):

- Organization and Planning
- Oral Communication

These two measures may indicate increased familiarity with work flow and the business vernacular/communication style and culture of the workplace. Predominantly, students are emerging from the “bubble” of college campus experience and trying on their business persona for the first time. From the positive directional trend of the midterm to final evaluation, students are encouraged and engaged with the experience. There is no evidence of a turn-off or shut-down due to a less than ideal experience. A few students return from the experience with a new perspective that the firm or the industry type is “not for me” and would like to try a different job experience, yet, they still function at a high level, exhibiting professional behavior and results.

Employer comments. Review of employer comments in evaluations point to strong performance and relationship building. Employer comments on evaluations (n=209) were input into a text analysis tool to generate a Cloud Map. A Cloud Map is a visual depiction with text scaled according to the frequency of use by respondents.
Pleasure to Work Great Worker Skills Tremendous Help

Great Help Easy to Work Improved Dedication Asset Clear Excellent Outstanding Intern Tasks Quick Learner Job Student Learn

Operations Team Work Ethic Reliable Good Worker

Projects Exceptional Young Needed Hard Worker

Open end comments are highly positive. The most frequent comments referred to job performance (22%), with the following rounding out the top five mentions: task orientation (12%), learning (10%), excellence (9%) & teamwork (8%). Here is a sampling of the employer comments:

- Helpful covering different tasks. He is bright and got along well with others.
- Extremely pleased with her and her effort.
- Strong candidate I would hire.
- Great intern, worked well with team, willing to take on any task. Tremendous job, works with little direction and gets it done correctly.
- Strong employee. One of the best interns we have had. Had profound effect on our clients.

Comments reflect the dialogue BBSOBFE maintains with internship employers. BBSOBFE Internship coordinators and Career Center staff meet regularly with employer’s human resources and hiring managers to discuss the internship program and student performance. The employer feedback is positive and instructive. The opportunity we see is to partner for further technical skill development for select job functions. For example, we are building intermediate/advanced Excel skills training for financial analytics internships. Our students’ non-technical and attitudinal skills are perceived favorably in discussions with employers. The impact of a pedagogical approach focused on engaged, experiential learning is manifest in the strong intern KPI scores for relational skills.

Student feedback. Student feedback is consistent and points to the critical confidence-building impact of the internship experience. The FSC Office of the Provost began administering post internship student surveys across the college in 2012. Our conclusions reflect the results of Business and Accounting students (n=93) surveyed over the 2012 to 2014 period. Preparing for the internship and the internship experience itself built confidence and esteem among students. Students came away feeling very or somewhat confident on all the key preparation elements of the job search. The positive impact was felt across the board. Both “on the job” skills and job search skills for future employment were all perceived as improved by the students. Importantly, underlying student confidence in the ability to successfully execute a full time job search was extremely positive. Students perceived the internship experience to be a confidence builder across key job search preparation skills, including conducting information research about: internships, summer jobs, post-graduation jobs. Other preparation elements scored high confidence by student interns: networking, resume & cover letter writing, communicating effectively with potential employers & completing a job application.

Responses to assessment of eighteen functional and soft skills gained during the internship were highly positive. Ninety percent of the responses were positive and only ten percent were negative or neutral. Three dimensions had modestly higher non-positive scores (“very little”, “none” or “na”): using equipment not found at FSC (75%), importance of ethical conduct (80%), utilizing different computer software (81%). The technical scores are reasonable given the range of internship assignments, for example sales and non-technical support positions may not utilize firm software as part of the experience, hence “na”. Our experience indicates the ethics score may relate to a lack of confronting ethical dilemmas during the internship. On the upside, several dimensions scored extremely high for positive impact: time management (95%), defining and solving problems (96%), working independently (95%), able to integrate other's feedback to improve work (94%). These critical thinking & self-management skills are a tremendous perceived benefit to students emerging from an internship and are closely aligned with employer evaluation feedback. The balance of the dimensions queried all had ratings approaching 90% positive. Here are the other skills surveyed: Leadership, Written communication, Oral Communication, Innovative Thinking, Working as Part of a Group, Ability to Analyze Data, Self-confidence, Clarification of my Career Path, Tolerance for Obstacles, Ability to Evaluate and Give Constructive Feedback & Becoming Familiar with New Ideas and Developments in my field of interest. Two thirds of the negative/neutral comments (across the 18 queried dimensions) were driven by only 16% of the students surveyed. The vast majority of students had little or no negatives to report about the intern experience. Only two of ninety three (2%) respondents would not recommend their internship to another.

Text analysis of the elements of the internship students found most challenging. Sample textual comments illustrate the effect of the learning curve. Challenging (46%) and learning (17%) are the most common mentions in student feedback. Here are some sample comments about the challenges met by interns:

- Working under a lot of pressure, and learning how to negotiate with clients, selling strategies
- Understanding all the contracts was challenging at first, but I soon got more comfortable with them the more I worked.
- I found the oral communication and presentations were challenging
- The internship was very fast paced. At first I found that a little difficult to get used to but then I got the hang of it and enjoyed it.
- The software used to prepare tax returns presented a huge learning curve.

The student comments reflect their climbing the internship learning-curve. Also, they show the value of student commitment to managing the workload. The student feedback points to a healthy, positive stress, contributing to student development and growing confidence.

Students acquired new job skills over the term of the internship. The following student comments are illustrative of the skills acquired during their internship:

- This internship helped me to realize that I really want to study finance, I like the negotiation with clients and be active every moment. It helped on my communication skills, I'm more confident in myself and my choices.
- I learned to understand content better through real-world dynamic applications. Unlike book scenarios, the real world can be unpredictable and give you a broader way of learning
- I believe I gained a better understanding on how to manage time and organize events. Also how to market events through social media and also word of mouth.

Student discover enjoyment during the internship experience. Comments indicate that students find fulfillment and satisfaction in their internship. When queried on what they enjoyed from the internship experience, the highest student mentions were for Enjoyed Working (26%), Learning (16%), Business (14%) and Experience (14%) as seen in the text cloud map:

Field Writing Great People Single Company
Flexibility Experience Absolutely Learning
Actually Working Enjoyed Working
Involved Business Ability Sports Networking
Meeting Process Friendly Supervisor Kids

The following are sample comments about what students enjoyed:

- I enjoyed the work and feeling of accomplishment in completing clients' returns.
- I enjoyed absolutely everything about my internship.
- I loved having a job in the sport industry and it was exciting to go to an office job that was related to a major interest.
- The atmosphere, actually working on financials.
- The field of work and people I developed relationships with

Student intern survey feedback reflects a high degree of enthusiasm for hard and soft skill development. The net effect of intern skill development and practice in preparation for the job search paints a picture of a confident and motivated student emerging from the experience. Further, the student perspectives align with the positive evaluation scores reported by employers. The confidence reported by student interns is likely aided by the positive, developmental feedback loop in the employer evaluation process. The intern experience is somewhat analogous to “Dumbo’s Feather” in the Disney classic, when the student is given a reason to believe in their abilities and has a positive first experience it can lead to a marvelous take-off in the workplace. In the career sense, business students emerge from internships with the confidence they are capable of bridging from academics into a new world of career opportunities.

Faculty & Staff feedback. FSC professionals indicate the internship experience creates critical teaching moments. Both Faculty & Career Center staff witness the positive student impact in the search process through to the conclusion of internship. In Final Oral Presentations - the concluding element of the academic intern experience – faculty see students in a new light. The same students that were hesitant and unsure in other course oral presentations emerge from internships with a positive energy charge. Students speak confidently and enthusiastically to their professors and peers about the intern experience. They see clearly advantages and gains, as well as weaknesses and developmental needs. Occasionally, we see a shift in perspective, when a student concludes from the experience that their dream career was not what they imagined and they need to pursue a new direction. In all orals, we applaud candor and the value of perspective gained. At FSC, the Career Center staff view the internship search process as an invaluable teaching moment. Students come to the Center with a clear goal in mind versus an ‘assignment’. The highly successful internship placement outcomes are in large part a result of the partnership of student and Career Center professionals. Center staff see a wide difference between the internship experienced student and the late-comers to the professional job search process when students move into full time job search mode.

BBSOBFE results align with broad market internship observations seen by NACE

2014 National Association of Colleges and Employees (NACE) Internship and Co-op Survey results show employers continue to prefer ‘high touch’ methods for recruiting interns reflecting the value of direct contact and engagement at a personal level (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2014, p. 3). Nationally, interns recruited convert and retain at a high level with employers making job offers to 65% of interns and 51% converting to employment (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2014, p. 4). Internship is clearly seen as the way ‘in the door’ to successful employment. Thus, emerging from a successful internship experience is clearly advantageous to students seeking full time employment. In the NACE Job Outlook 2014 leading attributes employers seek on a candidate’s resume include: communication skills (written and verbal), leadership & initiative, analytic/technical skills, strong work ethic, ability to work in a team, detail orientation and adaptability (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2013, p. 30). The desired attributes list closely parallel the skill building witnessed in the internship experience we have documented at BBSOBFE. Further, the high value BBSOBFE places on engaged learning in small classes with many team based projects, pays dividends when students put behavioral skills to work in an internship.

Discussion

From a 360 degree view (employers, interns, faculty & staff) Internships contribute to an important bridge from the educational setting to the workplace. Student interns gain valuable experience, acquire/develop applicable job skills, build self-esteem and contribute to an effective transition to full time employment. Through both our quantitative and qualitative analysis, specific strengths are observed:

- Job Performance
- Positive attitudinal & behavioral measures
- Technical/functional skill development
- Hiring Potential and desirability among employers
- Increased self confidence in preparing for full time job search

Going Forward

From our study of the data on both evaluative and projective dimensions we see a beneficial impact of the internship experience for the students and the businesses served. Our BBSOBFE internship experiences may be especially strong on non-technical, relationship building dimensions due to the nature of our program and the ongoing focus on engaged learning methods and practices. We continue build on our culture of internship among BBSOBFE students and business community partners. The 360 degree view indicates all the players in the internship loop highly value the experience, benefit from KPI assessment and development. Students and employers emerge from the experience with strong relationships. Student gain great confidence as they cross-over the bridge to employment and bright career prospects. We have initiated graduate survey tools to gain insight into workplace outcomes. Also, this will enable us to delineate outcomes among interns and non-interns in future analysis. Ongoing monitoring, preparation and refinement of the internship program will lead to continued student success across KPIs and favorable employment outcomes.

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Appendix													
Statistical analysis of Employer Evaluations of BBSOBFE Students, period 2011-2014 on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)													
Final Evaluations													
#	Criteria	Superior	%	Very Good	%	Average	%	Low	%	Average	Std Dev	t	Variance
1	Organization / Planning	147	0.684	64	0.298	4	0.018605			9.64651	0.5846		0.34175
2	Oral Communication	140	0.651	70	0.326	5	0.023256			9.60465	0.61673		0.38035
3	Skill Level	138	0.642	72	0.335	5	0.023256			9.59535	0.61824		0.38222
4	Quality of Work	149	0.693	59	0.274	7	0.032558			9.62791	0.6565		0.43099
5	Quantity of Work	145	0.674	65	0.302	4	0.018605	1	0.005	9.61395	0.70033		0.49046
6	Written Communication	136	0.633	67	0.312	12	0.055814			9.52093	0.76627		0.58718
7	Reliability and Dependability	173	0.805	35	0.163	6	0.027907	1	0.005	9.72558	0.71306		0.50845
8	Evidence of Self-Confidence	150	0.698	58	0.27	7	0.032558			9.63256	0.65557		0.42978
9	Progress Toward Goals	159	0.74	53	0.247	2	0.009302	1	0.005	9.69767	0.63888		0.40817
10	Ability to Accept Supervision	184	0.856	30	0.14	1	0.004651			9.84651	0.39821		0.15857
Sample size:		215											
Average:		96.51162791											
Std Dev:		5.877933124											
Variance:		34.5500978											
Midterm Evaluations													
#	Criteria	Superior	%	Very Good	%	Average	%	Low	%	Average	Std Dev	t	Variance
1	Organization / Planning	104	0.605	60	0.349	8	0.046512			9.51163	0.7294		0.53203
2	Oral Communication	106	0.616	53	0.308	13	0.075581			9.46512	0.84046		0.70638
3	Skill Level	104	0.605	58	0.337	9	0.052326	1	0.006	9.47093	0.8613		0.74184
4	Quality of Work	110	0.64	51	0.297	11	0.063953			9.51163	0.79831		0.63729
5	Quantity of Work	116	0.674	45	0.262	10	0.05814			9.55233	0.78184		0.61128
6	Written Communication	103	0.599	50	0.291	17	0.098837			9.40588	0.91985		0.84612
7	Reliability and Dependability	139	0.808	25	0.145	6	0.034884	1	0.006	9.70349	0.77941		0.60747
8	Evidence of Self-Confidence	117	0.68	45	0.262	8	0.046512	1	0.006	9.55233	0.84649		0.71654
9	Progress Toward Goals	122	0.709	42	0.244	8	0.046512			9.61628	0.72011		0.51856
10	Ability to Accept Supervision	144	0.837	28	0.163					9.83721	0.37025		0.13709
Sample size:		172											
Average:		95.51744186											
Std Dev:		6.192311623											
Variance:		38.34472324											
<p>Skill Tiers by Average Competency</p> <p>Tier 1: Ability to Accept Supervision (9.85) Reliability and Dependability (9.73) Progress Towards Goals (9.70)</p> <p>Tier 2: Organization/Planning (9.65) Quality of Work (9.63) Evidence of Self-Confidence (9.63) Quantity of Work (9.61)</p> <p>Tier 3: Oral Communication (9.60) Skill Level (9.60) Written Communication (9.52)</p>													
<p>Comparison of means between midterm and final evaluations</p> <p>The presence of statistically significant evidence is indicated by P(T<t) being less than or equal to 0.05, corresponding to a 95% confidence level.</p>													
Does organization/planning ability increase?													
		Variable 1	Variable 2										
	Mean	9.646512	9.512										
	Variance	0.341752	0.532										
	Observations	215	172										
	Hypothesized Mean Difference	0											
	df	324											
	t Stat	1.971106											
	P(T<t) one-tail	0.024781	Yes, statistically significant evidence to suggest										
	t Critical one-tail	1.64957	this ability increases.										
	P(T<t) two-tail	0.049562											
	t Critical two-tail	1.967313											
Does oral communication ability increase?													
		Variable 1	Variable 2										
	Mean	9.604651	9.465										
	Variance	0.380352	0.706										
	Observations	215	172										
	Hypothesized Mean Difference	0											
	df	305											
	t Stat	1.820306											
	P(T<t) one-tail	0.034846	Yes, statistically significant evidence to suggest										
	t Critical one-tail	1.649865	this ability increases.										
	P(T<t) two-tail	0.069692											
	t Critical two-tail	1.967772											