

An Introduction to Internships

Candice Wilson-Stykes

Definition

Finding systematic and empirical studies of internships is challenging because of variety of definitions that exist in programs and in the literature (O'Neill, 2010; Hora et al., 2019). Furthermore, the lack of a consistent definitions makes it hard to evaluate student development outcomes and outline specific benefits of internships experiences (O'Neill, 2010; Hora et al., 2017). The following definitions have been cited in the literature as a good standard for defining internships. They come for organizations that are reputable in the field of higher education.

Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2011):

The primary mission of Internship Programs (IP) is to engage students in planned, educationally related work and learning experiences that integrate knowledge and theory with practical application and skill development in a professional setting.

National Association of Colleges and Employers (2018):

An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.

Best Practices for Quality

The NACE Criteria for a “Legitimate Internship” are as follows:

1. The experience must be an extension of the classroom: a learning experience that provides for applying the knowledge gained in the classroom. It must not be simply to advance the operations of the employer or be the work that a regular employee would routinely perform.
2. The skills or knowledge learned must be transferable to other employment settings.
3. The experience has a defined beginning and end, and a job description with desired qualifications.
4. There are clearly defined learning objectives/goals related to the professional goals of the student’s academic coursework.
5. There is supervision by a professional with expertise and educational and/or professional background in the field of the experience.
6. There is routine feedback by the experienced supervisor.
7. There are resources, equipment, and facilities provided by the host employer that support learning objectives/goals. (NACE, 2018)

Internships are a high-impact practice (HIP), but with all HIPS, the extent to which a program can be considered high impact depends on the standards that an institution sets for the program (O'Neill, 2010; Kuh, 2012). The following is an application of the qualities of high impact practices for internships:

1. Set appropriately high expectations and require considerable student effort

2. Ensure that supervisor and peer interactions throughout the internship are about substantive topics and work
3. Situate students in internship contexts that require them to interact with diverse peers and other constituents who are different than themselves
4. Build in opportunities for students to receive targeted, constructive feedback from the internship coordinator and supervisor and to use this feedback to engage in their own self-assessment process
5. Ensure that the internship allows students to apply what they are learning in different, real-world settings
6. Include an authentic audience to which the student can demonstrate their competence

Additionally, there are several other best practices that should be included in structuring an internship program:

- Articulate clear goals for the internship experience regarding the structure, relation to the students' program of study, and relation to the students' career goals and interests (Hora et al., 2017)
- Encourage collaboration across campus and in the community and ensure that the necessary resources are committed to an internship to support both interns and sites (O'Neill, 2010; Hora et al., 2017)
- Guard against unpaid internships are not with non-profit and government organizations; these are the only entities that are legally allowed to have unpaid internships (Edwards & Hertel-Fernandez, 2010; Hora et al., 2019)
- Through training or a rigorous selection process, ensure that supervisors will provide high quality supervision and mentorship and will craft an intentional internship experience for the interns (Hora et al., 2017; Hora et al., 2019)

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

- A national survey found that the 2015 intern conversion rate (intern to full-time hire) was over 51% (Crain, 2016).
- Internships can provide options and help students clarify their interest in a specific discipline and career interests (O'Neill, 2010; Hora et al., 2019).
- Internships can help students develop a professional network and a career identity (Crain 2016).
- Internships may be helpful in decreasing the shock that graduates experience upon entering the work world and may help graduates understand the work culture in a particular field (Hora et al., 2017).
- One study found that paid internships were positively associated with the development of professional skills, while unpaid internships were connected to helping students understand their coursework (Crain, 2016).
- Students who have supervisor support and mentoring, goal or task clarity, clear coordination between the internship and their academics, and autonomy have positive, quality internship experiences (Hora at al., 2017; Hora et al., 2019).

Challenges

- Because unpaid internships require students to forego job income and take on additional expenses (transportation, attire, application fee, etc.), they can perpetuate socio-economic inequality by being inaccessible to low income students and by increasing the privileges of upper-income students (Edwards & Hertel-Fernandez, 2010; Hora et al, 2017).
- There may be serious legal issues associated with internships, especially given the lack of federal, state, and institutional regulations that protect interns (Crain, 2016; Hora et al., 2017).
- One study found that unpaid internships negatively impact student salary and employment after graduation (Crain, 2016).
- According to another study, barriers to participation in internships include the need to work a paying job, course load conflicts, and lack of internships in the students' field (Hora et al., 2017).
- The various barriers to participation in an internship are significant. In a three institution study of internship participation, 64% of the students who had not participated in an internship wanted to do so (Hora et al., 2019).

Resources

Center for Engaged Learning (Elon University): Internships

<https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/doing-engaged-learning/internships/>

National Association of Colleges and Employers

<https://www.nacweb.org/>

O'Neill, N. (2010). Internships as a high-impact practice: Some reflections on quality. *Peer Review*, 12(4), 4-8.

Wisconsin BBA Career Services. Designing a successful internship program. Retrieved from <https://wsb.wisc.edu/-/media/companies-recruit-hire/bba-recruit-hire/recruiting-services/wisconsinbbainternshipprogramsguidepdf.pdf>

True, Michel (ed.) (n.d.). Starting and maintaining a quality internship program. Retrieved from <https://www2.virginia.edu/career/intern/startinganinternship.PDF>

References

Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. (2011). *Internship programs*. Washington, DC.

Crain, A. (2016). Understanding the impact of unpaid internships on college student career development and employment outcomes. *NACE Foundation*. Retrieved from <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/internships/the-impact-of-unpaid-internships-on-career-development/>

Edwards, K., & Hertel-Fernandez, A. (2010). Paving the way through paid internships. *DEMOS*

- Economic Policy Institute*. Retrieved from https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/PavingWay_PaidInternships_Demos.pdf
- Hora, M. T., Wolfgram, M., & Thompson, S. (2017). *What do we know about the impact of internships on student outcomes? Results from a preliminary review of the scholarly and practitioner literatures*. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions Research Brief #2. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison Retrieved from <http://ccwt.wceruw.org/documents/CCWT-report-Designing-Internship-Programs>
- Hora, M., Chen, Z., Parrott, E., & Her, P. (2019). *Problematizing College Internships: Exploring Issues with Access, Program Design, and Developmental Outcomes in three US Colleges* (Working Paper No. 2019-1). Retrieved from https://wcer.wisc.edu/docs/working-papers/Working_Paper_No_2019_1.pdf
- Kuh, G. (2012). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. *Peer Review*, 14(3).
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2011). *Position statement on U.S. internships: A definition and criteria to assess opportunities and determine the implications for compensation*. Retrieved from https://www.naceweb.org/connections/advocacy/internship_position_paper/
- O'Neill, N. (2010). Internships as a high-impact practice: Some reflections on quality. *Peer Review*, 12(4), 4-8. Retrieved from <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/internships-high-impact-practice-some-reflections-quality>