



## COORDINATING AN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM IN A TECHNICAL FIELD: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

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### ABSTRACT

Internships give students the opportunity to gain practical, professional work experience in their industry. Internship coordinators at higher education institutions serve an integral role in helping students secure internships. This article first highlights the importance of internships in

an undergraduate academic curriculum. This article then discusses challenges and lessons learned by a faculty member during her fifteen years of coordinating the internship program for an undergraduate baccalaureate construction management program.

**KEYWORDS:** internship, experiential education, construction, related work experience

### INTRODUCTION

Internships give students the opportunity to gain practical, professional work experience in their industry. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) explains that internships are, “A form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting.” According to U.S. News & World Report (2010), “Internships are a near necessity in the quest to find a job in today’s market.” Divine, Linrud, Miller and Wilson (2007) found that approximately 90% of colleges offer their students some type of for-credit internship or work-related learning experience.

Internships are extremely valuable for students, employers, and higher education institutions. According to Fender and Watson (2005), internships are win-win-win situations for students, employers, and universities. Students go to college to become gainfully employed in their

chosen industry. One of the primary factors employers look for when hiring candidates is experience. NACE found 95% of employers said candidate experience is a factor in hiring decisions. In addition, 50% of employers wanted that experience to come from internships. In the job market, having related experience gives students an advantage over other graduates.

This doesn't mean the classroom experience isn't valuable. However, students can't learn everything they must know about their industry in the classroom. Tovey (2001) noted, "The implications and influences of the workplace are far more extensive than the limits and boundaries imposed by the classroom, peers, and instructors" (p. 225). Internships are an excellent way for students to gain additional knowledge and to apply what they learn in the classroom. According to Divine et. al. (2007), approximately 90% of colleges offer students some type of for-credit internship or work-related learning experience. That statistic shows that higher education institutions support internships and recognize the importance of gaining related experience outside of the classroom.

Students aren't the only group that benefit from internships. Employers also benefit. Internships are like short term job interviews for potential full-time employees. NACE found that 80% of employers use internships as a recruiting and hiring tool. Tovey (2001) noted, "Training and working with an intern can often lead to the hiring of an individual whose training has already begun and whose work ethic and capabilities are already known" (p. 226). According to NACE, employers have 40% higher retention rates with internship students than with their non-experienced peers (Gold, 2002). NACE (2013) also found that approximately 60% of graduates in 2014 with job offers prior to graduation had completed an internship.

Completing an internship shows students how what is taught in the classroom is relevant to their industry. English and Koeppen (1993) found that students who complete internships bring more to the classroom, link the importance of classroom discussions to practice, and are more mature. In addition, students who complete internships have higher GPAs and were more likely to be employed at graduation than students who didn't complete internships (Knouse, Tanner, Harris, 1999).

### **Background of Author**

The author of this paper has over fifteen years of experience coordinating the internship program for an undergraduate construction management baccalaureate program at a four year higher education institution. Students in this academic major are required to complete two internships for academic credit in order to graduate. This means that all students graduate with at least 800 hours of related work experience. The author also coordinates the annual construction management career fair and all employer relations for the program. The challenges and lesson learned discussed in this article are insights gained from her experiences assisting over 1200 students secure academic credit for internships.

### **Challenges**

Challenge #1: Student apathy is real.

The author started working with the construction management program in 2007. The recession of 2008 greatly impacted the construction industry, as it did many industries. Much work in the construction industry was delayed or stopped. Employees were laid off, and companies were not hiring interns or new full time employees. This was an incredibly challenging time as competition for positions was fierce. Fast forward to about 2022, and companies cannot find enough employees to fill internship and full time positions. It is very common for students earning a degree in construction management to have multiple internship offers. Students in this new generation do not understand how lucky they are to have that any opportunities, and they do not understand or appreciate how competitive the internship market has been in the past. The abundant employment opportunities are one factor that contribute to student apathy. Students, especially underclassmen, may wait to do their first internship because they know there are plenty of opportunities available. Why are many underclassmen hesitant to do an internship early in their academic career? Students like staying in their comfort zones. That's a generalization about students, but honestly, it's true. Students want to go back home and work at the golf course, the restaurant, or the store where they have already worked. That is a comfortable space for them. Students often don't see the value of internships until after it is completed. Expressing the importance of internships early in students' academic career will hopefully make students think about gaining as much related work experience as possible to help make them more marketable in their job search and in their career.

Challenge #2: The workforce shortage is real in the construction industry, and hiring demands are great.

Having weathered the 2008 recession in the construction industry with years of not tracking full time placement rates of graduates because they were so low, the boom in the construction industry and hiring is a welcome relief. However, with so much work, so many companies with internship and full time openings, and so many Baby Boomers retiring, the opposite issue is true from 2008: in 2022, there are not enough candidates for internship or full time positions. On what seems like an almost weekly basis, new employers contact the internship coordinator with employment opportunities, and only a few students are interested, based in part because many students have already accepted positions. Having too many open opportunities is definitely better than the opposite program. However, when coordinating employer relations, the primary goal is to keep the employer satisfied. That goal is difficult to accomplish if an ideal number of students are not interested in an employment opportunity. Therefore, internship coordinators and those who coordinate employer relations must monitor and adjust. The economy can always change, and it is important to keep employers and industry partners actively engaged with academic programs in case hiring needs change. Academic programs do not want to lose industry support solely because there are too many employment opportunities. If there is a negative downturn to the economy, re-engaging these industry partners could be challenging.

One strategy to manage an increased interest from new industry partners is to develop a sponsorship program. The academic program highlighted in this article began a sponsorship program in 2021, and the program has already raised over \$70,000 for the program. These funds support student competitive teams, student and faculty professional development, and other initiatives for the program. Sponsors receive benefits from the various levels of sponsorship, including resume books, recognition in the program's building on campus, and inclusion in various event and program marketing materials. The sponsorship program helps these companies have more name recognition with students on campus, and the students benefit from the financial support of these companies.

An additional strategy to manage an increased interest from new industry partners is to develop a guide or plan for industry partner success. Industry partners need to know the various options available to them for ways to connect with academic programs. Example ways to connect with academic programs include participating in sponsorship programs, speaking to student organizations or classes, serving as mentors for student competitive teams, donating software or other materials, or hosting field trips for students. In times of

robust hiring in a particular industry, simply posting an open position is not guaranteed to garner interest from students. Employers need to build recognition and awareness of the company on campus with students. In the short and long term, these partnerships benefit both the academic program and the industry partners.

### **Lessons Learned**

Lesson #1: Students need to start the internship search process early.

As previously stated, the construction industry is booming. The industry is already experiencing a workforce shortage, and that is projected to continue. Regardless if an industry is experiencing a slow down or a boom in employment, it's still critical to begin expressing the importance of internships to students early in their academic careers. Underclassmen, beginning at the freshmen year, should be introduced to the idea of internships and the importance of these experiences. In addition to hearing this from faculty and industry partners, underclassmen benefit from hearing about the importance of internships from upperclassmen students. Those upperclassmen have been there, done that. Those upperclassmen know the value of having related work experience and can share their first hand experiences with younger students. Events such as student intern panels and having industry partners give guest lectures in classes can help show underclassmen the importance of internships.

Lesson #2: It's all about industry connections.

Another key to success for coordinating a successful internship program is industry connections. The construction management program highlighted in this article was established in 2004. The author joined the program in 2007. At that time, the construction management program was the new kid on the block. Many employers in the state and in the region did not realize that this program existed. Most employers in the state and in the region hired interns and new employees from other more well known, well established construction management programs. To help increase employer awareness and interest in the program, the author frequently attended tradeshow, industry events, and related professional organization meetings. Attending these events helped to establish industry connections and helped increase the awareness of the program. Attending these events helped to increase the number of employers who attend the annual construction management career fair by 600% over a span of 15 years. Did every new contact made recruit with the program? No. But any new contact is important, especially when an academic program is just getting established.

Fast forward 15 years to 2022. The number of employers who recruit with the program has increased exponentially, due largely in part to a strong alumni base. Those students graduated from the program. They know the curriculum. They know the faculty. They know the expectations required to graduate. Most importantly, they now know the industry. They know the knowledge that is necessary to be a successful construction management professional. Engaging alumni in the program, such as being guest speakers for student organizations, having their employers come to campus to recruit, or serving as mentors for current students, helps to further strengthen an internship program. Alumni have been there, done that, not only in the classroom, but also in the industry. Alumni can increase the employer connections for an academic program which ultimately leads to more internship opportunities for students.

## CONCLUSION

Internships give students the opportunity to gain practical, professional work experience in their industry. Coordinating an internship program has both rewards and challenges. Internship coordinators must monitor and adjust to adapt to economic changes and varying hiring needs in order to help students be successful in their internships and ultimately in their careers.

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