

Key Philosophical Decisions to Consider When Designing an Internship Program

Richard Divine
Central Michigan University

Robert Miller
Central Michigan University

J. Holton Wilson
Central Michigan University

JoAnn Linrud
Minot State University

Abstract

Setting up an internship program requires that a department make a number of decisions regarding how the program will be implemented. These issues include whether or not to require an internship, whether or not to attempt to place students into internships, whether to assign letter grades or grade pass/fail, whether or not to allow part-time internships, and how much assistance should the department provide students in finding internships. This paper provides a discussion of these issues based in part on the experiences of a large marketing department in a Midwestern state university.

Keywords: internships, curriculum, placement, grading, external relations

Introduction

Research indicates that approximately 90 percent of colleges offer their students some type of for-credit internship or work-related learning experience (Cook, Parker and Pettijohn 2000; Gault, Redington and Schlager 2000). The primary reason for the popularity of internships is that they offer win-win-win opportunities for students, employers and schools. Students benefit from internships because the professional work experience makes them more marketable (Taylor 1998), employers like internships because they provide risk-free-trial access to potential future employees (Coco 2000), and schools benefit from them because it helps strengthen their connections to the business community (Coco 2000; Gault, Redington and Schlager 2000).

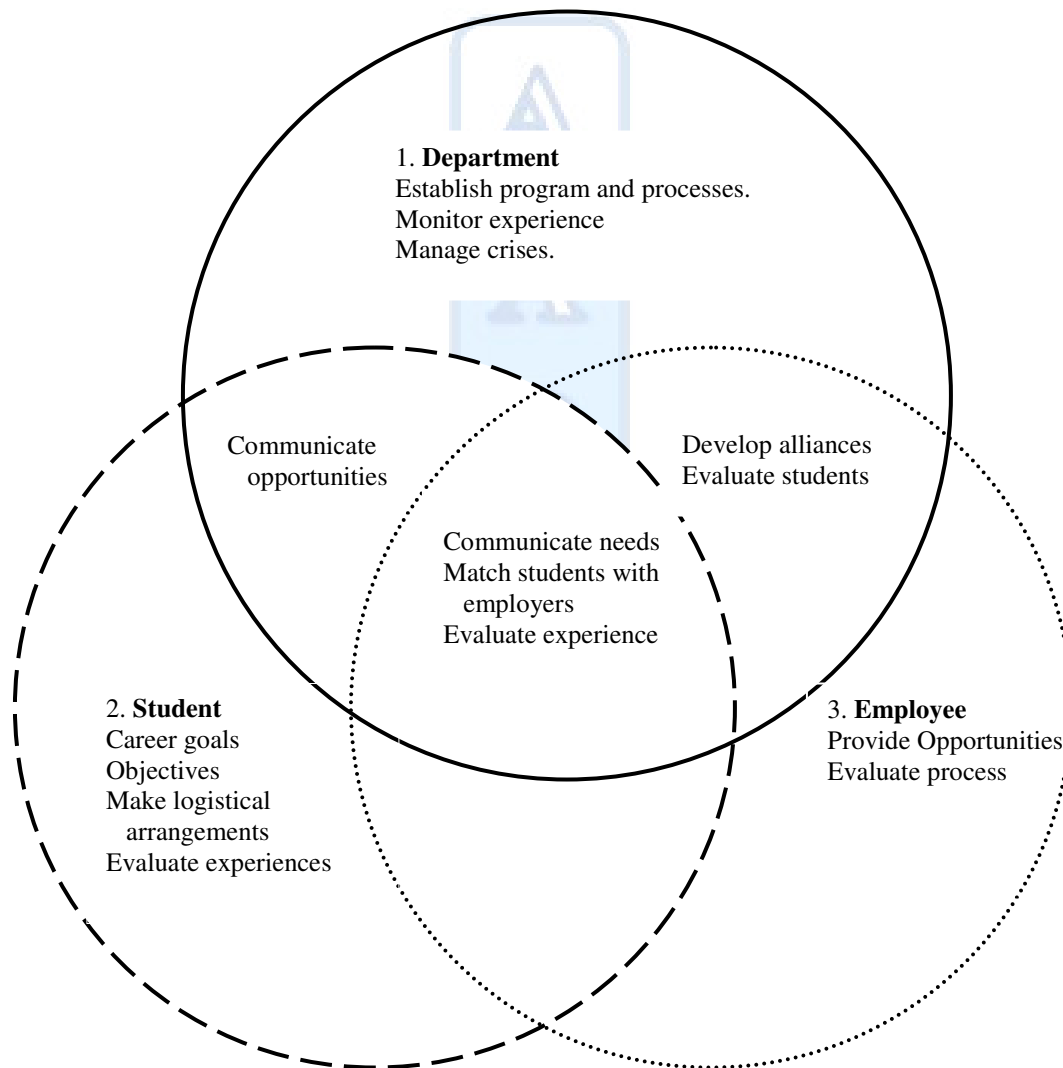


Figure 1. University/Department, Student, and Employee Roles in Internship Programs.

Figure 1 illustrates some of the key roles played by departments, students, and employers with respect to making internships a positive experience for all who are involved. The

department normally initiates the internship program and sets up the processes that are needed to maintain and improve the program. Students need to consider an internship with respect to their long term goals and objectives, such as identifying a career field of interest. Students also are normally charged with the responsibility of arranging logistical aspects of the internship such as housing and transportation. Employees provide a meaningful work experiences that augment the students' classroom learning and work with the department when there are special issues that need resolution.

Insert Figure 1 about here

When setting up an internship program, a department must make a number of key decisions that will determine the specific nature of its internship program. These decisions are not really issues of right and wrong but instead will serve to reflect the underlying philosophy that the department envisions for its program. Based on the authors' experiences setting up and directing a required internship program in a large Marketing department (600+ majors), it is believed that the key philosophical issues to be considered are as follows:

Required vs. elective

Given the mutually beneficial nature of internships and a substantial body of literature that supports their effectiveness (Cook, Parker and Pettijohn 2000; Knouse, Tanner and Harris 1999; Schambach and Dirks 2002), it is somewhat surprising that very few business programs require their students to do one.

Perhaps, the major reason is that, compared to elective internships, required internships represent a higher cost/higher commitment option for a department. Under the elective internship option, the onus typically falls on the student to find her or his internship opportunity. Students who are unwilling or unable to find an internship simply take additional course work. The role of the department is limited to making sure that the selected internships merit college credit and providing some institutional supervision of students while on the job site.

Requiring an internship, however, leads to a more substantial commitment of departmental time and resources. The most obvious reason for this is that requiring an internship necessitates a greater allocation of resources in order to provide an adequate level of academic support for all interns. In addition, an internship requirement forces departments to assume greater responsibility for insuring that all students are placed in appropriate internships. This means the department must direct substantial effort toward activities that will build better relationships with employers and improve their students' job search and interviewing skills.

While there is little doubt that a required internship program imposes a substantial burden on a department, the literature clearly shows that students benefit greatly from having an internship experience. These benefits include improvements in career direction (Perez 2001; Beard and Morton 1999), job preparedness (Perez 2001), marketability (Swift and Kent 1999; Maynard 1999; Hymon-Parker and Smith 1998), job expectations (Knouse, Tanner and Harris 1999), interpersonal skills (Beard and Morton 1999), leadership (Cook, Parker and Pettijohn 2000), and understanding of the business

applications of classroom learning (Hyman-Parker and Smith 1998). Given the value of these outcomes, it is readily apparent that an internship is in the best interest of the student. By implementing an internship requirement, a department can insure that all of its students benefit from such experience.

Ultimately, the issue of whether a department should have an elective or required internship revolves around the declared purpose of the department's internship program. Some departments may see the main purpose as one of external relations or reputation building. Such departments mainly want to use internships as a vehicle for showcasing their best students to influential employers, and thus would prefer to limit internship access to students that will represent the school in a very positive manner. As a result, an elective program could be a better fit for these departments, since it allows greater selectivity surrounding internship placement (Divine et al 2007). Required internships are more appropriate for departments less concerned about PR objectives and more concerned about making sure that all students, not just the best and brightest, will experience the benefits of an internship. If an internship is not required, it is likely that many students will opt not to pursue this opportunity, particularly those with below average grades or those lacking interpersonal skills. It is precisely these students who stand to benefit the most from an internship. Students with lower GPAs need the practical work experience of an internship to help compensate for their grades. In addition, low GPA students are often less motivated in the classroom and thus may have a greater need for the "reality check" an internship can provide them with regard to the rigors of the workplace. This can in turn motivate them to take their studies more seriously when they return to the classroom.

Managing/not managing the placement process

Another decision a department needs to make with regard to its internship program is the degree to which it will be involved in the actual placement of students into internships. In an unmanaged process, the department publicly posts all internship opportunities and students are free to pursue whichever of these positions they wish. In a managed approach, the internship director is likely to keep information on internship openings somewhat private and work individually with each student in an attempt to find the best matches between students and positions. The unmanaged approach has the advantage of requiring much less administrative effort, and perhaps being a more fair approach for students since it gives them the opportunity to compete for all available internship opportunities. The managed approach, though requiring more administrative effort, gives departments greater control over the placement process by allowing them to selectively target specific students (based on qualifications, skills, and career interests) for specific internship openings.

One potential problem with attempting to manage the placement process is that doing so may not comply with EEOC laws requiring schools to maintain a fair and equitable workplace. Some have interpreted these requirements as meaning that failing to disclose information on internship openings to all students could be discriminatory (Swift and Kent 1999). On the other hand, based on the authors' experience, mandating an unmanaged "open-market" placement system may alienate employers, many of whom request that schools handpick a small group of quality students for them to interview.

Forcing employers to do their own screening may decrease their satisfaction with the school and therefore reduce their likelihood of returning.

Pass/fail vs. graded internships

Grading internship experiences can be very difficult given the uniqueness of each experience and the fact that internship directors are generally not able to directly observe a student's on-the-job performance. As a result, some programs do not award letter grades in internship courses but instead use a pass/fail system. The main advantage of this approach is that it reduces the grading burden on the internship director. The main drawback of the pass/fail system is that it may negatively affect the amount of effort students put forth both on the job and in their internship course assignments. Assigning letter grades is thought to be more motivating, but it can lead to grading inequities when internships vary in their difficulty or when internship supervisors vary in their evaluation standards. The concern here is that students who accept more rigorous positions and/or who work for more critical supervisors may receive lower grades than students who perform up to expectations in less demanding internships. One way to make grading more equitable (and also make the course more learning-focused) is for the director to place more weight on written assignments and less on supervisor evaluations.

Full-time vs. part-time internships

Full time internships generally require students to work forty hours each week and may or may not allow them to take other classes concurrently. Part-time internships allow students to work fewer hours a week (over a longer time period) and offer students the advantage of allowing them to work and take classes simultaneously. Based on the authors' experience, employers seem to prefer full-time internships because interns can be scheduled for more regular work hours. Additional advantages of full-time internships are that supervisors are able to fully observe all aspects of a student's performance in a typical work day, they allow students to devote their full attention to the demands of their job, and they provide students with a break from the academic world. Full-time internships also help eliminate time conflicts between work and school which can force students to juggle academic requirements with work place demands. Finally, full-time internships can effectively widen the geographic region in which students take internships because students are not limited to working only at locations within a reasonable driving distance of their campuses.

The main disadvantage of full-time internships is less flexibility in terms of planning students' schedules; as a result, some students may not graduate as quickly as they otherwise might. One compromise solution is to require full-time internships as a general rule, but allow part-time internship exceptions if certain special circumstances are met and if the student obtains the consent of her or his internship employer.

Placement assistance

A final philosophical issue involves the amount of assistance a department provides students to help them obtain internships. If the department assumes most of the

responsibility for placing students into internship positions, then students may not develop the life-long job search skills they will need once they leave school and enter the regular job market. In addition, if students are not actively involved in seeking out their own internship opportunities, then the department may not uncover a sufficient number of opportunities to be able to place all of their students seeking internships. If, on the other hand, the responsibility for finding an internship rests entirely with the student, then there is a risk that that some will be unsuccessful in their searches and therefore be unable to benefit from having an internship experience.

A potential solution for departments to balance these extremes is to use a two-stage placement process. In the initial stage, students should be responsible for conducting their own internship searches, through networking, for example. Potential avenues for networking may include friends, family, current/former employers, classmates, and alumni. In addition, students may also pursue internship openings advertised in newspapers, newsletters, job fairs, professional associations, student organizations, and community service groups. Departments may also require or encourage students to send resumes and cover letters to targeted businesses. This may be a particularly useful strategy, as data collected by PLP Research indicates that 85 percent of all paid internship opportunities are unadvertised (Penttila 2006; Shanley 2007).

Whatever internship-hunting strategies a department encourages its students to pursue in this first stage, students should not expect the department to find their internships for them. Rather, they should be prepared to develop an action plan that includes good record keeping and appropriate follow-through procedures. Departments may assist with this process by offering regular orientations, seminars, and field trips for students seeking internships. In addition, collaboration with the alumni association can provide resources, workshops, job shadows, and informational interviews.

If students are not successful in landing an internship on their own, and can document failed search attempts against their action plans, then they may proceed to the next stage. This would involve scheduling a meeting with the internship director at which the director can advance the students' internship search process by constructively reviewing the action plans. The director may also provide new leads: names of employers who have directly contacted the department seeking interns or contact information for employers who have hired the department's interns in the past.

Summary

Internships provide potential benefits to all who are involved: the students, the college, and the businesses/organizations who employ the interns. Perhaps the most important benefit to students who do an internship is the work experience itself. Further having an internship experience on a student's resume can be helpful when it comes to finding the first job after graduation. In addition, having had an internship makes it easier to get the first job after college graduation and that students who have completed an internship get more job offers. The process of finding an internship is also a valuable learning experience. This gives students practice in finding leads, approaching a business about employment, and interviewing.

Internship programs can enhance the reputation and visibility of the college and through the experiences of interns a school can learn how their students perform in

comparison to students from other institutions. This feed back can come from the students as well as from the employers.

A benefit to employers is that interns provide a source of inexpensive, qualified, and motivated labor. Typically, there are no benefit costs when employing an intern and the pay rate is normally lower than for a permanent employee. Hiring an intern also provides the business with an opportunity to evaluate the student's work prior to determining whether to make an offer of permanent employment. Interns typically want to do an outstanding job during their internship because they know that the experience and recommendations that can come from that experience can be very beneficial in finding a permanent position.

There is no one internship model that is right for all departments but all departments are likely to find benefits from either a required or voluntary internship program. It is important to match the type of internship program with the goals of the department and other institutional/geographic considerations. In considering the issues involved in developing an internship program a long run perspective should be kept in mind. It takes time to develop and refine the processes involved and to nurture the business contacts that are necessary for success.



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