

BENEFITS AND INTENDED OUTCOMES OF INTERNSHIPS IN UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS EDUCATION

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Abstract

Historically, business schools have primarily focused on preparing students conceptually, theoretically, and philosophically to excel in business, government, and social sectors. However, a gradual shift has occurred in the priorities of business education to identify skills employers seek, ensure that curriculum is regularly re-examined, and take employer satisfaction into consideration to keep up with the rapidly changing corporate environment. To address this concern, some undergraduate business schools have incorporated internships into the curriculum to help close the skills gap. The benefits of internships have often been assumed, but seldom explored from a qualitative perspective. A case study asked the research question: According to administrators, employers, and students, what are the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education? Qualitative methods consisting of individual interviews, a focus group, and several document reviews were conducted. Results indicate that internships bring theory to practice while shaping career outlooks; internships lead to full-time job opportunities; and that internships are all about building relationships and pipelines.

Keywords: Experiential learning; Career development; Professionalism; Higher education

Business schools have seen tremendous growth and success since the late 1800s, but along with those successes came concerns from industry professionals accusing business schools of not teaching the right skills and for graduating students that lack the essential knowledge to succeed in the workforce (Jamison, 2010; Wilhem, 2002; Yucelt, 1998). Efforts to address these concerns took shape as early as the 1950s with scholars citing complacency, narrow curricula, a disproportionate shift toward research, and a neglect in developing student skills as major concerns plaguing the undergraduate business education environment (Dalton, Earley, Hitt, & Porter, 2009; Gordon-Howell, 2009; Porter & McKibbin, 1988).

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), founded in 1916, was instrumental in addressing these concerns and improving higher education for business worldwide (AACSB, 2016; Hayes & Jackson, 1935). In a 2006 report, AACSB identified the need for business schools to modify their curriculum and to work alongside industry professionals to meet the needs of the global workforce (Shuayto, 2013).

Experiential learning has long been described as the process of *'learning by doing'* (Kolb, 2015; Rizk, 2011) and is defined as any form of learning that allows the learner to put theory to practice (University of Texas at Austin, 2016;

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University of Colorado Denver, 2015). What distinguishes experiential learning from traditional education is the focus on the process of learning as opposed to the outcome of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). Clark and White (2010) argued that an experiential learning component is essential for any university business education program to thrive and produce quality results. Internships, co-ops, and service-learning are perhaps the most common forms of experiential learning; however, internships are the dominant form of experiential learning used within the college under study and the “preferred method of business schools worldwide” to give students practical experiences and help them transition to the real world” (Kosnik, Tingle, Blanton, 2013, p. 616).

Internships, informed by experiential learning, provide students with an opportunity to explore career options while determining likes and dislikes without sacrificing a significant amount of time (Rothman & Sisman, 2016). As students investigate jobs, they are also able to reflect on their personal needs and interest thereby aiding in their ability to narrow potential career options (Rothman & Sisman, 2016). Many scholars noted that internships can clarify job interest; inform students of employer expectations; enlighten students on what they can expect from the job; and assist students in reflecting on whether or not a particular job will be a good fit both personally and professionally (Hiltebeitel, Leaby, & Larkin, 2000; Lord, Sumrall, & Sambandam, 2011; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Rothman, 2007; Moghaddam, 2011). Rothman and Sisman (2016) found that internships have become such a prevalent component of undergraduate education that many scholars believe participation should be mandatory for students enrolled in business schools (Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007; Hiltebeitel, Leaby, & Larkin, 2000; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Rothman & Sisman, 2016; Templeton, Updyke, & Bennett, 2012).

Alon (2003) noted that several skills are developed as a result of experiential learning including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Internships also help students (a) produce stronger resumes, (b) perform better on job interviews, (c) enhance networking skills, (d) gain academic credit, (e) obtain job offers quicker than their peers, and (f) obtain higher starting salaries (Coco, 2000; Divine et al., 2007; Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002). Bennis and O’Toole (2005) found that business school graduates are not receiving enough training in the skills necessary to compete in the labor market. Thus, internships present a viable option to help learners develop skills that generate new ideas and prepare graduates for successful careers.

The nation is facing a “skills imperative” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2010, p. 9) that threatens the U.S. economy and our ability to see competitive growth. Therefore, business schools must understand how to use internships and other forms of experiential learning to cultivate the skills, competencies, and values to produce the next generation of leaders (AACSB, 2016). When implemented correctly, internships can improve skills and “solve a variety of other workplace issues while offering mutually beneficial outcomes for students,

employees, and employers” (Smith, 2015, para 1). Graduating a large volume of students is simply not enough to meet the demands of a changing workforce (Kavas, 2013).

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to describe, analyze, and draw conclusions about internships in undergraduate business education at an AACSB accredited business school at a Research 1 institution located in the United States. Grant University was the pseudonym that was assigned to this institution and the following research question was used to guide the study: According to administrators, employers, and students, what are the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education at Grant University?

Related Literature

Internships have been widely viewed as a popular and beneficial form of experiential learning in undergraduate business education (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013). They allow students to immerse themselves into an organization’s culture, participate in realistic tasks, gain insight into career choices, prepare for future employment, gain an individualized experience, and provide motivation to remain in a chosen career field (Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007; Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013). Internships also help students develop skills in judgement, integrity, trust, and collaboration while promoting the development of moral values (Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013). Gault, Redington, and Schlager (2000) found that interns have greater job satisfaction and also have more leverage to request a higher salary.

While the benefits are noteworthy, it is important to identify some of the limitations that internships pose for students and institutions. Among those include (a) an extensive time commitment, (b) logistics and location, (c) placement, (d) costs, (e) variability in the quality of the experience, (f) limited integration with business curriculum, (g) unstructured learning experience, (h) incomplete learning cycle, and (i) less conducive to teamwork (Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013). Requiring students to participate in an internship would require administrative expertise, a large network of employers (Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007), and a dedicated staff to coordinate student assignments which could be very costly to “smaller schools and programs, or for schools located in rural areas” (Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013, p. 617).

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, academia has 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 this form of experiential learning (Birch et al., 2010; Gault et al., 2000; Hurst & Good, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

To investigate the research question, it was important to understand the theory that helped to guide this study. A constructivist orientation to learning was adopted. Constructivism represents a wide range of perspectives while asserting that individuals *'construct'* their own meaning rather than meaning being discovered (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). True meaning emerges when human consciousness engages with objects (Crotty, 1998). Constructivists also believe that meanings are both subjective and objective. Paul and Mukhopadhyay (2005) noted that, unlike the positivist era that dealt primarily in scientific knowledge, constructivist take values into consideration. The constructivist perspective is evident in multiple theories of learning; however, contextual teaching and learning was used to assist in the analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Contextual Teaching/Learning. Contextual teaching and learning (CTL) uses eight interrelated components to help students make meaning of and retain course material (Johnson, 2002). By using this process, students are able to determine the viewpoints that people seek while developing steps to give meaning to the context that has been discovered (Johnson, 2002). Johnson (2002) defined the process as follows:

The CTL system is an educational process that aims to help students see meaning in the academic material they are studying by connecting academic subjects with the context of their daily lives, that is, with the context of their personal, social, and cultural circumstances. To achieve this aim, the system encompasses the following eight components: making meaningful connections, doing significant work, self-regulated learning, collaborating, critical and creative thinking, nurturing the individual, reaching high standards, and using authentic assessment (Johnson, 2002, p. 25).

The eight components of contextual teaching and learning assisted in gaining understanding of how administrators and employers structure internships and the interpretation of the role they have in student development. More specifically, students in the Grant University College of Business have the option to receive academic credit for their internship experience through enrollment in an online internship course. When viewed through contextual teaching/learning, students are able to make meaning of their academic preparation by reflecting on the relationship between the internship and their course material. Internships involve an integration of the eight components of contextual teaching/learning. Therefore, a thorough understanding of this theory was essential in understanding how students

make meaning of course material, how they create new knowledge, and how administrators and employers design internship experiences to provide benefits for all stakeholders involved. The findings gathered from the researcher and the research participants served as the foundation for developing an understanding of the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education. Together, a clear understanding was developed of how administrators, employers, and students view internships and how they work together to provide benefits and increase the intended outcomes.

Contextual teaching and learning served as the constructivist theory of learning guiding this study. By using this theory, appropriate research procedures were developed and applicable interview questions were presented to each of the populations under study. Careful selection in these areas aided in gaining a better understanding of the benefits of internships in undergraduate business education through viewpoints presented by administrators, students, and employers.

Methodology

A qualitative, single case study design was used for this study because it allowed people to make meaning of their own experiences. The use of various data sources enabled the researcher to explore the issues from multiple viewpoints for better understanding and more disclosure (Baxter & Jack, 2008). While multiple paradigms would have been appropriate for this study, the researcher identified most closely with the constructivist view and the philosophical assumptions presented by Sharon 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 suggested 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). By adopting the constructivist paradigm for a qualitative, single case study, the researcher was able to provide the most depth in the investigation.

Research Setting. The institution under study was a large research 1 institution located in the United States with a student population of more than 40,000. Minority students account for 40% of the population with Hispanic students dominating at 17% followed by Black students at 8%. The 67-year old College of Business is AACSB accredited and recognized as one of the largest business schools in the nation with an undergraduate student population of more than 6,000. During the Spring 2017 semester, 6,359 students were enrolled in the College representing 69% White, 17% Hispanic, and 4% Black. With more than

14,000 total employees and 351-degree programs, Grant University maintains its status as an elite research institution.

The College of Business consists of the following six academic departments: accounting; business analytics, information systems and supply chain; finance; management; marketing; and risk management/insurance, real estate and legal studies. These departments offer a total of 10 undergraduate degree programs: accounting, finance, human resource management, management, management information systems, marketing, professional sales, real estate, retail management, and risk management/insurance. During the Fall 2017 semester, finance maintained the highest undergraduate enrollment with 1,816 followed by marketing at 1,303.

The Grant University College of Business was chosen because of its current standing as an AACSB accredited business school, its size, and its concentrated efforts to incorporate internships into the curriculum. Currently, each academic department within the College has at least one corresponding internship course that can count as either an elective credit toward the student's major or as general elective credit toward overall graduation hours. These factors, along with AACSB's emphasis on the need for dramatic changes to occur in the business school curriculum in order for industry and academia to work together to meet the needs of the global workforce (Shuayto, 2013), provide further insight into why this institution was selected.

Participants. Participants in this study were administrators employed within the College of Business; business students that have recently participated in an internship experience and received academic credit through enrollment in an online internship course; and employers that provide internship opportunities to business students within the College. Participation was completely voluntary using the purposive, or purposeful, sampling strategy. According to Merriam (2009), purposive sampling is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). Therefore, the purposive, or purposeful, sampling strategy was the most appropriate technique for this study.

Administrators had a role in the development of internship guidelines and requirements for their respective areas. In addition, they interacted in some capacity with the internships and career services office to assist students and employers in making quality internship connections. The Grant University College of Business has nine online internship courses representing six academic departments. Therefore, an administrator from each of the six academic departments was identified and invited to participate. Additional administrative participants included the Dean of the College and the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs. Their leadership roles, years of experience, and knowledge of internship programs within the College made them ideal participants for this study.

Each employer (a) worked full-time, (b) maintained an established intern recruiting relationship with the College for the last two years, (c) used at least one of the following recruiting tool to secure interns (e.g. career fairs, job postings,

classroom visits) and (d) focused, either, primarily on a specific business discipline or multiple business majors. The focus group consisted of 5 full-time students representing 6 majors in the College. Each student had internship experience and was previously enrolled in an online internship course. All participants were able to provide significant insight into the benefits, intended outcomes, and challenges of internships in undergraduate business education.

Procedures. The semi-structured interview approach was used for both the focus group and the individual interviews. Semi-structured, or guided, interviews allowed the researcher 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).

Eligible administrators and employers were invited to participate via email. Upon agreement, each participant received detailed information on the nature of the study and a request for preferred interview dates, times, and locations. An email announcement was sent to all students in the College that have participated in an internship for academic credit within the last year. It was important to have students from multiple majors represented. Therefore, respondents to the focus group invitation were narrowed down by timeliness in their response to the invitation and major. Upon selection and agreement, each participant received detailed information on the nature of the study. They were also asked to share their availability during a pre-determined week. From there, a date, time, and location were confirmed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) found that the composition of focus group depends on the topic while the number of participants can vary. The focus group lasted about two hours and provided sufficient time to reach data saturation.

In case study research, documents help provide insight into events and activities that cannot be observed (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) found that documents provide rich descriptions, are easily accessible, and help minimize ethical concerns. In this study, a variety of documents related to internship programs in the College of Business were collected. These documents 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.

Data Collection and Analysis. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. By doing so, the researcher was able to minimize the difficulty in deciphering large volumes of material (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009). To maintain organization, a data collection file and calendar were created. The file contained the names and contact information of administrators and employers that were eligible for a face-to-face interview as well as a list of relevant documents.

Interviews and the focus group were audio recorded, *thank-you* emails were provided and recordings were transcribed for the purpose of analyzing. The

researcher used an online company called *Go Transcripts* to transcribe each session at the end of each week of interviews. Once interviews were transcribed, they were reviewed and shared with each participant for the purpose of member checking. Member checking helps to ensure credibility, trustworthiness, and transparency (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2003). Participants were able to review their transcript and email the researcher soon thereafter if any modifications were necessary to ensure that the information analyzed was an accurate representation of each interviewees thoughts.

Coding was done manually using a notepad and post-it notes. Once participants confirmed and/or made modifications to their transcript, documents were individually analyzed to determine primary themes from each interview question. Significant thoughts were written down as themes began to emerge. Next, thoughts were compared across categories (*e.g., administrators, employers, students*) to determine which themes were shared by the majority of research participants in each group. Another comparison was performed across categories to determine the themes that were most prevalent among the groups as a whole. The documents that were collected for this study were helpful supplements to the interview and focus group material and also provided a more detailed view into content that was not visually observable.

As recurring themes emerged, memos were maintained to document what was heard, observed, and how the findings were interpreted. By creating memos after each data collection procedure, the researcher was able to compare findings and better prepare for subsequent interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009). Because this study explored administrator, employer, and student perceptions of the benefits of internships in undergraduate business education, it was important to carefully read and re-read the data (*e.g., interview transcripts, documents*) to further assist in the development of themes and trends.

After collecting and reviewing program documents and website content, the researcher was able to broaden the scope of the investigation in order to validate data received from individual interviews and the focus group. This review of documents also provided insight into the content of the College's online internship courses. The policy and procedure manuals were available online while the course syllabi and staff training manuals were accessed internally via Canvas, the online learning management system, and via the College's internal document drive. These documents assisted in the researcher's ability to compare student, employer, and administrator perceptions of the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education.

Investigator Position. In this study, the researcher played a significant role in the data collection and data analysis process by serving as a participant observer and the primary research instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009). This included reviewing all documents relevant to the research questions, interviewing each research participant, organizing and moderating the student focus group, and analyzing all material.

The researcher strongly believed that internships play a significant role in a student's professional development and that they should be encouraged. However, resources, institutional type, location, and size were taken into consideration as factors that can impact an institutions ability to require internships of all of its students. With this knowledge, it was found that a research-focused institution is able to infuse internships, and various other forms of experiential learning, into the curriculum while maintaining its academic rigor and producing students with skills that exceed those gained through classroom instruction.

The researcher's belief in the constructivist paradigm allowed thoughts to merge with those of the research participants in order to create an interpretation of the findings based on the construction of new knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As meaning emerged, the researcher maintained an inquisitive mind and a "high tolerance for ambiguity" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 18). In addition, researcher memos were maintained, surroundings were carefully observed, good questions were asked, good communication skills were practiced, critical thinking occurred, and the researcher was comfortable with writing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009).

Trustworthiness. As a qualitative researcher, trustworthiness is of extreme importance. Therefore, it was the researchers goal to ensure that findings were credible. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) noted that internal validity "deals with the question of how research findings match reality" (p. 242). Reality, however, is subjective in this research study. The constructivist orientation to learning reminds us that people do not discover knowledge, but knowledge is created (or constructed) through interactions with the outside world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since reality is subjective, '*credibility*,' as it relates to the research findings, may be a more appropriate term (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam Webster's dictionary defined credibility as the "quality of being believed or accepted as true, real, or honest" (Credibility, n.d.). Credibility can be established through various attributes including triangulation and member checks. To verify this research, the triangulation strategy was employed. Triangulation of data allowed the researcher to use multiple sources of data to confirm research findings.

"Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 250). In a constructivist qualitative research study, there is no single reality. Therefore, the traditional belief that all research studies should be replicable is inappropriate. "While replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results, this does not discredit the results of any particular study; there can be numerous interpretations of the same data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 251). To ensure reliability in a qualitative research study, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) found that the most important question to ask is "whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (p. 251). Methods used in this study to ensure reliability included triangulation, the investigator's position, and an audit trail. Thick descriptions and a thorough outline of the research design helped to document the audit trail. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined the audit trail as a

“detailed account of how the study was conducted and how data was analyzed” (p. 253). Thick descriptions of the background data also helped to establish the context of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Results

The analysis of administrator, employer, and student perceptions of the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education yielded the following themes: (a) internships bring theory to practice while shaping career outlooks, (b) internships lead to full-time job opportunities, and (c) it is all about building relationships and pipelines. This section highlights the findings from each of those themes.

Internships Bring Theory to Practice While Shaping Career Outlooks.

The majority of respondents felt that internships were an excellent way to put classroom knowledge to practice in real-world business settings. They also believed that many students are able to, either, solidify their career path or change their career direction into a more appropriate field as a result of an internship experience. Seven of the eight administrators interviewed felt that all students should participate in an internship if only to test drive their degree before they get out in the real world. Abigail, a risk management and insurance professor, noted that her students come back to class more polished than when they left. “They get more confidence in their interpersonal skills and their business acumen,” she said. “They also have savvy and are more marketable to other employers.” Ingrid, a professor in management information systems, asserted that students need to know what they’re getting themselves into as they pursue a major. “I can explain things theoretically and show students various technologies in the classroom,” she said. “But they may only hear what I’m saying and won’t truly understand it until they see it in practice.” Thomas, a marketing professor, shared that internships are the next step in growing up. “You don’t get that if you only set foot on campus and participate in social/academic activities,” he said.

The six employers interviewed all agreed that internships provide a great opportunity for students to develop professional skills while deciding if the career path they have chosen will be their best option. John, a manager in the supply chain industry, shared that continued exposure to real-life experiences is key to professional success. He said, “some students have a misconception that internships are just paper pushing or stapling or filing papers - a belief that the company is taking advantage of the student - when in reality, what we do here is based on actual business.” Jeffrey, a senior tax accountant, shared that employers should continue to connect the textbook knowledge learned in the classroom to what’s happening in the real world. In addition to internships, he suggested that professors make every effort to integrate real-life perspectives into the classroom by putting students in situations that force them to talk in front of the class or give presentations. “I think that offers a value-add to the student,” he said.

When asked about the benefits that internships offer, all five students agreed that career preparation was a significant factor. Two students mentioned how the internship helped them decide what they wanted to do in their future career while two others noted that it helped them figure out what they didn't want to pursue. Anna, a finance major, mentioned that when she went into her financial advising internship, she had no idea what she was doing, but after this experience, she realized that this wasn't the area she saw herself pursuing as a future career. However, she acknowledged that she still gained valuable skills and experiences that she didn't learn in a classroom. For Christopher, a senior HR management major, he found that his internship was the perfect route into his chosen career field. "I was exposed to HR management in the execution of what that's like," he said. "I also worked alongside HR managers, and it gave me the opportunity find out that I absolutely love this field." Whether the internship solidifies what the student loves or brings to light something the student hates, all participants agreed that both are beneficial and will help shape the student's career outlook and academic pursuits moving forward.

Internships Lead to Full-time Job Opportunities. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017), the conversion rate from intern to full-time hire was 51.3% in 2017 while the one-year retention rate was 65.5% for interns that received full-time offers from the companies for which they interned. The possibility of full-time employment has remained one of the top benefits of internship participation (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008) and the participants in this research emphasized this during their interview sessions.

All administrators interviewed felt that internships help students secure full-time employment. Three administrators specifically mentioned full-time employment as the number one benefit they see from internship participation. Frank, a finance professor, said: "it's the biggest thing." He named several companies that have hired students from his department and also noted the maturing aspect that comes from participating in an internship prior to graduation. He said, "It's the next step in growing up." Donald, dean of the college, shared, "if you want our students to have great job placements, they need to do one or more internships along the way."

The six employers interviewed for this study all agreed that internships help the students grow professionally while taking on the role as a training ground for future employment either within their organization or another company. Paul, a corporate communications and outreach director, mentioned that his company prefers to bring on students in their late junior or early senior year so they can learn for about a year and then switch them over to full-time employees. Jeffrey, a tax accountant, mentioned that his organization is able to be more efficient as a result of their internship program. "We are better able to identify young candidates for entry-level positions which helps us to grow as a company," he said.

Four of the five students participating in the focus group were offered full-time jobs. Christopher, a senior HR management major, mentioned a plethora of

benefits but noted the most significant as being the job offer. “Once I learned the culture, I was better able to execute and make better decisions.” Isabella, a senior accounting major, was offered a full-time position with an accounting firm and shared how important participation in an internship was in her decision to accept.

It is All About Building Relationships and Pipelines. Administrators, employers, and students also emphasized the benefits of expanding their professional network through internship programs. Attracting top companies has always been a goal of business schools (Gerken, Rienties, Giesbers, & Konings, 2012). These relationships often open doors for internships and other employment opportunities (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Velez & Giner, 2014) while also supporting the development of increased reputations for both the institution and employer (Coco, 2000; Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007; Weible & McClure, 2011). By building relationships, schools are also able to improve fund-raising efforts (Coco, 2000, Divine et al., 2007; Weible & McClure, 2011). Therefore, the benefits of internships are shared among students, employers, and business schools alike.

Aside from the most common benefit of students receiving experience and careers, seven administrators mentioned alumni relationships and industry partnerships as important factors in the success of the college’s internship program. Five administrators stressed that the college is not where it wants to be with its internship program, but they are making strides to achieve their internship goals with help from alumni and board members. Donald, dean of the college, shared that alumni help you get your foot in the door. “If you’re trying to get in with a big company, we always look for the alumni connection first because that’s the easiest way to get connected,” he said. Donald also mentioned that getting connecting to the right person also opens the possibility of receiving a personal gift from that alumni to the college. “Either way, both help the college.”

When asked about the primary resources employers use to recruit interns, relationships and job postings were the resources most frequently mentioned by all six employers. Four employers shared that they leverage relationships with current and former faculty to gain entry into targeted classroom settings. Daniel, president of a market research firm, mentioned that his primary resource in reaching students in the college was his senior partner, a former marketing professor at the school. “There were a thousand students a year in his classes so he had a number of quality candidates and they liked him,” he said. He also noted that the connection between the professor and students helped to peak the student’s interest in the business allowing them to receive many qualified applicants for open internship opportunities. Now, they primarily recruit using job postings and email blasts sent out through the College.

Four of the five students participating in this research agreed that internships were important in their ability to develop meaningful professional connections. Isabella, a senior accounting major, shared that the associates, seniors, and managing directors at her accounting firm were all very open to getting to know

her and answering her questions. She said, “Getting on a personal level with these people was probably my biggest takeaway and benefit.” She also shared that “after engaging in meetings, having dinner, and discussing their personal lives, she was able to get a full perspective of what a career would look like within the organization.” In addition, her organization assigned each intern a senior advisor and a mentor that were close in age to each student. “It’s nice knowing that we have that structure and can also connect with other mentors that we admire,” she said.

Administrators receive connections that support the institution financially and professionally; employers receive access to talent with the potential to stay long term; and students receive mentors that can last beyond the experience. These benefits were highlighted throughout the research and provide specific take-a-ways that each research participant used to justify the benefits of internship participation.

Discussion

Thoughts on the benefits and intended outcomes of internships were consistent throughout each interview. According to Coco (2000), internships help students make a smooth transition from academia to the world of work. As theory becomes more relevant through practice, internships become more beneficial to administrators, students, and employers (Divine, Linrud, Miller, & Wilson, 2007; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013).

The National Association of Colleges & Employers (2017) found that more than half of internships lead to full-time employment and this benefit was solidified by the students that participated in this study. Of the five students interviewed, four were offered full-time jobs while the other was given an opportunity to continue her internship in the next semester. Although each employer interviewed did not have a consistent need to hire full-time employees, they did acknowledge that internship programs assists them in helping interns secure full-time employment in other areas or provide them the satisfaction in knowing that they played an important role in helping the student develop important skills necessary for future career success. Overall, all administrators, employers, and students agreed that internships are an excellent way to help students develop professional skills while also preparing them for future job opportunities.

Contextual teaching and learning had a significant role in understanding the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education. Making meaningful connections is one of the eight components of contextual teaching and learning and this research demonstrated that internships provide an excellent opportunity for administrators, employers, and students to develop professional connections. The majority of students and employers interviewed for this research remained in contact after the internship experience and all students mentioned how their former supervisor became a valuable professional connection. Administrators also shared that employers not only provide additional internship

opportunities for other students but they also provide expertise for professional development programs and financial support for other college-wide initiatives. By making these connections, administrators and employers were able to design structured experiences that allowed the students to engage in significant work while collaborating with others and engaging in critical thinking, all of which are components of conceptual teaching and learning.

Internships provide benefits for students, employers, and institutions (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013; Kuh, 2008; Stirling, Kerr, MacPherson, Banwell, Bandedy, and Battaglia, 2017) as demonstrated by the findings from this research study. Of the five students interviewed, four were offered full-time jobs while the other was given an opportunity to continue her internship into the next semester. All employers acknowledged that internships help them secure full-time employees. And the majority of administrators agreed that internships are an excellent way to help build employer relationships while developing student skills.

These findings support the research that internships help students prepare for future careers while exploring various career options (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Sattler, 2011); and assist students, employers, and schools in developing quality professional connections with each other (Gerken, Rienties, Giesbers, & Konings, 2012). By adding more hands-on experience, clearer expectations, and input from both students and employers during the internship development stage, Knouse and Fontenot (2008) found that internship experience for students, employers, and administrators can be significantly improved.

Limitations

The primary limitation is that this study examined internships in undergraduate business education at an AACSB accredited business school located at a Research 1 institution in the United States. Of the more than 13,000 business schools across the country, only 789 are AACSB accredited. Therefore, conclusions and recommendations drawn from this study may have relevance for other colleges and schools of business; however, the thoughts outlined in the research only reflect the understanding gained from a single case study of an undergraduate institution. Because this was a single, qualitative case study, no other institutions were examined, no graduate student involvement was included, and no comparative analysis of similar programs was conducted.

In terms of gender and ethnic composition of the research participants, this study was also limited. Of the 19 participants, six were female, 13 were male, and 15 were white. The institution under study is considered a predominately white institution (PWI) with a student population that is 69% white. According to McDonald (2011), predominantly white institutions are “higher education institutions that have a historically and predominately white racial composition” (p. 16). Therefore, the thoughts gathered from this study are relevant for all populations, but is limited in female and ethnically diverse voices.

Finally, this study was also limited in the sense that the researcher was a participant observer who has been involved in the development and execution of internship programs within the institution being studied. Acknowledging this relationship between researcher and subject was necessary, as it certainly impacted the findings and conclusions that were drawn.

Recommendations for Future Research

As a result of this study, several suggestions for future research have emerged. First, a focus on more diverse student populations would introduce new perspectives that could add depth to the research. The addition of more diverse voices could broaden the scope of the study and provide insight that could add relevance to internship programs at other institutional types. For example, a multiple case study of a predominantly white institution (PWI), historically black college or university (HBCU), women's college, men's college, or community college could provide a comparative analysis and possibly reveal differences in their perceptions of the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education.

Students interviewed for this study have completed at least one internship course offered by the college. A future study with students that have participated in an internship, but have not completed a corresponding internship course could provide insight into how other students perceive the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education.

Many students participate in internships during their junior or senior year of college. A future study could explore the benefits of internship participation during the freshman and sophomore years. An increasing number of employers are seeking talent earlier in the student's college career. Therefore, a future study that examines the benefits of internships during the freshman and sophomore years could be equally helpful in understanding the importance of internships in undergraduate business education.

A study that focuses solely on employer perceptions of the benefits and intended outcomes of internships in undergraduate business education could provide valuable insight from companies of various sizes, industries, and levels of involvement in internship programs. Research that focuses on the employer's perceptions of internships is scarce. Therefore, further insight in this area could add value to the existing body of knowledge.

Conclusion

This study was a single, qualitative case study conducted to examine administrator, employer, and student perceptions of the benefits of internships in undergraduate business education. This study was exploratory in nature, but it helped the researcher learn more about the internship program at the institution under study and how administrators, employers, and students perceived internships.

While this study was limited to a single case, it revealed key benefits that could be used to make improvements and implement new strategies. Previous studies have shown that internships are becoming a common feature in undergraduate business education (Hergert, 2009; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008) and the results of this study demonstrate how AACSB's recommendation to increase experiential learning in business (Hergert, 2009) has played a significant role in this area.

An analysis of administrator, employer, and student responses emphasized their belief that internships have a positive impact on a student's professional development and their ability to secure full-time employment. In addition, most respondents agreed that a required internship program would be ideal, but would present challenges associated with the number of internship opportunities, funding, and staffing for a college with more than 6,000 students. Perhaps, a focus on internships in business education is too narrow, and other forms of experiential learning should be introduced into the fold? With more creative thinking, this college and others can continue to move forward in sharing the benefits of internships with more students in an effort to produce graduates poised for the rigors of today's competitive workforce.

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