

Operationalizing AACSB's societal impact standard: assessing SDG 8 integration through a community partner internship program

Journal of
Business and
Socio-economic
Development

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Pamella Howell and Arun Aryal

Department of Computer Information Systems,

California State University Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA, and

Charleata Battle

Department of Management, California State University Los Angeles,

Los Angeles, California, USA

Received 1 February 2025

Revised 12 April 2025

24 May 2025

Accepted 25 June 2025

Abstract

Purpose – Although the revised AACSB's Standard 9 provides a strategic direction, limited research has been conducted on operationalizing its integration into business schools. To address this gap, we defined and evaluated a framework to explicate societal impact through specific inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes at the organizational, student and faculty levels.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a mixed-method approach. The data include quantitative and qualitative survey responses from nonprofit executives, which were analyzed using hypothesis testing. The qualitative responses from students were analyzed using natural language processing (NLP), and faculty evaluations used a standardized rubric.

Findings – The adopted model used in this research effectively measured the societal impact of Sustainable development goal (SDG) 8. Three key findings include: (1) Nonprofit executives reported contributions to their project success rate and enhanced decision-making processes. (2) The evaluation of student perceptions showed growth in career readiness competencies. (3) Faculty assessments indicated strengthened connections between academic preparation and workforce development with SDG 8 goals. The operationalization of activities and outputs within the internship program provided a framework for evaluating organizational and individual career development outcomes.

Research limitations/implications – This methodology has limitations: it does not account for other factors that may influence participants' responses. This analysis focuses on determining whether the executive's viewpoint deviates significantly from a neutral stance without considering the effects of additional variables. Another limitation is the sample size. Research on small sample sizes has demonstrated that the Type I error rate is close to the 5% nominal value in most cases (De Winter, 2019).

Practical implications – Our findings offer significant implications for AACSB accreditation by providing a practical framework for operationalizing SDG 8, which is used across many currently accredited universities. The paper can be used as supplementary information for AACSB interpretive guidance. This perspective can influence how AACSB evaluates and supports business education programs aimed at providing broader views of program effectiveness and AACSB accreditation of business schools. Future research could focus on providing schools with a comprehensive assessment tool kit for universities seeking accreditation.

Social implications – Our program can have a national or international appeal. If it can be successfully implemented across multiple universities, federal/state/local municipalities can collaborate with nonprofit organizations to pair with public business schools to achieve the SDGs. Additionally, the government may consider policies requiring organizations that receive loans/funding/support to partner with business schools to bolster participation. This model could serve as a structural architecture for addressing other societal challenges beyond SDG 8, potentially simultaneously evaluating multiple SDGs that affect constituents locally and globally.

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Journal of Business and Socio-economic
Development

Vol. 5 No. 4, 2025

pp. 315-337

Emerald Publishing Limited

e-ISSN: 2635-1692

p-ISSN: 2635-1374

DOI 10.1108/JBSED-02-2025-0023

Originality/value – This research demonstrates a novel framework for operationalizing AACSB’s Standard 9 using SDG 8 in the information systems discipline. This model of implementing data-driven community partner internships can be integrated across business schools nationally and internationally. Our assessment approach provides valuable insights for accreditation bodies, educators, researchers, employers and students on implementing and assessing societal impact initiatives in business education.

Keywords AACSB, Sustainable development goals (SDGs), Curriculum, Societal impact, Program evaluation

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Over the past decades, organizations have been facing pressure from stakeholders to be more socially responsible (Moir, 2001; Lindgreen and Swaen, 2010). This focus on social responsibility requires fundamental cultural changes in organizations. Moreover, organizations must identify a catalyst to make this change last (Ali *et al.*, 2021). Business schools shoulder the responsibility of driving cultural shifts by acting as catalysts of social responsibility (Azmat *et al.*, 2023). The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) ensures that business schools stay abreast of real-world business needs. Consequently, it updated its accreditation standards in 2020 to include a societal impact standard. Through this new criterion, Standard 9 (Thought Leadership, Engagement and Societal Impact) mandates that accredited schools demonstrate their positive impact on society. As with most new initiatives, they are only adopted holistically once early adopters have tested them.

Our study proposes a novel approach for operationalizing AACSB’s Standard 9 by utilizing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (UN SDG 8), which promotes “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (SDG Goal 8, 2024). Within SDG 8, our study specifically focuses on SDG 8.2 and 8.3, which emphasize enhancing economic productivity through diversification, innovation and technology (8.2), and promoting development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation and entrepreneurship (8.3). While the AACSB provides interpretive guidance on achieving societal impact, there is a notable gap in the research on implementing and measuring the impact of such initiatives. By integrating UN SDG Targets 8.2 and 8.3, business schools can help diversify the workforce to promote economic growth and provide the required job skills while teaching a culture of social responsibility through societal impact. This integration aligns curricula with global sustainability goals, enhancing the relevance and impact of business education programs (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019). Starting the SDG alignment in the information systems (IS) discipline can be strategic, as digital technology facilitates global connectivity and cross-functional/cross-cultural teams. Although our framework is presented at the departmental level, its structured data-driven approach can be implemented across disciplines, with the potential for impact at the national and international levels. These guidelines provide a universal language for business schools to communicate, apply and integrate into their educational practices to create a societal impact (Bebbington and Unerman, 2018) that emphasizes the role of business education in fostering responsible management practices and ethical decision-making, which are crucial in today’s complex global environment.

Whether responding to the need for corporations to tackle the issue of how their activities impact society and the shifting dynamics of the job market or addressing the call from accrediting bodies, business schools should encourage social responsibility. Utilizing the program theory model (Coryn *et al.*, 2011), we offer a unique analysis of SDG 8.2 and 8.3 implementation in an IS capstone course through a community partner internship program (CIPP). This approach aligns with global sustainability goals and responds to the shifting dynamics of the job market by enhancing the relevance and impact of business education programs. Specifically, this research investigates the following: (1) How does operationalizing Standard 9 in the IS curriculum help partnering organizations achieve their strategic goals? and

(2) How do these internship programs prepare students for decent work? Our research contributes to the extant literature by demonstrating how to implement, assess and measure societal impact at three distinct levels: organizational, instructor and student perceptions, providing valuable insights for educators and researchers.

Research context

To achieve reaccreditation or initial accreditation, business schools are required to align with the 2020 AACSB standards. This research focuses on Standard 9, which provides interpretive guidance that suggests aligning with the UN SDGs to meet the mandate for societal impact. This research was designed and implemented in a public university located in a liberal state with a diverse student population. Recent research on implementing societal impact initiatives found that 51.8% of participating universities selected SDG 8, with 57.5% being public institutions and 48.5% in liberal states (Conklin and Houston, 2024). Following this trend, our university selected SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth as its focus area.

Aligning with SDG 8 fulfills one of the AACSB criteria: ensuring that goals align with the university's mission. This societal impact initiative aligns with the Business School's Strategic Plan, specifically the strategic priority areas of student experience and success and engagement, service and the public good. Improving students' career readiness using the internship program will increase the likelihood of securing decent work, and furthermore, a diverse student body can improve diversity in the US workforce. SDG 8 includes 12 targets or numbered subgroups with multiple indicators; two targets best align with the study aim: 8.2, which focuses on economic productivity and innovation, and 8.3, which promotes supportive policies for generating productive activities and creating decent work.

In collaboration with the Center for the Public Good, we partnered with nonprofit organizations (community partners) in Los Angeles to execute the societal impact initiative. The program was implemented in the Capstone in IS course, which integrates all core IS and technology courses. This course was selected for the pilot program as it aligns with the Learning Goals or core competencies of the Bachelor of Science in Information Systems (BSIS) program, which are suited for measuring student success and community engagement. Figure 1 depicts the program alignment as factors that impact inputs in the theoretical model.

The program goal was to create a sustainable CIPP that connects students with interested nonprofit organizations while maximizing the societal impact of students' chosen career trajectories on the Greater Los Angeles community.

Literature review

The impact of AACSB on business schools

AACSB is one of many agencies that define a specific set of standards that an institution must adhere to acquire accreditation (Zhao and Ferran, 2016). AACSB requires business schools to demonstrate continuous quality improvements in innovation, impact, and engagement. Studies have emphasized that AACSB accreditation can enhance business schools' curricula, particularly through improved program design and delivery (McKee and Botsford Morgan, 2025). Changes to curricula stemming from the assurance of learning have advanced new theoretical paradigms like the scholarship of teaching and learning, which focuses on advancing

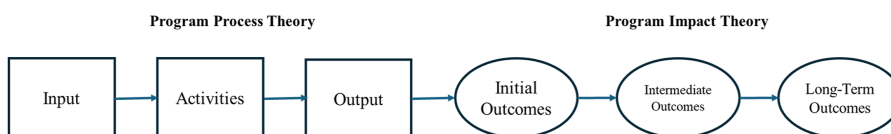


Figure 1. Linear program theory model. **Source(s):** Figure adapted from [Coryn et al. \(2011\)](#)

the methodological rigor of teaching and learning (Siddiqui and Lento, 2024). Adopting innovations could prepare graduates for careers and earn higher salaries (Hunt, 2015), align with organizational missions, foster engagement with external stakeholders and improve internal collaboration within business schools (Fleming and Kowalsky, 2022). AACSB accreditation has contributed to an increase in graduate student enrollment and brand recognition. These benefits stem from enhancements in strategic planning, faculty qualifications, intellectual research contributions and the focus on assurance of learning (Ito, 2022).

Change in trend to focus on societal impact

Aiming to distinguish itself as an accreditation agency and continue to provide value to organizations beyond business schools, the AACSB has widened its scope to include societal impact. The 2020 standards emphasize better alignment of accreditation criteria and elevate societal impacts as a critical measure of a high-quality business school (AACSB, 2020). The “AACSB’s vision of societal impact is that business schools contribute their specialized expertise to help mitigate some of society’s most pressing economic, social, human and environmental problems (AACSB, 2023).” This conceptualization of societal impact aligns with the organization’s continued support of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is its dedication to acting ethically and sustainably regarding its impact on society, the environment and the economy (Rodríguez-Gómez *et al.*, 2022; Matten and Moon, 2004). Societal impact is codified into Standard 9 – Thought Leadership, Engagement and Societal Impact, which emphasizes student and faculty engagement with nonacademic external stakeholders to support the external communities, enhance business practices and address real-world business problems that improve society (Gupta and Cooper, 2022; AACSB, 2023; AACSB, 2020).

In response to these new standards, noticeable and transformative changes have been observed as higher education institutions increasingly prioritize societal impacts over purely economic priorities to enhance their societal roles. Business schools have made a concerted effort to match business school rankings with their impact on society, thereby showing their alignment with broader goals such as CSR initiatives. The reaction of business schools is salient as an increasing number of organizations have embedded CSR programs by leveraging high-potential employees who act as internal change agents, enabling the institutionalization of CSR values through active involvement in business strategy (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2011). To support the transformation process, businesses have adopted a competency-based approach that has gained attention for emphasizing individual abilities that enable employees to translate sustainability goals into action (Osagie *et al.*, 2016). Six core skills are required for a CSR professional to succeed: strategic planning, systems thinking, project management, communication skills, problem-solving skills and inspirational skills; these were later broken down into eight more granular individual competencies, which are foundational for CSR leadership (Osagie *et al.*, 2019). The CSR skills align considerably well with the career competencies students learn during internships, including critical thinking, oral and written communication, teamwork/collaboration, digital technology, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, career management and global fluency (Newell and Ulrich, 2022; Akos *et al.*, 2021), representing the aggregate knowledge required to be successful in one’s career (Jo *et al.*, 2024). The intersection of skills makes internships and other experiential learning opportunities prime for students to learn and practice societally impactful skills.

The CSR adaptation process is further influenced by the prevailing business case logic, which can shape how individuals contextualize and apply their competencies in corporate environments (Osagie *et al.*, 2019). This current study uses an internship as a launching pad for students to practice their competencies. By practicing skills before joining the workforce, new employees can help CSR managers often face challenges in managing diverse stakeholder demands and maintaining a balance between business objectives and sustainability initiatives. These challenges highlight the importance of developing specialized competencies and flexible management skills tailored to the CSR context (Osagie and Wesselink, 2020). This

recognition aligns with the increasing value placed on soft skills and future-focused capabilities that improve academic engagement and career adaptability – critical elements for preparing future professionals in sustainability-driven roles (Zhang *et al.*, 2024).

In business education, accreditation bodies like AACSB are powerful levers for institutionalizing ethical and sustainability values (AIDhaen, 2025), from as societal impact initiatives and CSR programs into curricula. Higher education institutions will encounter challenges as they seek to integrate AACSB (AIDhaen *et al.*, 2023), but accrediting bodies have shown that they can be instrumental to business schools' success as they face global changes (Alromaihi and Hamdan, 2022). Achieving societal impact goals can have a global significance; as we learn from researchers, the quality of institutions like business schools and universities can strongly impact economic growth (Musah, 2024; Nguyen *et al.*, 2018). The application of AACSB's Standard 9 has, therefore, been a topic of considerable interest and scholarship for business schools, specifically regarding how business schools can operate in a new frontier of responsible management education and how to measure and quantify its relationship with sustainable societal impact (Abdelsamad and Farmer, 2017; AACSB, 2020; AACSB, 2023).

Challenges with operationalizing AACSB standards and societal impact

Implementing AACSB's (2020) accreditation standards poses significant operational challenges due to the complexity of the higher education environment. Institutions often struggle to align their missions with societal impact goals and develop reliable metrics for assessing innovation, engagement and impact (Conklin and Houston, 2024). Misalignment occurs when there are discrepancies between AACSB guidelines versus actual practices of business schools (Woodside, 2020). In addition, difficulties commonly arise in selecting appropriate Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designing effective assessment rubrics and managing resource constraints within strategic planning efforts, as integrating SDGs into business education requires alignment with institutional priorities, measurable outcomes and sufficient resources to support sustainability initiatives (Leal Filho *et al.*, 2019). It is even more challenging for institutions new to the accreditation process (Galperin *et al.*, 2017). The lack of clearly defined indicators to assess the value and impact of accreditation limits the ability to communicate its benefits to stakeholders (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2020). Some studies have proposed applying systematic approaches, such as process models aligned with accreditation requirements, potentially enhancing teaching and learning practices (Kundu and Majumdar, 2020) and curriculum management (Hedin *et al.*, 2005). However, there is a lack of studies extending these process models to measure societal impact and increase stakeholder engagement.

One approach to increasing student engagement and measuring the efficacy of societal impact initiatives involves examining their perspectives. In a study that showed promise, researchers developed and presented a widely accepted positive impact rating (PIR) for business schools at the World Economic Forum (WEF). The PIR is a mechanism that incorporates students' perceptions of their impact on society, going beyond the traditional rankings that show salaries and economic performance (Dyllick and Muff, 2020). Other student-centered initiatives, such as implementing collaborative micro-practices (e.g. student internships), pave transformational pathways and advance measurable and SDGs (Lindgreen *et al.*, 2021). Evidence also suggests that collaborative faculty-led initiatives with industry partners, including nonprofit organizations, engage undergraduate students in developmental projects that align with addressing diverse perspectives of broader societal needs (Haley *et al.*, 2022). Unfortunately, this approach is limited as it only considers the student's perspective in a complex network of sustainability issues.

Using UN SDGs as a standardized measure of quality

Educational and organizational programs designed around societal impact and CSR can have a global impact; however, experts have encountered issues with implementing and measuring

the effect of these strategies. The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) have 169 targets and thousands of indicators that higher education institutions and organizations can use to track and measure societal impact and CSR (Pedersen, 2018; Rashed and Shah, 2021; Bilderback, 2024). Implementing a single SDG indicator may lead to interdependencies with others; however, their inclusion in private sector strategies is central to fostering socio-economic development (Ospina-Forero *et al.*, 2022). Studies have found that, contrary to the intention of the SDGs, most organizations have superficial engagement with them (Heras-Saizarbitoria *et al.*, 2022). Likewise, Elmassri *et al.* (2023) suggested that although AACSB accreditation is a driver of societal impact, this integration might be more symbolic than substantively impactful (Elmassri *et al.*, 2023). A similar inquiry into AACSB accreditation and the SDGs highlighted the growing importance of integrating SDGs and addressing societal impact in curriculum and accreditation. The study suggests that complying with international accreditation standards may not be enough to support the development of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economies. Instead, business schools should aim to surpass basic accreditation requirements and develop more ambitious missions and strategies to contribute to knowledge-based economies (Aldhaen *et al.*, 2023). As AACSB-accredited business schools implement Standard 9, most implement SDG #8, "Decent Work and Economic Growth," and SDG #4, "Quality Education," but struggle to narrow their initiatives and define their metrics (Conklin and Houston, 2024). The value of this present research is that it provides supporting evidence that SDG 8 can be implemented in a way that goes beyond symbolism by assessing the view from three different perspectives.

Researchers have recommended combining multiple sources and methodologies to evaluate the societal impacts of AACSB-accredited business schools (Paul and Gala, 2024). Additional research is needed to develop effective, robust and practical metrics for business schools to report their societal impact using SDGs. Examples of research include identifying both quantitative and qualitative indicators that can effectively capture the diverse ways in which business schools contribute to societal progress. This study fills gaps within the extant literature by addressing the complexities of measuring, quantifying, and aligning AACSB accreditation standards and SDGs with empirical evidence of societal impact.

Theoretical framework

Program evaluation is the assessment of the merits and worth of activities designed to achieve a specific aim (Donaldson, 2007). The program theory provides a structured mechanism for determining whether a program meets identified needs and produces its intended results. Program evaluations are applied in the educational, healthcare and social contexts (Chen, 2012) to provide a foundation for organizing and interpreting complex educational interventions. Programs are required to prescribe a goal or aim that reflects a need to be fulfilled (Chen, 2012). One commonly accepted classification, proposed by Stufflebeam (2001), categorizes evaluation approaches into four approaches: pseudo evaluations, the questions- and/or methods-oriented approach, improvement/accountability and social agenda/advocacy. This study used a hybrid questions- and methods-oriented evaluation approach that employs a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The questions-oriented approach usually begins with a set of narrowly defined questions based on an expert's preferred set of evaluative criteria. The methods-oriented approach may employ, as its starting point, a design for a controlled experiment, a particular standardized test (Stufflebeam, 2001).

Program evaluation is a combination of program process theory and program impact theory. The program process theory contains three elements: inputs, activities and outputs. All programs require resources described in the inputs. Inputs, such as financial, human and material, are necessary to effectively implement a program. Activities are the deliberate actions or processes facilitated by those resources. Outputs are tangible immediate results of those activities, while outcomes reflect the broader or longer-term changes a program seeks to bring about. Outcomes can be measured at various points, including short-term, intermediate

and long-term. Building on these foundational concepts, this study adopts the Linear Program Theory Model (Coryn *et al.*, 2011) to evaluate the integration of sustainability goals—specifically United Nations SDG 8 – into a business school curriculum aligned with AACSB Standard 9 on societal impact.

The program impact theory further classifies expected outcomes into three phases: initial, intermediate and long-term. Initial outcomes include students' exposure to applied learning, enhanced technical and soft skill development and increased engagement with real-world challenges. Instructors benefit from the improved relevance of the curriculum and new opportunities for assessing applied competencies. Organizations immediately benefit from the students' work, such as improved workflows or technology solutions. Intermediate outcomes emerge when the program matures. Students become more career-ready and gain clarity on socially responsible career paths. Partner organizations begin to institutionalize student contributions and become more engaged with inclusive employment strategies. For the university, this phase reflects increased alignment with AACSB Standard 9 and fulfillment of strategic priorities related to societal engagement.

Long-term outcomes extend the societal and institutional reach of the program, for example, graduates securing meaningful, decent employment, industry being a more diverse and inclusive workforce, and durable partnerships between academia and nonprofit sectors. The long-term benefits to the institutional level include a stronger reputation for social responsibility, enhanced accreditation readiness and a replicable framework for embedding SDG goals across disciplines. By synthesizing insights from program evaluation theory and sustainability-focused educational research, this study contributes to theory development by demonstrating how the Linear Program Theory Model can be applied not only as an evaluative tool but as a strategic guide for educational design.

Figure 1 outlines the linear model for program evaluation, and Figure 2 shows the linear program theory model adapted from Coryn *et al.* (2011) with the operationalization of UN SDG 8 and the initial outcomes.

The Linear Program Theory is especially useful in educational settings where outcomes are multifaceted and unfold over time. In sustainability literature, this model has helped operationalize broad strategic commitments by mapping the relationships between institutional priorities, implementation strategies and measurable impacts. Researchers have

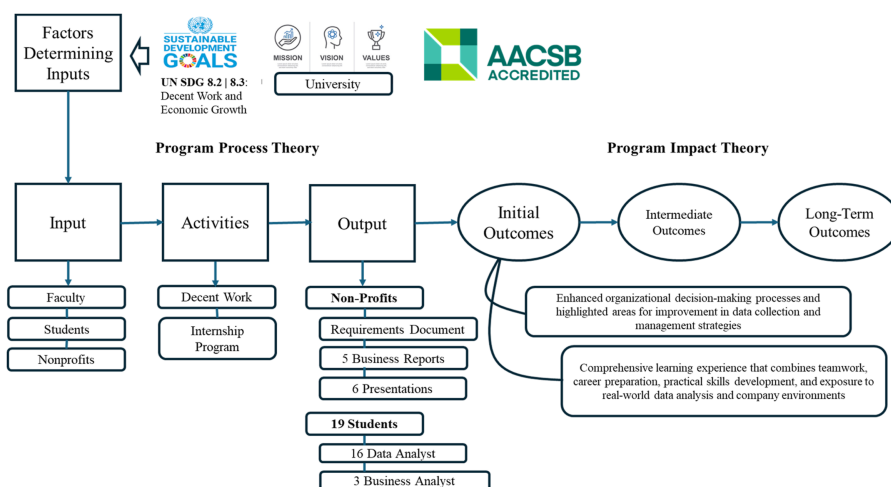


Figure 2. Linear program theory model with operationalization of UN SDG 8 and initial outcomes. **Source(s):** Figure adapted from Coryn *et al.* (2011)

applied theoretically based models to illustrate how universities incorporate sustainability into curricula, research and community partnerships to foster student competencies and institutional transformation (Lambrechts *et al.*, 2013; Lozano *et al.*, 2015).

The linear program theory model is used to map the design and expected results of embedding SDG Targets 8.2 (focused on economic productivity through innovation) and 8.3 (promoting policies that support decent work) within an IS capstone course. In our study examples of inputs include institutional support for AACSB accreditation, dedicated faculty, administrative infrastructure and established partnerships with nonprofit organizations. The key activity involves implementing a CIPP that allows students to apply their skills in real-world, societally impactful projects. The outputs of this initiative are observable in the number of internships completed, deliverables produced for nonprofit partners and the integration of societal impact within course outcomes.

Methodology

The goal of this exploratory study is to assess the impact of incorporating an internship program in the capstone in IS on business schools' approach to meeting SDG 8 for attaining AACSB's societal impact. This research uses a structured employer survey for the participating organizations, a grading rubric and students' self-reflection to assess the outcomes of the program.

Study design

This objective was subdivided to align with specific SDG 8 targets: (1) increase the economic productivity of community partner organizations by providing innovative technological solutions to corporate problems and (2) increase access to decent work for students participating in the internship program. The activities include identifying nonprofit organizations interested in providing internships and identifying career trajectories that can have a meaningful economic impact on socioeconomic status (decent work).

The outputs are described in the Data Collection and Analysis Approach section, including the number of students who participated in the internship program, their career trajectories, and the number of organizations and executives that participated. The initial measurable outcomes or short-term measures of success are as follows: (1) Did student participation in the internship help the company meet its organizational objective? (2) Did participation in the internship program improve student access to decent work by preparing them for specific career trajectories? Figure 2 outlines the linear program theory model with the operationalization of UN SDG 8 and initial outcomes.

Community partner assessment

We operationalized the impact on the company's strategic goal using single-item variables supplemented by written open-ended questions. Research indicates that single-item measures have the same predictive validity as multiple-item ones when a construct is sufficiently narrow (Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007; Wanous *et al.*, 1997). We captured organizational, student and instructor perspectives to examine students' potential for securing decent work. First, we operationalized this outcome by embedding career readiness questions in the survey for organizations; second, an instructor-created rubric was developed; and finally, students wrote a reflection for self-evaluation.

Participating community partner executives responded to 10 questions: six single-item author-developed constructs and four open-ended questions, outlined in Tables 1 and 2, consecutively. We utilized 5-point Likert scales with varying response options. Available responses were 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) to evaluate whether the initial business objectives were met, the project outcomes enhanced decision-making and given sufficient resources, the organization would hire student interns. Executives answered an

Table 1. Likert employer survey items

Q #	Constructs	Likert scale
1	Achieved objective	Did we achieve the initially outlined internship objectives?
2	Enhance decision-making	Did the outcomes contribute to enhancing your organization's decision-making processes, securing a competitive advantage or accomplishing strategic objectives?
3	Hire student	In the event of available opportunities and resources, would you consider hiring any of our students?
4	Decent work Adapted from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2024)	Did our students demonstrate proficiency in the following career readiness competencies: problem-solving skills, teamwork/collaboration, professionalism/work ethic, analytical/quantitative skills and oral/written communication?
5	Career-specific competency	Evaluate the students' comprehension of their career trajectory, specifically in roles such as business analysts, data analysts or cybersecurity analysts
6	Oral communication	How would you rate the students' presentation skills?

Source(s): Table by authors**Table 2.** Open-ended employer survey items

Q#	Open-ended questions
7	Enhance decision-making Did the outcomes contribute to enhancing your organization's decision-making processes, securing a competitive advantage or accomplishing strategic objectives? If affirmative, kindly elaborate
8	Do you have specific feedback for our students based on their performance during the internship?
9	Can you offer insights on enhancing communication or outcomes based on your experience with the program?
10	Is there any additional information or comments you would like to provide?

Source(s): Table by authors

open-ended question to further investigate students' impact on enhancing decision-making. To assess students' ability to secure decent work, we used a separate Likert scale ranging from 1 (Extremely incompetent) to 5 (Extremely competent) to assess if they possessed the core competencies required for workplace success.

Using Question 5 in [Table 1](#), we explored whether students were ready for a specific career trajectory based on the internships they received; this Likert scale ranged from 1 (Not knowledgeable at all) to 5 (Extremely knowledgeable). Finally, we assessed student oral communication skills by analyzing their ability to present effectively, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not effective at all) to 5 (Extremely effective). The three additional open-ended questions, outlined in [Table 2](#), allowed community partners to offer candid advice to students, shape the program's future direction and give additional feedback.

Instructor assessment

Students must develop career-relevant skills and competencies to acquire decent work; in this regard, research has demonstrated that instructor feedback can help ([Troisi, 2023](#)). Two assessment rubrics are used to evaluate students' specialized career-relevant skills based on student internship type, and a third is for oral communication. Despite the continued debate about rubrics, most studies have indicated that they enhance student achievement, improve

instruction and enhance program evaluation (Reddy and Andrade, 2010). The community partner internship consists of two career tracks: business and data analysts. The following paragraphs summarize students’ job tasks and the assessment benchmarks used.

Data analyst interns are assessed based on six industry-related skills defined in the Cross Industry Standard Process for Data Mining model (Wirth and Hipp, 2000): business understanding, data understanding, data preparation, data modeling, evaluation and deployment. Business analyst interns are evaluated based on eight system components, a storyboard and wireframe designs. The assessment rubric for all teams uses a 4-point scale, assigning predefined points for exemplary, proficient, limited and unsatisfactory execution of career-based skills. Verbal communication skills are measured using presentation skills. After giving scheduled oral reports throughout the semester, students deliver a concise presentation summarizing the outcomes of their work to the community partner and in the classroom setting. Using the 4-point scale, students are assessed based on seven criteria: organization, defining technical terminology and acronyms, the use of appropriate visuals, audience engagement, adherence to the time limit, the ability to respond to the questions effectively and the provision of deeper insights.

Student internship assessment

Assessing one’s performance can be difficult; however, enhancing student learning requires making judgments about their learning achievements and outcomes (Dochy *et al.*, 1999). Students wrote a reflective report for this study based on four open-ended items. The first question asked students to reflect on whether they felt more prepared at the end of the semester than they did at the beginning. The second and third questions required the examination of team dynamics and success. Accurate team-based assessments (Falchikov, 1993) elicit students’ experiences as team members and can inform future success as collaborators in the workplace. The fourth item sought student feedback on future program improvements. Responses to Items 1–4 are examined using natural language processing (NLP) in the “Results” section.

Data collection and analysis approach

Data was collected in Fall 2023 from multiple sources, including Qualtrics, the Canvas learning management system and Poll Everywhere. The assessment data gathered from Canvas and Qualtrics were analyzed with the approval of the institutional review board, IRB approval reference 23-184X [2174642-1]. Table 3 summarizes the data collection and analysis methods. The study participants include 19 senior IS students with career trajectories as data and business analysts who completed a 15-week internship. The six student teams were assigned to four community partner organizations. Data were gathered from seven organizational executives who attended at least three 1-h presentations at various stages of the project and attended an hour-long summative presentation after the project. The executives were a technology project manager, two senior/executive directors, an assistant vice president, a chief operating officer and two chief executive officers.

Table 3. Data collection and analysis methods

Participants	Data collection description	Data analysis method
Student	Canvas	Statistical analysis, NLP
Teacher	In-class presentation	Grading rubric
Community partners	Qualtrics survey	Statistical analysis
Source(s): Table by authors		

Lumivero's StatTools, a Microsoft Excel add-on that can be used for visual and inferential statistics, was used for hypothesis testing (Morrice *et al.*, 2013; Albright and Winston, 2020). For each single-item measure, we employed one-tail hypothesis testing to determine the significance of the results. The mean equals three for the null hypothesis, indicating respondents were neutral toward the measured construct. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis, where the mean is >3 , suggests that participants were interested deviated from neutral regarding the construct. If the null hypothesis is rejected, it implies that participants showed strong agreement with the statement rather than remaining neutral.

Students' reflections were analyzed using Leximancer, a tool that performs thematic and semantic analysis through machine learning techniques. Leximancer and its analytical methods are discussed in prior IS research (Tunca *et al.*, 2023). Leximancer provides word frequency and co-occurrence counts of concepts in a document (Smith and Humphreys, 2006; Ward *et al.*, 2014) by following these four steps: (1) document preparation, (2) document matrix, (3) dimension reduction and (4) data visualization. The document preparation involves creating a Word file for each student's project reflection. Once the input files are identified, words with multiple spelling variants (e.g. organize, organization, organizing and organized) are converted into "word stems" to ensure different forms are recognized as the same. In the second step, the software generates a document matrix vector composed of two elements: words and the documents being analyzed.

The third step in the analysis is dimension reduction, which condenses a large vector created in Step 2 into smaller sets of meaningful concepts by analyzing word frequency and co-occurrences. Word frequency counts how often words appear in a document, revealing patterns and trends. Co-occurrences measure how often words appear near each other. Combining these metrics identifies patterns presented as concepts (Merchant and Pande, 2018). The final step is data visualization, where Leximancer generates visual diagrams with key terms in different-sized circles. The size and color of these circles are significant, with "hot" colors (red, orange and yellow) indicating stronger relationships between themes and concepts. Table 5 illustrates the visualizations created after semantic analysis.

Results

The results of the one-tailed hypothesis tests are summarized in Table 4. The sample mean for "Achieved Objective" was 4.71 ($p < 0.0001$), indicating that executives strongly agreed that interns helped them achieve the organizational objective(s). For the "Enhance Decision-Making" item, the sample mean was 4.71 ($p < 0.0001$), suggesting that executives strongly agreed that the outcomes contributed to enhancing their organizations' decision-making processes, securing a competitive advantage or accomplishing strategic objectives. Examining the open-ended question about enhanced decision-making indicated that the project outcomes generally contributed positively to the organizations' decision-making processes and strategic objectives. A participant indicated that data visualization enhanced their understanding of complex information, commenting that they could "visually see a dataset that was so hard to wrap our heads around." Participants saw the outcomes as beneficial for strategic planning, with one noting that the project would enable them to provide critical information to leadership more quickly.

The career readiness competencies were used to measure the ability to secure decent work; the mean was 4.85 ($p < 0.0001$), indicating that executives strongly agreed that students demonstrated proficiency. Executives agreed that students' oral communication skills were effective, with a mean of 4.42 ($p = 0.0002$). The Career-Specific Competency item inquired whether students were knowledgeable about their career trajectories; the sample mean was 4.71 ($p < 0.0001$), indicating executives strongly agreed that students' knowledge levels were high. The Hire Student item had a sample mean of 4.71 ($p < 0.0001$), suggesting that executives strongly agreed that if resources and opportunities were available, they would consider hiring any of the students.

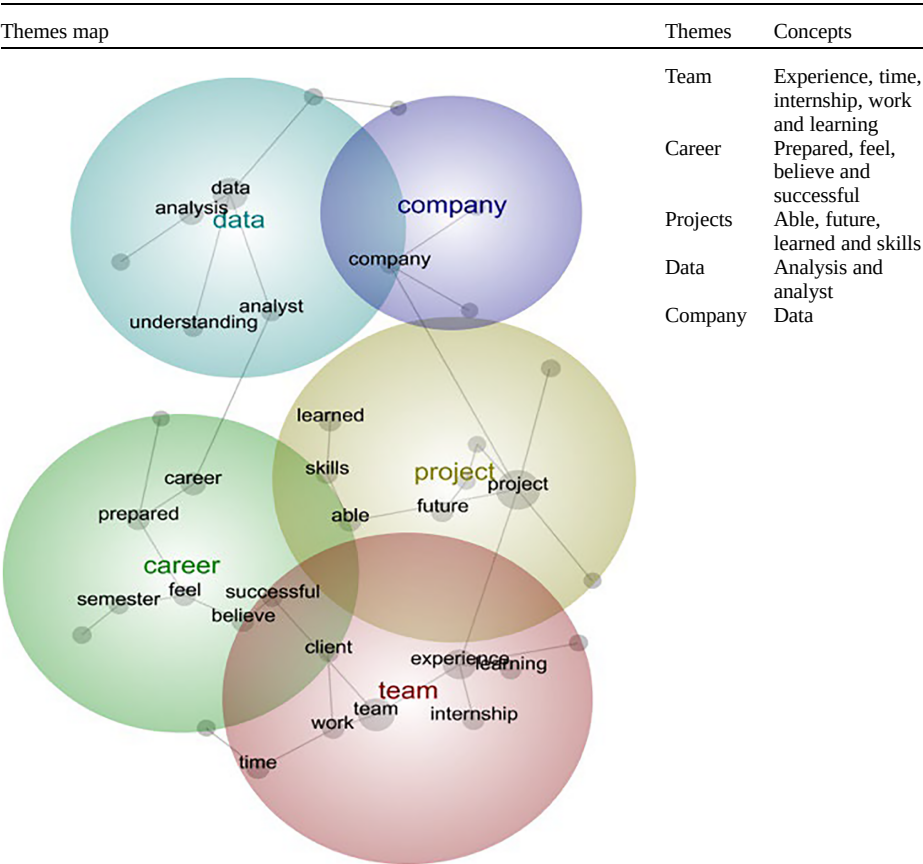
Table 4. Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis test (one-sample)	Sample mean	Sample Std dev	Standard error of the mean	t-Test statistic
Achieved objective	4.714***	0.488	0.184	9.2952
Enhance decision-making	4.714***	0.488	0.184	9.2952
Decent work (career readiness competencies)	4.857***	0.378	0.143	13.0000
Career-specific competency	4.714***	0.488	0.184	9.2952
Oral communication	4.429***	0.535	0.202	7.0711
Hire student	4.714***	0.488	0.184	9.2952

Note(s): *** $p < 0.0001$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 5. Summary of student perceived themes and concepts



This section summarizes the analysis of Open-Ended Questions 8–10 in Table 2. Participants, responding to Question 8, applauded students for their work ethic and data-handling skills, stating, “I am proud of the perseverance these students showed over the course of this project.” Another highlighted the “diligence in sorting through the data to come up with solutions.” The quality of communication was another area of positive feedback. One participant appreciated “the care the students took in communicating,” noting an improvement over time: “The presentations were incredibly professional and useful.” Another brief comment suggested that “confidence will grow with repetition,” implying that the internship experience contributed to the student’s skill development and that continued practice would continue to enhance their abilities.

When asked for insights on enhancing future communication in Question 9, most respondents expressed satisfaction with the current methods of communication. One participant noted, “The manner of communication throughout the program was excellent,” highlighting that they were kept informed of progress and meetings were scheduled well in advance. The collaborative approach to defining outcomes at the start of the semester was also appreciated. Question 10 asked for additional comments; overall, the comments expressed a positive sentiment. For example, “This was a great experience, and I am so proud of the students for their hard work!” The program was valued as a community partnership, with one respondent thanking the interns and faculty “for being an incredible community partner!” Other responses highlighted the practical value of the program – as participants “learned new things from the report,” indicating that using innovative data analytic techniques may lead to increased economic productivity.

Instructor results

The baseline assessment rubric used a 4-point scale to assess career-based skills; the results were converted to letter grades to improve comparability across both career trajectories and evaluation goals. Each letter grade describes the attainment level for each career competency or skill measured. An A is superior, an A- is outstanding, a B+ is very good, a B is good, a B- is better than average, a C+ is above average, a C is average, a C- is below average, and finally, a D+ is weak attainment of the career competency or skill measured. Of the six teams, two with the career trajectory data analyst had cumulative scores better than average (83%), and two other teams achieved outstanding (91%). The last data analyst and business analyst teams received superior ratings of 95% and 97%, respectively.

The results of the data analyst career-based skills are as follows: For business understanding, which involves describing the specific problem area, three teams were graded average (75%), and two had superior attainment. Two teams achieved better than average for data understanding, requiring students to describe, explore and verify data quality. One team was marked as good, one team achieved outstanding, and one team was rated superior for the data understanding skill. Data preparation involves enhancing data quality by eliminating duplicates, errors or outliers; three teams achieved superior, one team earned outstanding, and one team achieved better than average attainment of this skill. Teams utilized dashboards, graphs, charts or tables to elucidate data insights in the modeling phase. Four teams earned superior, and one team achieved very good attainment of the modeling skill. The evaluation phase includes interpreting results as they relate to the original business objectives. Four teams performed better than average, and one team achieved superior performance in this criterion. Deployment was the last skill measured, where students ranked potential actions and summarized actionable results; four teams achieved better than average, and one team earned superior.

One team selected the career trajectory of a business analyst. This team achieved superior in designing the domain model class, state machine, activity, system sequence, design class and package diagrams, as well as graphical user interface/prototype and storyboard. For the use case descriptions skill, they achieved better than average. All teams were assessed for verbal

communication. The results revealed that two teams earned a rating of good for the overall attainment of verbal communication skills (85%), two teams achieved outstanding (90%), and two teams attained superior (95–100%). Students received an A for preparing well-organized presentations, defining technical terms and acronyms, and adhering to the time limit. Fluency variation occurred for the following criteria: choosing the appropriate visualization, effectively responding to questions and audience engagement, resulting in scores between A and C. The most significant score variance was observed in providing deeper insights, where most students had weak attainment of this skill.

Student perception results

The Leximancer analysis of student responses is summarized in [Table 4](#); five main themes were identified: Team, Career, Projects, Data and Company. Each theme is associated with concepts reflecting students' experiences and perceptions. The “*Team*” theme encompassed five concepts: experience, time, internship, work and learning. Students viewed their internships as valuable learning experiences that simulated professional environments. One student described it as “a great learning stepping stone to what may be expected when working in a group to achieve a goal together in a professional environment.” Another emphasized the importance of teamwork and communication, stating that “being a team player and strong communication is what makes a great team.” The “*Career*” theme included four concepts: prepared, feel, believe and successful. Students' responses indicated they felt more prepared for their chosen career paths after the internship. One business analyst noted, “I am more prepared . . . I understand the process . . . before we go into the software development phase.” However, some students expressed uncertainty and the need to continue improving after hearing candid feedback from a community partner after their presentation.

The “*Projects*” theme was associated with four concepts: able, future, learned and skills. Students appreciated the opportunity to apply and develop new skills. One student mentioned, “I also learned how to utilize some of the applications, such as Lucid chart and Power BI,” while another noted, “From the internship, I was able to practice the skills that I have learned throughout my college experience.” The “*Data*” theme centered on the concepts of analysis and analyst. Students gained insights into the responsibilities of data analysts, with one student stating, “I learned a lot about the role and responsibilities of a data analyst. It provided . . . opportunities such as data cleaning, data analysis, presentations with the company.” The “*Company*” theme had one concept: data. This theme highlighted the real-world context of the internships. One student observed that the experience “really put into perspective what working under company deadlines and guidelines is like.” These themes reflect a comprehensive learning experience that combines teamwork, career preparation, practical skills development and exposure to real-world data analysis and company environments that may result in decent work.

Discussion

This paper contributes to extant literature by combining and extending the program process and program impact theories ([Chen, 2012](#); [Donaldson, 2007](#)) and by assessing and measuring societal impact at three levels: organizational, instructor and student perceptions. We extend the framework by identifying and empirically assessing context-specific factors influencing input and input categories, developing and implementing innovative activities, and capturing defining outputs for estimating SDG 8. The novel approach presented in this paper is one of the first to provide practical guidance to operationalize and evaluate SDG 8 ([Sidani and Sechrest, 1999](#)).

By combining and adapting two theories, we link key activities and outputs to the initial outcomes to assess the impact on all stakeholders. Previous research has demonstrated that connecting the outcomes to output increases accountability ([Hernandez, 2000](#)); the study

results indicate that this connection leads to enhanced decision-making for community partners. A practical contribution of this research to the linear program theory model is a new framework for evaluating the impact of interns on participating nonprofit companies, addressing a gap in existing research that typically focuses on benefits to the interns themselves. This study developed a new set of activities designed to enhance the management of the identified inputs and tailor these tasks to improve operational efficiency.

The Information Systems Department's CIPP has demonstrated significant promise in addressing key challenges related to instituting SDGs in the context of business schools. Positive outcomes have been observed across the board, including among community partners, faculty and students, supporting similar findings that revising course and program content to align with student success in the marketplace is essential (Konrad *et al.*, 2018; Palocsay *et al.*, 2020). From an organizational perspective, our community partners responded positively to the program, noting that internship activities and outputs meticulously met outlined project objectives. Partners reported enhanced decision-making attributed to improved data accuracy and integrity (Fisher *et al.*, 2003), which are crucial for reporting and demonstrating the tangible impact to their internal and external stakeholders. The improvements observed by community partners align with SDG Target 8.2 – which focuses on boosting economic productivity, thereby achieving AACSB's objective of societal impact.

The instructor's perspective in this research reveals insights for SDG Target 8.3, which emphasizes creating decent jobs and fostering innovation. The faculty assessment indicated that data analytics and business analyst students showcased above-average-to-superior attainment of career-specific skills. Student teams excelled in several areas of data analysis, especially data preparation and modeling, indicating they are acquiring highly sought-after skills in today's job market. While students' communication skills were strong, they sometimes struggled to provide deeper insights. This feedback will help continually refine and improve the program. Further, large-scale intermediate and long outcomes measured by the IS Job Index 2022 indicate that 28% of graduates wait over six months to secure decent work (AIS, 2022). The report also indicates that internship experience significantly boosts job offer rates. Like other experiential learning models (Sanders Jones *et al.*, 2021), this internship program may positively impact students' postgraduation prospects.

Our findings demonstrate benefits for faculty and institutional administration by illustrating how to programmatically go beyond merely teaching students in the context of an IS capstone course curriculum with an embedded, semester-long, quasi-virtual internship program with community partner organizations. The integrated internships provided insights into the capstone course curriculum design, focusing on societal impact, along with a replicable framework for measuring the implementation of SDGs that foster decent work and economic growth while enhancing students' career preparedness.

Students' perceptions led us to uncover critical findings that can support the attainment of decent work. Students reported significant gains in hard and soft skills, feeling more prepared for the workforce. This result reveals that we are effectively validating the objectives of field-based learning, where students learn technical, business and soft interpersonal skills (Gorman, 2018). The concepts and themes provided a deeper understanding of these findings. Students viewed their projects as valuable learning opportunities akin to professional environments, emphasizing teamwork and communication as crucial for achieving collective goals. Participating seniors felt more prepared for future careers post-internship, although some expressed uncertainty about specific skills. They highlighted that the practical application of skills learned in college leads to an appreciation of knowledge acquired, and they considered internships a chance to develop new competencies, such as using tools like Lucid chart and Power BI. For example, students gained a deeper understanding of data analyst roles through data cleaning and analysis tasks. These roles mirrored real-world responsibilities and demonstrated the technicalities of working within company guidelines and deadlines, offering students a realistic perspective on professional expectations.

The community partner internship experience provided a comprehensive learning opportunity and a chance for students to reflect on their impact on society through the lens of their career trajectories. Undergraduate student interns emphasized the value of tackling real-world business issues through engaged practical experiences within live industry-based internships. Students emphasized the importance of actively integrating classroom-learned concepts into project deliverables for nonprofit organizations faced with real-world business issues. Furthermore, interns underscored the importance of receiving real-time feedback from client organizations about individual performances and team dynamics.

Community partner survey responses highlighted that engagement with student interns positively and actively enhanced decision-making processes and real-time communication. Moreover, student deliverables significantly contributed to operationalizing and achieving strategic organizational goals by providing tailored solutions for real-world business challenges. This evidence demonstrated that our distinctive framework provides an innovative approach beyond conventional methods of measuring and assessing societal impacts for accredited business schools. Through real-world application tailored to measure the alignment between AACSB's Standard 9 (Thought Leadership, Engagement and Societal Impact) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), our research demonstrates significant benefits for organizations, students and AACSB-accredited business schools or those aspiring for accreditation.

Implications

Experiential learning experiences, such as the community partner initiative, are a medium for improving students' industry-relevant experiences. An increasing number of federal and private organizations are seeking students with practical skills; therefore, educational institutions would benefit from utilizing our model. The benefits to community partners involved in the initiative mean students have assisted in meeting their strategic goals and, by extension, helping the community. Long-term partnerships may result in continued benefits to customers who receive services from students participating in the program. By preparing students for the job market and supporting local organizations, we contribute to local economic development, aligning perfectly with the broader objectives of SDG 8. The context of this paper focused specifically on IS, bridging the gap between industry and academia; it is easily applied in other industries or business contexts. [Table 6](#) highlights the practical applications, policy considerations, strategies for higher education institutions and social impact of the research findings, providing a comprehensive view of the implications of the study.

To facilitate the program's long-term growth, community partners can consider hiring universities to provide support services. Similar to the software-as-a-service model, universities would provide community partners with various services – such as finance, accounting, marketing, management and economics, essentially becoming “business school as a service” or “university as a service.” Through these “back-of-the-house” supportive services for partner organizations, we observed perspectives that underscored the value of higher education institutions' interaction with local businesses. These programs may act as catalysts to revitalize communities that have seen significant migration of talent after degrees are obtained. Therefore, there are limited disadvantages to community partners joining these programs, as the faculty and university bear the risk of providing a valuable product. A great way to mitigate additional risks is to ensure that scope, time and budget are set at the beginning of the project. Setting a project with a moderately complex scope is sufficient to offer any organization a quality product and give students the required experience.

Colleges and universities considering implementing the community partner initiative must consider ways to measure the impact of activities on society accurately. In the paper, we started with a survey of the executives who worked directly with interns. There are a few things to consider for implementation, such as interviewing or surveying other internal or external stakeholders. We suggest that community partners survey some of the clients directly impacted

Table 6. Summary of research implications

Summary of research implications	
<i>Implications for practice</i> • Use the CIPP framework to operationalize AACSB standard 9 • Integrate UN SDG skills into business curricula • Invest in IT for evidence-based curriculum decisions • Partner with alumni and community engagement centers	<i>Social implications</i> • Support local economic development via internships • Revitalize communities by retaining graduate talent • Foster student citizenship through nonprofit engagement • Scale CIPP to broadly address productivity and employment
<i>Implications for higher education institutions</i> • Offer “business school as service” to community partners • Set clear project parameters to mitigate partnership risks • Encourage funded internships to boost participation • Develop AACSB accreditation toolkit for societal impact	<i>Policy implications</i> • Promote government-nonprofit-university SDG collaborations • Consider policies tying federal funding to SDG partnerships
Source(s): Table by authors	

by the initiatives the students were involved. Question-oriented approaches can be enhanced using validated measurement instruments to collect data on relevant constructs. Additionally, we must find additional ways to continuously collect feedback from all stakeholders to keep the program aligned with participants’ needs. This approach may inform the discourse on how higher education institutions implement community engagement programs.

We systematically present insights into interns’ perspectives; however, collecting and analyzing the data can be difficult for institutions attempting to implement this program. Faculty can consider preprogram surveys, often not required by AACSB, but can be utilized to showcase the change in student outcomes after the program. Students were given open-ended survey questions that provided rich data but could only be studied thematically; similar to the employer survey, we suggest implementing validated instruments to measure many of the concerns elucidated in this paper. This study measured the initial outcomes; future studies are required to measure intermediate and long-term outcomes. Longitudinal monitoring and evaluation can provide valuable insights into the decent work provided through IS careers. Universities must invest in IT infrastructure to support data collection and storage. Since many universities utilize Microsoft SharePoint, we suggest using this as a starting point and incorporating MS Teams and Outlook to facilitate communication and the secure storage of data. The focus on data collection and analysis could lead to more evidence-based decision-making in curriculum design across educational institutions.

To improve student participation and benefit, facilitators should encourage participating organizations to provide funding for students. There are several government programs, such as the work–study program, that can be utilized as a method to provide funding when the organizations are operating on a tight budget. This study incorporates a unique perspective on the role of faculty in facilitating the internship program by highlighting the role of faculty researchers in facilitating and supporting the overall internship program with nonprofit community partners. Future research can focus on how to make the standardized project management tools utilized in the internship program available across multiple courses and programs. To successfully implement the program, faculty must be given sufficient time and a budget to prepare. We recommend advertising the available support services at least three to six months before the start of the new semester by working with alumni organizations or

community engagement centers. Establishing a grant or line of funding to support faculty specifically is important. Three inputs were studied in the initiative – students, faculty and community partners – with limited funding; securing a multistakeholder line of funding may result in greater participation.

Our findings offer significant implications for AACSB accreditation by providing a practical framework for operationalizing SDG 8, which is used across many currently accredited universities. The paper can be used as supplementary information for AACSB interpretive guidance. This perspective can influence how AACSB evaluates and supports business education programs aimed at providing broader views of program effectiveness and AACSB accreditation of business schools. Future research could focus on providing schools with a comprehensive assessment tool kit for universities seeking accreditation.

Our program can have a national or international appeal: If it can be successfully implemented across multiple universities, federal/state/local municipalities can collaborate with nonprofit organizations to pair with public business schools to achieve the SDGs. Additionally, the government may consider policies requiring organizations that receive loans/funding/support to partner with business schools to bolster participation. This model could serve as a structural architecture for addressing other societal challenges beyond SDG 8, potentially simultaneously evaluating multiple SDGs that affect constituents locally and globally.

Limitations and conclusion

Limitations are inherent in all research. In this study, the methodology has limitations in that it does not account for other factors that may influence participants' responses. This analysis focuses on determining whether the executive's viewpoint deviates significantly from a neutral stance without considering the effects of additional variables. Another limitation is the sample size. Research on small sample sizes has demonstrated that the Type I error rate is close to the 5% nominal value in most cases ([De Winter, 2019](#)).

In conclusion, the CIPP shows promising results for business schools to effectively operationalize AACSB Standard 9 on societal impact by aligning with UN SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth. The CIPP helps undergraduate students learn valuable real-world experience by applying their technical and soft skills to socially impactful projects, allowing them to develop career readiness competencies while contributing to their local community ([Alromaihi and Hamdan, 2022](#)). Therefore, the framework outlined in this study could serve as a model for other business schools looking to implement similar programs.

Higher education institutions that adopt our model can expect to see a marked improvement in students' competency in education skills for sustainable development ([Aldhaen, 2023](#)). Interns work effectively on diverse project teams, establish shared goals, communicate openly and leverage each other's strengths, demonstrating higher levels of interconnectivity and emotional intelligence. The CIPP requires interns to think critically, break down complex issues, ask probing questions and propose creative solutions; these skills build resilience, adaptability and motivation. Navigating ambiguous real-world projects cultivates adaptability and resilience, preparing interns for the volatility of modern workplaces. Hands-on work supporting nonprofit missions instills in students a sense of social responsibility and illuminates ways business skills can advance community betterment, enhancing their sense of local and global citizenship.

This study examined broader applications, implementation strategies, measurement and assessment, accreditation, future research and practical implications. Programs like the one discussed enhance student job prospects and benefit nonprofit organizations. However, as noted in other studies, implementing these programs requires significant supporting resources ([Speier-Pero, 2018](#)). Given funding availability, business schools can optimize students' local and global citizenship development through community-based internships. Higher educational institutions can fully realize this potential through intentional program design,

monitoring and iteration as needed to address broader societal issues related to economic productivity and quality employment.

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Corresponding author

Charleata Battle can be contacted at: cbattl14@calstatela.edu