

Students' perspectives on an internship experience

Deborah Banker

*Division of Child Development and Family Studies, Tarleton State University,
Stephenville, Texas, USA, and*

Jamie Borchardt

*Department of Psychological Sciences, Tarleton State University,
Stephenville, Texas, USA*

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aimed to evaluate whether internship experiences provide students with meaningful training post the COVID-19 pandemic through a hands-on approach, thereby enhancing career readiness upon graduation.

Design/methodology/approach – The Career Benefits of Co-Op/Internship Experience Survey, supplemented with demographic questions and one open-ended query, was administered to students at the conclusion of their 16-week internship experience.

Findings – Results indicated a generally positive internship experience, as reflected in the overall participant responses ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.18$). Furthermore, the internship experience enhanced participant's respect for diversity and understanding of cultural differences ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.46$).

Research limitations/implications – This study determined that students perceive internships as beneficial for their career readiness post-graduation. It was limited to a single semester and two disciplines at one regional university. Further research should encompass a broader range of disciplines and a larger student sample.

Practical implications – Internships foster partnerships between universities and industries, thereby better preparing students for their future careers. Students learn first hand the soft skills necessary to become successful employees after graduation.

Social implications – This study examines students' perceptions of their readiness to enter their chosen career fields post-graduation by providing them with a preview of workforce requirements through the internship process. The social implications include a better prepared workforce for the new challenges and retention of trained workers.

Originality/value – This research is beneficial for academics involved in workforce preparation, particularly in contexts where there is a shortage of adequately prepared workers.

Keywords Experiential learning, Experiential education, Student internship

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

According to a 2018 study from McGraw-Hill, only 41% of college students feel prepared for careers once they graduate (McGraw-Hill Education, 2018). In a study by Kaiser (2019), hiring managers indicated a skills gap in college graduates, indicating a lack of basic skill knowledge needed for future employees. The skills hiring managers specifically target are known as soft skills (Mwita *et al.*, 2023). Mwita *et al.* (2023) further elaborate that soft skills include interpersonal communication abilities, teamwork, problem solving, decision-making, work ethic, adaptability to change, innovation and creation abilities, being tolerant to stress and customer orientation. The lack of soft skills were further reiterated in studies done by Feraco *et al.* (2022), Baert *et al.* (2021) and Noa and Asis (2020). It is within this context that

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research showed that neither college students nor hiring managers feel that college graduates are well prepared for careers once they graduate. It is to be noted, however, that the [Kaiser \(2019\)](#) study did point out that the perceived skills gap indicated by hiring managers could be more related to an expectation gap, “mismatched expectations between institutions of higher education and organizations hiring college students” (p. 10). The focus of this research study was to determine if having students participate in internships assisted in alleviating their perceptions of the skills gap.

It is important to note that there is a gap in the literature of research done on post-secondary student readiness for the workforce since the reopening of businesses and educational institutions from the COVID-19 Pandemic shutdown. Part of the mismatch between the skills needed by employers in industry and the skills that the more recent college graduates have learned lies in the changing workforce’s required skill sets from years past ([Rubaca, 2023](#); [Poláková et al., 2023](#)). Currently, most unfilled job openings require very focused specialized training that needs to be provided in colleges and universities ([Cook, 2017](#)). Also, according to [Marsh \(2013\)](#), an individual must have knowledge, skills and abilities to be competitive in the “new economy.” A university degree is knowledge-based and does not necessarily provide a future employee with soft skills and abilities. Linking post-secondary work readiness and skill attainment to employment after obtaining a degree with university/community business and agency partnership internships allows higher education to reimagine the futures of its graduates for successful early employment ([America’s Promise Alliance, 2023](#); [Borchardt and Banker, 2024](#)).

To improve upon providing college graduates with real-world skills and application experience and to enhance community/university partnerships, we developed a cross-disciplinary internship for students obtaining degrees in psychology and child development and family studies. The psychology and child development and family studies programs are part of the School of Behavioral Sciences at the institution where the study took place. The purpose of the study was to examine if the internship experience provided the students with beneficial real-world training using a hands-on-experience approach in a child development center where they could relate the knowledge base they learned in their previous courses to the day-to-day demands of working with small children not yet in kindergarten and developing curriculum in a non-K-12 school environment. The research question was, “What are the students’ perceptions of their career readiness as a result of the internship experience?”

The paper’s structure is as follows. The next section is a literature review which includes relevant theories. Then we describe the methodology which details the experimental design. Subsequently, we present the results, discussion, limitations, future directions, conclusion and references.

Literature review

Undergraduates and graduate students work tremendously hard to achieve their goals, and participating in an internship experience is no different ([Ramirez et al., 2022](#)). These endeavors can benefit the students by teaching them how to work collaboratively with a team. Participating in activities like this helps prepare students for the world of work in a supportive environment under the university’s umbrella. Research in these areas is necessary to understand the values and perspectives of both the intern and the employer. It is important to address the perspectives related to research-based practices. One area of interest is to increase the number of students engaged in internships. Research has shown that it could lower organizational turnover at internship sites and increase the number of students interested in partaking in an internship ([Marano, 2015](#)). When students are provided with flexible hours and receive pay, this may help them attain a work-life balance ([Ramirez et al., 2022](#)). In addition, students need a faculty member who practices student-centered facilitation experiences to expose them to a growth mindset in academic and field settings.

Students pursue the path of internship to gain experience and develop their careers ([Galbraith and Mondal, 2020](#)). Additionally, [Galbraith and Mondal \(2020\)](#) point out that

internships also acclimate students to the path they are pursuing. As an example, if a student wants to pursue a business degree, they may be interested in working in the retail industry. Businesses can use surveys to select capable or qualified internship candidates from the students interested in pursuing the opportunity (Mackey and Efron, 2020). The main advantage of using surveys is that it improves students' interviewing and recruitment processes. It also expresses the value of internships and how they are specifically designed to focus on students' specific goals (Mackey and Efron, 2020). Other key factors when choosing internship placements include the stipends provided to the students (if any), diversity amongst professors (faculty), patients or clients/customers, workload, etc. It is also critical that the internship meets the expectations of the institutions and provides the internship students with adequate training. Different regulatory policies, such as the Standards of Accreditation for Psychology and the National Association of the Education of the Young Child, ensure that the internship location has a diverse population that is vital to assisting different communities. For example, some students may feel passionate about pediatric psychology and others about child clinical psychology; thus, the internships must provide them with enough or adequate training to specialize in their respective fields (Mackey and Efron, 2020).

Research is becoming increasingly vital and significant as the years progress (Sin-Ning *et al.*, 2020). When considering candidates for admittance to graduate school, universities prefer students with a strong research record, and thus, they are more likely to succeed in a graduate program. The purpose of research is not only limited to the classroom but also assists in expanding one's mind and helping increase one's knowledge; it is defined as an educational and developmental enterprise (Sin-Ning *et al.*, 2020). In addition, contributing or participating in research is beneficial to students as it allows them to become potentially successful in the workforce by showing future employers that the student, as an employee candidate, can become an asset to the production requirements of the employer. Moreover, student research assistants are vital to the functioning of research labs; these aid in providing student research assistants with career and academic mentorship. This experience also provides the students with the skills and confidence they need to achieve their research goals (Sin-Ning *et al.*, 2020). Students' research techniques and collaborative skills are honed by working in a research lab (Morrison *et al.*, 2020). An example is that it allows the students to build rapport with other team members by working in a group, eventually increasing overall effectiveness. Employers state that students need experience dealing with difficult situations, so this is a skill that is desperately needed (Borchardt and Banker, 2024).

The internship experiences should emphasize assignments like literature reviews, data coding and statistical calculations, which will strengthen students' research skills and improve their overall productivity (Borchardt and Banker, 2024). Another primary goal of the research is to ensure that research assistants can think critically and go beyond tasks and assignments given for completion in the lab (Sin-Ning *et al.*, 2020). Student research assistants need to develop the ability to ask fundamental questions related to their field of research. It must be acknowledged that both undergraduate and graduate researchers work long hours and, at times, are not rewarded for their hard work; therefore, the researchers must be taught all the skills they will require or need to succeed in their future employment in research facilities. Another thing to consider is that student researchers can be provided with constructive criticism to help them flourish in their future research lab employment (Sin-Ning *et al.*, 2020).

Experiential education or experiential learning is practiced in institutions of higher education to promote students' success, ensuring that students are passionate about learning and that attention should be given to the education provided to the students (Estes, 2004). A power struggle between students and professors should be avoided during the internship, meaning the professors should not feel superior to the students. Education formed from experience assists in preparing a student for the real world; students develop critical thinking skills, which are fundamental for applying their experiences (Estes, 2004). Therefore, the primary purpose of an internship experience is for students to become successful in their future careers. Students can also generalize their learning to other aspects of their lives, improving the quality of their work (Estes, 2004).

Experiential education has a rich history and has been associated with scholars like Dewey, Lewin, Joplin and Kolb (McKim *et al.*, 2017). Dewey was one of the most prominent scholars credited with the birth of experiential learning. He opposed the traditional approach to learning and created an innovative approach known as the learner-centered approach. He believed that students learn better when they experience learning, which can lead to reflective thought and action (Holt, 2020). Lewin focused on evaluating experiential learning methods and how the technique can impact an individual in the field (McKim *et al.*, 2017). Joplin introduced the five-stage experiential learning model that explains and sheds light on the benefits of experiential learning over non-experiential learning (McKim *et al.*, 2017). Kolb further added to the experiential learning phenomenon by introducing four crucial phases to the process of experiential learning, including concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (McKim *et al.*, 2017).

Research has shown that colleges and universities are shifting their focus from generating revenue and providing students with an expensive degree to assisting students with skills to help them prepare for real-world employment with the quality of education provided to them (Roberts, 2018). Students need instruction that will test and challenge their skills, prepare them to attain their goals and assist them with life beyond their degree. Therefore, experiential learning allows students to gain hands-on and applied learning (Roberts, 2018). It can make an immense difference in the academic world when experiential learning enables an individual student to get insight into how the real world functions. Experiential learning also increases a student's chances of success in both the classroom and the real world. Applications such as study abroad, service learning, internships, etc., give students an advantage in obtaining a desirable job. Employers seek applicants with certain qualities like leadership, being able to communicate effectively, working collectively in teams and problem solving. The Gallup–Purdue Index Report indicates that experiential learning can benefit students because it may lead to postgraduate success and workplace engagement with valuable workplace skills (Roberts, 2018).

When used in the first-year experience courses for freshmen in college, experiential learning can help students transition from secondary schools to post-secondary schools, that is colleges. This experiential experience “sets the stage” for students to understand and learn the importance of what they will learn in the classroom and will apply in their future careers. Hence, the experiential learning experience helps create a learning environment where students can flourish and prosper in college (Greene, 2011). These courses are used to promote educational preparedness, especially during the first year. They can also further define and state how persistence impacts one's education in terms of satisfaction, thereby promoting student retention. The research question for this study was, “What are the students' perspectives of their career readiness as a result of the internship experience?” We hypothesized that the students would have a positive perspective of the internship experience.

Methodology

Research design

The research design used for the study is survey research about perceptions. This method was selected because it cannot only gather information about the opinions of a group of people but also assess needs and examine impact (Pinsonneault and Kraemer, 1993; Salant and Dillman, 1994). One of the research study's overall goals was to examine the effects of internship experiences on students' perceptions of their readiness for their future careers.

Participants

Twenty-eight college students were successfully recruited to participate in the study from two internship courses in disciplines. One discipline was psychology, and the other discipline was child development and family studies. Both discipline programs are housed in the School of

Behavioral Sciences programs at a rural, regional university during a 16-week timeframe. One student self-identified as male, and twenty-seven students self-identified as female. Ten students self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, and eighteen self-identified as non-Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, two students self-identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, four self-identified as Black or African American, twenty self-identified as White, and two declined to specify a racial identity. The age range was 20–48 years with a mean age of 27 years.

Materials

For this study, the survey instrument entitled *Career Benefits of Co-Op/Internship Experience Survey* was used and adapted to measure the participants' perceptions. Sawyer (2008) developed the survey for his dissertation *Career Benefits of Cooperative Education and Internships: Perceptions of Graduates from a Rural Midwest Engineering and Science Institution* in 2008. The survey uses a five-point Likert scale response format with ranges of 1-strongly agree to 5-strongly disagree that relates the participants' internship experiences to statements regarding the "degree to which their co-op or internship experiences influenced selected aspects of their career development" (Sawyer, 2008). There were 25 total questions: 4 demographic questions, 1 open-ended response question and 20 internship perception Likert scale questions. The instrument has a reliability of 0.936, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha (Sawyer, 2008).

The university's Institutional Review Board accepted and approved the study to be exempt. The participants also provided written informed consent.

Procedure

In each discipline, the participants were required to complete a specific number of internship hours over a 16-week semester. For one internship course in psychology, 100 h were required, and the other internship course in child development and family studies required 225 h. The difference of the hours required for the two courses were discipline specific as defined by curriculum criteria protocols for the university. The researchers did not control the hours for each internship course. The internship experience placements varied according to the participants' future career fields. For the most part, participants located their own internship placements since the students were in multiple geographic locations. The reason for the multiple geographic locations is that the programs are offered online. Students were provided an official letter from the professors addressed to potential internship sites about the expectations and importance of the internship experience for their career aspirations. During the 16 weeks, students completed weekly reflection reports on their experiences. At the end of the 16 weeks, participants were asked to complete the Career Benefits of Co-Op/Internship Experience Survey delivered online via the Qualtrics platform. Qualtrics was selected as the delivery method because it is housed on the university's online platform in a safe and secure manner.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used for the bulk of the study analysis. The analysis by descriptive statistics was chosen to assist in better defining the problem (skill perception gap on the part of students for their future careers), understanding what the survey data revealed, analyzing the data in the simplest terms and communicating the results (Acosta and Brooks, 2021). By using descriptive statistics, it allowed the researchers to determine if students saw a benefit to the internship experience before researchers undertook the process of launching into the more time consuming development of further internship institutional policies to change the existing degree plan structure at the university. It is to be noted that the samples were not homogeneous between the two disciplines. Due to the small size of the participant populations, regression

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analysis was not suitable between different categorical sub-populations. One-way ANOVA statistics were performed to determine any differences in participant population responses.

As determined by self-reporting on the survey, most participants were 25 years old and younger ($N = 16$). Eleven participants ($N = 11$) were over the age of 25 years, and one participant did not self-report an age.

All participants self-reported an ethnic identity, with the majority self-identifying as non-Hispanic or non-Latino ($N = 18$), as shown in Table 1 below.

Two participants declined to report their racial identity. As shown in Table 2 below, two participants self-reported a race of American Indian or Alaskan Native ($N = 2$), four ($N = 4$) participants self-reported a race of Black or African American and twenty ($N = 20$) participants self-reported a race of White.

The survey used a five-point Likert scale with response selections ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. The survey questions asked the participants to rate the degree to which their internship experiences met the criteria of each question. The questions dealt with various aspects of career development, personal growth and overall satisfaction with the internship experience. The overall average for the participant responses indicated a positive internship experience ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.18$). The highest-scoring question was whether the

Table 1. Responses by ethnicity

	Hispanic or Latino	Non-Hispanic or non-Latino
# of Responders	10	18
Perception scores		
Mean	4.46	4.38
Median	4.46	4.53
Mode	4.85	4.60
Standard deviation	0.41	0.54
Minimum	3.80	2.75
Maximum	5.00	4.95
Note(s): The Responses by Ethnicity table was created by the authors D. A. Banker and J. Borchardt		
Source(s): Authors' own work		

Table 2. Responses by race

	American Indian or Alaskan native	Black or African American	White
# of Responders	2	4	20
Perception scores			
Mean	4.83	3.74	4.46
Median	4.83	3.80	4.51
Mode	4.80	2.75	3.95
Standard deviation	0.04	0.78	0.34
Minimum	4.80	2.75	3.80
Maximum	4.85	4.60	4.95
Note(s): *Two students declined to report race			
The Responses by Race table was created by the authors D. A. Banker and J Borchardt			
Source(s): Authors' own work			

internship experience increased the participant's respect for diversity and understanding of cultural differences ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.46$). The lowest-scoring question was about whether the internship experience provided an advantage in securing employment after graduation ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.04$).

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of age on perceptions of an internship experience. The age groups were separated into those under and over the age of 25. The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the internship experience between the two age groups [$F(1, 38) = 2.28427$, $p = 0.138,964$].

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of ethnicity on perceptions of an internship experience. The two groups were non-Hispanic or non-Latino and Hispanic or Latino. The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the internship experience between the two groups [$F(1, 38) = 3.42037$, $p = 0.072186$].

A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of race on perceptions of an internship experience. Three groups were included: White, Black and American Indian or Alaskan Native. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the internship experience between the three groups [$F(2, 57) = 59.1288$, $p = <0.00001$].

Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD indicated that the mean score for the White participants ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.22$) was significantly different than the mean score for the Black or African American participants ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.43$). Also, the mean score for group 1 (G1 [White]) participants ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.22$) was significantly different from the mean score for group 2 (G2 [American Indian or Alaskan Native]) participants ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.18$). Further, the mean score for group 3 (G3 [Black or African American]) participants ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.43$) is significantly different from the mean score for group 2 (G2 [American Indian or Alaskan Native]) participants ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.18$).

There were 11 participants who responded to the open-response question. The question asked the participants to provide any additional benefits or comments about their internship experience not addressed in the previous questions. The overall comments were positive, from "It was a wonderful experience!" to "Strongly recommend the internship experience based on what you would want your future job to focus on," and "I have gained so much knowledge." Note that one participant was still worried about getting COVID from exposure to people who may have had COVID, and another did not report favorably about the intern site personnel.

Discussion

Twenty-two out of the twenty-eight participants found the internship to be a positive opportunity. When graduating students lack the knowledge of workforce expectations, the transition from college student to working professional can be difficult (Sekiguchi *et al.*, 2023). Providing an internship experience for college students before they graduate allows them to develop professional networking skills, along with realistic views of what an entry-level position entails, which could help offset unrealistic or anticipatory expectations of what their chosen career aspirations have in store for them. The deeper learning experienced by students as interns allows them to "relate new ideas to previous [academic] knowledge and experience." (Kern, 2024, p. 27).

The internship experience also provides a graduating student with the opportunity to "preview" an organization for whom they may be inclined to work with and establish if that organization is a good fit. In our study, two participants commented that the internship location would not be one they would like to work for in the future. This is an essential factor for them to know upon graduation. In addition, this is beneficial for the future employer, too, because they would not have to spend time and resources training and paying an employee who does not want to work for the organization. Gonzalo Chavez, a dean at Hult International Business School in Boston contends that "students need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable" (Casson *et al.*, 2024, p. 8). Although he was referring to the likeliness of several rejections graduates will receive from job interviews, it also applies to internship students learning to

normalize difficult situations that may be present in an internship environment. Exposure to uncomfortable situations will serve them well in future career positions in our fields of psychology and child development and family studies. They will be able to quickly internalize new environments and personnel when they are expected to perform job tasks and skills.

In addition, the internships can expose the student to a community of practice, that is a group of individuals with whom they will work in the future, who “share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, para. 5). Until the graduating college student starts to work with said individuals in the group, they do not have the networking or collective knowledge of expectations of practice in their future professional fields.

On the other side of the internship experience are the employers, agencies and institutions that “host” the interns. In a 2018 survey completed by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, there were significant gaps in how employers rated recent college graduates in the areas of professionalism, ethics, communication skills, critical thinking and leadership compared to how the recent college graduates rated themselves (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). Casson *et al.* (2024) states that the current requirements of employers are much different than in years past. Employers now look for candidates who possess soft skills like communication and teamwork along with the technical skills necessary to complete the job. Further, Busson (2024) provides that the World Economic Forum in 2023 presented that soft skills are “eight of the top 10 employable skills.” (p. 14). These include analytical thinking; creative thinking; resilience flexibility and agility; motivation and self-awareness; curiosity and lifelong learning; technological literacy; dependability and attention to detail; empathy and active listening; leadership and social influence and quality control (Masterson, 2023).

The perceived skills gap has led to a deficit among new graduates, and it is necessary to find a way to address this in the future. Since higher education provides the academic knowledge necessary for careers, internships go a long way towards illuminating the softer skills needed by employers for prospective job candidates. The Partnership Imperative (Fuller and Raman, 2022) found a lack of emphasis placed on collaboration between colleges and employers for solid partnerships to work and continuously improve as work skills demands evolved. Increasing the number of university/community partnerships through internship experiences, could yield a higher number of college graduates who could be better prepared upon graduation. In addition, employers could be training their future employees, which may save time and money.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the fact that there was only one male and 27 females. It is not easy to generalize the data to the general population when there are not enough participants to complete a random sample. Another limitation of the study was that all the participants were from one U.S. regional comprehensive university. An additional limitation is the participants were from two academic programs. One program had participants located in various geographic locations from around the country because it is an online program, and the other had participants from the immediate area of the regional university. This information is necessary to form a larger sample size in order to generalize to the greater population of college students.

Future directions

Future studies would benefit from broadening the participant pool by expanding the data collection to other programs that offer internship experiences for their students. Additional data should be gathered from the internship sites to gain their perspectives on the internship participants’ readiness to work and suggestions about how to improve the internship experience for them and the participants.

Conclusion

Internships can provide students with valuable knowledge and skills for their professional development and career readiness. These experiences offer students a platform for them to apply academic concepts in real-world settings, which enhances their practical understanding of the workforce and assists them in developing problem-solving abilities (Iskandarova and Ford, 2024).

Internships also help students develop essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork and time management. These skills are often not taught in classroom settings but are necessary for workplace success and desired by industry (Calfoforo, 2024). Internships allow students to interact with professionals in their chosen fields which allows them to experience navigating workplace dynamics and start to establish professional relationships (Baird and Mullen, 2023). The internship also provides valuable skill development through situational learning (Zehr and Korte, 2020).

Internships can also provide students with significant networking opportunities. The students can establish connections with professionals in their chosen careers, mentors and peers who can open doors to future job opportunities and career advancement. These relationships can also provide guidance and recommendations that are beneficial after the internship ends (Gomez et al., 2023).

Overall, the comprehensive benefits of internships, including practical experience, soft skill development and networking, equip students with a competitive advantage in the job market. These skills learned in internship experiences can make them more attractive to potential employers and better prepared for their careers.

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Corresponding author

Deborah Banker can be contacted at: banker@tarleton.edu