

The Essential Undergrad Internship

While internships generally are considered an important part of business education, few schools do much to maximize the value of those experiences at the undergraduate level. Unfortunately, too many schools consider undergraduate internships to be add-ons, instead of integral parts of the educational experience. But when it comes to differentiating and honing leadership skills, there is nothing better than incorporating meaningful work experiences into an undergraduate's academic career through internship programs.

So why do many business schools resist setting up such programs for undergraduates? Some faculty and administrators believe that undergraduates are too young, naïve, and unfocused to capitalize on the benefits provided by these opportunities. Yet in my experience, most undergraduates are more than ready to be challenged by unique work experiences, but they're frustrated because not enough resources are made available to make those programs a reality.

To be sure, undergraduate internships present a number of challenges. But if our students and institutions are to succeed in this difficult economic environment, it is critical that all stakeholders work together to overcome any obstacles that might block the implementation of these very beneficial programs.

First Challenge: Getting Faculty Buy-In

For an undergraduate internship program to be successful, schools must devote one of their most important internal resources to the effort: faculty. Why? Because faculty often con-

sult for businesses and have strong relationships within organizations that can be leveraged to create work experiences for students.

The challenge is that internship development takes time away from research, curriculum/class preparation, or both. Identifying the right executives, pitching the program, and managing the logistics—at least until the program can be transferred to the career development office—is a time-intensive process. No wonder faculty are tempted to say, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

To overcome this obstacle, deans and administrators must build the value of internships into a school's culture. This can be accomplished in part by requiring the participation of both tenured and untenured faculty, who will not only teach and conduct research, but also play a substantial role in developing and sustaining internship programs. While this approach helps young faculty become involved in—and understand the importance of—internship programs early in their careers, it also has a trickle-down effect as they move into tenured positions, begin mentoring new faculty, and take on more high-end consulting opportunities.

Second Challenge: Making The Workload Manageable

Faculty aren't the only ones who must commit time and energy to an internship program. Students also must make a significant commitment, so it's not surprising when they comment on how hard it is to manage an internship while completing academic work and paying tuition. Despite the risk of coming across as an uncaring

administrator, nine times out of ten my response is “Too bad.”

We are living in unprecedented times, and I have no doubt that only the strong will succeed. And those who want to be among the strong must continually find time to fit in a “workout,” regardless of how difficult or time-consuming it might be. Bottom line: Both students and their parents must make short-term sacrifices to achieve long-term goals.

Nonetheless, there are ways schools can help students ease the pain. First, they can offer academic credit for internships—an option that appeals to parents and helps students remain committed to the internship program during their college careers. While administrators and faculty often find themselves at odds on this issue, I believe deans can and should be stronger advocates for this approach.

Second, department chairs can spend more time identifying in-class “bridge” opportunities that give students access to real companies and allow them to apply what they're learning in class to real-world challenges. While these in-class projects achieve some of the same objectives as traditional out-of-class internships, they require less time and effort.

Third Challenge: Building A Strong Foundation

In-class “bridge” opportunities also serve another function: They prepare undergraduates for the demands they'll face in the workplace.

For instance, at Miami University's Farmer School of Business, certain courses give students a chance to act as consultants for real companies with real problems. These companies, which also recruit at our school, pay substantial fees

to submit projects to undergraduate classes so students can analyze the issues, provide input, and generate solutions. Recently, global retailer Tesco became a paying client and asked one of our interdisciplinary undergraduate teams to refresh its customer-focused “Every Little Helps” campaign. While Tesco was extremely pleased with the work, the best compliment came when the company incorporated our students’ recommendations into its marketing plan.

This type of program can be a win-win for all involved: Companies benefit from fresh perspectives and get access to potential future employees, while students have the opportunity to prepare for internships and real jobs.

Fourth Challenge: Providing Global Exposure

While there are a handful of schools that believe in undergraduate internships, they often fail in a key area: offering *international* work opportunities to their students. This is most unfortunate because—as the economic downturn has made clear—markets, financing, production, and supply chains are increasingly global. In fact, even when this crisis is over, the continuing rise of new economies will force most businesses to compete more aggressively.

These changing realities mean that *every* business major must develop a global vision of commercial activity and cultivate a true understanding of the cultures and business practices in other nations, particularly China. To accomplish this, I believe business schools will need to require all undergraduate



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business majors to spend some time participating in overseas internships prior to graduation.

To my colleagues who’ll say, “That looks good on paper, but how can we pay for such programs?” I offer the following two suggestions:

- Dedicate a portion of donor outreach activities to raising funds for international internships. Target donors who understand the need for a strong focus on international studies because they own or manage international businesses.
- Approach international companies that recruit at the school and ask them to provide overseas internships, including travel and accommodations. In return, offer them free consulting services from faculty or in-class “bridge” classes on specific real-world projects.

Developing Leaders

So what will happen to our MBA students if the “MBA experience” now starts at the undergraduate level? I believe business schools must develop MBA programs that provide students with unique opportunities to combine curriculum and practice throughout their MBA careers. The goal should be to develop programs with extended internships—including substantial live-and-work opportunities overseas for six weeks or more—that are complemented by business seminar courses to integrate the internships into the rest of the program. Through this approach, MBAs will not only build on their BBA experiences, but take those experiences to the next level.

The reality is that an expanded internship program for undergraduates will elevate a business school’s MBA program and play a key role in developing undergraduates into real leaders. Time and again at Farmer, we’ve seen undergraduates come out of internship experiences with increased confidence and assertiveness. Indeed, they show more leadership in everything they do—from completing class teamwork assignments to taking positions of responsibility within campus organizations.

Undergraduates who participate in internships also build well-rounded resumes and develop a network of business contacts. Most important, they learn about their own inner landscapes: what experiences stimulate them, what careers appeal to them, and what work environments make them satisfied and productive.

At a time when the business community is under intense scrutiny and criticism, we must take steps to increase the value and relevance of all business education. If we start by enhancing the total value of the internship experience, beginning at the undergraduate level, everyone—students, business schools, and the corporate world—will benefit. It’s a tall order with many challenges, but I’m confident it can be accomplished. More important, if we do not take action, we will continue to squander an incredible opportunity to enhance the development of our undergraduate students. **Z**

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