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The Benefits of Constructing an Effective Internship Program

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About the Author(s)

Dr. Danielle A. Harrison recently completed her Educational Doctoral Program at Northcentral University and received her Master of Science Degree from North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University. She has coordinated, managed, and developed internship programs, for collegiate learners for both scholastic and governmental agencies. Higher education, more specifically learner achievement is a major focus for Dr. Harrison's work.

THE BENEFITS OF CONSTRUCTING AN EFFECTIVE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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Abstract
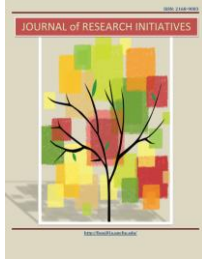
The internship program offers opportunities for learners to fulfill their scholastic, professional, and personal interests through a contractual agreement. The various stakeholders within the internship experience are vital and should be aware of the internship program structure. The goal is to prepare the intern for life outside of the collegiate experience and to transition from novice to expert. To ensure best practices while creating, implementing, and maintaining experiential learning programs, the need for an effective program structure is   addressed in this paper.

Introduction

Within higher education, experiential learning, learning based from life experiences, is a practice that many schools, colleges and departments use to ensure their learners have what it takes to enter the world after college and can perform at the same levels as those who are in the workforce (Gailbraith, 2004). Experiential learning is a hands-on approach to learning and allows the learner to gain real-life experience in the learning process. Gailbraith (2004), discussed the various philosophies of andragogical practices, and internships was a component addressed within the various educational philosophical approaches. Due to globalization and the continuous shifting of educational initiatives across the nation, it is best that a holistic approach to learning that encompasses an increased focus on experiential learning rather than traditional learning is emphasized to address these societal changes (Gailbraith, 2004).

Within the internship process, there are many stakeholders such as the learner, the school, faculty, community partners, and field supervisors. Each role is critical and may vary from institution to institution; however, each internship program has one main objective, to aid the learner in his or her transition from out of the classroom into the real world (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). To ensure that individuals are gaining well-rounded experiences, they should be knowledgeable of diversity in their work or learning setting, aware of the organization and its structure, and be eager to gain real-life experiences through networking.

Educating a Diverse Society

To ensure that learners are adequately prepared to enter the diverse workforce, it is imperative that diversity is replicated into their internship experience to eradicate a prejudicial outlook (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). Today's society is well-diverse in countless aspects such as: race, gender, sexual orientation, and physical/psychological dimensions (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Due to this, it is imperative that stakeholders within the learning experience and the learners are sufficiently trained and educated to refrain from discriminatory practices (Cunningham & Melton, 2012). Having a well diverse staff within any institution that promotes experiential learning, permits the learners to receive instruction by professionals from many backgrounds and not have to be subject to isolated learning experiences (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009).

The ethnic make-up of the United States is continuously shifting and becoming more diverse (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). The U.S. school system has consisted of mainly the Caucasian ethnic group; however, minority ethnic group enrollment is increasing enormously

(Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). Studies have shown that having personnel within the learning experience that reflects the student population provides a well diverse internship experience (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). Therefore, participation in learning initiatives, such as interning, allows the learner to experience interaction with individuals outside of the scope of their current community and or institutional demographics.

Societal influences impacts the learning experiences of students (Lewis, 2012). This is due to adolescents imitating what they observe in their communities and scholastic settings. Due to this, it is understood that collegiate learners will have similar experiences as those witnessed within their communities (Lewis, 2012). Learning experiences are perceived to be social settings where learners can obtain knowledge, skills, and abilities from many stakeholders and via observations. The internship experience, experiential learning, is an avenue that learners can gain social skills in a diverse setting.

Due to the diverse global community, it is also essential that instructors, field supervisors and other personnel understand the many obstacles that learners may experience, such as language barriers (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). Due to this, all stakeholders should be cognizant of these differences and are culturally sensitive to the needs of the learner so that the learner can have a well-rounded learning experience (Khatib & Hamidi, 2013). During the experiential learning process, learners gain experience through intermingling with clients of the organizations as well as witnessing and participating in trainings, workshops and other learning initiatives offered by the agency hosting the internship experience (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). This experience provides the student with an abundance of knowledge.

Experiential learning is also beneficial for learners who may not grasp the content well within the classroom and may need a more hands-on approach (Gailbraith, 2004). Some learners may belong to special populations, such as having a learning disability, and the internship experiences aids with their actual learning process (Education, 2017). According to the California Department of Education, some characteristics of persons belonging to special populations are those that may have disabilities, single parents, and those who are limited English language speakers (2017). Learners who are not self-confident and who may have learning barriers can gain better practice and triumphs through hands-on techniques, in comparison to other practices. Reading and writing are some mechanisms that professionals utilize daily. Having the ability to read and write fluently, allows one to perform many tasks scholastically and in the modern world (Baszile, & Brandon, 2009). If the internship incorporates real-life, practical approaches to the experience of the learners, then reading, writing, and other techniques that are utilized frequently in the workforce would benefit the learners' likelihood of future employment.

Understanding the Collegiate Internship Process

As Gailbraith (2004) emphasized Knowles principles of adult learning, it is imperative that the educator, the agency to which the intern will conduct their internship, as well as the intern have basic knowledge of the internship process. Knowles five principles of andragogical practices: 1) what learners need to know, 2) recognizing the self-concept of the learner, 3) identifying the experiences of the novice, 4) recognizing the learner's orientation, and 5) instilling motivation within the learner are all essential to having a successful internship experience (Gailbraith, 2004).

Educators, field supervisors and any personnel that are supporting the mission of the internship experience should be sure to incorporate various coaching and instruction

methodologies. All stakeholders should also be experienced professionals that are fluent in educator-centered approaches (appropriate, professional, and personal model teaching, and novice centered tactics (coaching, lecturing, facilitating, blended, and collective trainings) (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2014). A student's learning experience can affect the student's social mobility, which includes scholastic and professional experiences (Collins, Collins, & Butt, 2015).

To ensure that an intern is experienced and proficient in his or her field of study, many institutions offer field hours, or shadowing experiences from the freshman year until the actual internship process, which is typically during the senior year. These earlier learning experiences of students, not only prepares the learner for the internship process, but it also prepares them for real-life experiences through experiential practices of learning (Khatib & Hamidi, 2013). This allows learners to gain responsibility for their learning as well as their professional and academic growth.

For a student to receive satisfactory internship experiences, an educator must be able to recognize a student's learning style and areas for improvement, which will enhance the overall learning experience.   There are several approaches that one can employ in the learning experience to captivate their learners (Galbraith, 2004). Some of these approaches are the use of script, technology, hands-on events and group dialogue. These numerous approaches can also include evaluation, language, and supplementary materials to provide the intern an informed experience (Gailbraith, 2004). Educators may attend workshops and intermingle with field supervisors to expand ideas to improve their supervising and mentoring methods. To have a favorable and accomplished scholarship experience, the educationalist must warrant that the learner receives satisfactory coaching as well as useful criticism (Galbraith, 2004).

Instruction should be void of biases, encompass various teaching methods, learning styles, the diverse society and should reach as many learners as possible (Cunningham & Melton, 2012).   Factoring these items can aid with making the internship experience enjoyable. Although, all of the stakeholders involved have a responsibility, it is imperative that transparency, collaboration and effective communication are in effect to ensure best practices.

Best Practices

To have a beneficial, yet well-rounded internship program, it is critical that all stakeholders involved understand and aid with the creation and implementation of an internship program structure. As school personnel and community organizations begin to collaborate through recruitment, training, and processing learners, all stakeholders should be aware of the internship program structures from both the institution of higher learning's perspective as well as the community partner's perspective (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). It is best that the institution of higher learning informs the community partners of their academic programs as well as their expectations for their learners. By doing so, this allows the community agencies to ensure the learners are receiving an adequate learning experience, the agency is meeting institutional deadlines, and that all parties are aware of the process.   The work unit that is responsible for the internship program, should have a structure that encompasses how to process requests, selection of applicants, placements, tracking, and how the interns will be oriented (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014).   An example of an internship program structure of a local government organization in the Piedmont region of North Carolina has been utilized to illustrate how a community organization mirrors the academic calendar of area institutions of higher learning to structure its internship program. The intern program structure should be well in depth so that all

stakeholders are on the same page, have record of set guidelines, and have a protocol in place (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Internship Program Structure for a Community Agency

Request	Selection	Placement	Tracking	Orientation
The Office of Staff Development takes the placement request (phone/e-mail) (Placement request deadlines: spring semester 10/15, summer semester 3/15, fall semester 5/15). MOU's are completed and filed by OSD. Applications and request forms are completed by prospective interns and returned to OSD.	Each Division reports how many interns they are willing to accept by 10/30 for spring semester, 3/30 for summer semester, 5/30 for fall semester. Applications are reviewed and interviews are scheduled by the OSD. Interview time slots will be provided to each division. Final decisions are reported to OSD by 11/30 for spring semester, 4/30 for summer semester, and 6/30 for the fall semester.	Placement confirmation and declination letters are sent to the intern, institution and/or the community organization from OSD. Deadlines for distribution of letters will be 12/15 for spring semester, 5/15 for summer semester, and 7/15 for fall semester.	Each division will fill-in their roster for their area(s). Each division will provide OSD with a final roster by 1/15 for spring semester, 6/15 for summer semester, and 8/15 for fall semester. Each division will report any roster changes with OSD.	Interns will receive a new intern orientation through OSD prior to beginning their internship Each division will conduct their own divisional orientation for interns.

No matter what the student's program of study is, all stakeholders involved in their learning experience should be encouraged to implement a motivational change into their lives (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). MacAllister (2014) indicated the need for the learner to feel inspired and to believe that he or she had limitless potential in the realm of education. This humanistic approach to learning was emphasized by theorists such as Maslow and Knowles who enforced the ideal of continuous learning through shared experiences and self-directed learning initiatives (Khatib & Hamidi, 2013).

Benefits of Encouraging Internships

Khatib and Hamidi (2014) discussed what theorists Knowles and Maslow, believed regarding experiential learning being a means of progressing individually, scholastically and socially. The idea of entering adulthood and taking on those tasks such as gaining sound employment are all a part of life's experiences. Internships, practicums or experiences that apprentices participate in to become professionals within the area of their skill set are beneficial for many reasons (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). The institution of higher learning reassures that learners have not only gained what was learned through context but also the learners can apply those concepts into the field. Through collaboration with scholastic programs, the community organizations, receive temporary workers (interns) who aid with fulfilling the organization's mission by meeting their customers' needs. If the learners perform well, the internship could lead to employment within the agency of their internship experience. The employment of the learners would be helpful for the organization due to not having to recruit new workers because selecting, recruiting, and training new workers can be costly for employers (Rangan & Natarajarathinam, 2014). The organization could employ the already trained learners, which could be less strenuous for the organization. The institution of higher learning could benefit from the employment of students by increasing the colleges' success rates through the offering of real-world experiences through learning. The attainment of the trained workers by the organization, the reputation of the institution of higher learning and experiences gained by the student are all-significant concerning the internship process. Internship experiences can be a gain for all of the stakeholders involved.

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