

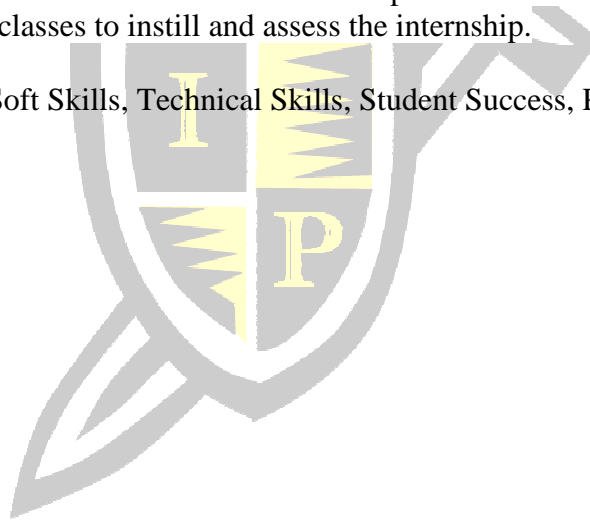
Technical training and soft skills – a study of internships

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ABSTRACT

Faculty encourage students to participate in internships to gain major-specific knowledge and make contacts in their field. Internships are becoming more popular with students over the past 5 years, with an uptick in the number of students who participate in this kind of experiential learning. While students do learn technical training in an internship they also have the ability to experience, practice and hone soft skills. Soft skills are skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem solving. These skills are the skills employers are seeking above and beyond technical skills. When the goal in internships becomes not only helping students focus on their intended field of study, but also learning the soft skills requested by employers, the internships benefit students in a multitude of ways. The question becomes how does the academic environment structure an internship to ascertain that students are learning the soft skills as well as the technical skills needed to succeed? This paper focuses on internships and their benefits to students in both a technical and soft skill aspect as well as assignments and measuring tools used in internship classes to instill and assess the internship.

Keywords: Internship, Soft Skills, Technical Skills, Student Success, Professionalism



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INTERNSHIPS – WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Internships are experiential learning experiences where students gain experience in their chosen field as well as the soft skills necessary to succeed. Cambridge Dictionary defines an internship as “a period of time during which someone works for a company or organization in order to get experience of a particular type of work” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022.). [Careers.com](#) describes an internship as “a professional learning experience that offers meaningful, practical work related to a student's field of study or career interest.” (Careers, 2022). Students gain technical skills in not just accounting, management, marketing or other field of study. Students also learn computer skills and programs, problem solving, job skills and a day to day understanding of how work “works”. Faculty encourage students to participate in internships to gain major-specific knowledge and make contacts in their field. These experiential learning experiences by definition cannot be experienced in the classroom. Instead, students must go into the workforce and gain hands-on experience in their chosen field.

Internships are becoming more popular with students over the past 5 years, with a 23% uptick in the number of students who participate in this kind of experiential learning according to [NACE's 2021 Internship & Co-op Survey Report](#). (NACE, 2021). It is noted, however, that in the Spring of 2020, many schools and universities closed or transferred to a solely online delivery system and internship opportunities drastically declined. According to Emily Boskamp of Zippia, more than 70% of internship offers were rescinded in 2020. (Boskamp, 2022). The good news for interns is that current demand for interns is continuing to rise. In her article *44% of Businesses Looking for Interns in 2022*, Sheena Hollander discusses a poll commissioned by Express Employment Professionals where she noted 44% of employers are looking to hire interns in 2022. (Hollander, 2022). In 2022, internship opportunities and placements increased by 17%, giving students new opportunities to sharpen their skills.

According to a [2016 National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\) survey](#), more than 56 percent of graduating seniors reported taking part in at least one internship. (NACE, 2021). Of those respondents, 56 percent were paid, while 44 percent were unpaid. Seventy-two percent of those unpaid internships were credit-bearing. In an internship, either paid or unpaid, a student can work a stated number of hours during a semester and gain both academic credit and experience.

Internship programs in 2022 show a current internship structure of approximately 60% paid versus 40 % unpaid internships, noting a slight uptick in paid internships. (Boskamp, 2022). A NACE study shows that “paid internships benefit students in their initial post-graduation job search” garnering students more job options and offers, higher starting salaries, and aiding students in finding employment quicker post-graduation. (*Open the Door: Disparities in Paid Internships*, n.d.) Along with payment, most internships carry 3-9 hours of academic credit provided student completes certain requirements. Internship programs reviewed require 80 to 120 hours of field experience to earn 3 hours of academic class credit.

A review of university level internships requirements shows that to award academic credit, students must usually complete many additional graded requirements in addition to the hours worked requirement. These separate graded requirements along with the work performed become the grade in the class. These requirements include weekly reports on work performed, a mid-point and final evaluation, a project and project presentation, a review of ethics learned by either completing a checklist or paper, as well as a final presentation that includes what the students learned and what could be improved upon in their internship. A table showing an

example of an internship grading spreadsheet with assignments and totals is attached is Table 1. This table outlines assignments and point percentages and requirements used in grading an internship as an academic class as opposed to just field experience. These extra requirements add to not only the technical skills learned but also the soft skills acquired.

While students learn and are reviewed on their technical skills throughout an internship, these experiences also allow students to learn a vast breadth of knowledge about business – how work “works”. Internship programs in other states, including New York and Ohio and Florida demonstrate that students across the country have similar goals of reviewing their interests and abilities in their field of study, and developing work habits and attitudes necessary for job success. Student learning outcomes also focus on identifying professional habits and focusing on important skills such as oral and written communication, critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork. (*Student Learning Outcomes / Internships and Co-ops / Monroe Community College*, n.d) Indeed, while students do learn technical training in an internship they also have the ability to experience, practice and hone soft skills.

SOFT SKILLS – WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Soft skills are a key to success in today’s job market. What are soft skills? Job powerhouse [Indeed.com](https://www.indeed.com) defines soft skills as “interpersonal and behavioral skills that help you to work well with other people and develop your career”. (Herrity, 2022) The Department of Labor identifies the top 4 soft skills employees should possess to succeed as leadership, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills. (DOL, n.d.). Additional examples are flexibility, creativity, integrity and work ethic, but soft skills or “professional skills” as they are sometimes called refer to a person’s ability to interact with other members of their office, their team or their customers.

These professional skills are the skills employers are seeking above and beyond technical skills. When the goal in internships becomes not only helping students focus on their intended field of study, but also learning the soft skills requested by employers, the internships benefit students in a multitude of ways. In a [LinkedIn Skills Report](#) (2018), 57% of people rated soft skills as being more important than technical skills. Skills beyond technical skills such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork can all be learned through an internship and utilized beyond that experience.

Kevin Gray in his discussion of the NACE 2022 Job Outlook stated that 98.5% of employers rated critical thinking skills as important or very important while only 55.8% of employers deemed new graduates as having the level of critical thinking skills needed. Additionally, 97.7% of employers rated teamwork as important or extremely important while ranking only 77.5% of students as having this important skill. Employers also saw a 42.7% differential between the students who possessed professionalism, 44.2%, and the employers who deemed it important, 86.9%. (Gray, 2021). Students appear to be lacking some of the required skills. It appears that best things a student may learn from an internship to help them in their future career is how to interact with colleagues and clients in a professional setting.

The question becomes how can students learn the inner workings of a professional workplace thorough an internship? Can students learn how to work in teams and communicate effectively by simply being assigned tasks and being asked to work with other people within an organization?

HOW DO STUDENTS LEARN SOFT SKILLS?

How does the academic environment structure an internship to ascertain that students are learning the soft skills as well as the technical skills needed to succeed? Students in internships, simply doing their job as assigned, working with other employees, asking questions and attending meetings can pick up on silent cues like what to wear to work, how to ask a question in a meeting, how are conflicts resolved, and the ever-important questions...who can eat the food in the break room? Are these silent cues enough for students to reach the necessary level of professionalism needed for future careers? Is there more internship preceptors can do to aid students?

Internship coordinators for schools can also facilitate these soft skills by requiring interaction between the student and their internship preceptors. Required reviews by preceptors and graded presentations by students that enable additional face to face communication and interaction between employers and students enhance the professional capabilities of students. Additionally, a requirement to interview a manager for the company's ethical policies again creates an opportunity for the student to practice and learn career competencies.

The Table 1 attached shows an example internship grading sheet that requires two graded evaluations between the student and the preceptor, an ethics evaluation where the student is required to interview someone within the company, and two presentations to be made by the student. These requirements create opportunities for the students to practice their soft skills and by attaching a grade to these opportunities all parties take the requirements seriously and become a learning experience with feedback for students.

SIGN ME UP! GETTING STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE

Since internships are obviously a plus for students, the question then becomes how do schools encourage students to participate. Even though participation is increasing, still only 50 to 60 percent of students participate in internships, less so when not required. (Boskamp, 2022). Some barriers to internships include lack of overall understanding of how an internship works, lack of understanding of the professional environment, inability to participate in an internship due to a current full-time job and communication barriers since students do not check traditional communication forums like emails, indeed, and in-class postings. How can colleges and universities work with students to break down these barriers?

Rachel V. Smydra, Amy Ring Cebelak, and Noah Pollock in their article *First Steps to Improving Internship Participation* noted that professor support in the classroom and through advising is essential in getting students interested in and participating in an internship. (*First Steps to Improving Internship Participation*, 2019). Professors and internship coordinators need to work with students to explain the academic and professional side of internships. Additionally, students can work with professors and internship coordinators on mock-interviews to help students prepare for any interviews and answer questions about the professional environment. Alison Pijar notes in her article *How to Run a Mock Interview with your Students* that the mock-interview process helps students achieve a level of preparedness that will benefit them not only in the interview process but in the internship and beyond in their careers. (Pijar, 2021).

Students with a full-time job face additional limits when trying to participate in an internship. Internships coordinators should speak frankly with students, acknowledging that this can be an issue and educating students on the availability of paid internships in many fields.

Many students think of internships as unpaid, when the breakout on internships is closer to 60% paid and 40% unpaid (Boskamp, 2022). The current United States average hourly rate for student interns is approximately \$20 per hour and although that varies based on where a student interns, students should be made aware of paid opportunities. (Boskamp, 2022).

Finally, communication issues can be an issue when trying to discuss internship opportunities with traditional students. Today's students do not regularly check email or forums like handshake or Indeed.com for internship opportunities. Lori Wade in her article *How Social Media is Reshaping Today's Classroom* notes that 96 percent of students have at least one social media account (Wade, n.d.). She discusses a need for professors and educators to be open minded about social media accounts in the classroom and as a method of disseminating information to students. Social media may become the next level of sending out internship information to students.

CONCLUSION

Internships provide students with excellent benefits. There is no doubt that the benefit of technical skills will help students excel in their future careers. However, it is the soft skills that employers demand that students can hone in an internship that will prepare them for future success. Continued partnership between employers, professors, internship coordinators to place students in internships can only benefit students in their future careers. The technical skills and professional skills are invaluable lessons that cannot always be taught in the classroom.



TABLE 1 – SAMPLE INTERNSHIP GRADING SHEET WITH COMMENTS

Student			
Course	BA 490		
Internship Site			
	Possible Pts	Pts Earned	
Internship Agreements	50		Initial agreements outlining duties and requirements of interns.
Orientation Meeting	25		Meeting with internship coordinator to review requirements
Weekly Activity Reports	300		Average score of weekly reports sent each week to review what as learned and including a weekly reflection
Internship Profile	50		A profile of the intern and internship site
Performance Eval-Mid-point	100		Preceptor's first evaluation of intern
Project Approval	25		Pre-approval of both preceptor and internship coordinator of project
Project PPT Slides (Written)	50		A review of the power point slides to be presented
Project Presentation	50		A presentation given to the preceptor and office members of internship project
Ethics Exploration	50		Paper on ethics after an interview of someone at internship site
Performance Eval-Final	100		2 nd Preceptor Evaluation
Thank You to Preceptor	50		Written note thanking preceptor for internship experience
Internship Presentation	150		A second presentation to internship group and coordinator on internship and learning experience
TOTAL Points	1000		
Total Possible Points		1000	
% Earned of Total Possible			
FINAL GRADE			
Hours Completed			

110 hours needed for 3 credit hours

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