

Agricultural Externship: Where Careers and the Classroom Connect

Dr. Ryan Anderson
173 IL RT 2.
Dixon, IL. 61021
815-35-6279
ryan.g.anderson@svcc.edu

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Introduction

Total student loan debt now exceeds \$1 trillion, more than the total credit card debt in the United States (Avery & Turner, 2012). More specifically, Smith, Foster, and Lawver (2017) identified funding was one of the many challenges that agricultural education teacher candidates faced. The burden of high student loan debt makes students less likely to pursue a lower-paying career like teaching (Rothstein and Rouse, 2011). Smith et al. (2017) further suggested that there was a need to find a best course of action to meet teacher demand issues. One course of action could be the implementation of an agricultural externship program. The Agricultural Externship provides students with the opportunity to gain real-world experience and learn theoretical applications in the classroom, all while receiving tuition assistance.

How it Works

Our departmental advisory committee is comprised of secondary agricultural education teachers and industry professions from the community and they provided insight on how to structure the agricultural program. We started by introducing the concept of an agricultural externship to this committee. Based on their recommendations we moved all of our courses to meet two days a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays only. This allows our students to participate in the externship on the other days of the week. The next step was to develop a website dedicated to the externship. The website highlights information necessary for both the students and the industry partners. We then created a database of all of the agricultural businesses that were located within a fifty-mile radius of campus. We identified at least one contact within each of the businesses, typically targeting their human resource director and/or the business owner/manager to include in our contact list.

Once we developed our contact list, an email was sent to each company informing them about our agricultural externship. We also invited them to participate in the department's externship fair that is hosted the first Thursday of classes each semester. Companies are encouraged to set up a booth at the fair and meet with our students one-on-one. The students enrolled in our classes are expected to meet with all of the companies that are participating in the externship fair. We also provide additional rooms for any company that wants to schedule interviews at the fair.

The advisory committee also helped establish guidelines and expectations for the externship. We expected employers to provide a wide-range of hands-on learning opportunities beyond being an entry-level employee or laborer. The companies were also responsible for paying the student wages that were comparable to other employees at that level. The companies were also expected to provide any additional benefits that other employees at that level received. This may include health, dental, and vision insurance as well as retirement contributions. Finally, we asked each company to provide financial assistance with tuition reimbursement. Each company was encouraged to create their own tuition assistance program. Finally, the externships were renewable at the end of each semester. Both the employer and the student were allowed to determine if they wanted to continue in the program or switch with no animosity at the end of each semester.

Results to Date

We are in the second semester of offering the agricultural externship. We had twelve companies participate in the fall externship fair and nine in the spring externship fair. We had several other companies that could not attend the fair, but met with our students at other times. A short list of the companies that participated in the fair include Archer Daniels Midland, Bayer, Growmark, Gold Star FS, Helena, John Deere, Nutrien Ag Solutions, USDA and several local businesses. We are continuing to meet with companies that have a footprint in our region to add to our list of participating companies.

Approximately thirty percent of our students were hired as a result of the agricultural externship. All of the students are receiving full-time wages that are highly competitive in our region. Majority of the students are receiving some form of benefits ranging from health insurance only, to all benefits associated with working with a Fortune 500 company. All of the companies agreed to provide tuition assistance. One company provided a \$3,500 stipend at the end of each semester while other companies developed a performance-based program where they reimburse the students based on their grades. For example, one company will reimburse 100% of the students' tuition if their GPA is over a 3.50. One student received a base salary of \$65,000 plus overtime, full benefits package 401K, and full tuition reimbursement, including textbooks. The student is expected to earn over \$100,000 in 2019 based on overtime projections, the student turned 18 the day before the fall externship fair. It should be noted that thirty percent of our students come from a family farm. Those students opted out of the externship program in order to continue to work on the family farm. The majority of the other students had already secured employment prior to participating in the externship, only a couple of students looking for employment did not receive an offer. About half of the companies that participated were unable to fill their positions with one of our students.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We plan to host our semi-annual externship fair again this fall. We also plan to invite more companies as the number of students who participate in the program grows. We currently have more companies interested than we have students available to fill the demand. We would recommend working with the registrar's office to identify courses outside of the department that could be reserved for program participants to ensure the students could take their classes two days a week or set up the classes for mornings only. We also recommend developing a comprehensive website that explains the program, highlights some of the students in the program, and all of the companies participating in the externship program. We also recommend including a short video or description of the Externship Fair for prospective students and companies to see what to expect. We recommend that companies reach out to the department if any human resource issues emerge that could potentially lead to termination. However, we have not encountered any issues.

Costs/ Resources Needed

There was limited expenses associated with the overall program. We provided a meal for the departmental advisory committee meeting which was already in our annual budget. We also provided beverages and light snacks for the companies who participated in the Externship fair. The only other resources needed was time and talent associated with developing the website, developing contacts, creating invitations, and setting up the tables and chairs for the fair.

References

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