

Investing and Assessing Agricultural Internship Opportunities at a State University

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Introduction and Need for Innovation

Professional internships have long been an educational tool utilized in college settings. There is a considerable amount of discussion around the positive impact internships can have on a student including student career goals, commitment, higher levels of job satisfaction, and increased career choice clarity (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Gault et al., 2000; DeVuyst, 2006). However, proximity, time commitment, and the prevalence of unpaid internships are just a few of the limiting factors students face when considering internship opportunities. The agricultural sciences program at West Texas A&M University focuses heavily on student involvement and experiential learning opportunities. Upperclassmen are highly encouraged to complete an internship within their area of interest. This internship may be counted for academic credit and should aim to utilize skills learned in the classroom. With the world population expected to exceed over nine billion by the year 2050 (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2017), it is ever-important to continue to provide the industry with career ready individuals. Persons who choose a career within the agricultural industry are often hardworking and generally have background knowledge on the expected tasks within their chosen field. Referenced in the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2021, roughly 61% of all newly graduated potential employees will have obtained a degree in agriculture, food, and renewable resources. Opportunities within the agricultural sector for college graduates with a bachelor's degree or higher will see a 2.6% increase by the year 2025 (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2021). The purpose of this project was to evaluate the agricultural internship program within West Texas A&M University and assess the value of experiential learning opportunities from a student perspective.

How It Works

Internships approved by an agricultural sciences faculty member must be related to the students' academic program and be in line with their career interests. A minimum of 120 contact hours must have been completed within the internship to justify three credit hours, as well as bi-weekly reports throughout the semester and a final interview with faculty coordinators within the department. Junior and Senior level students enrolled in internship credit hours for industry related experiential learning opportunities were asked to reflect upon their experiences at the completion of the course. In order to actively participate in the experiential learning process, students should intentionally reflect on what they have experienced (Kolb, 1984). For the purpose of this study, students were asked to reflect by answering five Likert-type questions related toward their perceptions of their internship experience. Additionally, students were asked to answer two additional yes/no questions related to assistance they may have received both on and off campus from university and internship supervisors alike.

Results to Date/Implications

Data was collected from the 2023 cohort of students enrolled in internship credit hours within the agricultural science program from Spring, Summer, and Fall semesters. Over one hundred students ($N = 117$) were observed with roughly 104 different internship programs and employers represented. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Overall students perceived internships and experiential learning opportunities to be beneficial in aiding in their

career decisions. Furthermore, students indicated that by completing an internship, they gained valuable insight into various business operations. Table 1 below outlines the findings:

Table 1

Student perceptions of an agricultural internship experience

Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Did this internship help you decide on a future career?	4.71	0.60
Did this internship provide insight into your employer's business or operation?	4.73	0.53
Did this internship help you learn new skills or techniques?	4.53	0.77
Did this internship help apply, integrate, or make relevant the knowledge gained from your coursework?	4.18	0.96
Did this internship help clarify your future education goals?	4.42	0.83

Likert scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*

When asked to report on their overall support from direct supervisors within their internship, 95% of respondents reported to have received enough assistance during their experience. From an open-ended question, one student wrote "It has been a great experience that I have learned a lot from based on a career I plan to enter after college." A second student stated "I had the assistance I needed and was able to communicate any and all questions I had." In addition, students were asked if they received enough assistance from their faculty coordinator and 100% indicated that they did receive enough assistance. A student also stated "Every time I had a question, my coordinator was willing to help and make sure I had the resources needed."

Future Plans and Advice to Others

The agricultural science program at West Texas A&M University plans to continue supporting and promoting undergraduate internship opportunities and industry experience. Student feedback of the internship program within this cohort of students was overall positive and perceived to be a valuable asset to the student's educational career. Although mean scores produced from the Likert-type questions were high, the lowest rated item was the application of coursework toward the internship. Further research toward this question is warranted. University faculty and staff should explore opportunities to grow connections between class content and career skills by attending professional conferences, maintaining direct industry involvement, and reviewing relative literature available. Continual feedback from agricultural employers and industry partners should be solicited. Nonetheless, student interns in this evaluation did believe their internship experience strengthened their knowledge of an agricultural business and that it added clarity toward their choice of a future career. Perceptions such as these should be shared with post-secondary students along with relevant stakeholders.

Cost and Resources Needed

For students claiming an internship experience for academic credit, the total cost for 3 credit hours is \$1,271.63 per long semester. Furthermore, students might have costs associated with housing and/or travel relative to the physical location of the internship. To the university, expenses may be incurred to host on-campus events such as career fairs or possible travel to meet and work with industry partners. However, colleges should invest funds and time toward growing internship opportunities for students. Relationships built from this should strengthen academic course work along with internship and employment opportunities for current students and alumni alike. Time should also be invested by university students so that they might find high quality internships which could help them in their professional career.

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