

## Feeding the Hunger for Employment Opportunities: Creating a Lunch & Learn Series

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## **Introduction**

Employers tend to value previous related work experience in relevant fields more than recent college graduates who are equally qualified (Verhaest et.al., 2018). Many students after graduation are being hired in jobs, they are overqualified for, also known as underemployment (Mckee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). During a student's college career, obtaining an internship is a great example of work experience needed for necessary workplace skills. Internships provide students an opportunity to experience full time occupation in a given industry without requiring a full commitment to the company (Stitchman & Farkas, 2005). Many benefits of agricultural internships have been found to help students with various employability skills such as decision-making, communication and others (Anderson, 2015; Binder et al., 2015; Coco, 2000; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008; Krieshok et al., 2009). Henderson et al. (2023) found that students find their previous experiences to aide in their internship. Furthermore, the hands-on learning associated with internships have provided students opportunities to connect what they are doing to their coursework, provide incentives for learning, receive supportive feedback, build their ability to individually develop skills, and develop personal goals (Henderson et al., 2023). Faculty members at [University] have developed a program for their students to create a connection between themselves and industry through social, service, and professional opportunities. One of the many ways that these faculty members facilitate this interaction is through coordinating lunch & learn events weekly. Indeed (2023) defines lunch & learn as a training held at lunchtime, with these events usually being informal in practice. These faculty members adapted this model to expose their students to internship and career opportunities during the course of the fall and spring semesters. By hosting lunch & learns, the faculty members are encouraging students to communicate with employers and gain more knowledge on employment opportunities after graduation. The purpose of hosting the lunch & learns is to provide ample and new knowledge for students who may feel lost in finding employment opportunities post-graduation.

## **How it Works**

In this process, a faculty member acts as the Lunch & Learn Coordinator where they will organize all aspects of the program. The coordinator develops a list of companies that align to their students' post-graduation employment and summer internships opportunities. Through various events such as State FFA conventions, teacher conferences, tradeshow, and volunteer opportunities, the list of potential lunch & learn presenters grows. Once a solid list of companies and representatives has been identified, the coordinator reaches out to schedule times with each presenter. Through this communication, usually through email, the coordinator more thoroughly describes the expectations for participation in the lunch & learn program. Company representatives are asked to share the history of the company, their experiences with the industry and employment and internship opportunities. Company representatives are also asked to provide lunch for up to 40 students who may attend the weekly event. Once a final list is developed, the coordinator shares the companies and dates with the departmental students. Lunch & learns are held every Wednesday during the fall and spring semester from 12:00 PM to 1:00 PM and are open to students in the department. Information is emailed out to students within the department informing students of the lunch & learn that week.

On the day of the lunch & learn, the presenters arrive around 11:45 am with lunch, allowing the coordinator to meet the company representatives and set up any presentation they may bring. Students and professors congregate in the classroom to listen to the presenter provide their information on the company. They start with the history of the company and the services

they provide. They then transition into employment opportunities and internship opportunities, allowing for questions at the end. To prevent distraction during the presentation, lunch is postponed until the presentation is over at around 12:30 PM. During this time, until 1:00 PM, students can talk to the company representatives, one-on-one, to gain more information on the opportunities provided and socialize with professors and other students. A room is provided for the companies to conduct on-the-spot interviews if interested.

### **Results to Date**

The lunch & learns are open to all students in the department. On average, around 30-40 students attend the lunch & learns. The faculty coordinator secures approximately 10-14 companies per long semester. In the past year, 20 students have received either an internship and/or post-graduation employment from multiple companies by attending these presentations. Students are also able to walk away with brand awareness and new knowledge of opportunities post-graduation. Prior to the implementation of lunch & learns, no students in the major had an internship and struggled to secure post-graduation employment over the previous two years. We have seen an increase in the number of current and former students who are asked to join the team of presenters to talk about their experiences with the company. Several companies have developed strong partnerships with the department and have provided additional support to the academic programs through educational, financial, and in-kind contributions.

### **Future Plans/Advice to Others**

Lunch & learns have been reported to be beneficial to students' knowledge of employment opportunities after they graduate. The faculty members plan to continue to host the lunch & learn in the future. The faculty plan to reach out to more companies to come present to the students. If enough are available, they plan on hosting more than one lunch & learn a week to allow everyone to get a chance to present. After the lunch & learn is complete, the faculty member plans to start sending out surveys to both companies and students to determine the impact the lunch & learn. Due to the success of the program, the faculty member has had the opportunity to secure a university funded course buyout to develop a career fair for the department in the future. For others who want to replicate this, we recommend starting communication with interested parties as soon as possible. If able, strive to have a full semester's worth of lunch & learns filled before the semester begins. Also be prepared to have companies cancel at the last minute due to unforeseen circumstances. Being prepared could be seen as having other student organizations come in and talk about their organization or the student organization hosting the lunch & learn can discuss events and plans for the semester or year.

### **Costs**

The cost for students to attend these presentations is free, other than one hour of their time. The faculty member also does not have any costs to host these presentations due to the classroom being available for use and not needing to provide food for everyone. However, there is a cost in time. On average, each company that would attend takes up a few hours in communications, outlining expectations, and follow up discussions. The costs for companies are food, giveaways, hotel stays, travel, and pay for the employees.

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