

**Boots on the Ground:
A Phenomenological Study of College Students' Internship Experiences**

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Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Across the United States, experiential learning is a cornerstone of collegiate education, offering students transformative opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings (Eyler, 2009). Experiential learning can occur in many different forms, including internships, service-learning, undergraduate research, and field-based activities, all of which contribute to deeper student engagement and skill development (Kuh, 2008). In the context of internships, research consistently demonstrates that these experiences support substantial student development, including increased confidence, professional skill acquisition, and clarity in career direction (Henderson et al., 2023; Swenson et al., 2014). Continuous improvement that addresses the need for efficiencies and improved strategies is critical. Continuous improvement frameworks offer a pathway for evaluating and enhancing internship programs. Garet et al. (2021) described continuous improvement as an iterative process of identifying local challenges, testing interventions, and refining practices based on evidence. In agricultural education, needs assessments and feedback loops are critical tools for tracking what works and what needs to evolve (DiBenedetto et al., 2018).

The theoretical framework that underpins this study consists of three theories: experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2011). Together, these frameworks offer a set of *a priori* constructs that guided data collection, coding, and interpretation, positioning the study firmly within a deductive qualitative paradigm. Each theory contributed a lens through which student learning, identity development, and meaning-making could be understood in relation to personal growth, professional skill development, and career readiness.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose was to deductively examine the lived experiences of students participating in a large livestock show and rodeo internship program, using the established theoretical framework to gauge how interns described their personal growth, professional skill development, and career readiness. We addressed three research questions: 1) How do interns describe personal growth as a result of the internship?; 2) How do interns describe professional skill development as a result of the internship?; and 3) How do interns describe career readiness and emerging professional identity as a result of the internship?

Method & Study Context

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher collected reflective journals written by students during their internship, conducted field observations and conducted interviews. The context of the internship program was a large livestock show and rodeo. The primary researcher was also embedded in this environment. Immersion was an important component of this qualitative research, as prolonged engagement in the field allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and the cultural context in which they occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011). We invited approximately 200 interns to participate in the reflective journal portion of the study. In addition, we invited a smaller, intentionally selected subsample of six interns to participate in an in-depth phase of the study involving a semi-structured interview. Reflective journals

(Boud et al., 1985; Dymont & O'Connell, 2011), field observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and interviews provided insight into both the *internal* meaning-making processes of students and the *external* behaviors, interactions, and contextual factors that shape their experiences. Data analysis consisted of deductive phenomenological thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) guided by predefined theoretical constructs derived from the study's frameworks.

Findings

We interpreted the findings through the lenses of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2011), providing a priori constructs that supported the deductive qualitative approach. The goal was to generate a rich, nuanced understanding of the lived internship experience to inform program improvement, strengthen experiential learning practices, and contribute to theoretical conversations about students' personal growth. Analysis of the six participant interviews resulted in **five major themes**: 1) Growth Through Discomfort and Adaptation, 2) Development of Professional Communication Skills, 3) Experiential Learning Bridges Classroom and Practice, 4) Career Pathways are Clarified and Expanded, and 5) Learning is Socially Constructed. These themes collectively represented the essence of the internship experience as one of *transformational, applied, and socially mediated learning*.

Conclusions / Discussion / Implications

Findings revealed that participants experienced significant personal growth through navigating discomfort, uncertainty, and a fast-paced work environment. Interns frequently described entering the internship with low confidence, overthinking tendencies, or uncertainty, followed by increased confidence, adaptability, and independence. This aligns strongly with the *narrative identity theory* (McAdams, 2011), which suggests that individuals construct their identities through lived experiences and reflective meaning-making. Participants' narratives demonstrated clear identity shifts—from hesitant students to more confident emerging professionals. The identification of classroom gaps is particularly important. While participants acknowledged that certain courses provided foundational knowledge, they emphasized that the internship offered a level of realism and complexity that could not be replicated in the classroom alone. This suggests that experiential learning opportunities are not supplementary, but rather *essential components of student development*. Findings suggest that academic programs should prioritize *integrated experiential learning opportunities*. Programs should: 1) incorporate more *real-world assignments* (e.g., press releases, interviews), 2) provide opportunities for *time-sensitive, high-pressure tasks*, and 3) emphasize audience awareness and adaptability. Additionally, programs should consider preparing students for the *ambiguity and unpredictability* of professional environments, as these were key components of student growth. The structure of the internship studied offers valuable insights for designing effective experiential learning programs. Key recommendations include: 1) maintaining hands-on, high-responsibility tasks, 2) encouraging peer collaboration rather than individual work, and 2) providing mentorship that balances guidance and independence. This study demonstrated that the internship program serves as a powerful experiential learning environment fostering personal growth, professional skill development, and career readiness. Future studies could incorporate longitudinal designs to investigate professional trajectories.

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