

Ready or Not? Investigating Perceived Readiness for College Students Entering Summer Internships in Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources

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Introduction

Internships are crucial for college students to receive real-world experience in future careers (Sink et al., 1984). Professional internships are often designed to increase the employability of students after they graduate as well as provide exposure to different roles and skills. Internships can be mutually beneficial for students, companies, and universities (Alpert et al., 2009). Often, students gain experience and professional traits, companies learn how to work with and teach younger generations, and universities gain exposure to careers and hands-on, practical skills (Alpert et al., 2009). Internships also fill the gap between an academic classroom and careers after graduation (D'abate et al., 2017). Internships support improved communication skills, teamwork, leadership abilities, and confidence (D'abate et al., 2017), and in some settings, personal job satisfaction (Beard et al., 1998; Tarmaz, 2021). Through hands-on experiences, students can apply classroom knowledge to real workplace situations while learning how to adapt to professional expectations and responsibilities, which is especially helpful in agricultural contexts. Yet, it can be difficult for students and employers to have a beneficial experience if students do not have a firm understanding of expectations (Chang et al., 2024). As a result, measuring workplace readiness can identify areas where students may need additional support, preparation, or guidance before entering a professional environment (Walker et al., 2015).

Purpose & Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe students' perceived readiness (i.e., knowledge, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, adaptability, stress management) to enter a 12-week, professional summer internship. The following objectives guided the study: (RO1) describe students' perceived workplace readiness scores, and (RO2) describe students' perceived importance of internship benefits for their career trajectories.

Method

We modified Walker et al.'s (2015) Work Readiness Scale to identify college students' ($n = 9$) at New Mexico State University perceived readiness for starting their professional summer internships funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Grant No: 2022-68018-36608) in May 2026. The survey included 54 statements related to workplace knowledge or competence, social intelligence, organization, and professional work characteristics, and we adapted the questions for an agricultural, food, and natural resources (AFNR) setting. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1-Strongly Disagree to 5-Strongly Agree), students rated their readiness perceptions of each statement via a Google form. We sought to gain students' perceptions of workplace readiness before entering the internship, but after receiving their workplace expectations in a pre-internship training. Additionally, students answered open-ended questions related to what experiences they thought would help them the most in their career trajectories. We inductively coded these responses to identify common themes.

Results

For RO1, students ($n = 9$) reported positive levels of workplace readiness before beginning their internships. The average readiness score was 3.90 ($SD = 0.90$), indicating that students generally felt ready to begin their internship placements. Students reported the highest

scores among their perceived readiness for organizational skills ($M = 4.54$; $SD = 0.38$) and the lowest scores for professional work characteristics ($M = 3.42$; $SD = 0.25$; see Table 1).

Table 1

Work Readiness Scale Characteristics

Characteristic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Work Knowledge or Competence	4.06	0.45
Social Intelligence	3.85	0.64
Professional Work Characteristics	3.42	0.25
Organization	4.54	0.38

Note. Characteristics were based on a 54-item readiness instrument (Walker et al., 2015) adapted for an AFNR context.

For RO2, many students believed that hands-on learning, networking, outreach activities, and working with professionals in their field would be the most beneficial part of their internship. Students also expected their internships to help them improve communication skills, build confidence, gain practical experience, and better understand future career opportunities. Overall, students stated that they thought the hands-on experience in AFNR settings would positively impact their personal growth and career developments.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The results of this study showed that students generally reported feeling ready to begin their summer internship placements. Many students reported strong confidence in their ability to learn new skills, communicate with others, adapt to workplace situations, and take responsibility for their actions. Students also expressed excitement about gaining hands-on experience and learning more about their future careers. While pre-internship surveys are not novel practices, investigating students perceived workplace readiness is vital to building quality internship orientations and trainings. Agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture, can further investigate the impact of funded internships on career trajectories, which increases the need for self-reported perception studies. Further, we recommend hosting similar studies at the beginning of internship placements as they can be valuable tools for identifying students' strengths, concerns, and expectations before entering the workplace. These findings can also help internship coordinators and supervisors better prepare students for professional experiences. Understanding how students view their readiness before beginning internships is important because it allows educators to provide support in areas where students may lack confidence. As a result, we encourage future internship coordinators investigate similar characteristics to best meet the demands of the workplace, while also encouraging students to increase their perceived and actual readiness. Overall, students recognized the value of internships and expect the experience to help them develop professionally, improve workplace skills, and gain a better understanding of their future career goals. When students value opportunities to learn from professionals, build connections within their field, and apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings, the overall internship experience improves, strengthening the relationship with agricultural industry partners (Chang et al., 2024). Thus, we recommend cross-referencing these numbers with employer perceptions of the students' readiness, while also investigating student growth throughout the placements.

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