

Required High School Internships

By Kate Graham
and Jennifer Morrow

Internships are a concrete opportunity for students to experience employability skills and establish references who can vouch for their workplace skills, rather than just the academic skills that test scores, transcripts and academic references of teachers and professors tend to report.

“The summer before my senior year, I was excited to begin an internship at Merrill Lynch. I was a promising young finance student almost done with my degree and a certified financial planning certificate. I was on my way to becoming a certified financial planner. I had been in an internship at Merrill Lynch for less than two weeks when I admitted that I was in the wrong profession. I had done what I had been told to do all along: Go to college, work on your degree and make sure to do an internship the summer before your senior year, because that is how you get a job. This epiphany was far too late. I was not going to call my father who was paying for my education and tell him I had made a mistake. I was confused but not crazy. Ten years later I work to place more than 150 high school students a year in internships.”—*Kate Graham*

High School Internships Available, but Underutilized

During the 2011–2012 school year, 265,149 students in Texas public high schools were enrolled in senior English, and only 976 (less than one-half of 1 percent) were enrolled in Independent Study Mentorship, a class designed to allow high school students to complete internships in the business community during high school. Local veterinarians, architects, engineers, newspapers and businesses of every kind allow a high school student to

learn in their place of business three to five hours per week for 15 weeks. While students can be paid, these are free interns to the employers, and no pay is expected. Students work directly with a mentor adult, study the profession and complete a culminating project to share their experience with classmates and teachers.

Independent Study Mentorship is an option to put in the curriculum in any Texas high school. However, at Clear Horizons Early College High School, located in the suburbs of Houston, this class is required twice—once in the spring of the junior year and again in the fall of the senior year. Students, families and school leaders are realizing the value of this requirement that was put in place in 2007 by the school’s founding design team.

The Value of the Required Internship

An internship experience ensures that students have a mentor who can be a professional reference, having actually witnessed what Mojkowski and Washor call the students’ “‘non-academic’ competencies”¹ in the October 2011 edition of *Techniques*. A high school internship allows young adults to begin building a professional network three to five years before graduation from a college, university or certificate program. A high school internship gives students experience in a professional environment that builds a schema of reference for academic conversations



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▲ The ACTE and Harvard literature discuss career readiness and the value of internships.

they encounter in collegiate lectures or readings. An internship is authentic, engaging instruction. And beyond engaging, authenticity is motivational.

Understanding the schema of this professional environment allows students to connect, process and apply what they need to learn in class. A required high school internship means that students whose families do not have a network in a given profession, students whose families do not have a history of professional success, or students who do not have an adult support system will still have a school liaison—a teacher—to help them make the contacts they need to secure an internship. Internship programs that only serve students who secure these connections and mentors by themselves by given deadlines do not serve the purpose of

guiding and teaching students who need these connections and networks the most.

At Clear Horizons Early College High School, every junior and senior is placed in an internship. Students who know where they want to intern can secure those placements themselves. Students who simply have a career interest can work with a teacher who has a network of experienced mentors available, or the teacher can make new contacts to meet the students' needs. We tell parents that some of the students will complete this internship and announce that this profession is certainly not what they want to do with the rest of their lives. This is the best gift we can give a parent. If students can learn now what they do *not* want to do, they save themselves the cost and confusion of changing mid-college.

Literature Review

The 2008 report, “High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter,” published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), suggests that internships are one of eleven practices that can have an impact on student success and engagement. The author, Kuh, suggests that these practices might help students become more sophisticated in their learning over time. In addition, the author shares six elements that might contribute to having a successful intern experience, including opportunities for students to apply what they learn in a variety of settings and reflecting on one’s values and beliefs with greater perspective.² Becoming a more sophisticated learner is directly

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related to having a real-life schema for the academic conversations and readings led by teachers and professors.

In its 2011 report, “The Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century,” the Harvard Graduate School of Education reported, “The workplace is clearly the place to ‘try on’ or test out a career choice. It’s also by far the best venue in which to learn the ‘21st-century skills’ so critical to success in today’s economy.”³ The report went on to suggest that secondary school students should have plentiful opportunities to participate in “work-linked” learning. The report notes, “Adult relationships are built on support and accountability, mentoring and supervision”⁴ in apprenticeships.

These work links support students so that they can make text-life connections when reading. These adult relationships help students realize the value of accountability and professional respect that they begin to earn.

In the paper “What is ‘Career Ready?’” released in April 2010, the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) notes the necessity of academic skills, employability skills and technical skills for career readiness.⁵ Internships are a concrete opportunity for students to experience employability skills and establish references who can vouch for their workplace skills, rather than just the academic skills that test scores, transcripts and academic references of teachers and professors tend to report.

In Their Own Words

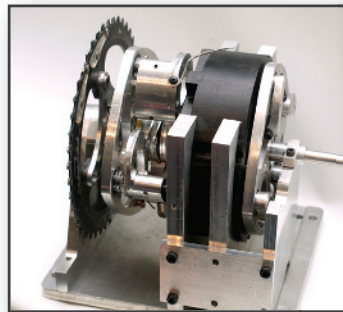
“Having an internship while in high school not only taught me to strive for my dreams, but also gave me insight on the professionalism needed in a workplace. ... I did my job shadow at the Army Corps of Engineers in Galveston, and I was able to realize that being an engineer is exactly where I needed to be. ... As a high school student, many of the people who worked at the office I visited were skeptical at first, but once I showed my interest and put forth effort, I gained respect and they realized that high school students need an idea of what their potential future may hold. Having experience allowed me to specifically choose a college that fits my needs and wants. I may change my mind in the process, but my internship really helped me to decide that I want to be a civil engineer.”—*Melody, Colorado School of Mines*

“The best thing about having an internship is that we start learning how the

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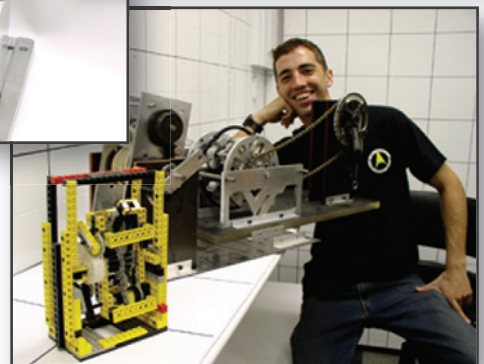
Virginia Tech engineering student Derek Lahr made his senior design project on his graduation present, a Tormach PCNC mill.

“One of my research projects at Virginia Tech was to make a continuously variable transmission (CVT) for a bicycle. To get continuously variable ratios out of the transmission, one of the parts in the cam changes shape along its length. I needed a 4th-axis CNC with a rotary table to get it done. While I was researching ways to solve the problem on the bicycle design, I discovered the Tormach mill and saw that it had 4th-axis capabilities, was economically priced, and the right size.”



For the Future

While pursuing advanced degrees at Virginia Tech, Lahr continues to use his Tormach CNC mill, making award-winning robots for the Robotics and Mechanisms Laboratory (RoMeLa) program.



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professional world acts and thinks. It was crucial for me to understand business culture because as I go forth into the future, that's one of the things I am constantly referring back [to].”—Zain, *University of Houston*

“I feel doing my internship in the dental field my senior year definitely helped give me some insight into what I wanted to do, which ultimately is not the dental field. I loved my internship, but it just really was not for me. I am very thankful that I had the opportunity... so I did not pursue a degree I would have regretted.”—Jordan, *University of Houston Clear Lake*

“The internship program affirmed my decision to go into the medical field. Getting the chance to work with medical professionals and interact with patients proved to me that I wanted to go into medicine and would enjoy my future career. In addition, the internship program allowed me to network with medical professionals and gave me a glimpse of what working in a hospital or medical office would be like. Independent Study Mentorship really encouraged maturity because when working with someone who is in the field of your choice, you want their respect. It also is great for networking. If you do well, you have an excellent reference for the future.”—Bat-Sheva, *University of Houston*

The Benefits Are Clear

The school-community relationship is the foundation of this program and ensures its success. This does require some education of the business community and working with them to understand the school, the program and its potential impact for their long-term employee development. When talking to potential community partners about possibly taking a student, they are generally surprised to learn that it is free. In this day and in these economic times, free gets you in the door. The benefits for the student, mentor, business and community can seal the deal. For the men-

tor, the benefits are exposure to today's young people, fresh faces and ideas, occasional help with a computer, personal satisfaction, and most importantly, an investment in their community. Bringing students into a company for the purpose of mentoring them is an investment in community and the next generation of the workforce. In the end and over time, there will be a strengthened bond between the community, businesses, schools and young people.

High school internships are underutilized but they are important work. Implementation takes a strong relationship between the business community and the school. It requires a strong commitment from the school, students and parents. However, with the right culture and strong community awareness, it can be successful and mutually beneficial for all involved. **I**

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Endnotes

1. Mojkowski, C. & Washor, E., “What Employers Don't Know About Their New Hires, and Why,” *Techniques*, 86, no. 7 (October 2011): 10–11.
2. Kuh, George D., “High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter.” (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008).
3. Harvard Graduate School of Education, “Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century,” (2011).
4. *Ibid.*
5. ACTE, “What is ‘Career Readiness?’,” www.acteonline.org/uploadedFiles/Publications_and_Online_Media/files/Career_Readiness_Paper.pdf.

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O'Neill, N., “Internships as a High-Impact Practice: Some Reflections on Quality,” *peerReview*, 12, no. 4 (Fall 2010).

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