

BUILDING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS THROUGH ON-CAMPUS INTERNSHIPS

AN INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Improving employability of our students is key to our institutional goals of graduating educated students who positively, creatively, and ethically contribute to our metropolitan area and beyond. However, nationwide employers claim that new college graduates coming to work for them lack soft skills such as leadership, written communication, teamwork, and problem-solving (Gray and Koncz, 2017; Hart, 2013) needed to be successful in their industries. These are the kinds of skills that students can develop in internships, clinicals, apprenticeships, part-time jobs, and co-ops (Washor, 2015).

We launched an on-campus internship program at our 4-year metropolitan university with the goals of increasing students' satisfaction with the University through deeper connections with faculty/staff mentors, helping students confirm or modify their perspectives on themselves as contributing employees, giving them a place to apply their content-specific skills, seeing measurable gains in one or more of our campus' core tenets of transformative learning, and helping them develop their soft skills.

Potential faculty or staff supervisors submitted their proposals for internship positions, and in this application, were required to justify the position as being more than "student work," including how the students' experiences might provide disorienting dilemmas and opportunities for critical reflection upon their perspectives about leadership, cultural competence, scholarly activity, or other core values. Each year, approximately 28 positions were funded, leading to cohorts of approximately 30 undergraduate students. As a part of their hiring and work on their internships, these students also attended monthly professional development sessions hosted by our campus' Career Development Center. These included sessions about goal setting, workplace and dining etiquette, professional communication, social media, career planning, resumes, and conducting meetings. All interns were required to submit final "artifacts" that displayed not only the products of their internship work, but also a reflection about how the experiences may have impacted their perspectives on core values. Students were invited to present about their experience at an Intern Showcase each spring semester.

For two of the years of this program, students were given surveys at the start and completion of their internship to answer questions about their interactions with their supervisor, other students, self-assessment of soft skill levels, confidence in their career path, and future plans. Analysis of retrospective pre-post survey data reveal that students felt they had significant gains in leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem solving (N = 42, significance at $p < 0.001$). Students also reported feeling more connected to campus because of this Intern UCO program. Attendees at this session discussed how this setup and resultant data could help them build or enhance their existing out-of-class interactions with students to be more transformative experiences.

SELECT REFERENCES

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