

**The Value of International Internships in Global Workforce Development**

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### **Abstract**

International internships are a key component of Global Workforce Development (GWD), an imperative which charges institutions of higher education to prepare global ready graduates. It is becoming clear that American employers from a wide range of organizations recognize the value which global skills, experience and understanding in recent graduates bring to their organizations. However, while increasingly utilized by students in an effort to increase marketability in the global economy, the real value of the international internship is limited by both lack of understanding on the part of American employers regarding internships as skill and quality building platforms, as well as by a lack of understanding and skill on the part of the recent graduate in effectively communicating their gained competencies. In order to fully realize the value of international internships, institutions of higher education, employers and students must create new levels of partnerships to develop international internship experiences through which all stakeholders gain.

## **The Value of International Internships in Global Workforce Development**

The ever-shrinking world and erasure of commercial and cultural borders is an accepted reality of the modern, globalized world. This shrinking or flattening of the world is clearly demonstrated in the 2.5 million tertiary students around the world studying outside their home country annually (UNESCO, 2006). Over 260,000 American students studied abroad in 2007/2008, representing an increase of four times the number of study abroad students in 1987/1988 (IIE, 2009). This data supports the conclusion that internationalization and globalization continue to be important characteristics of the current development of society which neither the production of knowledge or higher education can ignore (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008).

While study abroad may be the best known method for internationalizing higher education curriculum at the undergraduate level, growing numbers of students are choosing an international internship experience instead of, or as a complement to, their study abroad programs. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) distinguishes an internship from other forms of active learning by stating that internships require “a degree of supervision and self-study that allows students to “learn by doing” and to reflect upon that learning in a way that achieves certain learning goals and objectives” (CAS, 2008 p.1)<sup>1</sup>. The Institute of International Education (IIE) reports that just over 13,500 Americans either worked abroad or completed international internships for credit during the 2007/2008 academic year (Bhandari & Chow, 2009). When including students who did not receive credit for these experiences in the equation, it has been estimated that the number is closer to 50,000 Americans participating in international

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<sup>1</sup> Internships are, by definition, different from co-ops. As defined by the National Commission for Cooperative Education (NCCE), co-ops are a “structured educational strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student's academic or career goals. It provides progressive experiences in integrating theory and practice. Co-op is a partnership among students, educational institutions and employers, with specified responsibilities for each party” (NCCE, n.d.).

internships annually (Rubin, 2009). In a 2001 report published by American Council on Education (ACE), in which 500 college-bound high school seniors were surveyed, 90 percent of surveyed students agreed that international education would help them work with people from other cultures; 88 percent felt that international education would give them a competitive edge in the workplace (Hayward & Siaya, 2001). While this data suggests a trend in which students are choosing international internship experiences as skill-building platforms for the purposes of increased competitiveness in the global job market, a direct correlation cannot be made. International educators know that a well structured and processed international internship experience presents the potential for students to gain global competencies and skills, but further research needs to be done to understand student motivations in choosing this type of international education experience.

A 2010 study of American employers demonstrates that in the current economy, employers are most looking for recent graduates who have both a broad range of skills *and* in-depth knowledge or skills in a specific area. In addition, employers feel it is equally essential that recent graduates also have the ability to apply this learning in real-world settings (Hart Research Associates, 2010). For employers, the value of an internship comes from its intrinsic blend of theory and practical application. A quality internship represents a legitimate and preferred method of gaining *experience* which cannot be typically gained in a classroom setting and is valued by employers over all other methods of assessment for determining that recent graduates have the skills to be effective (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 2008). In fact, a 2004 study found that, for recent graduates who had completed an internship, the odds of securing a job after graduation were 4.43 times higher, in comparison with those that hadn't (Callanan & Benzing, 2004).

The 2010 Hart Research Associates study of employers also found that as the challenges facing organizations today have become increasingly complex, employer expectations of recent graduates

have increased. In order to be fully prepared for the global workplace, 67% of surveyed employers believe there should be greater emphasis in higher education placed on understanding the global context of situations and decisions, while 65% desired a greater emphasis on global issues and developments, and their implications for the future (Hart Research Associates, 2010). While increasing focus on the global context is being given throughout general education courses, international education has long been a preferred method of gaining those skills and developing a global outlook. A separate study found that, when considering the value of specific types of international education experiences to the workplace, employers from firms, agencies and organizations across a wide range of fields and industries tend to place the highest value on international experiences which included international internship components (Trooboff, Van de Berg, & Ryman, 2007). Therefore, the international internship could be an important component of Global Workforce Development (GWD); the perfect solution for gaining experience in the practical application of skills as well as building the global or intercultural competencies seemingly desired by employers across industry types and fields. The challenge faced by international educators as partners in GWD is that most employers can't identify the global or intercultural competencies that they view as important in recent graduates as those that are developed through participation in international internships.

This critical point is demonstrated in a 2007 study conducted by Trooboff, Van de Berg, & Ryman in which employer attitudes towards study abroad and, more broadly, international education were examined. The study surveyed employers about a specific set of skills and qualities developed by weaving together skills and qualities regularly listed in the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) annual surveys, as well as skills and qualities determined by Darla Deardorff to be considered criteria for "intercultural competence" and those determined by William

Hunter to be considered criteria for “global competence (Trooboff et al, 2007). While this particular section of the study focused on international education in the broader context, instead of specifically asking employers about international internships, the results give us interesting insight into employers’ perspectives. In considering personal qualities, two out of the top five qualities most valued by employers were drawn from the intercultural/global list, as were four of the remaining seven (See Table 1) (Trooboff et al, 2007). Skills from the intercultural/global competence list ranked even more highly, being outranked only by teamwork in the top five, with eight out of the total twelve most valued skills coming from the intercultural/global list (See Table 2) (Trooboff et al, 2007).

However, in further considering the results, it is shown that there is an inverse relationship between those skills and qualities most valued by employers and those most thought by employers to be enhanced by an international experience. This indicates that while these experiences may be helping students build the human capital and general skills and qualities sought by employers, neither the inclusion of an international education experience on a recent graduate’s resume, nor the recent graduate themselves in their own words, are drawing connections for the employer between those experiences and the value they provide for the employer. Therefore, in terms of human capital and potential, simply putting an international internship on a resume sends only a weak signal regarding the recent graduate’s value to employers.

Again, it must be noted within the context of discussion on international internships, the data in the Trooboff et al (2007) study was not specifically geared towards internships. Is it, therefore, that the skills employers believe students gain through international education are too broad or “soft”? Do employers place more value on specific skills which apply to the particular field or position? And, how might an international internship completed in a student’s major field be better

received by employers? Recall that the 2010 Hart Research Associates study found that employers want both a broad range of skills *and* in-depth knowledge or skills in a specific area. The Trooboff et. al (2007) study itself found that the degree of preference employers showed for academic major in the hiring process far outweighed any other type of education experience listed. As the authors of that study state: “Employers looking for engineers do not hire accountants just because they have studied abroad” (Trooboff et. al, 2007 p. 20). A 2000 study by Albers-Miller, Sigerstad, & Straughan, which surveyed 68 college-campus recruiters of business students in the American Southwest, found that the reality may be even more complex. In presenting their results, the authors of this study grouped the companies surveyed into three types based on their characteristics: Internationalists, Traditionalists and Ethnocentrists. The group deemed the Internationalists participated in the most international business activity. This group valued an interdisciplinary international business degree over traditional business degrees and gave a strong deferential hiring preference to potential employees who had participated in international internships. One Internationalist recruiter was quoted as saying “Internships are favored over study abroad; experience is the issue” (Albers-Miller et al, 2000, p. 74). The Traditionalists, who represented companies with less global business interaction, placed the most emphasis in hiring on recent graduates with a specific marketable skill. The academic major of the student was deemed most important, while relatively equal value was given to study abroad and international internship experiences. The Ethnocentrist group, which represented small companies with little to no international involvement, was found to treat international education on the whole very unfavorably and was inclined to reject students with too much obvious international education experience. Recruiters in this group were looking for students with traditional degree plans in a specific discipline (Albers-Miller et al, 2000). (See Tables 4-6 for further information on the hypotheses

tested, group characteristics and results.) This data suggests that, at least in the relatively narrow context of traditional business firms, the value placed on experience (international or otherwise) in comparison to specific academic preparation in the field varies based on characteristics of the organization. With regards to GWD, it remains to be asked how employers would perceive students who had completed an international internship within an academic major relevant to the professional field to which they were applying. Would this combination send a stronger signal to employers regarding the potential human capital skills and value developed as a result of the international internship of that recent graduate? In addition, how would the results of this same study differ for organizations such as NGO's, non-profits and governmental organizations?

Because the value of the international internship remains unclear for employers, it will be determined by how well the student can articulate the transferrable skills and competencies learned and draw connections with concrete examples about what value those skills represent for the employer. Students must learn how to contextualize and articulate their experiences for employers instead of making broad statements about their time abroad, which may lead employers to dismiss their experiences as skill building and human capital development platforms. Therefore, an additional role of the higher education organization providing the internship is to supplement the work experience with an academic component in which the student is guided through the concrete experience and reflective observation stages of learning in order to make these connections and formulate thoughtful applications for their experiences in the "real world".

The good news is that many U.S. colleges and universities are already working on helping students articulate those connections. Clemson University students in a Cultural Literacies Across Media course are encouraged to be more thoughtful about their time abroad and articulate their experiences and personal growth by documenting it through video, online photos and blogs (Kowarski, 2010). Michigan State University developed a program called "Unpacking Your Study Abroad



Experience” designed to help students reframe their international education experience in the context of the workplace and in language to which employers can relate (Gardner, Steglitz, & Gross, 2009). Unpacking sessions include discussion of skills and competencies sought by employers, reflection exercises focused on making connections to the student’s stated career goals, and developing methods to present those gained skills and competencies both in bullet point format for resumes and as stories told during the job interview process (Gardner, Steglitz, & Gross, 2009). In light of the research done by Albers-Miller et al (2000), practice evaluating an organization, and the level of emphasis it places on the international context, and making any adjustments necessary to those bullet points and stories may also be a useful and practical addition.

Finally, while internships are inherently based on the commonly understood concepts of experiential learning, there are few standards amongst programs which offer this type of education in the international setting. Often the only thread tying together international internship experiences is that they all provide learning which transcends the domestic classroom. While NAFSA was a contributor in developing CAS’ Internship Standards and Guidelines (CAS, 2008), as participation in international internship programs continues to rise, the field of international education should consider implementing standards for good practice specifically for international internships similar to those recently adopted for study abroad. If standards of program development and administration, outcomes assessment, and academic credit structure for international internships are accepted by the higher education community, the quality of these programs will improve thus benefitting the entire community of stakeholders.

Research has demonstrated that while there is strong belief on the part of higher education about the value of international internships, the value statement being received by the business community remains weak. It is time to realize that the interconnectedness of today’s economy and global systems makes partnerships between higher education, the wider business world and students

necessary to achieve the common goals of Global Workforce Development. Only with this level of collaboration will the true value of the international internship be transformed from the individual, short term gain of successfully finding a job after graduation into the longer term, all around gain of producing graduates with the skills and qualities necessary tackle the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Tables

<b>Table 1: Personal Qualities of Prospective Employees</b>		
Ranking for all Employers (5-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating highest, and 1 the lowest, importance)		
<b>Quality</b>	<b>Importance in Hiring</b>	<b>Enhanced by Study Abroad</b>
Honesty and integrity	4.93	2.25
Shows strong work ethic	4.87	2.79
Self-motivated, shows initiative	4.85	3.63
<b>Listens and observes well</b>	<b>4.68</b>	<b>3.24</b>
<b>Flexible, adapts well</b>	<b>4.58</b>	<b>4.02</b>
Rational and logical	4.47	2.77
Innovative and creative	4.33	3.32
Enthusiastic and outgoing	4.29	3.35
<b>Curious; wants to discover more</b>	<b>4.28</b>	<b>4.27</b>
<b>Non-judgmental towards other world views</b>	<b>4.24</b>	<b>4.16</b>
<b>Willing to take risks and learn new things</b>	<b>4.08</b>	<b>4.06</b>
<b>Recognizes own world view is not universal</b>	<b>3.91</b>	<b>4.24</b>

(Trooboff, Van de Berg, & Ryman, 2007, p. 27)

Bolded qualities represent those considered to be intercultural or global criteria.

<b>Table 2: Personal Skills of Prospective Employees</b>		
Ranking for all Employers (5-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating highest, and 1 the lowest, importance)		
<b>Skill</b>	<b>Importance in Hiring</b>	<b>Enhanced by Study Abroad</b>
Effective working in teams	4.73	2.93
<b>Works well under pressure</b>	<b>4.69</b>	<b>2.94</b>
<b>Analyzes, evaluates, interprets well</b>	<b>4.60</b>	<b>2.92</b>
<b>Works effectively outside comfort zone</b>	<b>4.54</b>	<b>4.03</b>
Expresses self effectively in writing	4.22	2.60
Knowledgeable about firm's core activities	4.22	2.31
<b>Communicates effectively in intercultural situations</b>	<b>3.41</b>	<b>4.06</b>
Knowledgeable about doing business elsewhere	2.92	3.20
<b>Understand global econ., political trends</b>	<b>2.74</b>	<b>3.58</b>
<b>Well-informed re: world events/history</b>	<b>2.68</b>	<b>3.71</b>
<b>Effective socializing/doing business elsewhere</b>	<b>2.14</b>	<b>3.96</b>
<b>Knowledgeable re: other history/culture</b>	<b>1.93</b>	<b>4.12</b>

(Trooboff, Van de Berg, & Ryman, 2007, p. 28)

Bolded skills represent those considered to be intercultural or global criteria.

## Appendix A

<b>Table 3. Hypotheses Tested</b>	
H1A	A student with a B.B.A. in a functional area, such as marketing or accounting, with additional international course work will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student with an infused B.B.A.
H1B	A student with an International Business B.B.A. will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student with an infused B.B.A.
H2	A student with a second language will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student speaking English only.
H3A	A student with an international internship will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student with a domestic internship.
H3B	A student with an internship in a foreign country will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student whose international internship was with a foreign company but working in the U.S.
H4A	A student with a study abroad experience will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student who completed all of the B.B.A. course work within the U.S.
H4B	A student with a longer (semester) study abroad experience will be given preferential treatment in the hiring process over a student who had a shorter (summer) study abroad experience.

(Albers-Miller et al, 2000 p. 60, 61, 62, 63)

<b>Table 4. Demographic Characteristics by Cluster</b>					
<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Annual Revenue (USD)</b>	<b>Estimates Sales for International Clients (USD)</b>	<b>Anticipated International Sales in 5 years (USD)</b>	<b>Employees in All Locations</b>	<b>Employees in Recruiters' Location</b>
<b>1</b>	514.0 million	91.5 million	122.3 million	27,600	2,520
<b>2</b>	667.0 million	150.1 million	200.1 million	33,600	6,590
<b>3</b>	87.5 million	0	0	30,000	163

(Albers-Miller et al, 2000 p. 68)

<b>TABLE 5. Supported Hypotheses by Cluster</b>					
	<b>1 The Traditionalist</b>	<b>2 The Internationalist</b>	<b>3 The Ethnocentrist</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Overall Percent Supporting Hypotheses</b>
<b>Number of Respondents</b>	49	5	2	12	N=68
<b>Percent of Overall Sample</b>	72.1	7.3	2.9	17.7	100
<b>Type of Degree Plan</b>					
H1A	Supported	Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	79.4
H1B	Not Supported	Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	7.3
<b>Second Language</b>					
H2	Supported	Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	79.4
<b>International Internship</b>					
H3A	Supported	Supported	Supported	Not Supported	82.3
H3B	Supported	Supported	Supported	Not Supported	83.3
<b>Study Abroad Program</b>					
H4A	Supported	Not Supported	Supported	Not Supported	75
H4B	Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	Not Supported	72.1

(Albers-Miller et al, 2000 p. 71)

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