

Helping Students Maximize Their Degrees as Competitive Tools: The Value of Experiential Learning

Cassandra R. Spencer, April L. Perry

Abstract

It is a common misconception among students that following graduation there will be an abundance of job opportunities, and by simply earning a degree, they will be competitive in the job market. Through a review of relevant literature, this article examines college graduate employment statistics and the skills employers desire most in new hires. Using this literature as a contextual lens, the benefits of experiential learning as a way for college students to maximize their degree is discussed. The research shows that these types of learning opportunities are essential in helping students grow, learn, realize their potential, explore different career paths, gain professional experiences, network, and become more prepared for their careers. Limitations and concerns are also addressed, and the article is concluded with a discussion outlining implications for educators that include helping students understand the value of experiential learning, providing students a range of experiential learning opportunities, and teaching students how to gain transferable skills that employers desire in new hires.

Keywords: *higher education, experiential learning, internships, graduation, new hires, value of a degree*

Graduation is both the light at the end of the tunnel and a terrifying black hole for many students. Students of all types dread graduation day for fear of the unknown, uncertainty, and having to enter the “real world” (Perry, 2012). Along with this dread, students also rejoice and celebrate having accomplished years of lectures, final exams, and all-nighters to celebrate the idea of not having to do it again. It is a common misconception among students that following graduation there will be an abundance of job opportunities, and by

simply earning a degree, they will be competitive in the job market. In today’s world, having a Bachelor’s degree often does not make a student competitive; it simply means that their resume will pass the first round of eligibility.

A degree alone is no longer enough for recent graduates who are trying to enter the working world following graduation. Internships, externships, co-ops, campus jobs, service learning, summer jobs, and various other forms of work-related experiential learning opportunities seem to be crucial

components in attaining a job after graduation. Experiential learning is operationally defined as work-related experiences (internships, externships, etc.) that provide students with the opportunity to gain transferable work experience before graduation. Given how competitive the current job market is, facilitating opportunities for students to engage in experiential learning has become a focus for institutions, faculty, and practitioners. Moreover, due to the fact that experiential learning has been identified as a High Impact Practice (Kuh, 2008), more educators are recognizing the value of such experiences for their students.

Since the move toward mass higher education in the 1960s, receiving a college degree has often been seen as an investment for students - a way to become an educated and successful member of society. Earning a college degree was, at one time, a ticket to gainful employment (Thelin, 2011). Does a degree hold these same promises or have the same value that it once did? To explore this idea further in this article, we first look at the employment statistics of recent graduates. Next, we evaluate what employers are looking for in new hires. Then, building on this contextual framework, we explore the literature on experiential learning, the value it brings in preparing students for future employment, and what role we, as educators, play in this process.

College Graduate Employment Statistics

Abel, Deitz, and Su (2014) found that between 2009 and 2011, 10% of recent college graduates were unemployed, while 56% of recent graduates were underemployed, meaning

their jobs did not require a bachelor's degree. More recently, Jones and Schmitt (2014) reported that one in three recent college graduates was employed in a position that did not require a college degree. Further, Jones and Schmitt (2014) found that 23.5% of recent graduates who are employed, are not only underemployed, but also are working in low-wage positions, meaning they will make less than \$25,000 per year. The unemployment rate, in addition to the underemployment rate, of recent graduates increases the competitiveness of the job market for college graduates. With fewer positions available, more graduates are competing for the same jobs, even if those jobs do not require a degree.

Inevitably, the economy has an effect on employment statistics; the U.S. unemployment rate started to increase in early 2009 and reached an all-time high of 10.1% in October of 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Although the U.S. is slowly recovering from the 2009 economic recession, we are still in a time where businesses are trying to stay afloat, people are fighting to keep their current jobs, and fewer companies are hiring new graduates entering the workforce. Therefore, as educators, we must examine what employers want in new hires, and then provide opportunities for our students to gain those skills.

What Employers Want in New Hires

As young adults graduate from university and enter their first professional jobs, there is often a disconnect in terms of new hire readiness for the workplace (Gedye, Fender & Chalkley, 2004; Hanneman & Gardner, 2010; Hart, 2008). Hicks (2014) demonstrated that a college

degree makes a candidate eligible, but it does not make them competitive for a job. She found on average 150 resumes are submitted for an entry level job that requires a Bachelor's degree (Hicks, 2014). Of those 150 resumes, 135 will meet the minimum qualifications for the job. Of the 135 eligible resumes, half of the interested applicants will have had some type of related internship or work experience. Hicks (2014) asks, "with about 68 resumes left, all with hands-on experience, are [recruiters] really going to consider any of the resumes in the 'degree-only' group?" (para. 7).

Wood (2004) emphasized the role and importance of higher education counselors and practitioners in assisting students to stay up to date with current job trends and employer expectations. Through a survey involving 900 employers, Hanneman and Gardner (2010) identified the most desired skills for new university hires:

- building and sustaining professional relationships (social capital)
- demonstrating initiative
- analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting data and information
- communicating effectively through justification and persuasion
- creating new knowledge or services
- engaging in continuous learning
- articulating global understanding

Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, and Cragolini (2004) suggested that it is unrealistic for universities to guarantee that their graduates will possess all the skills needed in future occupations. However, they emphasized that "universities should guarantee that their students will all have the opportunity to learn and develop generic skills and abilities during their undergraduate

study" (p. 148). Farner and Brown (2008) suggested that higher education and business sectors have opportunities for collaboration in supporting students as they shift from study to work. They suggested internships, job shadowing, informational interviews, and apprenticeships as ways for this. Additionally, "the characteristics of today's starting job resemble the job many young adults attained after seven to ten years of work experience" (Gardner & Perry, 2011, p. 315), meaning students must somehow make up this deficit before they ever enter the workplace. So, how do students gain these skills and experiences while still in college? The research points to experiential learning.

Experiential Learning and Related Benefits

Experiential learning has been a growing topic of discussion on college and university campuses. Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn (2004) reported that as of the year 2000, three out of four college students had an internship experience prior to graduation. The number of students participating in experiential learning activities has only increased since that time; a 2006 internship survey revealed that 53% of students will have completed two or more internships upon graduating (London, 2006). With over half of students completing one or more experiential learning opportunities prior to graduation, the job market tips even further out of favor for students who have not had such experiences. The demand for college graduates to have related experience prior to graduation has driven numerous colleges and/or academic departments to make experiential learning opportunities a

graduation requirement. This means that in the near future, it is likely that an even higher percentage of students will have completed not one but multiple internships, externships, co-ops, or other experiential learning opportunities prior to graduation.

Experiential learning activities are not only growing in popularity on college and university campuses, but also are becoming a necessity among employers. The 2012 Annual Job Outlook Survey, conducted by The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2011), found that 73.7% of employers preferred to hire recent graduates who had relevant work experience. Hicks (2014) noted that hiring employees is an expensive and time-consuming process. “Companies do not want to hire people who are ‘trying out’ a job for the first time” (Trust, 2011, para. 2). This further demonstrates that students with relevant and transferable learning experiences are more appealing to an employer than those without. Furthermore, *The Atlantic* recently published an article reflecting that employers focus more on a student’s related experience, including internships, externships, co-ops, and part-time employment, than they do on the relevance of their coursework, a student’s grade point average (GPA), or the reputation of the institution they attended (Thompson, 2014). This research was exemplified in Perry’s (2012) findings on recent graduates’ transition after college, as a research participant said, “The one thing I wish the university would have stressed is the importance of work experience. I still believe that’s the one thing that killed me when I was interviewing for positions” (p. 199).

The benefit of experiential learning goes beyond the end result of job placement or employer desires. These types of experiences throughout a student’s undergraduate years also give them the opportunity to explore various career options and hone in on a specific area or career of interest. A recent graduate in Perry’s (2012) study said, “Your professors are supposed prepare you for a career, if you’ve found it. But make sure you find it... do an internship about something you care about, or at least find out it is something you don’t care about” (p. 200). Hurst, Thye, and Wise (2014) found that 60% of students who participated in a summer internship reported that the experience confirmed their career choice. Furthermore, their findings demonstrated that internship experiences “(a) extend learning beyond the classroom; (b) provide opportunity to interact with industry professionals; and (c) provide opportunity to refine communication and networking skills” (p. 61). A recent graduate who did not participate in an internship said:

What I am learning is that it really does not matter what you know or how great you can make yourself look on paper, you need to network. And that’s something that you wonder why they don’t talk more about in college. Every degree should have an internship program... no matter what your degree field is going to be, because at the very least you’re going to be making contacts through that. I never did an internship. (Perry, 2012, p. 201)

In addition to confirming career paths and providing students with work-related experience, experiential learning opportunities also lead to students being

more engaged in the classroom. Green, Graybeal, and Madison (2011) reported that students with internship experiences are able to make connections between their experiential learning opportunities and their coursework. In doing so, students are more engaged in the classroom having seen the value of the material in a work-related setting. Green, Graybeal and Madison (2011) also found that following an experiential learning opportunity, students were better able to understand the values and traits that potential employers look for when interviewing and hiring employees. Furthermore, Ray and Kafka (2014) found that students who participated in experiential learning activities were not only more engaged in the classroom, but also were twice as likely to be engaged employees. A business student stated, "I was able to use knowledge I gained in school in real-world settings. I became familiar with the industries and businesses I worked in and acquired insights regarding the responsibilities I would have as a full-time employee... the knowledge I obtained enhanced my understanding of concepts I studied in subsequent courses" (Reding and O'Bryan, 2013, pp. 47-48). This further demonstrates that experiential learning not only benefits students while they are enrolled in classes and while searching for employment, but also continues to benefit them once employed.

Limitations and Concerns

While the research shows numerous benefits associated with experiential learning, such opportunities also involve areas of concern. Some of these experiences are paid, some are paid at very low wages, and some are unpaid all together. There are many different

opinions on the ethics associated with unpaid experiences, how it is determined if a student can earn credit toward their degree, and what exactly constitutes a legitimate experiential learning activity. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2011) defines an internship experience as having to meet seven criteria points. These points include

- applying knowledge from the classroom,
- gaining transferable skills,
- having a set start and end date along with a job description and the desired qualifications,
- defining learning objectives,
- supervision by a professional,
- continuous feedback given to the student, and
- providing resources, equipment, etc. (by the internship host).

It is important to note that, within this set of criteria, there is no mention of internship wages or criteria for earning college credit for the experience. Based on the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act, employers are not required by law to pay interns minimum wage if the student is learning/being trained in a similar manner to what they would learn or be trained to do in an education setting (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Additionally, the Labor Act includes criteria that the experience should benefit the intern, the intern should work under close supervision, the intern is not entitled to pay or a job offer at the conclusion of the experience, and finally, the employer of the intern should not receive any immediate advantages from the intern. This act helps employers determine whether they are required by law to pay an intern minimum wage or

not (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010).

In most cases, higher education institutions and/or academic departments make their own set of guidelines and criteria for the types of internships that students can be awarded for college credit. In some cases, institutions and/or academic departments also determine if and how much a student can be paid for the duration of their experience. While the research shows that students benefit from having completed an experiential learning opportunity, unpaid internships are often impractical for many students. Glaeser (2013) discusses in his opinion article for the *Boston Globe* that unpaid internships are highly valuable, but also are only open to students whose families can support them while they work for free. Glaeser (2013) suggests the implementation of an internship stipend program through federal aid and supports higher education institutions that provide stipend pay for student interns.

While there are differing opinions on the logistics associated with experiential learning opportunities, there is no denying that students benefit from these types of experiences prior to graduation. Benefits are often the greatest when teaching is the focus of an experiential learning opportunity. As Westerberg and Wickersham (2011) state, “Academic internships are three-way partnerships among an institution of higher education, the internship site, and the student. They have an irreplaceable role in the liberal arts by providing hands-on learning opportunities, allowing students to collaborate closely with faculty, and strengthening ties between the college and the community”

(para. 3). Furthermore, there is a balance to managing this three-way partnership; it is often not sufficient enough to simply facilitate internship opportunities. Rather, these opportunities need to be managed by individuals who can appropriately support the student intern. For example, a recent graduate reflected on her internship experience and said:

I think there should be more requirements for interns. Believe it or not I didn't have to do much with mine, not to mention my supervisor and professor never communicated. Supervisors couldn't care less....you're working for free! And the professors don't seem to really care as much either. Seriously, an internship to me is the most important class of your entire college career. It's preparing you for your future! (Perry, 2012, pp. 200-201)

This further demonstrates the importance of experiential learning opportunities for students, but also it reinforces that having effective, collaborative partnerships is vital to the success of any student's experience.

Discussion

Research has shown that not only is the job market tough for recent graduates, but also a significant number of students are un- or underemployed following graduation. The research also shows that a college degree is no longer enough to make a student employable. There is a growing trend in the number of students who graduate having completed at least one, if not several, work-related experiences. Students who have not had such experiences struggle even more to find a job related to their degree, especially as more and more employers seek students with related

experience. Research has also shown that experiential learning is not only beneficial for helping students find gainful employment following graduation, but also is beneficial in helping students explore career paths and encouraging students to be more engaged in the classroom.

Many college campuses offer experiential learning opportunities for their students through service learning offices, career services offices, and major/departmental requirements. It is the responsibility of both the institution to provide and encourage such opportunities, and also of students to take advantage of and seek out additional opportunities as they progress through their degree. Additional research could help clarify what types of experiences are most beneficial for students. Are these experiences beneficial regardless of type (e.g. internship, externship, co-op, etc.), compensation, or duration? Also, are these experiences equally or more beneficial to a specific group of students, employers, or institutions?

Experiential learning opportunities are essential in helping students grow, learn, and realize their potential. These opportunities provide safe spaces for students to explore different career paths, gain professional experiences, network, and become more prepared for their careers. Based on this synthesis of research, implications for educators include: helping students understand the importance and value of experiential learning, providing a range of experiential opportunities, and then teaching students how to leverage experiential opportunities to gain skills desired by future employers and market themselves when job searching.

Internships, externships, co-ops, part-time jobs, and all other work-related activities are what experiential learning opportunities encompass, and as educators, it is important to not only encourage students to participate in these learning opportunities, but also to engage them in reflecting on their experiences. It is our role to be collaborators and facilitators in fostering meaningful experiences for students that will better prepare them for their futures.

References

- Abel, J., Deitz, R., & Su, Y. (2014). Are recent college graduates finding good jobs? Federal Reserve Bank of New York: *Current Issues*, 20(1), 1-8.
- Cook, S. J., Parker, R. S., & Pettijohn, C. E. (2004). The perception of interns: A longitudinal case study. *Journal of Education for Business*, 79(3), 179-185.
- Crebert, G., Bates, M., Bell, B., Patrick, C., & Cragnolini, V. (2004). Developing generic skills at university, during work placement and in employment: Graduates' perceptions. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(2), 147-165.
- Farner, S. M., and Brown, E. E. (2008). College students and the work world. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 45(3), 108-114.
- Gardner, P. D., & Perry, A. L. (2011). The role of cooperative and work-integrated education in graduate transition into the workplace. In R. K. Coll & K. E. Zegwaard (Eds.), *International handbook for cooperative and work-integrated education: International perspectives of theory, research and practice* (pp. 313-320). Lowell, MA: World Association for Cooperative Education.
- Gedye, S., Fender, E., & Chalkley, B. (2004). Students' undergraduate expectations and post-graduation experiences of the value of a degree. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 28(3), 381-396.
- Glaeser, E. (2013, October 31). Unpaid internships: Unpopular solution to a real problem. *The Boston Globe*. Retrieved from <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2013/10/30/unpaid-internships-unpopular-solution-real-problem/KqHbPLxfgdjuhcvN0xL6XJ/story.html>
- Green, B. P., Graybeal, P., & Madison, R. L. (2011). An exploratory study of the effect of professional internships on students' perception of the importance of employment traits. *Journal of Education for Business*, 86(2), 100-110.

- Hanneman, L., & Gardner, P. (2010). *Under the economic turmoil a skill gap simmers*. CERI Research Brief 1-2010. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, Collegiate Employment Research Institute.
- Hart, P. (2008). *How should colleges assess and improve student learning?* Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Hicks, K. (2014, November 17). Your degree is only one piece of the employability puzzle. *Making Your Degree Work*. Retrieved from <http://www.krystalhicks.com/blogs--articles/your-degree-is-only-one-piece-of-the-employability-puzzle>
- Hurst, J. H., Thyne, A., & Wise, C. L. (2014). Internships: The key to career preparation, professional development, and career advancement. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 106(2), 58-62.
- Jones, J., & Schmitt, J. (2014, May). *A college degree is no guarantee*. Washington D.C.: Center for Economic and Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://www.cepr.net/documents/black-coll-grads-2014-05.pdf>
- Kuh, G. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- London, M. (2006, April 25). More students interning this summer, says new Vault survey. *Business Wire*. Retrieved from <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20060425005925/en/Students-Interning-Summer-Vault-Survey-62-Students#.VHtyyigfkfF>
- National Association of College and Employers [NACE]. (2011). *NACE Research: Job Outlook 2012*. Bethlehem, PA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.uwsuper.edu/career/students/upload/Job-Outlook-2012-Member-Version-1.pdf>
- Perry, A. (2012). *Treading through swampy water: Graduates' experiences of the post-university transition*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.
- Ray, J., & Kafka, S. (2014). Life in college matters for life after college. *Gallup Poll Briefing*, 3.
- Reding, K. F., & O'Bryan, D. (2013). 10 Best Practices for Business Student Internships. *Strategic Finance*, 95(10), 43-48.
- Thelin, J. R. (2011). *A history of American higher education* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Thompson, D. (2014, August 19). The thing employers look for when hiring recent graduates. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/08/the-thing-employers-look-for-when-hiring-recent-graduates/378693/>
- Trust, T. (n.d.). Internships: The key to finding your ideal career. *Graduating with confidence: A guide to making the most of your college experience*. Retrieved from <http://graduatingwithconfidence.blogspot.com/2011/01/internships-key-to-finding-your-ideal.html>
- U.S. Department of Labor. (2010). Fact sheet #71: Internship programs under the Fair Labor Standards Act. *Wage and Hour Division*. Retrieved from <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf>
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.). *Unemployment Rate*. Retrieved from <http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>
- Westerberg, C., & Wickersham, C. (2011). Internships have value, whether or not students are paid. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Internships-Have-Value/127231/>
- Wood, F. (2004). Preventing post-parchment depression: A model of career counseling for seniors. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 41(2), 71-79.

About the Authors

Cassandra Spencer is a second-year M.Ed. student in the Higher Education Student Affairs program at Western Carolina University. She is the Graduate Assistant in the Center for Career and Professional Development at WCU. She has also completed internships at the University of North Carolina Asheville and Susquehanna University. Cassie has a research interest in student transitions, and specifically the transition out of college.

Dr. April Perry is an Assistant Professor in the Higher Education Student Affairs graduate program at Western Carolina University. She completed her Ph.D. at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, and her research interests are in higher education student development, career development, student transitions, and faculty transitions. To learn more about her research, teaching, and passion for students, visit aprilperry.weebly.com.