Assessing business student internships for external accreditation: A case study

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ABSTRACT

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is the premier agency for external accreditation of collegiate business programs. Accreditation by AACSB requires demonstration of assurance of learning across the curriculum of the program, including experiential learning components such as internships. This paper reports on an assessment of internships employed in the accreditation self-study of one university-level business program. Performance by business interns in ten key skill areas, from the perspectives of the intern and the workplace supervisor, were collected and analyzed. The results of the survey of interns and employers had a high level of agreement about which skill areas are important to success of the internship experience. Across all ten skill areas, average intern evaluations improved over the duration of their internship. In fact, the improvements in academic skills (verbal communication, written communication, analytical/quantitative and computer skills) exceeded those of workplace skills (honesty/integrity, interpersonal, motivation, work ethic, team work, and flexibility). The results provide support for the argument that well-planned internships contribute significantly to the broad learning objectives of a collegiate business program. The consequences of these study results in the AACSB self-study process are discussed. . (Journal of Cooperative Education & Internships, 2010, 44(1), 13-22).

KEY WORDS: Academic vs. workplace skills, accreditation, assessment, business career development, experiential learning.

Universities are required by both public and professional interests to assess the quality of their programs. From building the case for public support to answering the call for legislative oversight, assessment of university programs responds to a broad public audience: at the same time it provides evidence in response to the collective concerns of individual parents. The ability of a program to document its effectiveness takes on additional importance in times of increasing competition for public support and increasingly sophisticated queries from potential students and their families.

Accrediting the quality of university programs serves professional interests as well, validating the character, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of university planning, goals, and program achievements. Discipline-specific accreditation agencies confirm the quality of baccalaureate and/or graduate programs in a field. In the field of business, one of the oldest and most widely sought external accreditations is offered by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Founded in 1916, the AACSB reviews undergraduate and graduate institutions for "… their commitment to quality and continuous improvement through a rigorous and comprehensive peer review" (AACSB, 2009). AACSB outlines standards for strategic management, participants (i.e., students, faculty, staff, and administrators), and assurance of learning. The standards are mission-driven, and those used to document the assurance of learning are specific to the educational goals motivating each program.

The basis for scrutiny of program quality has undergone a fundamental shift over time in both public and professional interests. Where before programs were required to document their inputs to show they were mounting quality programs, increasingly, public and professional interests now call for documentation of program results to serve as the basis for assessing program quality. As teaching implies learning, that shift has seen a translation of focus from teaching and delivery inputs to learning and program outputs. Current standards organizing accreditation activities not only reflect the requirement to document learning outcomes but to engage in cycles of improvement, taking formative steps to improve programs in the light of results uncovered.

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ISSUES IN ASSESSING APPLIED BUSINESS EXPERIENCES

Many respected university business programs (including the university where the authors work) seek to obtain and maintain external accreditation from AACSB. Many participating universities require that students engage in an applied business experience as a formal part of their academic program. Documenting the assurance of learning in applied business experiences presents special challenges to develop sufficiently broad internal assessments to document the many program achievements as well as sufficiently specific external assessments to guide employers in assessing students placed in business experience.

A number of vehicles for experiential learning are employed on college campuses today, including class projects, site visits, service learning, study abroad, and computer simulations. One effective form of active experiential learning, if administered and managed properly, is an internship related to a student's field of study. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), employers are seeking relevant work experience in today's college graduate. Internships are one of the many ways students can gain that practical and relevant experience needed to be successful in the transition from college classrooms to the workplace (NACE, 2007).

The benefits from internships are many, accruing to the student, the employer and the university sponsoring them. Beyond supplementing academic preparation with applied experience for the student, good internships strengthen and validate what students learn in the traditional classroom. Internships offer students an opportunity to try out employment in a particular career or industry, sometimes with a prospective employer they are considering. Internships may provide compensation to students to support their educational and living expenses.

Employers benefit from internships in terms of having access to a pool of educated and enthusiastic people. Byrd and Poole referred to interns as "highly motivated employees" who "… are typically the best students and make the best employees." (2001, p. 31) In addition, Maskooki, Rama, and Raghunandan referred to a benefit of internships "… as a low-cost method of screening potential employees" (1998, p. 75). Compared to others the employer might hire, student interns are often willing to work for lower wages in return for the internship experience and are usually easily oriented and trained for a particular job. Interns are recruited with a clear understanding that the employment is for a prescribed short-term period. In fact, Byrd and Poole point to the internship as an opportunity for an organization "… to evaluate a prospective employee nearly risk free" because the organization is not "obligated to continue the relationship" beyond the academic term (p. 31). At the same time, the internship arrangement also gives the employer an opportunity to identify and hire good, long-term employees before they are available for consideration by other employers (Byrd & Poole, 2001).

Internship programs also benefit the universities and programs within universities that arrange and manage student internships. Internships can create good will among employers as to the contribution and importance of the university within the broader community. Internships can encourage university faculties to increase their interaction with the local professional community (Maskooki et al., 1998). The internship program itself can also be used as a measure of success for a university or school. Assessment of the experience by both student intern and worksite supervisor can provide valuable feedback to a university as it strives to gain a measure of how well its students perform professionally in relation to what industry expects of its professionals.

While internship programs are an enticing win-win-win for students, employers, and university programs, some vigilance is in order. Matching students with opportunities in business and nonprofit organizations is relatively easy. Making sure those placements outside the campus proper provide experiences that, in turn, enhance the missions of university, school, and program may not occur without careful planning and oversight. Rather than placing students in largely unsupervised arrangements where they may do little more than low-level work, internship arrangements need regular and ongoing assessment to ensure they are fulfilling their intended purpose in developing skills critical to career success and reinforcing what is learned in the classroom. Developing a well articulated system of assessments that captures and responds to the many benefits of internship programs accruing to the university, the school, the program, the student and the business community is an ongoing challenge.

This paper reports results from a highly structured internship program at a large California public university, where students are placed into carefully screened positions that align with each student's academic program. Student interns are overseen weekly by a work site supervisor who is an expert in the student's academic area of concentration. Internships are limited to no more than 20 percent clerical and/or administrative work and are not assigned to home-based businesses so that student interns can be exposed to real-world business settings and professional work responsibilities. During the academic term, the student intern works 150 hours at the workplace and completes several academic assignments, including learning objectives, journal entries, a reflective paper as well as face-to-face student mid-semester checks and exit interviews.

As part of early preparation establishing the internship, faculty in the academic area related to the internship often accompany the internship director in initial contacts in defining internship positions, thereby communicating programmatic goals and enhancing the relevance of the internship to the student's academic program. Supervisors are also contacted at mid-semester by email, phone call, or site visit. Evaluation of the internship experience is gathered from both the student intern as well as the work site supervisor at the completion of the internship. The evaluation asks both respondent groups to assess student skills in ten key areas, both in terms of level of importance and student performance across the internship. Actual results and statistical analysis comparing the perceptions of the interns and their supervisors are presented in the following sections.

This paper offers a case study of how our own school assessed and improved our internship program. As part of our accreditation self-study, we were interested in how the internship program supported our adopted undergraduate learning outcomes, that our students will have:

I. An integrated knowledge of the functional areas of business, including an ability to read and process information and express complex ideas to facilitate critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and the use and application of technology to solve business problems;
II. Effective oral and written communication abilities;
III. An understanding of business and cultural values, including ethical behavior, respect for diversity of opinion and personal style and global cultural diversity; and
IV. Applied experiences in business, including participation in service learning, internships or other long-term experiential projects.

In this paper, we share results of our assessment of the contribution of student internships toward both the development of academic skills outlined in the first two learning outcomes and workplace attitudinal skills developed in the last two learning outcomes. One hypothesis organizing our work was that we expected to find students and employers agreeing on the relative importance of the student skills to the success of an internship. A second hypothesis was that internships were effective in promoting growth in all student skill areas evaluated. A third hypothesis was that internships were as effective in promoting academic skills as workplace attitudinal skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A well-known theoretical model for the process of experiential learning was proposed by Kolb and Frey (1975). Their model is a "learning circle" of four elements: (1) concrete experience, (2) observation and reflection, (3) formation of abstract concepts, and (4) testing in new situations. In this model, learning is a continuous process, with the testing in new situations leading to new experiences and starting the cycle anew.

Based on research applying the Kolb and Frey model, Jarvis (1995) developed a different model that distinguished circumstances where experience could result in non-learning, in unreflective learning, or in reflective learning. Reflective learning encompasses the experiential learning process of Kolb and Frey, and characterizes the desired outcome of student internships in developing new understanding of what is learned in the classroom.

Gentry (1990) explored experiential learning for business administration programs and concluded the following list to be critical elements for the success of internships: business curriculum-related, application, participation, interaction, whole-person emphasis, contact with the environment, variability and uncertainty, structured exercise, student evaluation of the experience, and debriefing feedback on both the process and outcome of the internship. He concluded that internships themselves readily met the criteria of participation, interaction, contact with the environment, and variability/uncertainty, which he summarized as giving students "a feel for the 'messiness' and ambiguity associated with real-world situations" (Gentry, p. 14). In contrast, success in the other critical elements may require active management and assessment.

Gentry noted that poorly managed internships can result in little educational value. Clark (2003) identified some safeguards to assure the educational value of internships. She advocated the use of academic assignments during the internship to enhance the learning process: a work product for evaluation by the university, a paper drawing connections between the internship and academic subjects, a summary presentation, a written report on the organization served, a paper on lessons learned at the conclusion of the internship, daily journals, or a written plan for practicing and applying a specific skill during an internship. The underlying intent of all of these assignments is to encourage reflection and to link the internship experience to the student's academic preparation.

Knouse, Tanner, and Harris (1999) tested the hypothesis that internships improve college performance by comparing students who completed internships with students who did not. They controlled for academic potential using student scores on the American College Test (ACT) upon entry into college. Their results indicated that students who completed internships had higher grade point averages compared to students who did not do internships, implying that the internship strengthened academic skills and/or improved personal habits that increase academic success.

If internships fulfill their objectives, employers should favor students with internships over students without internship experiences. A study by Gault, Redington, and Schlager (2000) compared two samples of business administration alumni who did and did not complete internships. The authors concluded that the students who completed internships had, on average, shorter periods between graduation and their initial job offer, higher initial compensation, and higher job satisfaction. Another study by Callanan and Benzing (2004) of graduating business seniors found that the proportion of students who had secured a post-graduation job was significantly higher among students who had completed internships compared to their counterparts who had not done internships.

Additional studies demonstrate internship outcomes in terms of specific skills gained. A study by Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn (2004) of student interns from 12 different colleges and universities over a ten-year period queried the interns as to their level of agreement with statements that their internship experience improved their workplace skills and enhanced their academic performance. The results provided evidence of a consistently positive assessment of internships over the ten-year period in developing workplace skills and relating classroom learning to the work environment, but, in contrast to what Knouse, Tanner, and Harris (1999) found, this study did not find strong evidence of an increase in grade point average.

A study by Shambach and Dirks (2002) of student perceptions of internships done by computer science, information systems, and telecommunication majors found a high level of agreement that internships both developed workplace skills and enhanced academic preparation. The clear majority of students agreed with statements that the internship helped them learn skills that were difficult to learn in the classroom, gave them background to better understand coursework, helped redirect course studies to areas of interest, and enabled more informed academic course selection.

Beard (2007) described a process for measuring perceptions of the outcome of internships for accounting students and their internship supervisors and then linking the perception measures to core competencies identified by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA). Successful internships, she argued, should enhance the key learning goals and mission of the academic program.

Although outside the specific context of internships, Gabric and McFadden (2001) compared student and employer perceptions of desirable entry-level job skills for graduates entering a position in operations management. Each group was asked to rate the importance of 15 general business skills, 15 technical skills, and 34 personality characteristics for an entry-level position in operations management. Responses from the students and employers were statistically compared on the mean scores for the three overall factor groups. Interestingly, the students provided significantly higher assessments of the importance of all three factors. The study also ranked the individual skills and personality characteristics within each factor and compared them between students and employers. While the ranked lists were not identical, they were not highly dissimilar.

Sapp and Qin (2009) conducted a five-year study of internship supervisors to better understand the expectations of industry leaders by measuring 11 student performance skills at the conclusion of internships. This study revealed, among other points, that students were not making the connection between what they learned in business communication coursework with their behavior and performance in the workplace.

The literature is not replete with assessments of internships in terms of learning outcomes either that use internal student and external employer measurements or that compare those two measurements. The need for such assessments as part of our AACSB accreditation self-study motivated this case study of internship assessment related to learning outcomes in terms of perceived skills gained by interns and evaluated by their work site supervisors.

METHODOLOGY

This paper reports on an assessment and comparison of the performance of interns in developing ten key skills, from the perspectives of the intern and the workplace supervisor. Like the Gabric and McFadden study, these skills were assessed by agreement levels on a 4-point Likert scale. However, unlike Gabric and McFadden, the focus of this study is the internship, and addresses business administration majors in general, not just operations management majors. In addition to ranking the importance of skills as perceived by student interns and their supervisors, the interns and their workplace supervisors evaluated the intern's skill levels before and after the internship. Beyond checking for statistically significant differences between interns and employers on individual skills, the order of skills in the ranked lists of interns and supervisors were tested for significant differences.

DATA COLLECTION

Data for internship assessment is collected at the end of each semester following the completion of the student's internship. Data for this study were collected for one academic year (Summer 2007, Fall 2007, Spring 2008). Each student intern, as well as the associated worksite supervisor, completed an internship evaluation form at the completion of the required 150-hour internship. Student interns and worksite supervisors were emailed the survey approximately two weeks prior to the end of the internship.

The survey for both employer and student intern covers the importance of the following competencies to the success of the internship:

1. Verbal Communication Skills
2. Written Communication Skills
3. Honesty/Integrity
4. Interpersonal Skills
5. Motivation/Initiative
6. Work Ethic
7. Team Work Skills
8. Analytical/Quantitative Skills
9. Flexibility/Adaptability
10. Computer Skills

The competence areas are consistent with those evaluated by National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2007).

The 10 competence areas listed by NACE generally correspond to the undergraduate student learning outcomes adopted by our faculty. Specifically, verbal and written communication skills, analytical/quantitative skills, and computer skills relate to the academic skills outlined in our first two areas of learning outcomes and the remaining six skills relate largely to the workplace skills outlined in our last two areas of learning outcomes cited in the Introduction to this paper.

Employers and students evaluated each of these competencies on a 4-point Likert scale, with *1 = Not Important* and *4 = Very Important*. Both employers and students were also asked to evaluate their level of accomplishment on each of the competencies, at the beginning and at the conclusion of the internship, using a 4-point Likert scale, with *1 = Poor* and *4 = Excellent*. These evaluations were completed at the same time, at the conclusion of the internship. As a result, the employers do have an opportunity to evaluate the student skills as they have developed over the internship. The overall learning value of the internship was rated by student interns using the same 4-point scale. Additionally, interns rated worksite orientation, communication and feedback, supervision, and training provided during their internship.

Worksite supervisors completed and returned surveys to the Internship Office via fax. Student interns returned the completed survey directly to the Internship Office upon completion of all internship requirements which included a face-to-face exit interview with the Internship Director. Data from both work site supervisor and student intern evaluation forms were entered into Excel spreadsheets for analysis.

During 2007-2008 academic year, 242 business administration students completed an internship. At this campus, business administration students declare a concentration option. During the study, interns came from the following options: Accounting (40), Business Administration (17), Entrepreneurship (12), Finance (42), Human Resource Management (17), Information Systems (15), Management (42), and Marketing (57). Of the 242 student interns, 221 surveys were returned (91% response rate), completed and useable for this study from student interns. We received 224 completed surveys from worksite supervisors. The survey was required, although some surveys were found to be incomplete. Data were combed to remove evaluations that did not have all questions answered by both the intern and worksite supervisor, resulting in 159 internships with complete survey records. The results presented below apply to those 159 internships.

RESULTS

The results of our study are presented in three sections: the analysis of the relative importance of student skills to the success of an internship, a comparison of student skill performances at the beginning and conclusion of the internships, and an analysis of differences between improvements in academic skills and workplace skills.

Relative Importance of Student Skills to the Success of an Internship

In contrast to actual intern performance evaluation, respondents were first asked to score the importance to success in the workplace of each of the ten skill areas. Using a 4-point scale, average scores given by interns ranged from a low of 3.22 to a high of 3.81 for an overall average importance of 3.55. Average scores given by employers ranged from a low of 3.35 to a high of 3.90 with an overall average importance of 3.64. Table 1 shows the summary statistics submitted by the student interns and the workplace supervisors, with the average importance and standard deviation as determined by the student interns and the average importance and standard deviation as determined by the workplace supervisors for each of the ten skills evaluated. Six of the ten skill areas were valued more highly by employers than by interns, in contrast to what Gabric and McFadden found when they reported student interns valuing the importance of skill areas more highly than did their employers.

TABLE 1
Importance on a 4-point scale of skill areas to the success of an internship according to students and employers

Intern	Verbal	Written	Honesty/ Integrity	Inter-personal	Motivation	Work Ethic	Team-work	Analytical/ Quantitative	Flexibility/ Adaptability	Computer
$\bar{x}$	3.783	3.336	3.811	3.638	3.717	3.742	3.362	3.223	3.440	3.437
s	0.434	0.837	0.502	0.536	0.526	0.503	0.827	0.864	0.723	0.748
Rank	**2**	**9**	**1**	**5**	**4**	**3**	**8**	**10**	**6**	**7**
Employer										
$\bar{x}$	3.765	3.699	3.896	3.634	3.839	3.843	3.553	3.366	3.437	3.354
s	0.578	3.294	0.343	0.579	0.396	0.378	0.610	0.740	0.727	0.749
Rank	**4**	**5**	**1**	**6**	**3**	**2**	**7**	**9**	**8**	**10**

Based on the rank ordering of the importance of the 10 skill areas, a Spearman rank correlation coefficient was computed to measure the amount of agreement in the rankings of the ten skill areas between the two sets of respondents. The Spearman coefficient was 0.77, which indicates a high level of agreement in the rankings between interns and employers (p-value <0.01). Interns and employers had a high level of agreement about which skill areas are more important to the success of the internship experience, validating our hypothesis of agreement between the two groups.

Changes in Skill Performances During Internships

Student interns were asked at the conclusion of their internship to evaluate their skills before they began their internship and after they concluded their internship. Across all ten skill areas, average intern evaluations improved over the duration of their internship. Employers were asked to make the same before and after evaluations of the interns and again, the evaluations improved in all ten areas. See Table 2.

TABLE 2
Intern self-evaluations and employer evaluations on a 4-point scale at the start and completion of an internship

Evaluator	Intern				Employer			
Time Of Evaluation:	Start		Completion		Start		Completion	
Skill Area	Mean	s	Mean	s	Mean	s	Mean	s
Verbal Communication	2.849	0.724	3.462	0.511	2.997	0.751	3.482	0.548
Written Communication	3.047	0.688	3.393	0.549	3.102	0.616	3.360	0.552
Honesty/Integrity	3.752	0.500	3.858	0.347	3.802	0.398	3.840	0.366
Interpersonal	3.072	0.737	3.544	0.569	3.225	0.758	3.565	0.577
Motivation	3.226	0.695	3.654	0.512	3.444	0.622	3.704	0.543
Work Ethic	3.519	0.675	3.805	0.409	3.585	0.596	3.725	0.537
Team Work	3.160	0.701	3.575	0.571	3.421	0.628	3.689	0.502
Analytical/Quantitative	3.019	0.631	3.393	0.552	3.180	0.688	3.484	0.569
Flexibility	3.267	0.718	3.667	0.508	3.436	0.610	3.722	0.511
Computer	3.019	0.748	3.569	0.547	3.309	0.634	3.606	0.497

We hypothesized that the interns would evaluate their skills more positively at the end of the internship than at the beginning. While we believed student skills generally improve over time regardless of whether they are doing an internship or not, since this was a survey specifically about their internship experience, we believe any differences they report on the survey reflect the impact of the internship on each of the skill areas. For each student intern, we formed the change in self-evaluation over the internship by subtracting the beginning skill level from the ending skill level for each of the ten skill areas. We tested whether the average change for all student interns was positive across each skill. The results support our hypothesis: across the ten skill areas, student interns reported significant improvements in the paired difference for all skill areas (p-value < 0.001 in each instance). See Table 3.

TABLE 3
Change in assessed skill levels paired before and after internship according to students (n = 159. All p-values < 0.001)

Skill Area	Verbal	Written	Honesty/ Integrity	Inter- personal	Motivation	Work Ethic	Team-work	Analytical/ Quantitative	Flexibility/ Adaptability	Computer
$\bar{X}$	0.613	0.346	0.107	0.472	0.428	0.286	0.415	0.374	0.399	0.550
s	0.562	0.528	0.310	0.552	0.587	0.517	0.627	0.557	0.603	0.671
t-score	**13.750**	**8.268**	**4.349**	**10.777**	**9.189**	**6.980**	**8.349**	**8.475**	**8.356**	**10.345**

A similar analysis of the employer assessments of the changes in student skill levels produced similar results, with highly significant improvements (p-value < 0.001) in all areas except in the area of honesty (p-value = 0.039), which was still significant, but very high to begin with and left little room for improvement. See Table 4.

TABLE 4
Change in assessed skill levels paired before and after internship according to employers (n = 159. All p-values < 0.001, with the exception of honesty/Integrity, which has a p-value < 0.05)

Skill Area	Verbal	Written	Honesty/ Integrity	Inter- personal	Motivation	Work Ethic	Team- work	Analytical/ Quantitative	Flexibility/ Adaptabili-	Computer
$\bar{x}$	0.485	0.258	0.038	0.340	0.260	0.140	0.267	0.304	0.286	0.297
s	0.572	0.480	0.229	0.508	0.521	0.417	0.470	0.487	0.517	0.469
t-score	**10.700**	**6.772**	**2.079**	**8.436**	**6.293**	**4.247**	**7.172**	**7.876**	**6.962**	**7.988**

These are particularly meaningful results because the employer evaluations represent direct measures of student performance that complement the student self-evaluations on each of the skill areas.

Changes in Academic versus Workplace Skills

We wanted to contrast each intern's self-evaluation of improvement in academic skills (verbal, written, quantitative, computer) with improvement in workplace skills (honesty, interpersonal, motivation, work ethic, team work, flexibility). Across the 159 interns, we formed an aggregate index of the change in self-evaluations for the four academic skills based on a simple average of the four individual changes. For these students, the average improvement reflected in the academic skills index was 0.471 with a standard deviation of 0.370. Likewise, we formed an aggregate index of the change in self-evaluations for the six workplace skills based on a simple average of the six individual changes. For the interns, the average improvement reflected in the workplace skills index was 0.351 with a standard deviation of 0.309.

To compare the change in the self-evaluations for academic and workplace skills, for each individual intern, we calculated the difference between their academic skills improvement index and their workplace skills improvement index. A positive difference indicates greater improvement in their academic skills index than their workplace skills index. Nearly 60 percent of the interns evaluated the improvement in their academic skills higher than the improvement in their workplace skills. Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of the differences between improvements in academic and workplace skills indexes.

Over all 159 students, the average paired difference between the academic and workplace skills indexes was 0.120 with a standard deviation of 0.401. The average paired difference was significantly higher than zero (p-value < 0.001), supporting our hypothesis that internships were as effective in promoting academic skills as workplace attitudinal skills; in fact, the perceived improvement in academic skills was significantly higher than the improvement in workplace skills as defined by our learning outcomes.

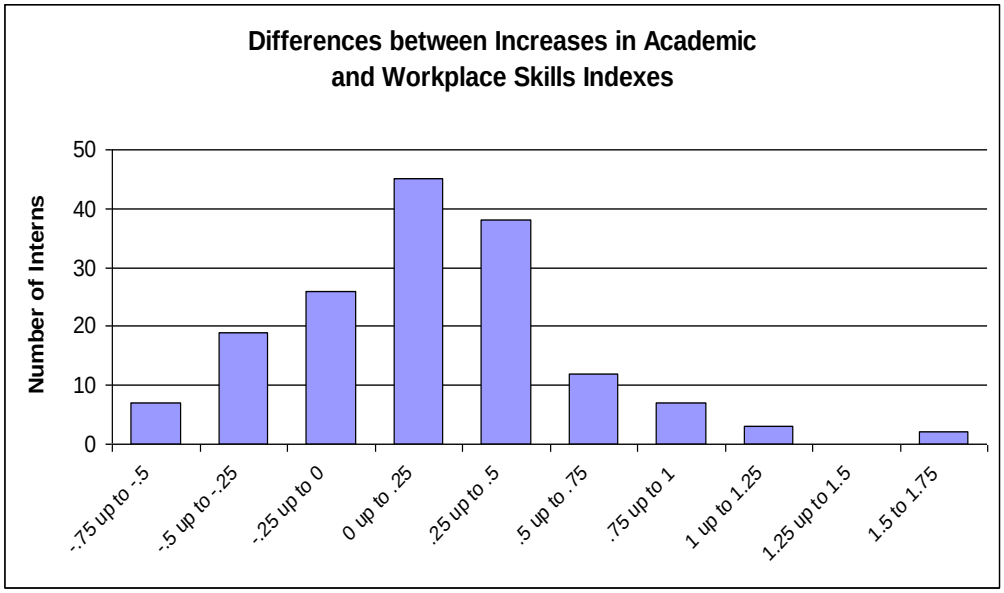
Once again, the results from the student self-evaluations were confirmed by a similar analysis of the evaluations reported by the workplace supervisors. Among supervisors, the average paired difference between the academic and workplace skills indexes was 0.114 with a standard deviation of 0.305. This average difference was again significantly higher than zero (p-value < 0.001), providing external corroboration of the student results with their direct measurements of student performances.

DISCUSSION

Maintenance of AACSB accreditation is a critical factor in affirming the quality of a business program. Assessment that demonstrates "assurance of learning" is a key component of the standards for maintaining AACSB accreditation. Business schools are expected to have meaningful learning outcomes for each program, to have assessment measures for these outcomes, and, based upon analysis of these measures, to have made changes for program improvement, commonly referred to as "closing the loop."

Providing applied active learning experiences is a component of our mission, and providing opportunities for students to gain such an experience through vehicles such as an internship is one of our learning goals. Thus, we were faced with the need to develop measures to assess the effectiveness of the internship experience in a way that would capture both intern and employer assessments and that would also allow comparisons to other internal assessments. The academic and workplace skills assessed by our interns and their employers, results of which are examined in this paper, each manifest one of the specific learning outcomes for our programs.

FIGURE 1
Differences between increases in academic and workplace skills indexes



Currently, AACSB accredited schools and colleges experience a maintenance of accreditation review by a three-person Peer Review Team (PRT) every five years. The PRT from a recent review for our school praised the internship program as a best practice, noting that modifications to the internship program over time and motivated by assessment provided a high quality program dedicated to continuous improvement. Some examples of those modifications over the last ten years include creation and management of an internship website; improved employer contracts; development of a student "code of conduct" to address risk management issues; collaboration with other business internship programs; development of internships that are international in nature (with work sites both local and abroad); creation of a weekly electronic newsletter sent to current students and former interns featuring internship opportunities, jobs, recruitment and other events in the school and on campus; creation of an online internship course component where interns have virtual meetings with other interns in the same option to share their work site experiences; development of a writing lab; increased emphasis on skills using Microsoft Excel in classes.

An important confirmation of the continuous improvement in the quality of our internship program was its recognition as the Experiential Education Program of the Year for 2009 by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE). One of the key success factors for this prestigious honor was the sustained application of program assessment, including the extensive use of the intern and employer evaluations reported in this paper. We continue to cite our internship program as one of the flagship features of our school.

We believe the success of this particular internship program is due in large part to the assignment of students to appropriate internships and the inclusion of required self-assessment activities beyond merely performing onsite job duties. Our programmatic use of learning objectives, journal entries and online team discussions, reflective papers, and mid-semester and exit interviews embodies a commitment to the model of reflective experiential learning. The significant improvement we found in student self-assessments of their skills before and after the internship, including the academic skills, offers support to the models of reflective experiential learning proposed in the literature by Kolb, Frey, and Jarvis. As such, these results support the stances of Gentry and Clark, who found that the success of internships requires careful management and safeguards to make sure that the internship is indeed business curriculum-related and includes structured exercises to encourage student evaluation of the experience and debriefing feedback on the process and outcome of the internship.

So, what is next? Now that we have learned that student interns feel that both their academic and workplace skills are improved through an internship and that employers have corroborated this finding, how do we "close the loop" to continue the improvement cycle? Students expect to prove and improve their workplace skills through an internship, and it was not surprising to see increases in those skills over the duration of the internship. However, the increase in academic skills exceeding the increase in workplace skills was meaningful. Early preparation in defining the expectations for internship positions, along with midterm progress and exit interviews with onsite supervisors, helped to support the importance of the school's academic objectives. Opportunities presented though an internship that apply classroom learning to the business environment validate the inclusion of internships as an important component of the business curriculum (Maskooki et al., 1998; Byrd & Poole, 2001). We are continuing to expand internship opportunities to increase the number of students who graduate with a quality applied business experience.

In the process of relating the results of the skill assessments of interns, we discovered two learning outcomes for our undergraduate program that were not being addressed in the elements evaluated by interns and employers: an appreciation for global business environments and cultural diversity. Based on this discovery, we are adding two more items to the evaluation set: global knowledge and intercultural skills. We anticipate that assessment of these additional items by interns and employers will provide insights into the internship experience with respect to the international dimension of business education today.

In order to provide common assessment data across all courses in our business program, we have developed a set of common grading rubrics that faculty use to evaluate student performance in each course offered within the school. Faculty are asked to select one of our five generic rubrics available in the areas of oral presentation, writing, quantitative reasoning, student project, and information technology, and apply the rubric to evaluate skills as reflected in one student assignment or activity in each course they teach. The rubrics provide a four-point scoring guide with a brief description for a given score for each criterion. The rubric scores are gathered and summarized across topical areas within the school to give us an integrated assessment of student learning outcomes. Using common grading criteria has not only given us the opportunity to evaluate the success of our courses in achieving the overall student learning goals of our program, but has also standardized student expectations for their performances in each of these areas across courses. The integrated use of common grading rubrics was recognized by our AACSB peer review team as an innovative assessment tool that allows us to evaluate authentic student work across the school.

Although school-wide rubrics were originally developed for assessment of student learning outcomes by our faculty, we realized that we can expand the richness of the data collected with these rubrics if we request that employers apply these same rubrics in their evaluation of student interns, particularly in the areas of oral presentations and written material. Collection of these data is still in its infancy and the first reports from employers will come in this academic term. This modification to our assessment strategy represents another important additional step toward continuous improvement, giving us valuable feedback from our business community as to the readiness of our students to meet professional standards in use at the work site. Additionally, putting our grading standards in the hands of business professionals is an important invitation to them for comment and for improvement of the rubrics themselves.

Our experience with assessment of internships has also identified an opportunity for improving the assessment of learning in our classrooms. Just as we asked interns and employers to evaluate intern skills using the same categories and measures, faculty are now sharing the rubrics they are using for classroom learning assessment and encouraging students to use the rubrics for self-assessment. We plan to begin collection of these student self-assessments for analysis. Thus, student self-assessments, which have been useful in the evaluation cycle for the internship program, are now being adopted in our courses and represent a step in continuous improvement of classroom learning.

As improvements to the assessment techniques used are ongoing, we plan to use a 6-point scale on future evaluations to spread the evaluations out over a wider response scale. With a broader scale, the respondent will provide better measures of importance and performance levels for the skill areas. Additionally, we can regard the measurements as being interval scale data and determine the correlation between student and employer importance means using the more powerful Pearson correlation coefficient. Although the Spearman rank correlation coefficient was able to detect a significant relationship between ranking for relative importance as viewed by students and workplace supervisors for sample of 159 interns, we would like to be able to test for relationships within smaller groups of interns (e.g., interns doing an accounting internship). Similarly, a broader Likert scale will allow the use of parametric tests of differences in mean skill levels at the commencement and completion of an internship for smaller samples of internships.

Concerning future research in this area, we offer the following observations. A longitudinal study with students who did and who did not complete an internship could help determine whether skills gained were the result of the internship experience or simply related to skills acquired over a period of time. We recognize a limitation of our study is that our data were collected at only one university and only from students and employers engaged in business internships. Additional studies should include interns and their supervisors from different disciplines. Other types of experiential education, such as service learning and study abroad programs, could be included to determine if there were similar results in skills gained as a result of those experiences.

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