



BUILDING A BETTER EXTERNSHIP

How great externships can result in
100 percent placement rates

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Externships provide many benefits to career schools, students, employers and the community. When structured effectively, students have the opportunity to gain valuable experience to add to their resumes, and employers can benefit from an extended interview with a potential new hire. Externships can be crafted for just about any program – even those with no clinical or internship/externship requirements. Planned effectively, externships can help career schools achieve high placement rates and enhance brand and image.

Externships are great tools to address gainful employment and other regulatory issues. One of the best ways to counter bad press and accusations is with facts. Successful externships can result in high job statistics, enhanced relationships with and testimonies from employers, and a greater understanding by the community of the value of the for-profit sector. Externships can impact all areas of the career school and result in increased enrollment, retention, placement and public relations opportunities.

The following provides an outline of successful externship strategies employed at several career schools and colleges.

Start the process

To be successful, new initiatives often start with an advisory board, either formal or informal. Stakeholders discuss parameters such as budget, staff, where externships are to be held and for which programs, and how to craft an externship unique to their institution. Additionally, regulatory requirements also need to be considered at this time. Depending on your programs, externship experiences may have regulatory guidelines dictating required clock hours, skills and learning objectives.

Initial steps include identifying current and prospective externship sites. You may already have relationships with companies that allow your students to extern

there. If not, there are many companies and community resources to locate potential externship hosts. These include chambers of commerce and professional organizations related to your training, associations, unions and trade publications.

A benefit of reaching out to the community is the increased contact with decision-makers. They can learn the benefits of your institution as a source for training and staffing. In addition, as you meet contacts in your community, you learn about new jobs and meet people who can tell you about these openings plus any new training needs.

A current trend is to offer externship opportunities for *all* training programs, whether externships are required or not. Since career colleges typically serve individuals with little or no relevant work experience, this means it is a challenge for them to develop effective resumes. When externships are properly structured and required for all training, graduates gain work skills. In addition, they learn business and work ethics as well as soft skills, such as critical thinking, communications and teamwork, which rarely get taught in class. They have an increased opportunity to land a great first job and jump-start job retention and promotion. This helps you to meet your placement commitment as a career training provider. In addition, you have an increased ability to stay in touch with your graduates when you have to report placement success and possibly salary. In addition, when prospective students consider whether to enroll in your school or a competitor's, the school with the externships might win out!

Formalize the externship program

Externships must be run in a highly organized way to achieve results. If you are starting out, this is the opportunity to set them up right. If you already offer externships, this is the time to formalize them. First, determine if the training you offer requires externships specified by your regulatory agencies. If yes, what are the specifics in terms of clock hours, skills requirements, evaluation and time frames? These requirements will become the underpinnings of your externship program.

Evaluation for results and benefits

When you begin the process, reach out to your community to locate externship sites. Once you have found some matches, the next step is to formalize these relationships. This requires signed agreements. Typically, externship sites have their own agreements prepared by their legal departments showing liability, responsibilities and more. Your institution's externship agreement will outline what you expect: the number of hours your students will be at the site, the role of the on-site supervisor, the specific work to be performed, how often the student will get feedback and formal evaluations, and more.

For your students to be successful and ultimately offered full-time positions, they must be prepared. Preparation includes keeping the students' focus on placement and helping them to act as if they were taking part in an extended job interview. It means training them to believe they have the skills to successfully complete the externship. Most important, they need the mindset to assert themselves as valuable players so they can possibly be offered salaried positions!

Your externship advisory board can help determine how to train students to be successful externs. Requirements to consider include: completion of specific courses and required grades, demonstration of skills, employment readiness, self-confidence, ability to work with others, and more. Students typically benefit from having an externship mentor as their go-to person for immediate answers to questions and dilemmas.

When formalizing your externship program, documents outlining regulatory agency requirements, skills requirements, institution on-site and workplace coordinator responsibilities, and methods for tracking results can be helpful in making sure your externship program stays on track.

Routine check-in strategies must be built into any initiative. Surveys, questionnaires and other forms of feedback yield valuable information from students and externship supervisors. You need data to measure success and determine what changes are required. Most important, you have another way to stay connected to the community and workplace decision-makers. You have tools to continue to reach out to individuals and companies that can benefit from your institution as a source for training and employees.

Great externship programs can result in 100 percent placement, plus many more benefits. Your placement department may have a lot less work because of the work-ready training your graduates receive. Many careers require skills not always offered in the classroom, such as the use of new equipment or procedures, especially in middle- and high-skills jobs. This means that companies may have to spend weeks training new hires to meet their specific way of doing business. Much the way apprenticeships used to, externships can head off that problem and afford you the added benefit of being able to promote your graduates as being trained to meet employers' specific needs.

Schools with outstanding externship programs attract an increased number of qualified enrollments. There are more referral students from happy graduates as well as an increased number of community contacts. Retention increases because students are motivated to get to the externship stage of their training. You have the opportunity to reach out to the community to build job listings as well as additional externship sites. Most important, you enhance the image of the for-profit sector and reach out to an increased number of individuals whose lives you can help change with training.



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