

GROWING AN UNDERGRADUATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: SOME LESSONS LEARNED

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ABSTRACT

An entrepreneurship intern program faces unique challenges and embodies fundamental differences as compared to “garden variety” business internship programs. For example, although many entrepreneurs may put in extremely long days, often exceeding 12 hours, interns would not be expected to do the same. How does the intern know what it is really like to “walk a mile in the entrepreneur’s shoes?” This paper discusses lessons learned in growing an undergraduate entrepreneurship intern program at one institution, and provides a framework for other institutions that may wish to explore or implement an entrepreneurship internship program of their own.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because internships offer employers a low risk, try-before-you-buy proposition, they have been characterized as a “win-win” proposition. Internships also create linkages and dialogue between faculty and members of the business community. Administered properly, there are numerous opportunities to support a strong business community-university partnership through an Entrepreneurship Intern Program. However, adequate time and a commitment of resources, planning, and reporting must be incorporated into the design of a viable program in order to ensure its growth and development. An entrepreneurship internship differs from “garden variety” business and management internships. The nature of a regular internship versus an entrepreneurship internship is different relative to the level of commitment required of an organization. If an Entrepreneurship Intern Program is to be developed to its full potential, a “point person,” i.e., someone who would serve as a formally assigned liaison to connect students with employers is needed.

BACKGROUND

The author of this paper is presently the Entrepreneurship Intern Program Coordinator and an Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship in the Jennings A. Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. According to MTSU’s College of Business Web site (<http://business.web.mtsu.edu/dean/about.htm>): The Jones College has one of the largest full-time faculties accredited by AACSB International — The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business with over 3,800 majors and 125 faculty. The institution’s student population consists of approximately 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The time frame under discussion spans the one year period from August 2004 to August 2005. Murfreesboro is situated approximately thirty miles south (and slightly east) of Nashville, Tennessee, a city that is otherwise known as the “country music capital of the world.” Murfreesboro is in Rutherford County, Tennessee, which has enjoyed a period of robust

economic growth for several years. MTSU's growth has corresponded with the rapid growth and development of Rutherford County. In its April 15, 2005 issue, a *Daily News Journal* (newspaper, serving Rutherford County) article cited third quarter U.S. Department of Labor Statistics and reported: "Rutherford County is experiencing the fastest job growth in America" (Cathey, 2004).

Upon joining the faculty in August of 2004, the author of this paper was asked to serve as Program Coordinator of the Entrepreneurship Intern Program. The Entrepreneurship Internship Program is organized under MTSU's Entrepreneurial Studies Program, which offers both a major and a minor in entrepreneurship. Approximately eight core entrepreneurship course sections are offered during a given fall or spring semester, taught by four entrepreneurship faculty members (in addition to others who teach related courses, such as Advanced Business Planning and Small Business Management).

OVERVIEW AND INITIAL CHALLENGES

"Experience continues to be one of the key attributes any entry-level professional can offer a prospective employer, and internships provide one of the best ways for the ambitious to obtain it" (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000, p. 45). In short, internships often lead to jobs (Cannon, & Arnold, 1998). Because internships offer employers a low risk, try-before-you-buy proposition, they have also been characterized as a "win-win" proposition (Anonymous, 1994). Internships also create linkages and dialogue between faculty and members of the business community, which have been increasingly identified as highly desirable (Pearce, 1992). Many employers have embraced internships a valuable recruitment tool (Schmutte, 1985; Cannon, & Arnold, 1998). Based upon initial briefings, it was established that the entrepreneurship internship had been formally organized and was a program of study requirement for entrepreneurship majors. A one course release (from a 4/4 normal teaching load) was also granted. Course requirements, student and employer enrollment forms, internship performance evaluations (completed by employers), and additional guidelines were already firmly established and approved by the University's administration.

However, in previous instances some students had sought to circumvent the internship course requirement by requesting a course substitution. Further, it was suggested that a dedicated faculty member who was qualified and able to acquire and maintain relationships within the business community was necessary in order to ensure the growth of the Entrepreneurship Internship Program. One of the reasons that students had attempted to substitute courses was that the process of determining a possible internship site depended on individual contacts with various faculty who had cultivated contacts with members in the business community; however, a list had not been formally developed and housed in a centralized location. Essentially, a "point person," i.e., someone who would serve as a formally assigned liaison to connect students with employers was needed if the Entrepreneurship Program was to be developed to its full potential.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH STRATEGY

While the Entrepreneurial Studies Program maintained a Web presence (<http://mtsu.edu/~entre/>), the Entrepreneurship Intern Program had no such presence, and it was determined that a Web site

should be developed. This presence under discussion was not deemed to be just about technology “bells and whistles” (although it was held implicit that the program should look like it belonged in the modern world, at least). It was agreed that in order to leverage public relations and press relations opportunities, a “place” needed to be created such that any interest on the part of constituencies could be appropriately directed. In other words, it would require than a phone number and sign-up forms to begin creating a public image among entrepreneurial firms and the business community at large.

Although the creation of a dynamic (database driven) site remains as a technology objective of interest, a static site (otherwise known as a “brochure or catalog site”) was developed to serve immediate needs. In the former case, employers could eventually register online and indicate an interest in program participation. Discussions about the possibility of reciprocity were also held, but given a state-owned and operated computer system, this notion was recognized as problematic. In particular, a more sophisticated Web site without the constraints of state ownership would have been geared to feature business community sponsors and program participants. To translate the implications of this line of reasoning into a graphical presentation perspective, the site would be designed to acknowledge supporters and participants by incorporating logos and other art, to be supplied by the sponsors themselves. Unfortunately, this could be interpreted to constitute private advertising on a taxpayer supported system, so questions arose.

It did not seem like a good use of time to wade through the legal and administrative process of answering these questions in light of more immediate goals at hand. While there may be workarounds (or solutions brought to the surface through additional investigation), it was decided at a departmental level to table the idea, for the time being, at least. Thus, the Entrepreneurship Intern Program site was developed based on existing program guidelines and to provide an information resource as rapidly as possible, with other visions for site enhancements and interactivity under consideration for implementation at a later time. One advantage of the static design was that the Program Coordinator (and author of this paper) was able to immediately begin work and implement the creation of the site using personally owned software and existing skills. Database sites typically require the skills of advanced programming specialists. Reliance on external university resources or those of commercial vendors who may have submitted bids would have in all likelihood, slowed Web site development and deployment time considerably. Hence, the Web site was deployed relatively quickly, during the fall semester of 2004 (<http://mtsu.edu/~entrint>). A departmental level review of the site deemed the work product acceptable for the stated purpose of establishing a “respectable presence.”

Another purpose of the Web site was to service basic needs for information on the part of employers (both those with a possible interest and active participants) as well as students. The site incorporates all necessary forms (see Appendix) and states guidelines for participation. Links for “Student” and “Employer” sections are provided to provide explanations and guidelines to those two separate audiences (this is not to suggest that there are any “secrets”; any site visitor may access either section of the site). Advisors and entrepreneurship faculty are now able to point to the site, which has been proven in practice to satisfy most of the needs that students and employers have for background information, participation guidelines, and administrative forms. Once the Web site presence was created, it became a much easier matter

to refer members of the business community and community leaders to the existence of the program. Efforts were made to communicate quite clearly that MTSU and the business community should work together to create the type of partnership that fostered continued economic growth and prosperity, for the benefit of all concerned.

Rutherford County has a very proactive Chamber of Commerce, which in turn sponsors a strong economic development platform. Chamber and Small Business Development Center Directors, and other business community leaders were contacted directly (e.g., for discussions over lunch and through established Advisory Board meetings), and have been very supportive. On an individual basis, many entrepreneurial businesses are operated by extremely busy founders. Part of the overall strategy has been to acknowledge these day-to-day pressures, but at the same time, to suggest that if the entire community does not “come together” and “stay together” in supporting a progressive entrepreneurial culture, in the long run, everyone will suffer. Part of that culture suggests incubation, mentoring, internships, and active University-business community partnering in additional contexts. Community leaders have wholeheartedly agreed with this perspective, and we (at MTSU) consider this to be crucial to the success of our Program growth and development efforts.

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Content for this section is taken from MTSU’s Entrepreneurship Intern Program Web site (<http://mtsu.edu/~entrint>).

Internship Objectives

The purpose of the entrepreneurship intern program is to provide student interns with an opportunity to: develop professionally, acquire real-world entrepreneurial experiences, and apply classroom learning to the workplace.

Intern Qualifications

- Entrepreneurship Major
- Senior Standing (80+ semester hours)
- Completion of Required Courses:
 - BMOM 2900, Entrepreneurship
 - BMOM 1400, Introduction to Business

Academic Requirements

The student intern agrees to:

- Complete an internship application
- Meet with Internship Coordinator as requested
- Work a minimum of 225 hours for 3 hours of college credit
- Work in a company approved by the Internship Coordinator
- Perform in a professional manner and comply with employing company’s regulations and policies

- Maintain employing company's confidentialities
- Ask employer to complete the employer evaluation form provided by the Internship Coordinator and to fax the form to (615) 898-5438 by designated due date
- Submit an Internship Portfolio by designated due date
- Entrepreneur Interview—A typewritten summary of an interview with the employer. Interview questions will be provided by the Internship Coordinator.
- Reflective Paper—A final paper, minimum of two typewritten, double-spaced pages, written as a retrospective of the internship experience.
- Company Literature—Promotional/information brochures, etc. from the employing company.
- Daily Journal—Daily journal entries of internship activities and hours worked. Journal entries should be approximately five to ten sentences and can be used to compose the reflective paper.

Discussion

Students are strongly encouraged to position themselves within a situation that will likely (or at least possibly) serve as a stepping stone in their career progression. Academic assignments include activities that are designed to enhance the experience by emphasizing adequate reflection (Clark, 2003). Journals (Alm, 1996) have been recommended by some scholars and they have proven to be an effective tool within MTSU's Entrepreneurship Intern Program as well. Although academic credit is given, many students are eager to apply themselves and gain practical experience through their internship experiences (Tovey, 2001).

LESSONS LEARNED

An entrepreneurship internship differs from "garden variety" business and management internships. Most apparent, is the challenge of providing true entrepreneurial insights to students who may have substantially different views and workloads as compared to their assigned entrepreneurial mentors. Another key difference is that the entrepreneurship internship asks, usually of a small, sometimes struggling, but certainly amply challenged business founder, for precious time and resources. Larger, established corporations have formalized routines, HR processes and organizational structures, and do not find it as disconcerting to add one more individual to the staffing mix. Although it is hoped that interns in larger corporate settings are given appropriate challenges, the entrepreneurial internship asserts the need for high level contact with business owners, hence the nature of a regular internship versus an entrepreneurship internship is different relative to the level of commitment required of an organization.

Unique Challenges in Securing Entrepreneurship Intern Program Employer Sites

In essence, the entrepreneurial business can sometimes view the notion of taking on an intern as a distraction, because it must decide on a role, train, orient, and otherwise accommodate a new individual. The practical implications of this suggest everyday illustrations such as a small business owner having to find space in an already cramped office space, obtain equipment for an intern's use, and otherwise accommodate someone who had not been in the entrepreneur's plans. The personal equivalent could be likened to the announcement of an unplanned pregnancy.

Further, in an ideal situation, the entrepreneur should agree to provide deep insight into his or her experience, which might include the disclosure of highly sensitive information.

Other concerns are suggested by the pairing of interns with entrepreneurs. It is logical that interns would want to work with firms that are similar, if not exactly, like the type of business that the intern would eventually like to start on his or her own. This means that the entrepreneur may be training an up-and-coming competitor—something that the entrepreneur might be naturally reluctant to do. In a few instances, this dilemma has been solved by negotiating non-compete agreements with time and geographical restrictions. In one instance, the intern was coached to negotiate an agreement that provided for the expansion of the entrepreneur's business, providing the internship suggested that a longer lasting relationship should ensue afterwards (by adding an additional location to an existing chain of karate studios, which was operated by the intern at the end of his academic training).

The Directory Mentality

We believe that MTSU undergraduate students are representative of typical undergraduate students in terms of their level of preparedness, yet anxiousness about the challenges that they will face in the so-called “real world” (Wilson, 2000, p.17). However, as a whole, students often inquire about the Entrepreneurship Intern Program with the same employment-seeking mentality and approach that students have when they are seeking traditional employment. Other scholars have observed that students may not apply the skills that they have learned in areas such as marketing to their own job search (McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon & Kling, 2003). As such, one of the first questions students often ask is, “what openings are available?” As a whole, students also may have a tendency to procrastinate and are not necessarily as opportunistic as they (or anyone with entrepreneurial aspirations) should be. Without coaching to instruct students to “sell the sizzle” to prospective internship employers, students may simply promote that they are seeking an opportunity (for themselves, which is not a particularly effective promotional appeal) as compared to offering skills and assistance in exchange for gaining entrée to an entrepreneurial business. This coaching, we believe, is vital for arming students with the necessary skills to identify and secure the best possible internship relative to their own abilities and aspirations.

The development of an ever growing list of prospective placement sites is an objective of the Intern Program Coordinator, and that list has been enlarged over the past year. However, students with a “pick an internship from a directory mentality” require additional, and sometimes substantial, one-on-one training in prospect research, information interviewing, negotiation, and personal selling techniques. This is a time consuming process, to teach the alternate mindset of (entrepreneurial) opportunism and networking skills, after (hopefully) guiding the student to find his or her entrepreneurial calling, if one is not apparent in the first place. In short, there are some Internship Program applicants who are still not sure what they want to do when they grow up. The positive aspect of the above situation is that by providing guidance, students can engage in the necessary introspection and search process to identify through networking, where they might fit. In some instances, coaching must start with standard career counselor's questions such as, “do you like working indoors or outdoors?” Students are also taught to engage in information interviews with entrepreneurs and to sell the benefits that they may offer to the entrepreneur (for instance, they could write a business or marketing plan, which as we know, often does not exist).

This differs from the approach that they typically would take, announcing all over town that they are “looking for a job.”

Be Careful About Designing Program Criteria

Some of the original documentation and guidelines have required alterations in order to respond to situations that have arisen in the course of administering the Program. As an example, the previously published guidelines dictated that students would complete their internships locally. Generally, it is the case that students will do just that. However, in a few instances students have proposed internships that make excellent sense in the context of their entrepreneurial goals, but have not met the specified geographical criteria. In one particular case, an Asian student was interested in an import/export business, and by leveraging family and personal connections in Singapore, the student had found an outstanding opportunity. Hence, the notion of a geographic restriction was challenged, and subsequent internships have been designed to reflect the possibility that a viable internship might arise anywhere.

In another instance which challenged our assumptions, a quadriplegic student was allowed to work across multiple placements (often conducting research and fulfilling obligations via the Internet). One of these assignments allowed him to conduct a feasibility analysis on behalf of a venture capital firm. Another assignment paired the student with a MTSU physics professor who had developed a new type of sensor with possible commercial applications; the professor and university collaborated with the student to develop a business and marketing plan to exploit the intellectual property opportunities associated with the sensor. In both cases, the student’s performance was highly praised, and the internship clients were very satisfied.

SO WHAT? IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION

Institutions that are considering an entrepreneurially oriented internship program should be encouraged by the range of benefits that they might enjoy, but should also be advised that operating an effective program is a significant undertaking, not to be taken lightly on the part of community leaders, program participants (i.e., employers), or administrators. Small businesses may benefit directly by gaining fresh insights and access to assistance that they would otherwise not be able to afford or would not have considered. Whole communities benefit by creating entrepreneurial cultures, through which personal and small business growth contributes to economic growth and development. Students benefit by gaining hands on experience and accelerating their personal learning curves whether they find themselves in a traditional employment relationship, or starting a business of their own.

CONCLUSION

Students’ summative reports overwhelmingly suggest satisfaction with their internship experiences through MTSU’s Entrepreneurship Intern Program. Employer evaluations suggest an equally high level of satisfaction with regard to their own experiences with the students. As needs in the business community are in a constant state of flux, it is necessary for MTSU and similarly involved institutions to adapt. Administered properly, there are numerous opportunities

to support a strong business community-university partnership (Neumann, and Banghart, 2001) through an Entrepreneurship Intern Program. However, adequate time and a commitment of resources, planning, and reporting must be incorporated into the design of a viable program in order to ensure its growth and development.

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