

Accounting Student Internship Programs: Practical and Effective Administration

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Accounting internships are ideal supplements to traditional accounting education. The AICPA encourages fieldwork to develop skills needed to succeed in the accounting profession. Internships can be difficult to administer given barriers to finding and completing internships. This paper reviews concerns associated with accounting internships, summarized from the student, faculty, and employer perspectives, and offers practical solutions. The concerns are organized into the six Ws of accounting internships: Why are internships important; When can internships be completed; Who is ready for an internship; Where will students find internships; How can internships be encouraged; and What are the criteria for internship credit.

INTRODUCTION

The AICPA Core Competency Framework identifies a set of skills-based competencies needed by all students entering the accounting profession. The AICPA advocates, via the framework, that accounting curriculum focus on skills (as opposed to subject/content area) due to the ever-changing profession. The three main categories of skills, or competencies, are functional competencies relating to technical skills, personal competencies comprised of individual attributes and values, and broad business perspectives competencies representing an understanding of business. These competencies are emphasized and tested extensively on the CPA examination, especially in the simulations (AICPA Core Competency Framework).

The AICPA provides accounting educators some teaching strategies and techniques that address the core competencies (AICPA Teaching Strategies). One strategy noted is fieldwork via accounting internships. Accounting internships provide a unique, hands-on experience to develop the functional skills (such as reporting, research, and leveraging technology), personal skills (including interaction and communication), and broad business perspectives (such as strategic and critical thinking) needed to succeed in the accounting profession. Internships are ideal supplements to traditional lectures, writing assignments, and team projects.

Accounting educators realize and appreciate the importance and value of internships. Articles and websites highlight internship benefits to students (competency development and possible full-time positions) and to professionals (recruiting tools and additional hands-on assistance, especially during busy

season). However, integrating internships into the college accounting curriculum is often difficult. Meyer (2015) provides valuable general guidance in this area, including “be responsive to employer requests” and “prepare students for the application process.” In this article, we expand on this guidance and provide specific, practical methods to incorporate internships into the curriculum by addressing the “why, when, where, who, hoW, and what” of curriculum-based internships, the six Ws of internships. These internships concerns are viewed from three perspectives (students, employers, and the university) followed by distinct strategies and tools to facilitate internships, thereby facilitating development of the core competencies of accounting majors.

THE SIX WS OF INTERNSHIPS

The process of getting students into internships is a relationship among three parties: the students, the university, and the employer. As the process unfolds, the questions and concerns of the three parties become evident. A non-exhaustive list of these concerns is presented in Table 1. The remainder of this paper describes these concerns and how accounting departments can address them.

TABLE 1
INTERNSHIP CONCERNS OF STUDENTS, EMPLOYERS, AND FACULTY

Six Ws	Student Concerns	Employer Concerns	University Concerns
WHY are internships important?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work experience • Full-time job opportunities in accounting • Satisfaction with accounting career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to potential full-time employees • Additional staff when needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core competencies development • Value of learning experience
WHEN can internships be completed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic progress • Effect on current job • Scholarship requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seasonal needs • Full-time versus part-time internships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum requirements • Course scheduling to accommodate internships
WHO is ready for an internship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical skills • Professionalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work ethic • Need for supervision • Ability to take criticism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student representation of department/university
WHERE will students find internships?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer connections • Daily commute • In or out of local community • International student requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicizing employment opportunities • Availability of internships
HOW can internships be encouraged?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of internships • Credit versus no-credit • Paid versus unpaid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid versus unpaid • Duties of the intern 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student preparation for internship
WHAT are the criteria for internship credit?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree plan integration • Tuition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality • Evaluations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirements and grading

WHY Are Internships Important?

Concerns

A common concern among students nearing graduation is the juxtaposition of the inability to get a job without experience, and the inability to get experience without a job. Accounting majors often wonder if they need accounting experience before they can get their first full-time accounting job and how they can achieve it. Accounting majors are also concerned with landing full-time positions and job satisfaction once they are employed. The employers are similarly concerned about finding full-time employees that will be successful and enjoy their career path. They also are pressed with short term issues; specifically, obtaining temporary assistance during peak busy seasons.

Accounting faculty have concerns of a more academic nature. There is a vast body of knowledge accounting majors are expected to obtain while getting an accounting degree, including technical accounting knowledge, functional skill development, personal skill development, and broad business perspectives that will prepare them for higher level accounting classes as well as entry-level positions and a successful career. It is often challenging to address all aspects of student learning in the traditional classroom setting format.

Solutions

Internships have been proven to address all these concerns. Accounting literature has been fruitful in the praises of internships, thus providing more support for the AICPA teaching strategy recommendation of internships. Maletta *et al.* (as cited in Apostolou *et al.*, 2001) found that work experience benefited student knowledge acquisition within the classroom, thus improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process. Krausz *et al.* (as cited in Apostolou *et al.*, 2001) demonstrated that the combination of work experience and prior accounting coursework improved the performance in graduate-level accounting classes.

Beck and Halem (as cited in Apostolou *et al.*, 2010) surveyed students on their perceptions of internship benefits and found that the internship led to learning in the areas of adaptability, interpersonal skills, and working under pressure. Martin *et al.* (as cited in Apostolou *et al.*, 2010) performed a similar study and found that completing an internship experience increased students' positive perceptions in the areas of accounting knowledge and confidence.

Mauldin *et al.* (as cited in Apostolou *et al.*, 2010) found that among all college job experiences, accounting internship experience is more relevant in hiring decisions. Marriott *et al.* (as cited in Apostolou *et al.*, 2013) surveyed audit trainees and recently qualified accountants and concluded that work experience prepares one better for a career in auditing than examination-based learning.

This body of research supports the importance of internships. However, the practical administration of internships can be challenging due to the logistics of managing collegiate requirements and job requirements. These practical concerns among students, university, and employers are addressed by exploring the remaining five Ws (when, who, where, how, what) of accounting internship programs.

WHEN Can Internships Be Completed?

Concerns

Internships require a considerable time investment from students and firms. For example, employment during busy season at a public accounting firm is often a forty hour per week commitment for interns. Some students are hesitant to take a semester off from classes for an internship, as it can derail their academic progress toward degree completion. A semester off for an internship may also have other unintended consequences such as giving up a current part-time job or loss of scholarship funding if the scholarship requires completion of a set number of hours in a given semester or time period. Some students believe they can manage an internship as well as a regular course load schedule, often leading to unfavorable outcomes on the job and in the classroom.

Employers reflect similar concerns in connection to the timing of internships; often students want to work in summer when the employer has needs during the fall and spring semesters. Internships often require many hours, meeting times, and perhaps overnight travel. Employer needs may not allow for the stop-and-go work of students who leave for class at times during the work day. Accounting department faculty must decide how an internship will fit into the curriculum and how students can schedule them in a way that makes the internship attractive and plausible.

Curriculum Development Solutions

Accounting departments can address many of these concerns with varied course offerings and curriculum development. Some options include condensed classes, online offerings, and expanded night-time and summer offerings. These allow students the opportunity to complete the required hours so that progress toward graduation is not delayed and scholarship requirements are not in jeopardy.

Departments can offer a half-semester internships and condensed, concentrated courses for students seeking the ability to work forty or more hours per week. These internships are especially advantageous in the first half of the spring semester, when accounting firms need extra assistance during busy season. Exhibit 1 shows how a typical internship student’s schedule might look. To make this viable, departments should offer two upper-division accounting courses in condensed, eight-week classes that begin in the second half of the semester. This will enable students to focus on the internship during the first half of the semester and focus on classes the remaining half. If additional hours are needed to for a student to carry a full course load, online courses should be available. Online course offerings do not necessarily need to be accounting if business core or elective courses are available.

EXHIBIT 1. HALF-SPRING INTERNSHIPS SCHEDULE

JANUARY	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL
For-Credit Internship (3 hours) Student works full time on internship; Is not on campus.		Condensed 4000-level Accounting Course (3 hours)	
		Condensed 4000-level Accounting Course (3 hours)	
Online Course(s) (3-6 hours)			

There are four factors that are critical to the success of the half-semester internship model. The first and most important is finding employers who are interested in full-time interns for only two months. The second factor is student advising. Students need to know semesters before they apply for an internship that these classes will be available so that they can plan their course schedules. It is not practical to offer all classes in the condensed format, so students need to be ready to take the designated courses in the internship semester. The third factor is consistency in scheduling. If students are expecting specific classes will be available, the department needs to make sure they are offered. Departments should consider the demand for condensed course and full-term course sections. The fourth factor for success is managing the course in an accelerated session. Similar to summer courses, there are challenges and benefits to meeting a class for six hours per week as opposed to three.

Other Solutions

Faculty should develop relationships with employers in the community, and investigate their ability to hire interns in the summer or part-time. Firms may not be aware of the student concerns, and might find ways to adjust the timing and requirements of internships. Faculty advisors should also encourage students to find out about the rules of particular scholarships. For example, some scholarships require completion of a requisite number of hours in a year (including summer) while some have semester-by-semester requirements. Some scholarship requirements can be put on hold for one semester; very often there is an appeals process that requires a written request from the student and/or the academic advisor.

Finally, for those students who don't want to give up a current job for a short-term internship, discuss the potential long-term benefits of the internship including salary differences, opportunity for full-time offers, skills development, and work experience. For some students, keeping their current job and foregoing the internship may be the best option. Advisors should let those students know the value of all kinds of work experience, not just accounting, because it demonstrates responsibility and signifies skills they may have such as customer service.

WHO Is Ready For An Internship?

Concerns

Many concerns associated with "when" to do an internship is better asked as "who" is ready for an internship. Some upper-level accounting students worry that they don't have the technical and functional skills needed to do the job, while other students desire an internship before completing any upper-level accounting courses. Other students are concerned about personal skills, especially communication skills and professional demeanor.

Employers are concerned with the work ethic of the students they hire for internships. They desire reliable, independent students for internship positions. Employers are also concerned with how students will receive feedback and constructive criticism.

Accounting faculty have two primary concerns associated with who they will recommend for internships, both related to the strength of the relationship between the accounting department and their network of employers. The short-term concern is how an individual intern will perform on the job. The long-term concern is how the performance of current interns will affect job opportunities for students in the future.

Solutions

Accounting faculty should set a policy that they will neither endorse nor give course credit to an intern that does not meet minimum criteria. Criteria might include completion of a certain number of accounting hours prior to accepting the internship and minimum GPA requirements. Using a specific threshold (i.e., a C in Intermediate Accounting) as a prerequisite makes it easy to address concerns about for-credit internships. However, this faculty endorsement is not applicable if a student chooses not to receive credit for an internship.

To address employer and faculty concerns, employers should be encouraged to seek references from accounting faculty to supplement the interview process. Faculty insight might include completion of class work and regular attendance in class, which may predict student performance in the workplace. If the employer conducts on-campus interviews, a faculty-employer session (e.g., meeting, lunch) is a great way for the faculty to share thoughts about students. Faculty should be careful to offer their opinions without revealing grades, other information protected by FERPA, or protected-class information.

Faculty advisors are probably best positioned to determine if a student is ready for an internship. Internships should be a topic for discussion in every advising session. Personal skill and professional concerns can be addressed in the classroom as well as in student workshops. For example, accounting clubs can host events on a variety of topics, including professional attire and communication development workshops.

WHERE Will Students Find Internships?

Concerns

The primary concern of students and employers is connecting with each other when an opportunity exists. Employers rely on college accounting departments and career services to publicize their openings, and students usually rely only on those opportunities that come from the university's network of employers. However, the university network might not produce enough internships for interested students or might not meet the interests of students. Accounting faculty must find good ways to make the needed connections and determine whether there are a sufficient number of internships available.

Students have many other concerns. Transportation for their daily commute may be a concern if the student doesn't have a reliable vehicle. If an internship is outside the local community, room and board may be an issue. International students may have trouble finding an internship if the employer does not normally hire non-residents. These concerns, often seem detrimental to obtaining an internship, are issues that can be addressed by the accounting faculty.

Solutions

Some employers prefer working with university career centers while others prefer working directly with the college accounting departments. This varies by university and employer. Students find many internships through job postings established by the accounting department and/or the university career service center. These openings can be publicized in a variety of ways, including club meetings (e.g., Meet the Firms events), emails to students, and website job postings. Whatever the preference, accounting departments should centralize job opportunity announcements for the benefits of both employers and students. Employers should have a main contact on campus to alleviate the burden of contacting multiple people and department for the same position. However, relationships often exist that are outside of established channels, and a former student may contact their favorite teacher about a new opportunity. Communication among the various points of contact is critical to collecting all the internship opportunities. Students benefit by having a centralized source to locate current opportunities. For a low-tech, on-campus solution, bulletin boards are still a great option. However, a more high-tech, online method of posting internship opportunities adds flexibility for the students. Using a blog platform to manage internship postings is an easy way to create an online list. The advantages of a blog include ease of posting, little need for Internet-posting skills, automatic dating of postings, and reverse chronological order with newest posts at the top.

Students interested in an internship should be encouraged to seek out internships opportunities that are not just part of the university contact network. There are numerous coveted employment opportunities that are not directly reported to university representatives. This is particularly true for internships in governmental and not-for-profit accounting. Students should review announcements on summary websites (for example, www.usajobs.gov/studentsandgrads and similar state websites) as well as specific organization websites. Departments should keep a running list of summary websites, but encourage students to actively seek other postings. Another option is for students to contact organizations directly. Organizations, especially local not-for-profits, may create an internship for an ambitious student.

Departments can alleviate transportation issues for students by looking for on-campus opportunities, such as within the university's finance, accounts payable, or internal audit departments. When lodging is an issue (e.g., another city, during summer), finding local professionals to host students for the internship period is an option.

Finally, solving the problem for international students can be accomplished by gaining a better understanding of the student visa requirements. The university office for international programs has the ability to give students a temporary social security number for the purpose of an internship, but the internship must be "related to their area of study and authorized prior to starting any work by the Designated School Official" (USCIS, 2016). In addition, student visas can be extended after graduation for optional practical training. Employers need to know that international students on a student visa do not require sponsorship like employees seeking permanent residence, so there are no administrative barriers

to hiring an international student as an intern. Employers who use internships as a stepping stone to hiring full-time employees still may not be interested in hiring international interns. Therefore, international students may be more successful at finding internships with companies that have international operations.

HOW Can Internships Be Encouraged?

Concerns

Most students probably understand the concept of an internship, but have not thought practically about the benefits and drawbacks of internships or how to go about finding and scheduling an internship. Students also may not understand the potential to earn college credit and money on an internship. Employers have their own concerns, including the appropriate pay rate. There is a wide range of ideas on the hourly wage of an accounting intern. Some employers pay as high as the hourly equivalent of an entry level position, while some compensate closer to minimum wage or offer unpaid internships. While unpaid internships are not common in public and corporate accounting, they often exist in not-for-profit organizations. Employers are also concerned about the duties and responsibilities that are appropriate for an intern. Accounting departments may find it difficult to deliver a consistent message to students about internships and their benefits and drawbacks.

Solutions

To get an internship program running smoothly, accounting departments should open the lines of communication with students and employers. Academic advisors certainly have the ability to introduce the idea of internships to advisees one-on-one. However, hosting an internship meeting targeted at sophomores and juniors is a great way to deliver a consistent message that helps students start planning for all the requirements of internships so they are prepared in their junior or senior year to complete an internship. During the meeting, faculty should outline the benefits of the internship, including professional development, career awareness, and post-graduation job opportunities. This is also an ideal time to discuss possible course credit for the internship and the six Ws of internships noted throughout this paper.

Accounting departments and employers should share expectations about pay and duties, particularly if there are requirements in these areas related to for-credit internships. For example, if the university requires 120 hours of accounting work be performed for the student to receive credit, employers need to know what those hours should and should not include (i.e., no clerical work).

WHAT Are The Criteria For Internship Credit?

Concerns

When considering an internship for credit, students are concerned about how the hours will fit into their degree plan. They also may not realize, but should be concerned with, the requirement to pay tuition for a course to receive internship credit. College accounting departments also have many concerns associated with internships, including ensuring learning occurs when college credit is associated, how to evaluate learning, and how to assign a grade for the internship experience. Some employers are concerned with confidentiality of client information. Other employers are hesitant to give a poor evaluation to a student, either because they do not want to adversely affect the student or possibly subject themselves to legal action.

Solutions

Faculty advisors and those hosting internship information meetings should describe how an internship fits into the accounting curriculum. Whether the internship is required, an elective, or one of several choices to fill a requirement, it is important to let students know if university tuition is a requirement for the course in order to receive credit. To avoid paying tuition, some students may opt to do an internship without receiving college credit. Unfortunately, that makes it harder for accounting departments to keep track of student experiential learning, as they will not be required to document their work experience.

To address the department's concerns, a formalized set of requirements should be established for all for-credit internships. To establish learning goals, the first document should be a contract among three parties: the employer (supervisor), the student, and the accounting department (a specific faculty member). This learning agreement should document the identity of the parties, the job description, the learning objectives, skills development, and evaluation methods. Approval by the accounting department indicates that these elements are sufficient for receiving credit for the internship. Accounting departments should consult the university's legal counsel while constructing the document. It may be advantageous to the university to include statements that outline the university's responsibilities with regard to the internship (e.g., grading), exempt the university from certain responsibilities (e.g., for workplace or travel related injury), identify state university policies (e.g., equal-opportunity employment), and document student responsibilities (e.g., conduct, confidentiality). With these types of statements, a notarized signature may also be needed.

After the standards for the internship are established, the student and employer need to report their progress toward the goals of the learning agreement. A weekly journal from the student is a good way to collect information on the types of work done (e.g., bank reconciliations, audit of cash, scanning, filing) and the amount of time spent (if there is a minimum number of hours required for credit). Employer evaluations allow feedback on the student progress in achieving the learning goals and skills development. Two evaluations, one at mid-internship and one at the end of the work period, are useful in showing progress, but may not be appropriate for shorter internships. Finally, because a for-credit internship is associated with learning, interns should submit documents that reflect on their experiences and what they learned. Two methods for collecting this information are a self-evaluation and a term paper that indicates the student's perceptions of learning outcomes, how the internship related to their previous accounting courses, and how it will affect their future career.

Confidentiality is important in many of these areas. Students should be instructed not to reveal any client information in their weekly journals, final evaluation, or term paper. Employers may be concerned about their client confidentiality and company policies and employees. Departments could choose to allow employers to approve these student-prepared documents before they are submitted; however, this might lead students to be less than candid about their experiences. A better solution may be to include confidentiality statement in the learning agreement on the part of all parties, so if a student does reveal something, the university is bound by confidentiality as well. Employers may also choose not to negatively evaluate a student or not to evaluate them at all. Departments should be prepared to evaluate the student in these situations. With respect to grading, departments should have criteria to determine a course grade. Grades could be based on points assigned to the various documents or based on performance.

SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

This paper is a collection of all the major administrative issues and practical concerns associated with students internships; it addresses the concerns from the perspectives of all parties involved. Although there is an abundance of research addressing the importance and value of internships, there is an opportunity to research some of the more practical aspects. There is little research about student viewpoints after the completion of accounting internships and the obstacles of obtaining and completing an internship. Longitudinal studies that compare students who have and have not completed internships throughout their academic and professional careers could be an interesting topic. More research on the relative importance of internships from the employer perspective may be useful in driving the curriculum and assurance of learning. Finally, researchers may wish to compare the internship opportunities available to traditional and online students as well as the job performance of each group.

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