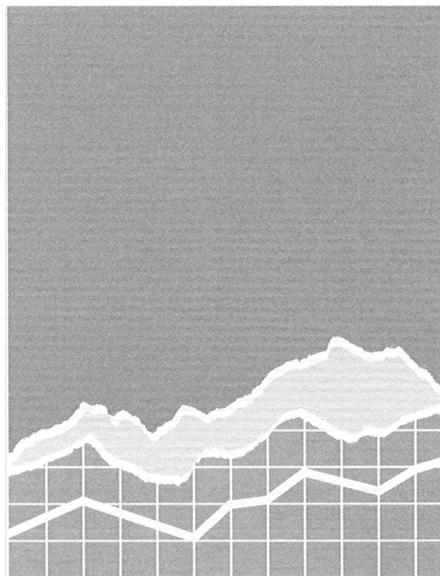


# **International Business Internships: Preparing Students for Business Without Borders**

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# **INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS INTERNSHIPS: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR BUSINESS WITHOUT BORDERS**

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## **Introduction**

The importance of internships for international business majors has been trumpeted in business education literature over the last quarter century. In a recent study, Webb et al., (1999) surveyed 99 global managers as to the key characteristics of successful international business programs. Global managers rated student internships with firms abroad and student internships with international firms in the U.S. high on the list along with foreign language expertise, study abroad, and the knowledge of content areas. A seminal study by the RAND Institute (Bikson & Law, 1994) explored the ways in which college programs prepare students for success upon entering the global corporate arena. The RAND Report noted that multinational corporations seek job candidates who have successfully demonstrated knowledge and on-the-job skills in their specific career field. European business schools have long recognized the need for internships and study abroad and, as a result, are preparing students more effectively for international trade than are U.S. business schools (Webb et al., 1999). Currently, only three percent of U.S. college students have studied or interned abroad (Collins & Davidson, 2002).

Despite the call for first-hand experience, a disconnect continues between the needs of U.S. firms and U.S. business schools. Bikson & Law (1994) posit that

“corporate representatives do not believe that colleges encourage students to gain work experience relevant to their professional goals” and they believe that “faculty for the most part are likely to regard work while completing a baccalaureate degree as a necessary evil rather than a learning and developmental opportunity” (p.24). Additionally, the RAND Report found that corporations valued recent undergraduates’ knowledge of academic subject matter significantly less than prior work performance, cognitive skills (ability to learn independently, problem-solving ability, decision-making and innovativeness) and social/personal skills (flexibility, openness to new ideas, ability to communicate effectively in writing and in speech). Yet, “corporate representatives do not believe that colleges focus on developing these skills and qualities” (p. x).

The authors are certain that another reason exists for the paucity of required internship programs at U.S. business schools. Internship programs are difficult to develop and manage. Collins & Davidson (2002) agree that developing internship programs is even more difficult in international education. Despite perceived difficulties in developing and managing internship programs, in the present article the authors will describe how a model internship program at a top undergraduate international business program can be a part of an academic unit and without significant additional institutional resources. The authors will discuss key issues in designing and managing a successful undergraduate internship program will be presented, with descriptions of strategies for cost-effective implementation.

### **San Diego State University’s Model Internship Program**

San Diego State University's undergraduate international business program, ranked 12th in the nation (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2002) requires a one-two semester internship as part of its interdisciplinary program. Students must either intern with an international firm in the U.S. or with a firm abroad. The internship requires a minimum 150 hours of work that serves as the content for a three-credit course. Currently, 150 international business majors enroll in the program per year and 1,300 students have successfully completed an internationally oriented internship since it was established in 1989.

Eight-five percent of the internships have been completed with international firms in the U.S., while 15% have been completed with firms internationally. Internships have been located in 38 nations -- countries ranging from Vietnam to Qatar and including 14 European, 7 Asian, 2 former soviet Union, 11 North-Central-South American, and 4 Middle Eastern nations. The percentage of internships with firms abroad is quickly increasing due to the willingness of exchange partner institutions to provide internships as a part of the study abroad experience. Thirty-six students interned abroad in FY 2001.

Students intern in a variety of firms and organizations and perform a variety of internationally related tasks. Every year, SDSU's Internship Program generates position listings from 85 private businesses annually, as well as 25 government offices, 20 international business-networking associations, and a wide variety of non-profit organizations. Interest from the business community arises from student research and program alumni who, in effect, provide free advertising of the benefits to organizations that employ interns from this university program. Companies contact SDSU's Internship Program after hearing of successful internships either from business contacts from who

have listed with us, or from our student alumni who become established businessmen and women. Companies range in size from one-person entrepreneurs to multinational corporations. These have included such diverse industries as Sony (both in U.S. offices and offices in Japan), IBM, Sun Systems, Qualcomm, Mercedes-Benz, Kyocera, Deutsche Bank, Hewlett Packard, AT&T's International Division, Marriott Hotels, Merrill Lynch, Costco, Siemens, Paramount Pictures, Gallo Wine Co., and the Los Angeles Dodgers.

### **Program Mission and Procedures**

The academic goal of the internship program is to educate students in the realm of career definition, planning, resume development, and networking. Confidence building and skills development, especially in terms of improved abilities in a second language usage and computer expertise, are the stepping-stones that students take in this course. Ultimately, many students determine a field they want to pursue after graduation, perhaps even being offered a full-time position. Or, just as valuable a result occurs if they eliminate a career field they had wanted to explore but decide not to continue after the internship experience.

The majority of internships are unpaid. SDSU's international business program leadership believes that the experience garnered in the internship far surpasses the value of a salary earned during the internship.

The unique nature of the internship program for international business students is that the international business faculty consider it to be an integral part of the curriculum in the major. While most business students must rely on a campus-wide career services

center for employment direction, the international business students at SDSU work with a professor in their own discipline to focus on field-specific positions made available exclusively through program contacts with the international business community.

### **The Perfect Match**

One of the questions posed most frequently by new participants in the program is: "How does an academic program place these numbers of students in internship positions that match each student's needs with the company's needs?" The answer speaks to the nature of an academic program, as opposed to an employment agency or a career service office. The program's mission is not to find students their jobs, but rather to educate international business students about the nature of one or more potential careers.

Students begin by going through exercises to identify not only the type of work they would like to pursue (e.g., marketing or management), but also target industries of interest. They work with their professor to identify correct contacts in companies of interest, e.g. the Human Resources officer or the Vice President of Marketing or International Sales. If specific areas cannot be identified, students may choose to work for a one of a variety of valuable networking associations, such as the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce or the Organization of Women in International Trade.

Feedback on resumes is provided; e.g., internship resumes often list students, skills rather than their work history (given that companies know a priori that interns have little or no work experience.) Feedback to students on interview skills is also necessary, since few interns will have experience with interviewing.

The search for companies with which to interview is at the heart of the course's educational experience. It involves the following:

- Identifying appropriate companies or job-type;
- Networking and contacting possible supervisors;
- Resume development, specific to interns' skills;
- Interview preparation.

The professor directing the International Business Internship Program at SDSU (the senior author of this paper) is an economist, so the matching problem has been approached with a philosophical perspective relying upon the "invisible hand." Almost 15 years of experience in this program points to the reliability of this approach. Adler's self-described role is to guide students in exploring the possibilities of those careers, and inspire students to acquire experiences that will further the wide variety of individual goals regarding those careers after graduation. Thus, the professor directing the internship program does not place any student. Rather, the internship office works with each student to brainstorm about the myriad of options, to focus on one-to-three possibilities, and then to begin the necessary research involved in securing an interview within the target fields or industries. The difficulty of matching students with companies is far less of a problem when students and companies self-select one another based upon perceived potential benefits to each.

The Internet is a valuable tool for creating potential matches. Adler has developed an extensive website ([www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~ibintern](http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~ibintern)) that lists company details for firms seeking internships. This Position List, exclusively available for students enrolled in the Internship Program, can be accessed on-line by both students and companies with

passwords. Furthermore, students are required to create a one-page résumé on the internship's website that can be accessed on-line by companies seeking interns with specific qualifications.

The key to successful internships is reliance on a self-selection process that occurs between the student and the company supervisor. Each party has a vested interest in making the best possible choice about the match between a student intern and a company where success is likely. The professor's role is to be a facilitator acting in an advisory capacity. Most importantly, Adler teaches students that traditional approaches to university learning -- a focus on the next grade on an exam or student paper -- ignore the fact that the student's lifetime will include 40+ years in a career. The time to begin brainstorming and gathering information on career options is before graduation, even though few classes before this have encouraged students to focus on career options.

For example, a student interested in the international fashion industry could work for a custom brokerage to acquire a general understanding of importing and exporting. Students seeking internships in this field have also contacted specific companies such as clothing manufacturers or retail sellers of French clothing, or a company such as Pier 1 that imports ethnic items. Another student might determine that (s)he wants to work for a firm which focuses on a specific nation, rather than a specific product. In this case, the advisor might suggest internships with importers of Italian products, such as marble. Alternatively, a student may feel that the field of marketing or human resources is the area (s)he wants to target, and so the type of product or nation(s) involved are less important than the type of work experience.

Many internships in other countries can be developed by students themselves, and the professor's role is to provide information on how to network and locate contacts through sources in the target country. Campus support of summer travel at SDSU has also allowed Adler to focus some effort on developing specific programs in host countries where SDSU interns can participate in international business projects. Examples include summer internships for groups of SDSU students working through companies networked within a Chamber of Commerce-type organization in Okinawa. Another program operating in Costa Rica provides summer interns from SDSU's program with business experiences in the context of sustainable development in Central America. To meet the demand for internships abroad, Adler also relies on the program's website that provides links to a variety of specific companies worldwide that locate internships in specific countries on a fee basis.

A detailed, user-friendly interactive website for the program is key to providing on-going information updates and for enhancing participants' ability to interact as a class. The nature of the international business internship course is that students are required to obtain knowledge off-campus. Therefore, a necessary consequence is the lack of weekly interaction with their professor and other students in the class. Furthermore, creating the transition between the classroom and the world of work is an outcome that is not commonly shared by most academic courses that end after one semester. For these reasons, Adler provides year-round support to students via office hours and Internet contacts--email and on-line chat rooms--so that individuals, specific issues can be addressed or can be shared.

## **Program Operations**

From a campus perspective, the International Business Internship Program provides a forum for students and companies to interact in a great variety of ways, and on an order of magnitude less likely to occur when students are only in traditional classroom settings. Thus, the professor directing the program must be viewed as offering a unique course experience. It is possible to offer students and companies some face-to-face contact and on-going monitoring if the supervising professor is awarded course credit for offering the internship class. Though students do not meet in a traditional lecture setting, the demands on the professor to work with each student individually, and each company as well, imply that a specific course must be structured around this topic. At SDSU, Adler offers two internship courses, 40% of her total assignment.

The student who participates in the program enrolls for three units of senior level course credit -- and students, primary responsibility is to secure a successful interview and work for 150 hours within a one-year period. This amount of time is considered to be roughly equivalent to the in-class and out-of-class study time that would be spent on a traditional three-unit business course.

The majority of internships are unpaid, since companies must allocate staff to train undergraduate interns, as well as providing space and work stations. While some internships provide hourly or lump sum payments, the academic internship program does not attempt to locate paid positions. Students are reminded that they are not paid to take classes in mathematics or economics; the internship course is another class in which time spent is a part of the degree requirements in International Business.

Adler provides initial orientation sessions that are mandatory for new student interns. Students then begin researching three possible areas to pursue an internship. Topics addressed in the meeting and the course text, *The Complete Guide to Internships* (Adler 2002) focus on how to determine an optimal internship industry, company, and job description for each individual international business major. Each student's interests can be highly diverse, so each is required to spend time developing a well-thought-out and well-written set of career goals and life goals.

Potential interns are asked to develop specific statements regarding areas of interest, such as marketing or human resources. Workshops on aspects of choosing a career are held, where the primary purpose is to teach students to rely on their own wits as they pursue this off-campus course, to build confidence in their own abilities that have been developing through on-campus courses. Students are also referred to campus Career Center resources and bibliographic or Internet resources that may help students in their initial search for potential industries and companies.

Adler serves in a monitoring capacity for internships as they progress. Information on the student's performance at the internship site, as well as guidelines for each stage of the process (such as sample cover letters and resumes for interns that have little or no job experience) are provided in Adler's *Complete Guide* (2002). Each student is allowed to seek and procure any internship which (s)he can show meets her/his particular career goals, in keeping with a requirement that any internship must contain at least 20% international duties. International duties, even within a domestic office of a company such as IBM, can include dealings with customers, suppliers, products and activities associated with another nation and its language.

Adler's interactive website allows on-going communication with site supervisors as well. Companies' changing needs must be addressed as they arise. The outcome for the program will be to develop long-term ties so that future students will have access to internships with satisfied companies.

Monitoring a program of this size presents significant challenges, especially since each student has one year to locate a position and complete the internship. Thus, at any time during the year, there are large numbers of students involved in each stage -- the search, the interview process, the actual work experience, and reporting in various points during the work experience. Adler manages the monitoring aspects by providing a series of standardized forms for each stage -- a goal-setting form, a resume form, a contract to be filled out by the student and supervisor, and various evaluation forms to be filled out by both the supervisor and student at various stages during the internship. All forms, with guidelines and discussion, are provided as tear-outs at the end of the text for the internship class.

The program's philosophy, that working with interns is a mutually beneficial experience, is borne out by the value added from Adler's employ of her own interns. For staff assistance, Adler has 1-2 interns to assist in database and website management. To track this much information requires a well-structured system of databases. In fact, there are seven sets of layouts that serve a variety of purposes to track students' information -- from the time of registration to the final issuance of grades. At the same time, Adler also tracks changes in the Position List as new employers come on-line and others change their entries. (See Adler, *Program Director's Manual*, 2002 for specific layouts.)

## **Outcomes**

A valuable benefit of the International Business Internship Program is the creation of strong, lasting ties with the regional business community -- enhancing San Diego State University's fund-raising ability in a time of federal and state funding cutbacks. Satisfied alumni serve to provide more internship and employment opportunities for the home university. In CIBER's alumni survey of international business graduates in 2001, 79% of respondents reported that their internship experiences improved their likelihood of finding a job. This result has been consistent since 1994, when the annual reports ranged from 70-81%.

Perhaps the most rewarding, and most demanding, aspect of a large internship program is meeting the educational needs of the participants. There are few moments as gratifying for a professor than to witness the effusive enthusiasm in students, faces when the light goes on and they know where they are headed after graduation. Below are two quotes from students that describe the impact of their internship experience:

"I was absolutely thrilled that this internship position allowed me to apply my education in international business. Not only is the company global in their business, but culturally as well . . . In the end, I accepted a position after my supervisor stated she saw great opportunities for me with Reef."

"As an intern with a German background, I developed a promotional strategy for a business selling low priced products to northern Europe . . . In cooperation with the owner and my supervisor at ITC, I created an online brochure . . . and we sold more than \$400,000 worth of merchandise during the last two weeks of my internship. Throughout

my internship I received five different job offers and referrals. I finally decided to accept a position with Xerox in their marketing and sales division."

## **Conclusion**

Other professional schools, like the medical-legal-education fields, would never consider sending students into their professional arenas without having first completed internships in the field. Yet, business schools have largely ignored this critical experiential dimension of professional education, and the business community is very cognizant of it. With the growth in international business, both in terms of world product demand and the resultant student demand for a specific major in international business, the need for international business internships has become even more critical. Because of the need for language expertise, multi-cultural finesse and international business etiquette, U.S. students are falling behind business students in Europe, where the need for international internships is recognized (Webb et al., 1999). There is also a need because of the rapidly changing world of technology that transcends borders – international business students need to be able to utilize and take advantage of the technological possibilities, and this facility only comes through real world experience at using it through a practicum.

Bikson and Law (1994) and Collins and Davidson (2002) point out the disconnect between this need for international business internship experience and Academia's response. As they point out, one reason is the resource commitment required at a time of tightening the university's fiscal belt. Another is the resistance on the part of academics to permitting the world of work into the classroom. Our program addresses both the needs

of the business community and the fiscal concerns of U.S. higher education. Internships provide the international experiential need of the global business community and the needs of students who want to succeed in that arena. Our program meets the needs of a university's need for a program that is not heavy in terms of resource commitments. Finally, our program demonstrates the need and facility of integrating an internship program within standard courses in the curriculum. Colleges and universities that develop successful internship programs will discover quickly how much more marketable their students will become and how much more globally prepared they will be.

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