Internships have become increasingly important in business education. Colleges and employers see them as a strong link to ensure that students are properly prepared for the transition from academia to a business setting. Internships impact students' business skill sets and self-confidence, providing an effective bridge to a profession. Following a structured and easy-to-implement approach to business internships is highly effective in generating positive outcomes for students and employers alike.

**The College-to-Business Skills Gap**

Recent research studies point to a significant gap between job skills and educational preparation. New college graduates think they are prepared to enter the work world, but surveys of organizations reveal that managers are much less optimistic. Results of a study by Maguire Associates (2012) revealed that "When it comes to the skills most needed by employers, job candidates are lacking most in written and oral communication skills, adaptability and managing multiple priorities, and making decisions and problem solving" (p. 12). The gap between new graduates' perception and employers' assessment of their abilities is sizable. For example, although 59% of students said they were well prepared to analyze and solve complex problems, just 24% of employers said they had found that to be true of recent college graduates (Hart Research Associates, 2015, p. 12). Faced with this significant gap and the mission of business schools to prepare students for the work world, what tactics work?

**Internships Provide Needed Business Skills and Experience**

Internships are the number one item employers look for when they review candidate résumés. "Employers place more weight on experience, particularly internships and employment during school, versus academic credentials including GPA and college major when evaluating a recent graduate for employment" (Maguire Associates, 2012, p. 11). A 2014 National Association of Colleges and Employees (NACE) Internship and Co-op Survey showed that employers continue to prefer "high-touch" methods for recruiting interns, reflecting the value of direct contact and engagement at a personal level. Nationally, interns convert and retain at a high level; employers make job offers to 64.8% of interns and 51.2% convert to employment (NACE, 2014, p. 4). Internships are clearly seen as the entryway to successful employment. Emerging from a successful internship experience is obviously advantageous to students seeking full-time employment, which is evidenced by the leading attributes employers seek on candidates' résumés: communication skills (written and verbal), leadership and initiative, analytic/technical skills, strong work ethic, ability to work in a team, detail orientation, and adaptability (NACE, 2013).

Many business students have a limited view of the professional world. They often have vague professional interests influenced by popular media and unrealistic expectations for entry-level positions. Additionally, while college educators focus on course subject matter, the environment outside of coursework is often left to chance. Surprisingly, survey results indicate that 21% of college seniors never use their career center (NACE, 2013, p. 4). Internships complement the classroom and campus experience of business students, and students get a low-risk opportunity to explore capabilities and interests, build business relationships, network, and gain important perspective on culture and fit. The internship perspective is invaluable as students take their first career steps. Although
Business programs focus on engagement and experiential learning, internships complement the business curriculum. Creating structure through easy and practical means ensures greater success for an internship program, enhancing positive outcomes for both students and employers.

A Structured Approach to Internships: The 3 Ps

The 3 "Ps" approach divides the internship into three component parts: preparation, promotion, and perspective. This approach provides a disciplined structure for internships that is easy for students to grasp and has been implemented successfully by the author. Students are provided an overview of the approach by the business internship coordinator and given discrete tasks and checklists to help manage the process. Students then follow up with appropriate designated resources to ensure strong preparation and self-promotion.

Preparation

The first step for student success in landing a quality internship is preparation. Properly prepared students benefit from counsel by advisors and career development staff on the basics, including career interest exploratory/assessments, résumé and e-portfolio development, interviewing skills, networking, and business opportunity research. A preparation checklist is a key tool for students and aids advisors in reviewing student progress. Strong preparation environments feature a cooperative spirit among business professors, career counselors, and supportive business community members willing to engage and coach students. Not surprisingly, the most engaged business professionals tend to benefit the most from recruiting student talent because they have experienced face-to-face exposure with motivated students. Once students have worked through their preparation checklist, they move on to the promotion phase with greater confidence.

Promotion

Promotion is the second step for students, which they must recognize is a two-way street. Students excel by leveraging the tools and skills developed in the preparation phase. At the same time, firms seeking interns should focus on promoting the value of working for their business with prospective interns. The promotion phase is the time to put preparation into action. It is during this time that students actively research, target, apply, network, and interview. Often students who have engaged fully in the preparation process enter the promotion phase with business relationships already formed, having met professionals in mock interviews, business roundtables, and the like. The "STAR" method of answering questions in a behavioral interview works extremely well for students. Students who study and practice the STAR delivery achieve overwhelmingly positive interview outcomes. Many students return after an interview and tell how using the STAR method sealed the deal on the job offer.

The STAR Interviewing Method

The STAR (situation, task, actions, and results) method of answering questions in a behavioral interview works extremely well for students. Students who study and practice the STAR delivery achieve overwhelmingly positive interview outcomes. Many students return after an interview and tell how using the STAR method sealed the deal on the job offer.

In this approach, students are advised to dissect their résumé for specific examples illustrating their key attributes, particularly in the crucial skill areas of teamwork, project leadership, managing priorities, and problem solving. Students break their responses down into four steps:

- Describe the situation (the issue, problem, complication, etc.).
- Describe their task emerging from the situation.
- Highlight the actions they took to address the task.
- Conclude with the results achieved.

The STAR approach has multiple benefits. Employers welcome a structured answer as a sign of an organized mind. The structure promotes a concise, purposeful response, avoiding verbal loss of focus. Clarity and successful outcomes exemplify a results-oriented behavior pattern that is valued by employers.
and learn how their skills and interests align with the reality of the job. Perspective, then, allows students to acknowledge their newfound skills. In addition, the feedback loop aide schools in identifying opportunities for continuous program improvement. For employers, the trial run with interns provides them with a detailed evaluation of a potential new hire.

As part of the assessment during the internship, several tools are key to a rich internship experience. In the author's program, employers provide evaluations across 10 key measures to help students gauge their strengths and development opportunities. Student reflection journals, advisor meetings, final oral class presentations, and post-internship surveys help students gain a deeper understanding as well as provide program input for the future. In addition, effective dialogue among faculty advisors, employers, and career center staff ensure that the program continues to deliver on stakeholder needs.

Quality Feedback Generates Robust Perspective
In the author's experience, the employer evaluation process contributes to positive student outcomes. The design used rates the performance elements that employers seek from new graduates. The process assesses both behavioral measures (accepting supervision, punctuality, reliability and dependability, organization, and goal orientation) and technical/functional dimensions (oral and written business communications, skill level, and quality and quantity of work). Evaluation outcomes show that learned/acquired job skill scores are typically lower than the behavioral skills that students "bring to the party." Mid-term evaluations are used for coaching purposes, and student scores often improve as they climb the learning curve. Interns emerge from the “bubble” of the college campus experience and begin developing their business persona. They typically show directional rating improvement from mid-term to final evaluation.

Students provide feedback to the program in several ways. Faculty use post-internship surveys, final oral presentations, weekly reflection journals, and advisor meetings to gain a more complete picture of outcomes. Feedback suggests that preparing for the internship, working through the research/recruitment process, and experiencing the internship combine to build confidence and esteem among students. In student surveys and final oral assessments, on-the-job skills and job search skills for future employment were perceived as significantly improved following the internship experience. Importantly, the experience bolstered underlying confidence in students’ ability to execute a full-time job search successfully. Students perceived the internship experience to be a confidence builder across both key job search preparation skills and self-promotion skills. Furthermore, students’ journal reflections pointed to growth fostered by healthy, positive stress. Students acquired new job skills through the internship. They felt challenged by intern assignments, the work environment, and expectations of personal responsibility.

Final oral presentations are required in a group setting where interns have a few minutes to share their takeaway with the class. Faculty often hear confirmation of career interests in an enthusiastic tone. In a few cases, a minority may elect a different career path after completing the internship based on the realities of the job. Either way, students find that the perspective gained is a major win versus waiting until after graduation to discover a good or bad fit. Some students appreciate the internship but, upon gaining an understanding of the financial reality of the work, choose a more lucrative career direction. In other cases, students discover that chasing the big paycheck is not personally rewarding and choose to engage in more personally meaningful work.

The presentations reflect a pride in achievement. Students most often take ownership in their projects and assignments well beyond the level seen in typical class projects. Many mediocre academic performers improve when they engage in internships. High-performing students are more likely to find fault with what they imagined as a dream profession. Overall, students emerge more cognizant of both skills acquired and skill deficits. Furthermore, student interns are encouraged to invite younger classmates to their final oral presentations so they can hear firsthand about a range of intern experiences.

Summary
Internships provide an important bridge for student crossover to a professional work life. A quality internship experience makes a significant impact in closing the key skills gap that employers see in college graduates. Having a structured program approach is key. Employing the “3 Ps”—preparation, promotion, and perspective—approach to internships with students is highly effective and easy to implement. The approach is readily grasped by students, is relatively easy to implement, and generates quality internship outcomes for students, employers, and college programs.

References
Hart Research Associates. (2015). Falling short? College learning and career success. Selected findings from online surveys of employers and college students conducted on behalf of the

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