

BEST PRACTICES FOR STRUCTURING, COACHING, AND ASSESSING STUDENTS IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL MARKETING AND SALES INTERNSHIPS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share our best practices for structuring, coaching, and assessing students in their professional marketing and sales internships. Sales and marketing students at St. Kate’s participate in a structured, for-credit internship-focused course called “Business Practicum” The class sets students up for success in their internships through: (1) career-related readings, resources and discussions, (2) peer coaching, and individual business coaching from the Faculty Internship Advisor (Business Administration faculty member), (3) a business plan for the internship called the Learning Contract, and (4) midpoint and final evaluation feedback from the site supervisor.

Coaching Students through the Internship Experience

Students actually begin meeting with their Faculty Internship Advisor months before their internship begins to ensure the job descriptions meet the University expectations for rigor, to introduce them to the internship requirements, and to coach them through getting the internship off to a good start. The class meets throughout the semester and students receive credit for the course based on the number of hours they work. The Faculty Internship Advisor meets with the student and her site supervisor at the mid-point of the internship to discuss student work performance, learning and success. The student also meets with her site supervisor at the end of the internship for a final evaluation. The Career Development department on campus provides support by providing key information about expectations, safety, and other valuable topics, too.

Assessing the Internship Experience

Mid-semester and final review data was collected from 43 students who participated in sales or marketing internships during 4 different terms (2014-2016 time frame). In order to assess student growth and professional development, on site supervisors are required to complete a mid-semester and end of semester evaluation. The evaluation assesses skills across five broad areas:

1. Communication Skills: Components - Written, Oral, and Listening
2. Interpersonal Skills: Components - Relating, Developing Rapport and Networking
3. Organizational Skills: Components - Critical Thinking, Planning, Time Management, Multi-Tasking
4. Professionalism: Components - Professional Etiquette, Quality of Work, and Flexibility
5. Technical Skills: Components - General Technology and Computer Literacy (software and hardware).

Each of the skill areas has multiple components that are tracked throughout the internship on a scale of 1-4. With 4 = Outstanding and 1= Needs Improvement.

Average scores for mid-point and final review were calculated for each student to determine the extent to which students are developing what we have identified as the necessary skills for success. Average scores across each of the five broad skill areas for the 43 students assessed are as follows:

Review Term	Professional Skills	Communication Skills	Interpersonal Skills	Organizational Skills	Technical Skills
Mid	87	89	88	88	93
Final	94	92	91	91	94
Change	+7	+3	+3	+3	+1

Scores above reported in percentages

Feedback from the site supervisor is shared with the student and the Faculty Internship Advisor to determine the extent to which students are developing the skills necessary for career success. In these marketing and sales internships, companies expect that students will effectively engage with customers and colleagues. It is also required that they will have an appropriate level of financial acumen so they can fulfill their assigned marketing and/or sales work responsibilities.

Assessment Conclusions

In the overall analysis of the four samples, the most gain in points from the midpoint to the final time occurred in the category of “Professionalism.” The average score increased by seven points. This makes sense because professionalism topics are thoroughly reviewed in class including: managing your manager, putting forth a professional image, managing expectations, setting regular meetings with your manager and providing updates to him/her, along with other key subjects. Another finding of note is that the average score in the “Technology” area increased only by one point however it was the highest performing category area with a score of 93 at the midpoint and a 94 at the final time. In analyzing the data on a per-student level, it was interesting to see though that the larger Fortune 500 companies tended to score the students with a lower score, often a 75, and the smaller to mid-sized firms typically evaluated the students with a score closer to a perfect 100. These findings align with the informal communication which is often shared at the midpoint review meetings. The site supervisors at the large Fortune 500 firms often have an expectation that the student is performance-ready with technology, particularly Excel, at a similar level of a new full-time hire. These managers may comment that they do not have time to train an intern for their work on the computer and/or that they prefer that they have been “trained” for their work by the University. Conversely, sometimes the supervisors at the smaller companies will comment that today’s students are quite adept with technology because they have grown up with computers. Moderate gains (two to three points) occurred in the categories of “Communication,” “Interpersonal Skills,” and “Organizational Skills.” These areas are also emphasized in the course, however possibly not to the degree of overall “Professionalism.” It could also be that effective communication, interpersonal skills, and organizational skills are perceived as being within the professionalism umbrella.

The individual feedback from the site supervisor is helpful as part of ongoing professional development for each student. This overall assessment data informs changes needed in curriculum, such as the addition of a *Business Analytics* course and the integration of increased financial content in the sales and marketing major coursework. Both of the latter changes occurred as a result of feedback received from corporate internship employers. This assessment information allows us to continually benchmark corporate and industry expectations as we work to prepare our students for their future careers.