



Business Student Internship Focus Groups Final Report

Summary of Business Leaders' Experiences with Student Interns/Employees

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Introduction

The Bridge of Southern New Mexico is a group of leaders from business, K-12 and higher education who are concerned about the lack of readiness of young people in Dona Ana County for careers and college. They have worked collaboratively to address this problem in various ways, the first of which was to find ways to increase retention of students in high school. The group has successfully worked to develop an Early College High School at Arrowhead Park located on the NMSU campus. So far retention from 9th to 10th grade has been 100%. Two additional studies are being done in relationship to the success of The Bridge and the Early College High School. The first study shows the positive potential of dual credit courses to contribute to student success (Peter Winograd, Center for Research on Policy, UNM, 2012). Another study on The Bridge is being supported by the Kellogg foundation and will include efforts toward building a state-wide research network that makes additional research-based findings related to education and workforce preparation available to decision makers. (Arrowhead Research Center, University of New Mexico, and New Mexico State University)

The Bridge is currently exploring additional ways to increase the college and career readiness of students and to increase the skills and retention of the work force in Southern New Mexico in various business settings. The purpose of the three focus groups conducted in December 2011 and January 2012, was to uncover what business people are ready to share about their experiences with student interns, both from the college and from partnering high schools. This information is needed in order to explore an additional pathway The Bridge is considering for increasing workforce readiness and retention. The proposed pathway includes increasing successful internship programs leading to *Return on Investment (ROI)* for business partners, retention and skill development for high school and college students, and the development and retention of a successful work force in Dona Ana County.

The focus group research was requested by Tracey Bryan, CEO of The Bridge, and led by Dr. Karin Wiburg, Ken Korn and Sara Morales, who are part of the NMSU College of Education's Center for Research and Outreach. These individuals volunteered to facilitate these focus groups and analyze findings as a service contribution to the community. One of The Bridge's reasons for doing these focus groups was to gain more information about the kinds of skills and dispositions employers currently experienced with their student interns and what they would like to see in future interns. The intention of a focus group is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of survey responses, as well as to gather new information. The focus groups for this project served as a follow-up to a survey for businesses on internships done earlier this year.

All members of the three focus groups were promised anonymity and opinions shared in this report are representative of the groups, but no specific individual is identified. This information will be helpful in designing education and business partnerships for mentoring and training programs which prepare students to work successfully in area businesses.

Participants

The makeup of the focus groups was quite diverse in terms of the kinds of businesses represented. Business owners and agency directors represented a wide-variety of types of businesses ranging from customer-oriented retail stores, to health agencies, non-profit service agencies, banks and news organizations. During the first focus group we discussed the kinds of interns that were hired and most people in the first group favored hiring college level students. After the first focus group, we developed a questionnaire to get more specific information about the focus group participants and their interns. Twelve of the participants in groups two and three filled out these short questionnaires. Of these 12 focus group participants, half of them (6) hired college-level interns, one hired high school students and five (5) of the participants did not currently hire any interns. However, all twelve noted on the questionnaire that they would like to hire student interns, often more than one, if students were provided with mentoring and training that would provide the business owner with a positive return on investment (ROI). What is needed for this ROI to occur is discussed by the focus group participants.

Emerging Themes from the Focus Groups

A number of themes emerged after several readings of the data from the three focus groups which were transcribed by a professional transcriber. Dr. Karin Wiburg used a constant comparative method to analyze and re-analyze the conversations of the focus groups. The findings from the groups are organized around themes that emerged from multiple readings. The transcriptions were read and discussed among at least two researchers and the final version of this report was prepared by Dr. Wiburg. In order to further refine this research Dr. Wiburg invites The Bridge and Focus Group Participants to provide a member check on the findings and report any

misunderstandings or misinterpretations they might find in the document. Participants are welcome to send any comments to kwiburg@nmsu.edu who will use their feedback to further refine the report if needed.

Themes which emerged from all three focus groups included:

1. There is a relationship between the type of business, educational level of the intern, and educational preparation for internships.
2. A theme of the Reasons why businesses benefit from hiring interns – a chance to train employees as you want, opportunities to find new employees, and the enthusiasm of the young interns for working.
3. Another theme is the Challenges to businesses when hiring interns. These challenges are related to a lack of soft skills (such as attitude, dress, civility and professional communication) as well as deficiencies in hard skills (writing, math) that participants reported after working with interns.
4. Participants had important suggestions on the skills and attitudes they would like to see in interns that make up a set of recommendations for future internship training and mentoring programs.

The Context for the Internship

The first theme that emerged involved the relationship between the type of business, related internship experiences, and educational level and preparation of the intern. The context for the internship or employment of students had an influence on whether the intern-employer relationship worked well. For example, some interns were placed in businesses in which they had little interest and were therefore less effective. Focus group participants suggested that students would benefit from the opportunity to work in a vocational setting that interested them. Participants from businesses would like to work more closely with the schools in sharing the kinds of employees needed in the local area, and what kinds of employment opportunities could be developed to accompany relevant educational opportunities for students.

College students seemed to be preferred by most of the business leaders who participated and some felt the best internship programs worked with college or university programs which had prepared students for the internship with specific coursework. Business leaders expressed the most satisfaction with student interns who came from a fairly structured internship experience at the university or the community college, such as those provided in Engineering, the Creative Media Institute, and various Health programs. Health and Vocational-focused education has long included well-specified requirements for internships as well as support for the transition from the educational setting to the business setting is well-defined. The participants commented that the applicants in these programs are pre-screened by the educational partner and are likely to be well qualified. One participant said, *We have hired our last three engineers based on the engineering intern programs here at NMSU.* Another Participant commented, *we rely heavily on New Mexico State Students. I have built my company off of [these students].* An additional reason for

hiring college-level interns is that in many cases there is an age requirement associated with the business such as having insurance, the ability to drive, etc. It also seems important to consider the match between the intern's interests and abilities and the kind of work expected in the business when determining a match for an internship. For example, education students made good interns at a company that involved a lot of community or social work with clients.

Leaders in different types of businesses reported distinctly different experiences with interns depending on both the educational level of the intern (high school or college) and the type of business being operated. There could also be a generational gap that emerged focused specifically in the area of technology. Traditional business leaders are working with students who are digital natives and who often turn to cell phones or computers to look up needed information or to send off a quick message. Some businesses, such as those in the media, engineering, or news area valued the ability of young people to use the technology so effortlessly and to access social media and computer-based resources. Others, for good reasons, needed the students to put away the cell phones and focus on professional and courteous interactions with live customers. The proper use of technology would be a great topic for a future internship training program.

Why businesses choose to hire interns/student workers

There were many comments about how businesses benefit from hiring interns. First, interns are inexpensive, and *we can train them the way that is consistent with our practices*. Participants also reported that *they are eager to learn*, that they *really want to learn the skill set*, and that hiring interns provides a *good testing ground* for seeing which interns they want to eventually hire. In other words, having interns is an economical way to recruit good future employees. One leader talked about the advantage of having an intern, and eventually an employee, who comes from the local area and knows about other business opportunities which exist in the area. One participant spoke specifically about the advantage of hiring bilingual students in order to better serve clients in our community. Overall, most of the business leaders said the opportunity to work with the interns before hiring them officially was considered a good return on investment.

Second, several business leaders mentioned that students who have just come from college can *bring in new resources and new techniques* that people in the workforce have not been exposed to. Most of the participants in the group commented that the interns were very technically savvy and could easily do a lot of computer-based work. Specific to the health field, the opportunity to hire nurses, respiratory therapists or speech therapists assists with participants' recruiting of new employees, since these positions are hard to fill and recruiting for these kinds of positions is expensive.

Why it is difficult or challenging to hire interns/student workers

The focus groups provided an opportunity for the participants to talk frankly about some of the challenges they faced when hiring interns. One company decided to take a hiatus from hiring interns when employees reported the interns needed too much supervision. The employees said they didn't have time to provide the kind of supervision required to ensure the job was done correctly.

In working with the high school internship programs (EXCEL), employers were concerned about not knowing how many interns might be available in a semester which was based on uncertain funding for the internship program. Not knowing the number of interns who can be available made it difficult to plan ahead for hiring. Most of the participants preferred to hire college students as compared to high school interns, since they were more mature and responsible. Employers also found problems with many interns at all levels in their lack of skills, even as simple as not being able to file documents correctly. The lack of soft and hard skills by interns is discussed below.

One business does use a screening test to eliminate students who do not have the skills they might need. Participants reported that they couldn't pick up information about skills from just an interview. The competency test they used assessed a student's ability to read directions and make decisions based on what they read, including organizing steps to do a job.

Soft skills (such as attitude and dress) were mentioned frequently and first in all three focus groups as a challenge when hiring interns. Initial remarks had to do with students' not knowing how to: dress appropriately; show up to work on time; focus on the job rather than texting; and inappropriate use of cell phones. The dress problem was so extreme for one business leader that he told a story about an intern who showed up to a meeting in pajamas after being told to dress casually. Student appearance is important for customer service and when interacting with patients. Interns need to realize that multiple tattoos or inappropriate dress can scare off a customer or terrify a patient in the hospital. Many employers also mentioned that some students displayed an openly negative attitude toward work. Employers with extensive experience, one with 15 years of experience hiring interns, reported a decline in work skills and service-oriented attitudes, especially in the last five years. The focus group participants felt that students are coming to them with less and less in terms of both soft and hard skills.

While soft skills, like appearance and attitude, were mentioned initially, as the groups got into more in-depth discussions of what they'd want in an ideal employee, ideas often turned to the harder skills - a lack of ability in writing, especially appropriate technical writing, an inability to communicate orally, and the lack of math skills, especially applied mathematics skills. For example, students often did not know what was a reasonable answer to an applied mathematics problem. They sometimes were comfortable with totally unreasonable answers, demonstrating an inability to estimate quantities in the real world.

Employers also wished students were more responsible when given a work task. Participants reported a desire for interns to be more self-directed and able to solve problems on their own. One participant summarized employers concerns: *Well, work ethics is one of the biggest things, making sure they come on time, that they show up, that they're there to work, and they're not there to talk on their phones or text.* Another participant added *students are not willing to follow safety rules or take them seriously and don't always wear the proper gear.*

Several participants felt that interns had a bad attitude which was expressed by one person as, *more, "You are here to serve me" than "I am here to serve you."* The employers present also expressed that when they got their first jobs and they were given a task, they took the task seriously and completed the task, even if it took longer than expected..*They owned the task* and took it seriously. This is in stark contrast to their experiences with interns who do not have that same work ethic.

One employer suggested that it is "attitude" or "work ethic" that made the difference between interns who were later hired and those that were let go. *It's commitment to the job; it's the expectation, the ownership of their position and the ownership of the responsibilities they have been given... We get very good students, whether they are graduates or undergraduates or part-time students. The majority of their technical skills are adequate, very few of them wash out because they technically couldn't do their job. They wash out because they constantly were late, or they did not follow instructions, or didn't follow through on tasks they were assigned, or just spent way too much time on the computer doing things other than work.* This last comment sums up well the problems employers are finding with many of their youthful interns.

There may even be a connection worth exploring between a student being able to do a hard skill well, such as writing a business memo, and their attitude toward the job. Employers mentioned frequently the whole area of communication, which is a combination of hard and soft skills. Some felt this was the result of the teenage world of texting and the frequent use of short messages, which was expressed by several members of the focus groups as *the way they communicate with each other.* According to the participants, both verbal and written communication skills were not strong for many interns. Some participants were most concerned about student verbal skills, especially in terms of serving customers. Interns often gave very short answers and did not try to interact in a meaningful way with customers.

Several participants also mentioned how students could do well in the interview and then not be able to pass the pre-employment screening. This company uses a program called PSI, an online test, to screen the interns in four areas: mathematics, checking forms, following written directions, and language skills. The lowest scores were usually in language skills. One participant added, *Writing skills in general, communication skills in general, are poor for the majority of them. I would say we are lucky if one in 15, one in 20, have decent written communication skills.* This

participant also added, *if they're lacking math, they will not last, or we will not hire, so they're automatically weeded out, so to speak*. Math and writing seem to be gatekeepers in the world of employment as well as in access to learning opportunities in school.

Finally there were comments on poor penmanship and what sometimes happens if a student has to write a note, for example: *well, sometimes when they write notes, you just can't read them*. Students can type notes on computers, but have declining skills in penmanship. These poor writing skills contribute to a general lack of good inter-office communication skills, another task which combines both hard and soft skills.

Suggestions for mentoring strategies or programs

These Bridge-sponsored focus groups provided extensive insight into mentoring programs or strategies business representatives and owners think would be useful for improving the performance of interns when they are placed in a job. These skills can also be seen as recommendations for those involved in preparing high-school and college students so they gain the necessary career ready skills they will need in today's workforce. Understanding the challenges employers mentioned above when hiring interns is one place to start when developing programs that might address these challenges.

One of the participants talked about the need to encourage kids. This person goes out to speak to kids, as early as middle school, to try to motivate them to think seriously about their future careers. In fact, in one group there were long discussions about when to start to teach students to act and interact in positive and constructive ways in social and work situations. Several participants suggested that training in communication, self-direction and responsibility, and the application of school skills in real world contexts, should begin as early as elementary school. There are a few programs in the community that teach kids in summer or during school through the simulation of actual workplace environments. In these setting students can apply what they are learning in school as part of being bank tellers, restaurant owners, retail sales people, and beauticians. There is a program at Lynn Middle School every summer called Enterprise City. It is run by Americorp and teaches elementary and middle school students to learn in the context of real world jobs. It is also important to teach emotional intelligence and confidence as early as elementary school. One program at NMSU, Strong Kids, lead by a counseling faculty member (Dr. Ivelisse Torres) is used in many of the schools to teach emotional growth and social cooperation.

The participants suggested that businesses hiring interns should have very well defined policies and expectations for interns and that this practice helps to develop the work ethic for students. Interns need to be told, *No, you cannot use the computer for that. So we have core values, service standards and very defined policies and that has helped*. Some do training on phone etiquette with all employees, which is helpful.

A couple of programs mentioned by the focus group that are helping students to perform better at work are the ENLACE program and the *Service Learning* program in the College of Education at NMSU. These programs are providing students with training in soft and hard skills, and employers are noticing the difference. Many of the students in education are involved in one or both of these programs. The participants also mentioned other programs they had participated in themselves as youth, such as the COPE program in education where graduate students mentored undergraduates. Finally there is a shadowing program offered in El Paso where potential interns could shadow professionals to learn about a job and what is required to do the job.

Participants also reported on other programs that worked with interns and had good systems for placing the interns with the appropriate company. The group, in general, wanted to have a program with high employer-based guidance that would work with the schools to increase the success of internships. They would like to see a system where students are identified by their interests and then placed with companies who hire students who want to work in their field. They'd like a system that keeps track of what kind of interns and employees are needed, and how many will be needed in the next year or two, as well as having an educational system that can help prepare the employees that are needed. The opportunity for business professionals to provide input into student education and training is important to this group and they welcome the opportunity to participate in helping shape future mentoring programs.

Based on these focus groups here are some of the qualities business professional would like to see in their ideal future interns. Input from these participants who hire interns was very helpful and could help shape workforce development and education.

The business people interviewed want:

- Interns who have good work ethics as measured, for example, by showing up on time, taking responsibility for doing and finishing a job, using their technical skills in the service of the company they are working for, and not for personal use.
- Interns who have strong written and oral communication skills especially in terms of communicating with others in the workplace and with customers.
- Students with a positive attitude who are able to initiate and successfully complete collaborative projects.
- Students who know enough applied mathematics not to be eliminated from some types of jobs altogether.
- Interns who know how to take responsibility for tasks and to search for the right answers on their own, without expecting someone else to tell them how to do everything.

- A good procedure for matching interns with appropriate placements in businesses that will help students acquire the skills necessary to obtain a full time job in their chosen field.
- Above all the participants want students with a good, customer-centered, service-oriented attitude.

Recommendations

While one participant mentioned his company did some work success training, most of the business people felt that if students came to them with many of the soft and hard skills needed in the job, they would be able to quickly realize a positive return on their investments in internships. As indicated in the earlier survey, business leaders would be willing to increase their hiring of interns, and possibly their investment in intern development programs, if they felt confident that students (future interns) gained the skills necessary to perform effectively in the workplace.

There were many suggestions and conversations about possible changes in educational programs. Many of the participants felt that high school and college programs were increasingly focused on book learning and cognitive outcomes, like being able to pass a skills test or a licensure exam or boards. However, the students did not come to them with practical skills. One example, provided by a participant, described how students had the theory of how to work with water pumps, but didn't have the ability to actually manually manipulate the pumps once in the field. While there are some excellent programs, such as a one credit distance education course at Onate that focuses on job preparedness, such as writing letters of applications, filling out forms, preparing for interviews, interacting in a work place, etc. most of the interns discussed by business participants did not have these skills. They had to be taught how to write a memo, or other business communication. Many students seemed to have poor communication skills for working in a business environment. Some of the employers did some of their own training, which could be shared and might helpful in planning a student camp or internship program for future job success. One person mentioned doing *mock interviews, making presentations on their job responsibilities and opportunities to learn appropriate business team communication.*

Almost all of the participants were concerned about the pressure on educators and teachers as a result of the accountability movement to teach to a test and thus limit what students can learn about geography or social studies or civics or even art or woodshop. Students were reported by the focus group to have poor skills in geography – when you don't know where the states are, you can't design or track transportation and shipping- and they seemed unaware of the news or the effect of political leaders on their future lives. When learning is focused on measuring small units of behavior- in only mathematics and reading - teachers and students have little opportunity to engage in any kind of larger project-based learning that requires problem-solving and the development of critical-thinking and team

communication. Some participants also felt that schools were unusually top-heavy and used a hierarchical system where administrators told teachers what to do, teachers told students what to do and no one could teach. Professor Roland Tharp, a well-known educational researcher, once wrote a book on *Bringing Minds to Life*. He talked about our current educational system as one where everyone is always assigning and assessing, the administrators to the teachers and the teachers to the kids, and no one is teaching or learning.

Fortunately, the new Common Core State Standards are focused on higher, fewer and deeper standards. Reading requires at least 50% of text read by middle and high school to involve informational texts related to science, health, social studies, and non-literature topics. Students are supposed to be learning how to make meaning of complex texts, as much as memorizing phonics rules. The math standards are much fewer and much more focused on the applications of mathematics in the real world, as well as fluency for each grade level in only a few focused areas. Integrating real world applications into classroom instruction should occur if administrators and teachers are encouraged to focus on fewer topics and then mastering those through fluency, problem-solving and application. However, the current system of education may mean that the new standards are only introduced superficially in terms of a checklist of behaviors to be mastered. While that is not the intent of the state developers of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), this may happen. What can keep it from happening is active participation by all of the stakeholders in the process and outcomes of our educational system, educators as well as business and government partners and the community agencies that are working to help our families and children to succeed in an economically-challenging time.

An understanding of systems thinking (see Margaret Wheatley or Peter Senge or Michael Fullen) is helpful for all who want to be able to lead in a culture of change. Understanding a systems approach could help in developing additional directions for The Bridge as they work toward supporting increased student success in both school and work. Because education is naturally a conserving system, its outputs may not match the needs of the rapidly changing larger society. This is made more difficult when society changes at an increasingly rapid pace, due to technology, and students are less likely to have the new skills needed by businesses or the larger society. Using a model of education that emphasizes hierarchical decision-making rather than teacher professional decision-making slows down educational change even further. Students need to graduate understanding appropriate uses of the content and the technology they are learning in applied situations. The students need to be able to work on teams in more complicated work settings and to communicate well with others. They are expected to become self-reliant and self-directed in problem-solving as the complexity of work increases. However, they may not have access to enough problem-solving opportunities in their classrooms. When teachers are asked to collaborate as professionals in their schools to direct the learning in their classrooms, students may have better role models for learning to manage their own learning tasks, and are more likely to enter the workforce as self-directed learners.

One can ask what kind of educational system is needed for students to graduate able to problem-solve, direct and monitor their own learning, communicate in writing and orally and work in teams to solve complex work problems. Some researchers have suggested looking at the local community as a collection of learning needs and various learning resources which provide multiple ways to learn and apply learning. This could mean thinking outside the traditional separation of pre-K education, K-12 schools, higher education, business training, and community service programs. For The Bridge, this might mean working across education and community agencies and businesses to develop a broader and more specific definition of a system of education that supports career and workforce development. While the problems are multiple and complex, combining the talents and perspectives of various stakeholders in the community has been a good start for The Bridge in addressing success in student graduation and employability. The Bridge is committed to this goal and the participants in these focus group must be thanked for their contributions in terms of their time and honest ideas. The researchers in this work appreciated being involved in Bridge research on the development of future internship and educational projects.