



WHAT ARE INTERNSHIPS REALLY LIKE?

BY **BRIDGET HOLCOMBE** • HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY

Internships.

That word often brings to mind TV and movie characters who fetch coffee and make copies. But internships are not about being the office errand runner.

Internships are crucial experiences that help you explore and launch your career, whether it begins with a full-time job or graduate school. In short, having internship experience is essential.

So, what will you learn and do in an internship? No two are the same. Today's global economy provides countless opportunities to work in any industry and gain ample professional experience.

To help you understand what to expect, let's dive deeper into the types of internships you may encounter.

The structured internship program

Some major corporations have structured internship programs in different departments of their organization. Structured internships often include training, course work, and company housing in addition to practical work experience.

Five years ago, a High Point University student named Ryan started working at one of the Disney theme parks as part of their highly competitive corporate internship program. A merchandise cast member, he dressed in a costume, pinned on his nametag, and interacted with guests every day.

Although he has retired the costume, today Ryan wears that same nametag as a full-time employee in the Walt Disney Company Corporate Alliances office. In every role he has played at Disney, from representing

the Disney brand with families to corporate partners, Ryan uses the same customer service skills he gained as an intern.

Participating in a structured internship such as Disney's offers many benefits. You gain knowledge through comprehensive training and experience, make contacts at a well-known company, and might even land a full-time job.

Internships that change a career trajectory

Of course, not every internship results in a full-time job—and that's often the point! Internships are a great way to try out a career path to see if it's a good fit.

Take Steven, a 2013 graduate. In the fall semester of his junior year of college, he landed an internship with a local Fox TV station in the sports department. Working as a sports broadcaster had always been his dream job...or so he thought. His early weeks as an intern were exciting; he met interesting people, shadowed reporters and anchors, and even got to do a little video filming and editing of high school football highlights.

After a few weeks, Steven realized the fluctuating hours made it difficult to spend time with friends and family. He asked his coworkers if they had any regrets about working in sports broadcasting. The common theme was a lack of family time. Hearing this, Steven had to think about what was important to him.

When Steven reflected on his goals, he decided he wanted a career with more regular hours. He concluded that his love of sports would be a hobby rather than a career. Having the internship allowed him to simulate the life of a sports broadcasting professional, and it helped him realize it was not for him.

The nonprofit organization

While Steven's internship changed his career focus, Erin's internship with a local United Way branch solidified her interest in working for a nonprofit organization.

One of the most important things she learned was the art of building relationships. United Way links so many people—donors, aid recipients, and organizations—and uses those strong and genuine relationships to accomplish its goals.

Erin believes her work with United Way helped her engage with more people than any other work experience she completed during college. Reflecting on her internship, Erin realized she enhanced her public speaking skills and gained a great deal of self-confidence.

Interning at the United Way not only led to other opportunities in the nonprofit community but also gave Erin a chance to work for a cause that serves others.

The “create-your-own” internship

Not every internship is advertised or even premeditated. Katie had always been interested in event planning and wanted to find a summer internship that would allow her to build upon her natural organizational skills and love for detail. So she polished her résumé, put on a professional outfit, and stopped by her local Chamber of Commerce to learn more about event planners in her hometown.

After a friendly conversation with the director, Katie proposed an internship that would benefit the Chamber in its event-planning efforts. The director was delighted to take on Katie as an intern in the small office of just four employees.

Katie’s main job was to contact companies and encourage them to attend events. She also helped plan and execute fun outings, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, and golf tournaments. Her experience working for a small organization allowed Katie to take on a variety of responsibilities and make several great contacts.

Through her internship, Katie learned how to speak comfortably with professionals. This skill helped her find her current full-time job and helps her communicate effectively with her boss.

Creating her own internship was an important part of Katie’s career exploration. The experience helped her refine her career interests and eventually led her to the field of human resources, where she works today.

The startup company

Similar to a create-your-own internship, interning for a startup company presents many opportunities to take initiative and contribute. Sarah interned at a startup design studio in Nashville, Tennessee, during the summer after her junior year. As a graphic design major, she initially applied to a larger graphic design firm. However, she was not selected. Although disappointed, she took the rejection as an opportunity to intern with a startup.

As the only intern at her company, Sarah took on the responsibilities of a professional staff member. She created designs to print on clothing, tote bags, aprons, and canvases. The company uses her designs to this day.

At startup companies where it is necessary to wear many different hats, Sarah cultivated a skill set of initiative, flexibility, and problem solving. She also enhanced her design skills and gained experience in the field. She did so well in her internship that the startup company offered her a full-time position as a designer, which she began the summer after she graduated.

And that big firm that didn’t hire her? She applied again to their internship program, and they offered her a position. She accepted a five-week internship before starting her full-time job. Sarah credits the skills she learned in her internship with the startup company as a main factor in receiving the offer with the bigger firm.

The research internship

A research internship is unlike any other internship experience. Students have the ability to impact findings about current societal questions under the supervision of a lead researcher.

Tyler was interested in medical school, so his advisors suggested he obtain an internship to make him a

stronger candidate. Tyler applied for a summer internship studying Alzheimer’s disease at a university near his hometown.

During his 10-week internship, he studied the potential causes of Alzheimer’s with a team of researchers and worked in a lab under the supervision of a professor. The internship gave Tyler an opportunity to contribute to research in his field of interest.

After completing the internship, Tyler was even more convinced of his desire to pursue medical school. He believed that his internship experience made him stand out against other applicants. In his applications, he discussed how his research increased his passion for understanding diseases and helping people overcome them.



Making the right choice

No matter which type of internship experience interests you, make it a priority to find the career and internship offices when you arrive at college. From there you can get to know your career counselor, who can help you determine which career fields and internship opportunities could be right for you.

And now that you know so many exist, the sky is the limit. Embrace the word “internship” each time you hear it—and you will hear it a lot. As you’ve seen in the examples above, it’s often the bridge to a bright future. 🏡

Bridget Holcombe is the Director of the Office of Career and Professional Development at High Point University in High Point, North Carolina.