

# Observations about the Value of a Legislative Internship

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## Abstract

Student internships permeate many academic programs in Colleges of Agriculture and Natural Resources, but are all internships the same? The purpose of this paper is to help answer this question by conducting a case study of the benefits of a less-common form of internship—a semester-long internship at a State Capitol in a state legislative office. One objective of the paper is to assess both the commonalities and differences a legislative internship shares with more traditional company-based, private sector internships. An additional objective is to use the lessons learned from this case study to specify a general structure for future legislative internship programs. The findings include descriptions of benefits to all parties concerned with the case (i.e., the student, the legislative office, the University). Though these benefits differ from some of the main benefits associated with more traditional company-based internships, the primary implication of this case study is that legislative internships can create opportunities for students to have practical experiences in the ever-increasingly important area of agricultural policy formation.

## Introduction

Student internships permeate academic programs across a wide variety of disciplines. Although these programs range in content, scope and structure, most internships match a student with a private sector company for a relatively short period of time, often during the summer break in the academic calendar. Researchers have examined the value of internships in the private sector and have found that students, businesses hosting the interns and academic departments can benefit from an internship program. A sample of specific benefits that have been reported in the literature is summarized in Table 1. The purpose of this paper is to conduct a case study of the benefits of a less-traditional form of internship—a semester-long legislative internship at a State Capitol.

Several of the benefits listed in Table 1 do not directly correspond with a typical legislative internship. These differences, which will be elaborated upon in this article, beg the question, “What are the

incentives for participating in and sponsoring legislative internships?” The qualitative differences between the two types of internships also raise concerns about the validity of granting academic credits for legislative internships. How is working in a public sector, politically charged environment different from interning with a private company? Can there be adequate “substantive” (i.e., intellectually engaging) work to justify granting credit for time spent on these types of internships? As these questions are not addressed in the literature, particularly in the context of students from Colleges of Agriculture and Natural Resources, one objective of this paper is to assess both the commonalities and differences a legislative internship shares with more traditional company-based private-sector internships.

Internships, in general, are not without their critics and researchers have examined their academic merit. Most of these authors have noted the fundamental importance of having a well structured, thoroughly planned internship that has specific goals and objectives based on a pedagogy of experiential learning (Heinemann, et al., 1991; Ciofalo, 1989). Hence, an additional objective of this paper is to use the lessons learned from the experience documented in this article to specify a general structure for future legislative internship programs.

## Data and Methods

This article details a case study that focuses on one student's experience as a legislative intern. The “data” for this paper are the observations by the student and the lessons learned from this pilot exercise by her faculty advisor. This section of the article summarizes the student's experience and is the foundation for the findings and implications derived from this case.

The student was a graduate student in a non-thesis (i.e., “terminal”) Master of Agribusiness degree program, and had already completed a required agribusiness internship as part of her program of study. However, she wanted to better understand how the political process works and how a state legislature can influence agribusiness firms and industries. Although she viewed her first internship

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as having been very beneficial, she had come to the realization that a legislative internship could add value to her college experience and better prepare her for her career interest working as a lobbyist for an agricultural company or industry group, and potentially, pursuing a law degree. Her major professor concurred and encouraged her to apply for an internship with a State legislator's office.

The State Legislature in the student's home state convenes annually for a "normal session" that lasts 60 days, beginning in March. The only other times the Legislature meets are for "special sessions" called by the governor and once every 10 years to address the reapportionment of Congressional districts. Hence, in most years, the only opportunity to serve as a legislative intern is during the normal session. The student secured such an internship on the staff of a State Representative, and began her work several weeks prior to the opening of the legislative session.

Like all other interns that session, she began her internship with several orientation classes and activities organized by the permanent staff of the state legislature. These included committee and chamber exercises where all new interns and employees participate in mock meetings where they acted as representatives. A typical committee meeting or day in session was simulated, including votes on bills and amendments. Other classes for interns reviewed how to draft bills and amendments, how to analyze a bill, and an overview of the legislative process. Once the legislative session began, the student had several responsibilities, including attending all meetings of her assigned Legislative committee, other committee meetings when those committees were reviewing bills or hearing presentations on topics related to the work of the assigned committee, meeting with representatives of other State governmental agencies, and conducting detailed "bill analysis" of proposed

legislation. Day-to-day activities varied from helping with the telephone and photocopying to reporting to her supervisor about on-going legislative committee hearings and her own bill-analysis research.

## Results and Discussion

In assessing this student's experience, the following issues are considered: What was the benefit of this internship to the parties involved? And more specifically, how did this experience and its benefits differ from either the student's previous internship experience or the experiences of other students who participated in more traditional, agribusiness-based internships? As noted in the introduction, Table 1 summarizes the benefits of internships as reported in the literature. The following discussion compares and contrasts these benefits to the benefits of the student's experience as a legislative intern.

**Table 1. A Sample from the Literature on the Benefits of Student Internships**

Beneficiaries and benefits cited	Citations
<p>Students</p> <p>Opportunities to apply and refine skills gained in the classroom</p> <p>Allows students to gain real world experience</p> <p>Aid students in procuring employment</p> <p>Increased opportunities to examine career possibilities</p> <p>An opportunity to explore a possible fit with a particular company prior to going through the hiring process.</p> <p>Increased maturity and confidence through handling added responsibilities.</p> <p>An opportunity to develop interpersonal skills through working with a group less homogenous than collegiate peers.</p> <p>An opportunity to earn money while learning (in paid internships)</p>	<p>Harrison and Kennedy (p.562)</p> <p>...</p> <p>Thiel and Hartley (p. 20)</p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p>
<p>Employers</p> <p>The primary benefit to industry is the strengthening of relationships with academic institutions that provide means for the education and identification of potential employees.</p> <p>...provides the company with increased information regarding the candidate's work ethic, interpersonal skills, problem solving abilities, and other attributes important to the company.</p> <p>...[interns provide] short-term staff support. Upper level undergraduate or graduate students typically have adequate training and experience to make a positive contribution to the firm.</p> <p>Public (media) recognition of sponsors' commitment to higher education.</p> <p>Cross fertilization of ideas among interns, their educational supervisors, and the corporate sponsor.</p> <p>Introduction of new techniques to the corporate domain.</p> <p>Corporate planning for cyclical, temporary tasks by college interns. Some tasks do not warrant a full time permanent position.</p> <p>Corporate identification of those educational institutions that offer programs most suited to their personnel and technological needs.</p> <p>Qualified supervisors from the corporation can serve as adjunct faculty or as members on curriculum planning committees.</p>	<p>Harrison and Kennedy (p. 563-4)</p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p> <p>Fitt and Heverly (p. 66)</p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p> <p>...</p>
<p>Academic Programs</p> <p>Given the desire of agricultural colleges to increase enrollment, internship programs that enhance the qualifications of graduates will be of value in attracting prospective students.</p> <p>...an opportunity for the academic institution to receive feedback from industry as to the direction and success of their[sic] curricula.</p> <p>Relationships with corporate sponsors help the college understand corporations' philosophies and personnel needs. This understanding may lead to grants, scholarship monies, and/or equipment donations.</p>	<p>Harrison and Kennedy (pp. 652-3)</p> <p>...</p> <p>Fitt and Heverly (p. 67)</p>

Concerning the benefits to the student, she and her faculty advisor identified the following major benefits of her legislative internship: a real-life experience in which she had to apply course material from her program of study (i.e., Ag. Law and Ag. Trade Policy); an opportunity to network with various parties (e.g., industry contacts, State legislators and staff at government agencies); and, the acquisition of career-oriented skills (e.g., understanding the legislative process, how laws are written, how to analyze pending legislation, how to research existing statutes, and how politics and the vested interests of various constituent groups affect legislation).

Though similar to the benefits listed in Table 1, there are subtle differences. First, the specific course material that was applied during the legislative internship differed. Her training in finance, accounting, marketing and other core agribusiness courses were much less directly related to her responsibilities than they had been during her first internship with an agribusiness firm. Second, the student had no realistic opportunity to transition from intern to full-time employee in the State legislator's office, but the internship did have career-building opportunities. The "networking" and exposure to decision makers from major constituent groups, lobbying firms, and top-level managers of agribusiness firms did create opportunities to seek full-time employment. Third, the skills she acquired extended beyond mere improvement of interpersonal skills and increased maturity and confidence. As an intern, she acquired new skills and a much deeper and broader understanding of the political process and its impact on agriculture. This aspect of her internship was perhaps its greatest highlight. As Olexa, et al. (2003) note, "undergraduates face a growing and critical need to learn about the policies, laws and administrative rules that impact decision making (p. 39)" because of the particular importance of the regulatory and policy environment for the agricultural sector.

The benefits accrued to the State Legislative Office were mostly associated with the intern's contribution to the general functioning of the office. Her major project during the internship involved a detailed analysis of a bill that subsequently was introduced to the Legislature. She also monitored developments in committee hearings, and in general, added to the labor pool of "ears and eyes" needed to track the flurry of activities associated with a typical 60-day legislative session. The Office staff delegated both menial office tasks and substantive work to the student intern, giving the office an opportunity to increase its productivity and more comprehensively address the needs of the State Legislator and his constituents.

Comparing these benefits to those listed in Table 1 illustrates that the legislative internship lacks many of the benefits associated with the "screening and hiring" of potential employees that can accrue to agribusinesses that sponsor interns. The cyclical

nature of a part-time legislature does lend itself to hiring interns who only work for the 60-day legislative session, a benefit that corresponds to a benefit noted in Table 1, and though difficult to document, the office did gain an additional perspective from a student of the state's College of Agricultural and Natural Resources who could contribute to the daily office interactions, debates and decision-making processes.

The benefits to the University and, more specifically the home academic unit of the student, are largely associated with the underlying messages implied by the institution's support of the internship. The faculty member and his academic unit (and implicitly, the University) were able to demonstrate to State Legislators that they are committed to active, experiential learning that enriches a student's college experience. The internship also helped strengthen contacts with State Legislators and their staffs, and provided an appropriate learning opportunity that met the specific needs and career goals of one of the department's graduate students. The internship also established a precedent within the department, so that students (and potential students) interested in non-traditional internships now know that the department is willing to support them in their pursuits. These benefits are similar to those listed in Table 1.

In addition to the comparison of types of internships and their benefits, there also is a need to determine ex post the lessons learned about the fundamental components necessary for a "meaningful" legislative internship. The foremost issue that needs to be addressed by anyone considering a legislative internship is the need for effective communication between the student, the faculty advisor and the legislative office hosting the intern. Such communication clarifies expectations of all parties involved and assures that the internship is designed to meet the needs and interests of all involved.

Second, the role of the intern must be substantive. Duties and responsibilities must include tasks that challenge the intern and engage the intern in the political realities of a legislative session. For example, interns should conduct research, draft policy position statements, and participate in briefings and in-office debates about issues of the day. Interns can and probably should still be assigned some basic office work (stuffing envelopes, answering the telephone, etc.), as it is an unavoidable component of any legislative office, and an intern willing to do these tasks provides added incentives for Legislative Offices to host interns. The key is balance.

A third issue that must be addressed is the potential conflict between the academic calendar and the legislative calendar. Course schedules, particularly for graduate courses, may be limited and inflexible. Some courses may only be offered once per year or even less frequently. Undergraduate courses may be sequenced and a missed course could delay graduation by 12 months or more. Clearly, potential

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conflicts between an internship and a student's program of study need to be anticipated and resolved before the internship is approved.

A final issue is to determine if the "political" dimension of a legislative internship could impede or compromise the learning experience. Prior research by Stonecash, et al. (1988) suggests that partisan politics do not distract from the experiences of interns. In analyzing the New York Assembly Intern Program, the authors noted that, "intern satisfaction was assessed by compatibility of the match between intern and legislator partisan affiliation (Republican intern and legislator or Democrat intern and legislator, for example, in contrast with a Republican intern and Democratic legislator). The extent of compatibility had no impact on satisfaction (p. 28)." A similar conclusion is drawn concerning the student in this case study. As party affiliation had no direct bearing on the student's experience, this variable apparently is not of critical importance when planning legislative internships.

## Summary

This case study indicates that a legislative internship can offer a student an experiential, active learning activity that enhances and broadens an academic program of study. Though the benefits of a legislative internship as compared to a more traditional company-based, private sector internship are somewhat different for all parties involved, the importance of the political process and the policy environment to agriculture suggests that the benefits of a legislative internship are growing in importance.

Presuming that this case study is indicative of benefits and experiences other students would have with similarly designed legislative internships, students from most academic disciplines within Colleges of Agriculture and Natural Resources would benefit from such an experience. Whether students are aspiring to work in production agriculture,

agricultural education and extension, or international agribusiness, the relative importance of the political process and the pervasiveness of the policy environment continue to distinguish the agricultural sector from other sectors in the U.S. economy. Hence, the authors recommend that Colleges and individual academic units should consider broadening their ongoing internship programs to include more policy-oriented internships like the one described in this article.

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