

Co-workers can be as important as supervisors for effective student internships, researcher finds

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Summer internships are beginning, and career-related research from Kansas State University is helping determine what can make those internships more meaningful for students.

Kerri Day Keller, director of career and employment services and a doctoral student in [special education](#), counseling and student affairs, has studied internships as high-impact educational practices and identified eight themes that characterize effective internships.

"[Students](#), employers and universities all have certain interests and outcomes they value from internships," Keller said. "I wanted to be able to look at some of these interests that affect students and I didn't want to lose the focus on the internship as a student-learning experience. I feel strongly that an internship should be a [learning experience](#) and not just a job."

Keller studied how internships are high-impact educational practices that can lead to higher levels of learning than those practices found in traditional classroom settings. Other high-impact educational practices include undergraduate research, first-year experiences, service learning and other activities. Very little research has looked at internships as high-impact practices, Keller said.

Keller researched two aspects of effective internships: the essence of

internships done well and the outcomes of internships done well. Through a qualitative study with 29 students, employers and [faculty members](#), Keller identified eight important themes: four themes related to the essence of internships and four themes related to the outcome of internships.

According to the four themes related to essence, effective internships: require commitment, connect the classroom to career, facilitate good communication and provide a sense of community.

"We often think about the importance of an intern's supervisor, but I also found that [interns](#) who had a good experience also talked about the co-workers and the other people involved in their internship," Keller said. "Students said that it was really important for them to feel welcome and to feel a valued part of the organization and not just 'the intern.'"

According to the four themes related to outcome, effective internships: develop competencies, produce crystallization, generate capital and build confidence.

"Crystallization involves deciding whether this is the career path for you and discovering more about your career interests," Keller said. "Generating capital also involves more than making money -- it can also refer to 'social capital,' which involves networking and connections made through an internship, or it can relate to 'symbolic capital,' which is essentially having the internship on your resume."

Keller's research has several implications for students, employers and universities. Her study shows that in order to create successful internships, it is important to prepare students, educate employers and carefully scale up programs at universities. Keller noted that it is especially important for students to show initiative, be self-directed and have strong communication and interpersonal skills.

"I think the university has a critical role in continuing our preparation of students," Keller said. "This is also applicable to what we are doing in career and employment services and I think it reminds us that we can continue taking an active role in educating employers about what creates a positive internship experience."

Keller's qualitative study involved interviews with 19 students who had an academic credit-bearing internship, whether paid or unpaid. To understand what the participants brought back to the classroom, Keller also interviewed five employers of interns as well as five faculty members who taught internship participants.

She interviewed students and faculty from a variety of disciplines, including horticulture, animal science, political science, mass communications, interior design and hotel and restaurant management. The employers she interviewed came from both for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

Keller would like to further research the area of unpaid and paid internships, as well as take a closer look at effective internships that were not for academic credit.

Keller received a first-place award for a research oral session she presented at the K-State Research Forum earlier this year. She also will be recognized as a recipient of a graduate student research award at the National Career Development Association annual conference this summer. Keller and a team of Kansas State University faculty and staff will attend the 2012 Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success, organized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, in June in Portland, Ore.

Provided by Kansas State University

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