

Making College “Worth It” – Season 2, Episode 8

Sense of Belonging In Internships

Nolan Shultheis (00:06):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:13):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Shultheis (00:28):

I'm Nolan Shultheis, a second year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learnings Podcast producer and a legal profession scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:39):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning and a Professor of Professional Writing and Rhetoric. In this episode, we'll explore the relational aspects of internship experiences. In the Center's 2024 survey of recent college graduates, 55% had completed an internship during college among participants who took part in an internship. 57% participated in a paid internship, 67% received academic credit. 93% participated in their internship in person and 7% completed their internship online. Recognizing that internships give students the opportunity to practice applying, adapting, or transferring prior knowledge and experiences to a workplace context while they still have support for their learning. A recent study published in the journal Teaching and Learning Inquiry explores how trust and sense of belonging contribute to student satisfaction with their internship experiences.

Nolan Shultheis (01:37):

We'll talk with Melinda Adams, a professor of fashion management and program coordinator of the fashion management program at University of the Incarnate Word, and Jody Jessup-Anger, Professor of Higher Education and Chair of the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership at Marquette University. Let's meet our guests.

Jody Jessup-Anger (01:59):

My name is Jody Jessup-Anger and I'm a professor of higher education at Marquette University and I'm also currently serving as our acting a dean in the college. And I became interested in studying internships because it's one of several high impact practices that really helped to promote learning and engagement for undergraduate students. And it seemed like a really natural place to do some research. There's not a lot of research out there on the conditions that promote effective internships and surrounds how to develop conditions that serve different learning interests. And so after Melinda and I were together and started about these conditions,

Melinda Adams (03:01):

I am Dr. Melinda Adams. I am a full professor fashion management at the University of Incarnate Word. I am currently the program coordinator for the program. And like Jody said, I got interested after we started looking at the high impact practices. I've done other high impact practices, but our students are required to do internships and we always tell them it's this great learning opportunity, but I know

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several of our students have not had great internship, so it was a good area for us to do that research and actually has helped refine our internship program that we have.

Jessie Moore (03:42):

That's exciting to hear and maybe we can hear more of the specifics as our conversation continues. You've recently published an article on trust and sense of belonging and internships, and we'll link to that article in our show notes. We're going to try and take a few pieces of that article at a time starting with just wondering if you could talk a little bit about how supervisors care and trust relate to student satisfaction with their internships.

Jody Jessup-Anger (04:11):

So interestingly, when we were engaged in this seminar with other participants and this notion of trust came out of the seminar from another group that was looking at conditions that promote learning. And so we got really curious about it and looked at this notion of supervisor care and trust, but we didn't find significance that supervisor care and trust. There was no relationship between that and internship satisfaction. And before we say that it's not important, I think it's vital that we did a little bit into the research method. We took a quantitative approach, and my interpretation of our findings is that perhaps we didn't capture supervisor care and trust in a way that enabled it to be significant for students. And so while we didn't find a relationship between supervisor care and trust and internship satisfaction, that doesn't mean that it's not necessarily important. It just means perhaps that our measure wasn't able to capture it. So I continued to believe that supervisor care and trust is important for internship satisfaction, but there are also other aspects that were significant that perhaps for the students in our study rose to a level of deeper significance.

Melinda Adams (05:42):

And while it didn't come out as significant, it did impact their sense of belonging. And I think that's very true of our own. When we go look for a position and we find a job when we don't feel like we belong somewhere, you're not going to feel like anybody about you. So I think it's still there, maybe weren't asking the right questions or the students aren't clear on exactly what that looks like.

Jessie Moore (06:06):

That's always such a challenging part of research is figuring out how to ask what you want to ask. And then even when you think you have it, there are other humans involved and so they may interpret it differently than you anticipated.

Nolan Shultheis (06:21):

What experiences contribute to students' sense of belonging in their internships?

Jody Jessup-Anger (06:26):

So we looked at several experiences and the ones that rose to a level of significance were opportunities to use their career related skills in their internships and also the opportunity to gain confidence in pursuing future job opportunities. And when I think about why those were important for foster and belonging in students, I think it really makes a lot of sense that students go into an internship experience really wanting to gain experience and learn about their location and when they have the opportunity to

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do so, that garners a sense of belonging for them. And then also many students will course pursue an internship because they want to have skills that will prepare them for a future job. And so thinking about why that might promote their sense of belonging, certainly if they have this goal that they want to gain these skills, they do gain these skills, then they feel like, oh yeah, this was the right experience for me. This made me feel connected to my internship site. This was worth my time. And so those two skills in particular really helped were significant in fostering a sense of belonging for students.

Melinda Adams (07:50):

And I think allowing them to use their skills is also shows that the intern, whoever their supervisor is, actually trust them or values their opinion, which also helps with that satisfaction with their internship because they're not just there. Those traditional going to fetch coffee internships, they actually are doing something that is of value to the company and therefore it's important to them because they're being able to make a difference.

Nolan Shultheis (08:20):

I'll say as a student and someone who's had internships both through the school and through my own methods, I would say that unsurprisingly, the school does a very good job here at Elon in terms of structuring internships for students and making it kind of a low barrier to entry in terms of fear and that confidence level you were talking about. I would definitely say though that as a student and a young adult looking to join the workforce later on in my life, I think that the whole competence thing is very true. Before I kind of dipped my feet into the world of internships, I was worried and I was scared because there's this concept around work in general when you're younger and that it's like this big bad thing and everyone's so serious and if you do one thing wrong, you're cut off the chopping block, you're fired, you're taking a pay, hit, any of that sort. And after coming here and working with Jessie for almost two years now, I would definitely say that that kind of fear and anxiety was never really once present here. It was always like a welcome environment. There was no kind of initiation process where I wasn't treated a certain way. Certain corporate work environments will take advantage of the interns and whatnot. So I definitely think that working towards the confidence is probably a good thing in the future for really anyone. I mean obviously confidence in any category won't do you wrong.

Melinda Adams (09:53):

It's true. I watch our students, they're trying to get internships right now because they need 'em for the summer and they are stressing out because nobody's called me back. What do I do? What do I am? Like you need to contact them, you need to harass them and show them you're interested. If you show you don't care, then they think you don't care, so they're not going to call you. I'm like, you need to reach out. It's that they're very intimidated by that whole, and these are just internships, so next year they got to go get a job. So it does help with their confidence because right now they're very stressed out.

Jessie Moore (10:31):

I think that there's a layer there too of learning how to communicate in the various workplace settings and even what tools are used. There are more phone calls still than some of our students might be comfortable with, and it's not just a text-based interface. So learning how to communicate across different platforms and technologies and to be proactive, as you're noting Melinda is really important.

Nolan Shultheis (10:59):

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What should site supervisors be thinking about as they assign tasks to internships?

Jody Jessup-Anger (11:05):

I really think that the internship supervisors should think holistically about what an intern's tenure is going to look like at the place in which they're interning, thinking about onboarding really to set expectations for students and then also lessen anxieties that students might have. In addition, thinking about outcomes of the internship. Certainly sometimes universities have outcomes that they want students learning outcomes that they want students to gain from the experience, but also to interns. Sites should also really think about what outcomes they want students to have from the in experience. My hunch would be doing that cognitive work before having an intern come in, they'll quickly realize that perhaps while some of that more administrative work might have a place in helping a student become initiated to the day-to-day work, it really can't be the focus of the work because it won't lead to the outcomes that certainly students want from the experience the university wants from the experience. And also the site wants the student to gain from the experience. And so while I see some benefit in students understanding the day-to-day work and that some of those administrative tasks are part of that work, I really see benefit in internship sites and internship supervisors, identifying more complex tasks for students to work on and really trying to hit the sweet spot between having students work on things that they're somewhat comfortable with, but also push them to greater cognitive complexity to a greater understanding of the work environment.

Melinda Adams (12:58):

And we have people that contact us for interns all the time, and I tell them, I'm like, you need a plan for your students, your interns. I am like, I'm not going to give this to the students until you can tell me exactly what you expect the student to do. What's the job entail? Because one, the student's going to ask me, and I don't know, I don't work there, but they need to know what you're looking for and they need to know what skills they're going to learn and what you want from them. So this has resulted in a lot of people that are looking for internships, creating a better document than, oh, hey, I'm just looking for an intern. They have to think about the skills. And I also tell them upfront that if you're not going to pay them, it's very likely nobody's going to apply for the job. So because they don't feel the money, well, it might not be a lot. It's a value issue of whether or not they think you value them, but you need to figure out what they're going to do before we even will post the internship because otherwise it's too chaotic and they don't learn anything and they do end up doing busy work and they're not getting anything out of it, and it's a waste of money and time for everybody.

Nolan Shultheis (14:08):

Having read the article you both had wrote, I thought the idea of autonomy you both had raised in the literature review was interesting, especially considering my past internship, which was most autonomous work, not here. I'd like to preface difference, place autonomous work in a lot of files sorting. So what would you recommend? So interns feel independent while also having the support they need to be successful?

Jody Jessup-Anger (14:35):

Yeah, I think there's a difference between autonomy and installation. That autonomy really enables students to feel supported in making decisions and feel supported in enacting their work. Whereas I would say isolation is given a set of tasks and then a hands-off approach to not doing any supervision. So

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I think there's certainly a balance. Most students thrive on having a sense of autonomy, and that autonomy can be ensuring that they have the capacity to do the work in a way that makes sense for them. They have the capacity to ask questions when they are unsure of something or ask for clarification. And so I think maybe Nolan, what you're describing is a little bit more of an isolation situation where a student is given a task that might be beyond the level that they're comfortable with and the expectation is that they just do it. Or on the flip side, being given a task that's really below what their skill level is. And so not only is it a task that's easy for them, but then there's really no feedback that will help them grow and develop. And so I think that's probably one of the worst ways to treat an intern is to have expectation for that intern but not really have any support for that intern.

Melinda Adams (16:04):

Yeah, I think I have, so I had a student last year who had a summer internship would probably be the best example of an autonomous type of project. He was given a project that was what he was supposed to work on the entire time, but he had weekly check-ins. So he was given the overview, this is the project, this is what we want to do. But he had check-ins every week with his supervisor and he could do what he wanted to do and he could also go to different departments and ask them questions to help him with his project. So I think that gets to that level of it was his project and he had to do it, but he could ask the questions like Jody was saying that he needed to get it done and it wasn't below his level and it was challenging him a little bit and he wasn't left out on his own. So I think that would be kind of find that sweet spot.

Nolan Shultheis (16:56):

So it's interesting hearing all these things and reading about them and now connecting them to my personal experience. I really do think the whole being able to ask questions and the idea of autonomous work is interesting. Basically what I do, I'm given an assignment or a task to do, use the skills I've been taught what I know to finish the task, but there's also the knowledge that if I want input or if I think I might be in the wrong direction, I don't think this picture is right, this sounds right. I can go over and I can ask, see these questions. Without that fear of seeming I don't know what I'm doing or the idea that if I ask this question, I'm not a good enough worker.

Jessie Moore (17:47):

Yeah, always welcome questions and to better quality work and a better working relationship. And I also appreciate Nolan is really good at receiving feedback too, not only from me, but from the many other people that he interacts with and his internship roles. So Melinda, the characteristics that you described really resonate both in terms of how I understand the research on work integrated learning, including internships, and then just good practice and I appreciate you summarizing it so succinctly, if some of the things that site supervisors can be doing to provide a higher quality experience for students,

Jody Jessup-Anger (18:27):

I think that notion of feedback is so important and it's oftentimes as supervisors, I think it's oftentimes the thing that goes by the wayside when we get really busy. I think it's really important to put ourselves in the shoes of who we supervise. And while it might be a task that we've seen done a million times by a million different people, oftentimes it's the first time or the second time that a student in an internship might be doing that task. And so taking time, even if it's a busy day or making sure to provide a space for that time to give feedback is really important. One of the things in some other research that I've done

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that I know is that especially new professionals feel like they don't get the feedback that they need. And so if they're not getting that feedback, then sometimes it can be a pretty uncomfortable and space for them. And that's I think, the environment that really would make them have a lack of belonging.

Jessie Moore (19:28):

Yeah, there's definitely some magic to developing feedback cultures where all of us feel like we can ask for and process feedback in community with others and make sense of the feedback we're getting too. So definitely extends to internships as well. And you've talked a little bit about some of the things that supervisors can do. I wonder what recommendations would you share with universities and their faculty and staff as they support students completing internships?

Melinda Adams (19:56):

So I think one, whoever's the supervisor from the university perspective needs to do their homework on who is actually the internship or who the company is, who's asking for the intern, need to really reach out to them and talk to them about what they're looking for and exactly what they're expecting the student to do. I think there's a lot of, they just assume or they just think it's a warm body to have in place that they don't necessarily have to pay them. And being very clear to them that that's just not what interns are for and it needs to be something for both of them. So I think it's something that the supervisor of the internship from the university perspective really needs to work closely with whoever is looking for the intern. Yeah,

Jody Jessup-Anger (20:43):

I would add to that, having really clear communication between the university site supervisor and the site and a student. I think about myself as an undergraduate student and the first time I did an internship, I knew during internships was important to getting a job, but beyond that, I hadn't really thought a lot about what an internship might entail or how to identify what a good internship was. And so doing some coaching as students, I think the university doing coaching and students to help them clarify what it's they want to take from an internship and then making sure that there's a good match between what the student wants to develop, especially because we know that opportunities to use career related skills are important and gain confidence is important. And so really doing that leg work from the get go, helping the student to clarify what they want from the internship and making sure it's a good match between what they want from their experience and what the internship is going to offer, I think is really important as well.

Jessie Moore (22:00):

Thank you both. And Melinda, you had mentioned earlier that your research has actually informed some of the practices at your institution in new ways. I wondered if you wanted to reflect a little bit on what some of those changes or tweaks have been.

Melinda Adams (22:14):

So for our department, because I fell into the internship supervisor role for all our students in the summer and doing the research, actually, I started looking at what we do for our internships and the reports, and it just, whoever asked for an intern, we would just post it out there. And so doing the research of what best practices were actually showed me that what we're doing is not good at all. So

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we've really strengthened our questioning and development of the internships that come across our desk or via email to make sure that it's something that would be of value for the students and it matches with the mission of the university or the program, and then making sure we get the right student in place. So I think it's been more of us doing our own homework, so it's been more on our end to make sure that this isn't somebody who's just looking for a warm body.

(23:13):

And so it's a lot more meetings on my end of talking to people and screening internship requests. And I think that's the big thing. And then we've been asking the students more about how the internship for them to reflect on it, we would have them just do a big report of everything they did over the summer. And now part of that is also a reflection piece of what they learned. Would they do this as a job? How were they treated? So bringing in that reflection piece, which also was something that we saw when we were looking at best practices and what we were learning for when it came to our research.

Nolan Shultheis (23:50):

What advice about internships would you give to students who are listening to the podcast?

Melinda Adams (23:55):

You need to do one, you're going to have to get some confidence. It's your practice to go get a job because it's coming. And so in this day and age, you need to know how to interact on a professional level, and this is your chance to practice those skills and learn some other skills. We can't teach you everything in college. So there's some things you're going to learn on the job, and this is your first chance to do that. And then figure out how you can take what you've learned in your internship to your actual job when you graduate.

Jody Jessup-Anger (24:30):

I just piggyback on that. So return to something that we talked about in the beginning, and that is don't be afraid to ask questions. I think that sometimes students go into an internship feeling like they need to have the answers and that they're in this paraprofessional setting because they're smart and capable. And asking questions might break that facade. But asking questions I think helps a supervisor understand that the student is curious and understand where the student is in terms of their knowledge base. And the questions can help to scaffold a better internship experience. And so I would really encourage any student listening to the podcast to feel free to ask questions of a supervisor. I think that it will help to create rapport with the supervisor, and in addition, ask for the space and the time that they need to reflect on their experience with the supervisor. I think that feedback loops are really important, and then the internship experience, and so ensuring that they're getting what they need in terms of feedback and also have the space to ask questions.

Jessie Moore (25:47):

Thank you both for those great insights for students, for site supervisors, and for faculty and staff. It's really been fun learning a little bit more about your work and the implications for internships in higher ed. Is there anything else that you'd like to share about your research before we wrap up our conversation?

Jody Jessup-Anger (26:07):

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Not about our research, but I just want to thank you both for the opportunity to engage with this research. I think you can only learn so much about internships by reading about them. I think talking and pulling out little aspects of the article is really important to helping the research come alive as well as helping us to think more deeply about the research that we're doing. And certainly, Nolan hearing your experience of internships puts a face to the students who we're writing about. And so I think it's really,

Melinda Adams (26:39):

Yep. Thank you both for having us. It does. It helps to talk about it so people can hear actual experiences.

Jessie Moore (26:48):

Well, we appreciate you taking time to visit with us today. It's really interesting research and important for student learning. As you said, internships are practice for the workplace, and there are ways that we can make that more meaningful practice. So thank you for sharing what you've learned so far. Thanks for your conversation, and we hope to catch up with you again soon.

Nolan Shultheis (27:09):

Thank you.

Jessie Moore (27:19):

So Nolan, what stood out to you in our conversation today?

Nolan Shultheis (27:23):

I think one of the things that stood out to me the most was the idea of intern confidence and the relationship between a supervisor and their intern. Obviously, having experienced it myself, I saw a lot of parallels through what was brought up in conversation and what was read about compared to what I'm dealing with right now. And I think that that's a good indicator of the way things are being done at Elon and probably the way things should be done in other places, as I really haven't felt probably 80% of the normal anxiety that an intern would feel and what would be considered the normal current structure of internships.

Jessie Moore (28:06):

Well, and that's great to hear. As they noted, internships really are an opportunity to practice before you are in the workplace without guardrails. So they really can be higher quality, less anxious, less anxiety promoting experiences when there is room to ask questions, room to seek feedback and process that feedback and really viewed as a learning experience, which I think our guests were really emphasizing that this is a relationship rich opportunity to practice workplace activities before you are formally in the workplace. And I appreciated the tips that they had for supervisors and for faculty, staff, and students. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Shultheis (29:06):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning.

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Jessie Moore (29:13):

To learn more about internships and other forms of work integrated learning in higher education, see our show notes and other resources at www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org. Subscribe to our show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.