



Micro Internships to Increase Student Employability

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the United States, many businesses have pinpointed deficiencies in today's college graduates in meeting their job requirements. According to a McGraw-Hill Education study, only four in ten college students feel prepared for a future career.

Purpose: This paper considers the experiential pedagogical strategy of micro internships to develop work-ready students, meeting the expectations and requirements of prospective business employers.

Methodology/Approach: Drawing upon the theoretical concepts of Situated Learning Theory and a real-life case study example based on a higher education institution in the United States (US), the authors illustrate how micro internships can be integrated within a business curriculum and its benefits.

Findings/Conclusion: This paper utilizes a case study to demonstrate how micro-internships can be practically applied in college classrooms. In addition, the positive aspects of micro internships vs. traditional internships, student learning outcomes, and related career-readiness skills associated with micro-internships are illustrated and emphasized.

Implications: This study is significant and relevant to today's higher education environment. It examines how Generation Z students currently enrolled in colleges and universities can be better prepared for future business employment by infusing various career readiness approaches in specific micro internships.

KEYWORDS: micro internships, experiential learning, business education, career readiness.

INTRODUCTION

Are universities in the United States successfully graduating students who are 'career ready?' Are today's college graduates prepared for 'The Future of Work' that lies ahead? These are questions that keep higher education administrators awake at night. Career readiness can be defined as a foundation that enables college graduates to demonstrate the necessary core for success in the workplace (NACE, 2022). However, recent studies suggest that there are growing concerns about the career readiness of U.S. children. According to a McGraw-Hill Education study conducted in partnership with MMR Research, only four in ten college students feel very or extremely prepared for future careers in business. This online survey, representing 1,000 United States students from different regions, institution types, and academic years, showcased the need for more preparedness among college students.

Furthermore, this research highlights the deficiencies noted by students and the growing implications that U.S. students need to catch up in their academic pursuits (McGraw-Hill

Education, 2018). Fewer than half of students' report feeling they have the critical skills necessary for employment. For example, students surveyed felt deficient in several areas, such as solving complex problems (43 percent), resume writing (37 percent), and interviewing (34 percent) for jobs (McGraw-Hill Education, 2018).

Some researchers promote the value of university course development for student career readiness. Regarding the United States, career courses are designed to prepare students for careers in each occupation or profession. Bettencourt et al. (2022) suggested that career and technical education (CTE) and college preparation curriculum in high school can be beneficial; they further argued for stronger secondary and postsecondary partnerships that integrate CTE with college preparation to provide students with more excellent opportunities beyond high school. These educational improvements included expanding dual enrollment opportunities, providing mentorship of diverse career possibilities, and beginning integration between college and career planning earlier in students' schooling.



Additionally, Reese and Miller (2006) suggested a positive impact of a career development course on career decision-making self-efficacy. A career development course, primarily designed to help undecided students with career decision-making, appeared to lower perceived career decision difficulties.

Additionally, Layton et al. (2020) found that career planning courses increase the career readiness of graduate and postdoctoral trainees. This study, conducted on 1,000 graduate and postdoctoral trainees, discovered that these classes positively impacted the students' career readiness, with 90% of the participants reporting an increase in their confidence in their ability to pursue their career goals. As this study pertains to undergraduate students, there are three key points to consider: (a) students should develop a clear understanding of their career goals and interests, (b) students should build a strong network of professional contacts, and (c) Students should gain relevant work experience through internships or other opportunities. Furthermore, it is essential to expose students in college to corporate-type experiences and scenarios. Micro internships provide a practical, hands-on experience that meets the expectations of prospective business employers.

Nevertheless, the literature on micro internships is scarce, and there is a noticeable theory-to-practice gap. There is a lacuna on how theoretical concepts about micro internships can be seamlessly integrated within business curriculums and in classrooms by business instructors in higher education (Rowe et al., 2023). In other words, more evidence-based examples from the higher education sector are required to increase understanding of the implementation process of micro internships (Reddy & Moores, 2012; Sattler & Peters, 2013; Rowe et al., 2023).

This paper explores the pedagogical strategy of micro internships and its usefulness in developing business students with career readiness skills. Research questions about what are micro internships? How is it different and better than the traditional internship model? How can this experiential modality be integrated into the higher education curriculum? What are the benefits of micro internships in terms of student learning and performance and career readiness? are answered in this paper.

The paper is divided into seven sections. The first section examines the need for curriculum innovation and Generation Z students. Section two reviews the existing literature on micro internships. Section three summarizes Situated Learning Theory (SLT) and its appropriateness in comprehending the impact of micro internships on student learning outcomes. Section four reviews the choice of the case study method and describes the case study, i.e., the micro internship model employed by the primary author in his marketing curriculum at a higher education institution located in the US. The last three sections consist of discussion, conclusion, and limitations, with suggestions for further research.

THE URGENCY FOR CURRICULUM INNOVATION

Among many university presidents and administrators, there is a sense of urgency in addressing educational challenges, especially after the pandemic. The pandemic accelerated several academic problems, including the closure of colleges and universities because of declining enrollments, the ballooning of online education, and an increase of nontraditional higher education providers, and the demand for short-term, non-degree training (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021). Furthermore, the cost of receiving an education, especially in the USA, is indeed a factor that may affect student enrollment. According to Jennifer and Pender (2021), tuition and fees for the 2022-2023 school year averaged \$10,423 for in-state residents at public colleges and \$39,723 for private colleges. These costs may deter some students from pursuing higher education but do not necessarily reflect a college degree's value or return on investment. Moreover, various sources of financial aid and scholarships are available to help students cover the cost of education (Dickler, 2021). Therefore, while the cost of education is an important issue that deserves further attention, it is not directly relevant to this study's research question and hypothesis.

Higher education is under tremendous pressure brought on by various market disruptions in the country (Green & McCann, 2021). Some pundits from across the spectrum are even questioning the value of higher education (Lederman, 2017). According to a Pew Research study, 61% of Americans believe that the higher education system in the United States is heading in the wrong direction (Brown, 2018). Business executives and college administrators have differing views about recent academic results. According to a 2014 poll, 96% of college provosts responded that their institutions were 'very or somewhat' adequately preparing students for employability, while only 11% of business leaders agreed that students coming out of higher education environments possessed career readiness (LeBlanc, 2021).

However, there is a diverging opinion about the concept of employment preparation. With career readiness, U.S. employers evaluate whether potential employees are prepared for work. Hansen (2021) argued that the U.S. education system falls short in preparing students for the workforce; he further outlines the importance of developing practical skills, such as problem-solving, by incorporating real-world experiences, internships, and apprenticeships into the curriculum. Furthermore, there appears to be a gap between the perceptions of employers and academic institutions regarding college graduates' preparedness. While employers rate recent college graduates' proficiency lower in some areas, students tend to give themselves higher marks in most career readiness competencies like good communication (Heine, 2023). However, there are divergent views on career readiness across the globe. In one study, the researchers identified disparities in the expectations of professionals and academicians in different countries and continents on career readiness issues for college graduates

(Mitchell & Allen, 2014). The survey of 1,000 respondents analyzed professionals and academicians in China, Europe, and the United States. Mitchell and Allen (2014) argued that the curriculum for career-readiness graduates should be flexible, adaptable, and responsive to the needs of the various stakeholders in the employment process. In a survey of 1996 undergraduate students from the United Kingdom, Nabi and Bagley (1998) found (a) graduates tend to rate the importance of particular skills more highly than their own ability in those skills, (b) graduates tend to rate their level of ability lowest in digital skills and highest in their work without supervision, and (c) the realization that there may be possible differences between male and female viewpoints on career readiness. In this research, students ranked themselves higher in general skill sets than specific ones.

There is an interest in further developing students in higher education in the United Kingdom and mainland Europe (Andrews & Higson, 2008). European universities are increasingly required to produce highly mobile graduates to respond to disruptive changes. Andrews and Higson (2008) found that employers preferred graduates who possessed soft skills more than hard skills. For employers, the added value of employing a business graduate was that a higher-level business-related qualification represented more than evidence of the acquisition and application of knowledge. It reflected an individual's ability to think critically and applied.

Significant themes emerged from the research, each focusing on different components of graduate employability: Business Specific Issues (Hard business-related knowledge and skills); Interpersonal Competencies (Soft business-related skills); Work Experience, and Work-Based Learning. These divergent views between various stakeholders demonstrate uncertainties about higher education in the United States. The projected outlook for higher education could be considered gloomy. Enrollment in accredited colleges and universities has shrunk consistently since 2010 with the rise of online learning (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Due to various disruptive factors, universities and colleges are projected to have 450,000 fewer students beyond 2025 (Green & McCann, 2021). Universities are fighting with their competitors to attract students. However, the nature of higher education is changing. For example, the percentage of students at private for-profit institutions who took online education courses exclusively (60 percent) was higher than that of students of both public institutions (46 percent) and private nonprofit institutions (34 percent) in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Also, contrary to conventional wisdom, today's college students are not the same as their predecessors. Today's Generation Z students are the most global, diverse, technological, and entrepreneurial generation ever (Green & McCann, 2021). Additionally, Generation Z students have developed unique learning styles. They tend to focus on,

appreciate, and prefer practical study methods connected to real life (Green & McCann, 2021). Given today's students' vastly different characteristics and learning styles, higher education institutions should consider how to realign their teaching to include more innovative approaches toward increasing student learning outcomes.

In this context, work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities offer long-term and full-time placement models, along with more flexible short-term and part-time placements for undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in higher education institutions. These WIL models emphasizing "integration and intention" encompass academic credit, interaction, and engagement with external organizations such as industry, government, and community (Coll et al., 2011; Orrell, 2011; Patrick et al., 2008; Sachs et al., 2017; Zegwaard et al., 2020). Examples include internships, clinical placements, teaching practicums, service-learning projects etc. (Rowe et al., 2023). WIL placements have also become an integral feature of vocational degrees such as nursing, education, journalism, and arts (Kennedy et al., 2015).

However increasingly it is the short-term immersion work placements coined as micro-placements in Australia, New Zealand, and Asia which have gained the approval of the students, higher educational institutions, and industry partners. Described as joint collaborative endeavors between higher educational institutions and the industry; these short stints in the workplace are embedded within the business curriculum and course content, effectively exposing students to various workplace practices and environments, thereby building their confidence, and developing their transferable skills (Ferns et al., 2019; Jackson, 2013; Jackson et al., 2019; Rowe et al., 2023). The distinct advantage of these micro-placements lies in its flexibility, in its ability to accommodate different types of employment responsibilities, and match with the learning styles of today's Generation Z students (Rowe et al., 2023). Within the US and UK, micro-placements have been referred to as micro-internships, and defined as "short-term" supervised professional projects (Parker, 2022; Wingard, 2019). The next section considers micro internship programs, and their usefulness in connecting with Generation Z students, to increase their career readiness and employability levels.

MICRO INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

As political officials sound the alarm about the lack of career readiness in US students, the world has become more competitive for global talent. Except for nontraditional students, the typical U.S. college students belong to Generation Z; these students can be defined as the most global, diverse, technological, and entrepreneurial generation ever (Green & McCann, 2021). Micro internships are project-specific, not industry-specific under supervision (Wingard, 2019). In general, traditional internships are usually longer than micro-internships and can last for several months (Parker, 2022). Micro internships encompass "short periods in the workplace ranging from two to ten days where students work

individually or in teams on highly focused projects... [which occur] in small to medium companies and startups” (Kay et al., 2019, p. 405). “Work is normally located within the academic institution but performed to the requirements, timelines, and standards of the customers [i.e., corporate partners]” (Fincher et al., 2004, p. 113). Micro internships consist of between five to 40 hours of work per month and can take place at any time of the year. The internships offer true and valuable experience with different projects they are asked to assist with, including lead generation, content creation and data entry. Students employed in micro internships receive a fixed wage, ranging from \$15 to \$25 per hour. The duration of the internship can be anywhere from a week to a month. These internships can also be virtual, providing students with more flexibility in class accommodation and reduced stress levels. A virtual internship allows students to work on projects not easily accessible to them geographically.

Overall, micro internships provide students with excellent opportunities, corporate connections, and increased employment opportunities after graduation (Willison, 2012). Students build resumes, increase their networks, add to their self-esteem, and gain confidence (Alexandria, 2020).

Micro internships are also beneficial for participating business organizations since it allows for the evaluation and training of prospective employees in different technical and soft skills (Willison, 2012). As Moss (2018) explained, micro internships enable organizations to complete projects for which they might otherwise be short-staffed. The special internship grants organizations access to students who do not need to hire full-time or commit to any form of long-term employment. In fact, this venue helps organizations avoid hiring people not suited to the job. Micro internships are also useful for small organizations that require a particular subject’s expertise and knowledge.

Moreover, micro internships reduce attrition rates. Organizations can assess the overall capabilities of micro internship students during what could be considered a trial period. This activity reduces the chances of hiring inappropriate people. Organizations participating in micro internships can diversify in terms of employee recruitment, forging relationships with young college students, and developing their skills and abilities (Willison, 2012).

Existing studies of the micro internship concept have considered its impact on student preparedness in STEM-related occupations (Yahdi & Bracey, 2019). In particular, these researchers designed a short-term project encompassing undergraduate research and extensive traditional internships, offering the advantage of flexible working hours and easy accessibility for the students. The initial analysis suggested that the participating students’ level of confidence in opting for STEM-related majors had increased considerably (Yahdi & Bracey, 2019).

Similarly, Suzuki et al. (2016) researched the effects of micro internships on existing crowdsourcing tasks. They designed

a micro internship platform called Atelier which evaluated crowd workers. They concluded that micro-internships are a “mentored, paid, real-work experience” with the capacity to empower unskilled individuals (i.e., the students) and hone their skills. Moss (2018) comments that micro internships are immensely useful in handling low-risk projects such as preparing presentations, editing reports and publications, etc. Universities such as Northeastern have introduced programs such as the Experiential Network, which arranges six-week projects for its students (Wingard, 2019). Micro internships have also enabled numerous students with opportunities to gain professional experience in well-known, reputable companies. Similarly, Parkey-Dewey (2022) provided examples of how college students have been placed in short-term projects in companies such as Microsoft, CBRE, Dell, and Barilla (Parkey, 2022).

In a nutshell, micro internships are highly beneficial for both students and businesses. However, complexities pertaining to how these micro internships can be integrated into business curriculums continue to persist. How does one integrate these short-term placements into one’s course content, assessments and effectively measure student learning and performance remains a puzzle. The following section resolves one part of this complex puzzle, by reviewing Situated Learning Theory (SLT) and relating its theoretical concepts to understand how student learning and development takes place within the micro internship pedagogical technique.

SITUATED LEARNING THEORY

Situated Learning Theory (SLT) is derived from the fields of psychology, anthropology, and education. It was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in the early 1990s. SLT postulates that human beings learn from external social contexts. Learning is a social process in which an individual interacts with his/her external environment and peers to assimilate new information, knowledge, and skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Individuals are constantly exposed to different situations, groups of people, cultures, and traditions regularly. These social experiences lead to the inculcation of new mental models and schemas resulting in self-transformations in behavior and skills. Learning is a process that occurs outside of the individual and is an outcome of human interactions with external physical and social environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Furthermore, Stein (1998, para 3) explained how these SLT environments can be designed in higher education institutions. Situations need to be developed inside the classroom which involve and prepare the student for external social interactions, problem solving, and application of prior knowledge. Also, guidance should be available to the students to ensure that help is readily available to assist them in mastering different situations. All classroom activities designed for SLT should revolve around a social activity which mimics real-world situations. Students construct new knowledge through these experiences, which are primarily

based on social interaction and kinesthetic activity (Oregon Technology in Education Council, 2007). In traditional learning, learning occurs via lectures and books, unlike SLT, where “learning takes place through the relationships between people and connecting [their] prior knowledge with authentic, informal and often unintended contextual learning” (Stein, 1998, para 1). SLT gets students involved in real-life activities specific to their subject disciplines, and it requires application of previously held knowledge, critical thinking, and kinesthetic abilities (Stein, 1998).

Henceforth, students acquire knowledge by observing others and then practicing themselves. They can be considered “cognitive apprentices” within the learning environment. Cognitive apprentices learn by solving complex problems, where they attempt to transfer their skills and knowledge to fulfill work-related duties and responsibilities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nielsen, 2008). Cognition in this sense is not an “internal process, knowledge is not an object, and memory is not a location”. Instead, “cognition, knowing and learning” all occur via interactions between individuals and their external environments (Wilson & Myers, 1999, p. 57; Qvortrup et al., 2016). Learning is not dependent on the memory or the capacity of an individual to store large amounts of information so that s/he can retrieve it and use it as needed. On the contrary, an individual learns and develops through interactions with the environment, a process known as perceptual learning (Young, 1993; Qvortrup et al., 2016). Learning is dependent on two components: the person and the context (Artino, 2013). An individual learns (i.e., gains cognition) as s/he evolves through different situations, is exposed to new values, beliefs, and philosophies.

Consequently, the pedagogy of micro internships incorporates the theoretical concepts of Situated Learning Theory. The external contexts consist of short-term work-based projects which mimic real-world scenarios since they are from the real world. Students navigate through these problem-based environments, apply their knowledge and skills acquired through education in the classroom, and learn indirectly. Students are exposed to different real-world, work-related responsibilities, they handle and resolve them for academic credit, and in the process learn career readiness skills (Hodge et al., 2011; Reddan, 2015; Reddan & Rauchle, 2012). While helping to solve actual problems that exist within organizations, and interacting with professionals employed there, these students grow and develop further, demonstrating their inculcation of required career readiness skills.

Ironically, all this corporate experience and personality development is possible with a time investment of just five to forty hours per month, either in a face-to-face or virtual environment. Micro internships thus can be powerful pedagogies with the ability to maximize student learning. The following section considers methodological concerns and the suitability of the case study approach to illustrate how instructors can integrate micro internships effectively.

MICRO INTERNSHIPS IN THE CLASSROOM

Implementing micro internships in the classroom could be a game changer for many college students. Case studies have been accepted as a useful methodology in work integrated learning literature research (Lucas et al., 2018). Case studies illustrate the processes involved in integrating different work-related pedagogies and providing data on real-world examples of practice (Rowe et al., 2023). The case study approach can utilize a single case study or multiple case study designs. Single case studies encompass a combination of methods including interviews, surveys, archival records etc. and are effective in examining an event which is unique or revelatory in nature (Yin, 1989). In contrast multiple case studies generalize results across more than one case study thereby validating evidence (Yin, 1994).

This paper focuses on a case study in the US, in which the primary author, a university professor, integrated micro internships into his marketing curriculum. Various aspects of that case study are covered in this paper, thereby answering the paper’s research questions, such as how micro internships can be designed and implemented, how they can be graded, as well as their impact on different aspects pertaining to student learning.

Employers expect more from entry-level employees in today’s hyper-competitive business environment. College graduates entering the workforce are no exception. While micro-internships have many benefits, they also may pose challenges for students. These challenges include student preparation, nontraditional office settings, and financial constraints. In starting a micro internship program, some students may need to be adequately prepared for the micro internships, some experience is typically required for micro internships (Parker Dewey, 2021). In some micro internships, students may be needed to work remotely, which could be challenging to manage for a few college students. Students may not have access to micro-internships due to geographic, financial, or personal constraints, which can limit their options and opportunities (Wingard, 2019). Spanjaard et al. (2018) further argued that today’s graduates face a competitive job market in which employers expect “work-ready” employees. In fact, there is an expectation among employers that college students have been engaged in different facets of their education that have prepared them adequately for joining the workforce.

To give its business students this kind of practical work experience, Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) initiated an academic initiative designed to enhance the course curriculum and provide business students with greater employment opportunities (Green, 2023). OBU is a senior level coeducational institution with an enrollment of approximately 1,900 students. About 60 percent of OBU’s students are from Oklahoma, while the other 40 percent come from 40 other states and 26 countries (Green et al., 2020). OBU is located in Shawnee, Oklahoma, a city of 31,500

residents 35 miles east of Oklahoma City and 90 miles southwest of Tulsa, near the geographical center of the state. OBU's 200-acre campus is on the northwest edge of Shawnee just two miles south of Interstate 40 (Green et al., 2020).

Today's college students need to be more familiar with part-time employment or the demands of being student-athletes. Student-athletes and other students do not receive any practical work experience because of these and other time constraints. According to Suzuki et al. (2016), many job market candidates are seeking alternative methods to learn new skills that will make them more attractive to employers. In OBU's Dickinson School of Business, the faculty strove to bring marketing concepts to life in real, practical ways that provide students with work experience while assisting local participating businesses. Unlike traditional internship programs that typically require the student's presence at the worksite, OBU's micro internships are conveniently embedded within the classroom environment (Green, 2023). The faculty's sincere efforts materialized in the form of micro internships, which help students learn and practice the skills necessary for professional success in the corporate environment. Micro internships provide students with opportunities to connect with key academic stakeholders to create a positive learning environment where they are allowed to grow and fail (Green et al. 2020).

The OBU program allows marketing majors in the Business college to gain meaningful work experience more efficiently via a "micro internship experience" (MIE) that is embedded within the marketing class. In MIE, students complete short-term professional assignments that are similar to those given to new hires or interns (Green et al., 2020). As with a traditional internship, these projects give students valuable work experience, the chance to explore possible career paths, and opportunities to network and stand out in a competitive job market. These mini internships last for only eight to ten weeks, a period that fits conveniently within the academic semester. These micro internships do not involve pay or academic credit (Green, 2023).

Micro Internship Experience

To get started, micro internships built into the curriculum design included learning objectives, student outcomes, and assessments. In building the overall course design for specific micro internship courses for the marketing students, the course designer focused on student-centered learning to maximize student engagement. Rabbini and Gakuen (2002) suggested that learners' needs must be analyzed in order to establish objectives in a syllabus. In the traditional teaching model, faculty-focused transmission of information formats, such as lecturing, place emphasis on the subject matter rather than on the students (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005). Thus, students become passive participants. While there is no agreed-upon definition for the overall concept of student-centered learning, Kaput (2018) maintained that a student-centered learning model shifts from adult-centered

(i.e., faculty) to student-centric and individualized learning. Specifically, faculty can personalize the learning environment to fit students' unique needs, interests, and aspirations.

At OBU, the micro internship model encompasses a supportive network consisting of the class professor, business partners, the OBU Career Center director, a business mentor, and other industry experts (see Figure 1). The school's process starts the moment the student enrolls in the marketing class. At the beginning of the semester, the instructor assigns each student to a team, which is then referred to a business partner for project placement. All team members are required to have an OBU alumnus as a mentor to assist and guide the students in their internships' projects (Green, 2022). Students are allowed to select their own mentors based on common interests or personal career objectives. The teams next make appointments with the OBU Career Center to complete their profiles, portfolios and online pre-surveys. From this point, the student teams meet with their prospective business partners to develop a mutually-agreed-upon work scope for the micro internship. For their initial assignment, students of the teams must submit signed student contracts, business partner agreements, a project approval form, and a completed online pre-survey. These documents are submitted to the marketing professor for grading (Green, 2020).

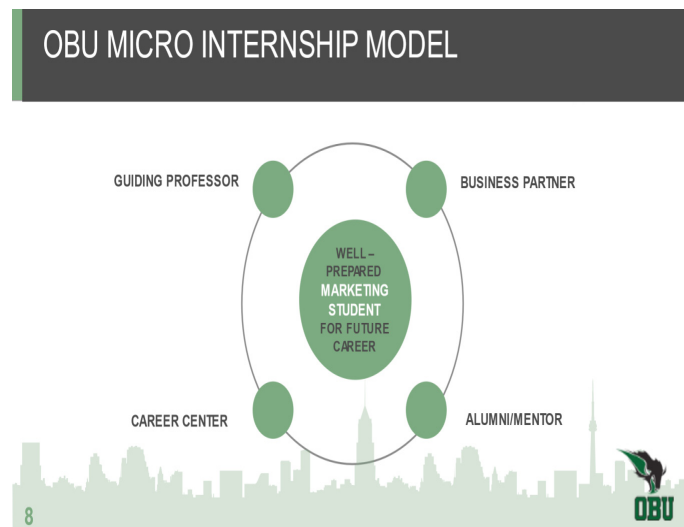


Figure 1. OBU Micro Internship Model

Source: Designed by the primary author

From this point forward, student teams begin working on their internship projects and meeting continuously with their business partners periodically. Students must conduct weekly oral briefings in the classroom and submit written reports to the grading professor. All students maintain close connections with their mentors for any assistance or help they require. Students receive numerous feedback on performance from several perspectives (i.e., faculty, client, mentor). Hora et al., (2019) argued that internship programs with specific characteristics, especially supervisor support and supervisor mentoring, and relation to academic programs, can lead to greater student internship satisfaction development.

At the midpoint of the project, business partners complete an online survey which evaluates their student team so that the grading professor can intervene and correct any problems the business partner identifies. This step is critical in order to provide students with constructive feedback during the micro internship so that they can learn from their mistakes in real time. When the teams complete their mini-internship projects, they do inform their marketing professors. Teams then must present their results to their marketing class, their business partner, their mentors, and their industry experts (Green, 2022).

After completion of their project, teams reconnect with the OBU Career Center and complete a post-project survey. Lastly, the grading professor sends notes of appreciation to all the micro internship stakeholders, including business partners. In step with continuous improvement processes, student and business partner survey results are used to further improve the entire micro internship project for future students (Green, 2023). Furthermore, Seemiller and Grace (2017) remarked that Generation Z students are stimulated by observing their peer learners that are engaged. They found that students (i.e., cognitive apprentices, from the SLT way of looking at the process) observe others completing tasks before they apply themselves to the same tasks, and they are able to foresee that the concepts they are learning have broader applications than just being mere practical examples. The parallel in micro internships is that different business partners may have various marketing problems to solve.

To simplify the process and allow for more student participation, the entire micro internship in-class assignment is broken down into smaller manageable tasks, which are then distributed among the students. The students can more successfully handle these mini-projects. As Seemiller and Grace (2017) correctly opine, breaking a project into multiple “checkpoints” allows students to achieve higher

levels of individual learning and reflection. Hanawi would agree that using a variety of teaching styles, such as team-based learning and different assessment methods, can assist students in achieving higher academic performance (Hanawi et al., 2022).

Student Learning and Development

At OBU, the course objectives and expected student learning outcomes align with the micro internship assignment activities and grading policies. As is evident from the OBU marketing syllabus, 40 percent of the course grade is allocated towards the MIE, which is broken down by (1) gaining approval of the micro internship project, (2) the submission of weekly status reports, (3) designing a marketing plan and campaign and (4) preparation of the final presentation and report. See Table #1. Students are required to lead discussions, share constructive feedback with peers, and participate in assignments, such as embedded digital marketing certifications, that evaluate their career readiness. Harley (1993) explained from the pedagogy perspective that situated learning provides students with new knowledge acquired through experienced practitioners. In the OBU micro internship program, the class professor serves as a provider, facilitator, and mediator of knowledge. Students gain new knowledge from the micro internship and practice it in team activities.

Furthermore, the course assignments and online survey are built from the NACE core career competencies (NACE, 2022). The entire process helps students hone their team building, communication, and interpersonal skills, along with discipline-specific skills such as preparing marketing plans or digital marketing campaigns. Harley (1993) further advocated that effective education requires learning to be embedded in authentic contexts of practice so that students are engaged in increasingly more complex tasks within social communities.

Table 1. Syllabus Example of Micro Internship Assignments

MICRO INTERNSHIP ASSIGNMENT OVERVIEW		
In this assignment, teams of students will assist a business/organization as it relates to digital marketing. As an alternative to formal internship programs, the OBU marketing program allows marketing majors to gain meaningful work experience called a “Micro-Internship Experience” (MIE) within a marketing class. In this micro-internship, students will complete short-term arrangements in the capacity of a digital marketing specialist.		
ELEMENTS OF MICRO INTERNSHIP ASSIGNMENT	PERCENTAGE	POINTS
❖ #5 – Final Project	40 %	200
❖ #5A – Micro-Internship (MI) Approval	2 %	10
❖ #5B – Digital Marketing Evaluation	4 %	20
❖ #5C – Weekly Status Reports	16 %	80
❖ #5D – Digital Marketing Plan	4 %	20
❖ #5E – Digital Marketing Campaign	4 %	20
❖ #5F – Presentation Package	8 %	40
❖ #5G – Peer Appraisal (Team)	2 %	10

Source: Designed by the primary author



Thus, in the OBU micro internship program, students undergo a rigorous process with continuous feedback. See Figure 2. Schedules and due dates are planned ahead of time to create a smooth process for students and business partners (Green, 2022). Potential partners are solicited using a variety of networking systems, like alumni and other supporters of the University. Partners and students are provided formal and informal training about the entire micro internship process (Green, 2020).

Additionally, students have professional mentors which students select themselves. These mentors provide feedback to the students about their micro internship experience and career readiness in general. As Suzuki et al. (2016) argues, the importance of mentors in micro internships should be considered.

At the end of the semester, all student teams make in-class formal presentations of their lessons learned and results.

Various stakeholders, including students, business partners, mentors, industry experts and alumni, participate from across the globe, because the presentations are conducted online on platforms like Zoom. Students receive valuable feedback from a variety of sources. Undeniably, the OBU experience is that these micro internships provide graduating students with career readiness skills which they can leverage anytime for future employment.

Equally important, the OBU micro internship provides more work experience to underserved communities like Blacks and Latinos who might be overlooked in traditional internships. Hora et al., (2019) noted problems with traditional internships including specific barriers to participation, primarily low-income, first generation, and/or minority college students. Additionally, the authors argued about the lack of sufficient attention to the impact of structure and format of traditional internships on the program's success.

OBU MICRO INTERNSHIP PROCESS



Figure 2. OBU Micro Internship Process

Source: Designed by the primary author

The last stage of MIE at OBU revolves around data collection in the form of pre- and post- surveys. Feedback from students, business partners and OBU administrators is gathered at the beginning and end of each semester to foster continual improvement of the program. In Figure 3, the bar graph shows the survey results that measured the career readiness competencies of 10 students in MKTG 3323, Introduction to Marketing Analytics and Web Intelligence, at OBU. The survey was based on the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) eight competencies: critical thinking, teamwork, professionalism, oral/written communications, career management, global/intercultural fluency, leadership, and digital technology. The university's career center director administered and analyzed the survey results. Pre-survey results reveal that most students are not aware of employers'

expectations and lack career readiness competencies (NACE, 2022). The survey was administered twice, September and December: before and after the students participated in a micro internship program. The survey used a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree. The survey results show that the micro internship program improved the students' skills in seven out of eight competencies, except for global/intercultural fluency. The bar graph compares the average scores of the pre- and post-surveys for each competency. For example, the average score for oral/written communications increased from 4.2 to 4.6 after the micro internship program. Students are immediately briefed on these results so they can work to consciously improve themselves during the entire semester. The survey suggests that the micro internship program was effective in enhancing the students' career readiness competencies.

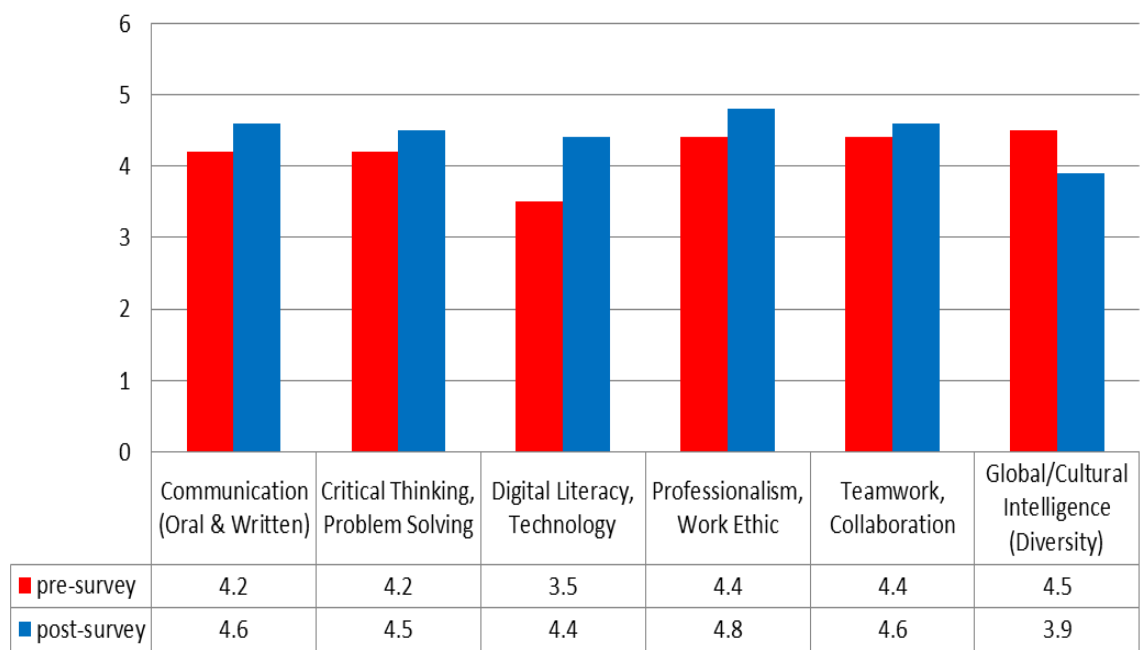


Figure 3. OBU Pre-and-Post Student Surveys (Course: MKTG 3323 – Introduction to Marketing Analytics and Web Intelligence, Fall 2021)

Source: Designed by the primary author

Lastly, a post-survey is sent to the business partners and the students at the end of the semester. Its purpose is to compare the students’ skill sets and the perception of the business partners regarding career readiness of the students after participation in the micro internship projects. The post-survey results demonstrate that business students participating in multiple MIEs during their degree program accumulate more work exposure and are better prepared for future employment.

DISCUSSION

Today’s Generation Z students are different from their predecessors in their learning styles and expectations. They prefer to learn in the company of their peers, by observing them, imitating them, and learning from their mistakes and experiences. For these “cognitive apprentices,” learning is a social experience, which is not dependent on the memory capacities of the student, or on their ability to store large amounts of data and then retrieve and apply them as needed (Young, 1993). Instead, this process is a problem-based environment which mimics real-life scenarios. Students in these action-based learning environments solve complex issues and problems and learn while doing so. Learning now is a process of connecting with situations, problems, and people, applying their subjective knowledge, using critical thinking and kinesthetic abilities, and developing as an individual (Stein, 1998).

The OBU MIE presented in this paper can be described as a holistic model, in that it encompasses student learning at instructor, peer and stakeholder levels. In a college internship program, students are normally supervised in a structured learning framework to allow them to gain valuable work experience in their chosen field of study. Students can

expect the following: (a) To gain real work experience and provide meaningful assistance to the company; (b) To have a mentor who provides guidance, feedback, receptiveness and models professionalism; (c) To gain experience and skills in a particular field; (d) To develop professional contacts; and (e) To receive an orientation to the company for which they are interning (University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2022). However, students are not the only individuals benefiting from internships. At the same time, employers get the opportunity to bring new ideas and energy into the workplace, develop new talent, and potentially build a pipeline for future employees (University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2022).

Furthermore, students are exposed to real-life problems, given opportunities to apply the theoretical concepts learned from the classroom in external learning environments provided by business partners, where students can make mistakes about operations in a safe, nurturing environment. Students are also introduced to the Career Center office, exposed to career consultants, and receive help in designing their profiles and portfolios, all as part of the OBU curriculum. Also, continuous data collection and analysis enables the instructor to improve the program on a regular and continuing basis.

Micro internships are one social learning pedagogy which exposes business and marketing students to corporate based short-term projects in which students collaborate in groups to resolve real-life business issues and problems, with the assistance of their educators and peer mentors.

CONCLUSION

This paper contributes towards the literature on micro internships by examining a case study of OBU which



designed a MIE to increase students' career readiness skills. Issues such as how micro internships can be integrated into a curriculum, types of assessments that can be employed, and methods of data collection are reviewed. The paper provides in-depth insights about micro internships as an innovative pedagogical strategy to increase students' employability after graduation. Colleges and universities now realize that to survive and thrive in this disruptive environment, they must make a compelling case to all stakeholders that their students are career ready (Koerner, 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study only focuses on career readiness and employability. Considerations such as whether student learning is increased with micro internships versus other experiential modalities should be addressed here. In addition, this paper does not include specific comments from students about what they have to say about micro internships. Similarly, the authors have not incorporated the specific comment of business partners.

Also, more empirical evidence is needed on how micro internships can be implemented in classrooms across different subject expertise other than business and marketing. Some questions and issues requiring further examination are (a) Why or why don't students prefer micro internships? and (b) Where does higher levels of student learning occur more successfully, in internships or micro-internships?

In addition, there is scope for empirical research in the field of situated learning environments. The emotional aspects of the learning process have been ignored in SLT literature (Hodge et al., 2011). The interconnectedness between meaningful learning, social interaction, and self-identity requires further exploration. More quantitative and experimental research-based studies are demanded to justify these interrelations within the learner's learning process (Qvortrup et al., 2016). Also, different types of authentic situated learning environments must be explored and integrated into higher education to increase professional identity development and student career readiness.

Moreover, it would be interesting to capture the learning process of the educators and their experiences in facilitating these social learning environments. In-depth and reflective autoethnographic narratives would certainly add value to education research.

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