

# Internships: An Avenue to Graduation for Today's At-Risk Students

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## Today's Workplace

Today's workplace is changing. Jobs that once had a narrow focus and required one specific skill are now jobs where the jobholder is required to be proficient in a wide range of skills. Whether students are entering the workforce after high school or college they will need a higher skill set to be successful.

The service station assistant, for example, who in the past may have mostly worked on automobiles under precise direction is now required to have a high level of technical skills, use computers for problem diagnosis, start, manage and complete a project without direction, understand the economic impact of gas prices on customer buying habits and be able to interact with customers and colleagues on a regular basis.

The job of a bank teller has also changed. In the past the role of bank teller had been to enable customers to make deposits and withdrawals. Jobholders could work individually dealing with customers at their counter. However, today bank tellers are customer service representatives

and, as well as handling deposits and withdrawals, are asked to build relationships with their customers, use computer systems to review customer accounts, work as team with other bank employees to identify and understand customer needs, proactively contact customers and sell additional products.

Workers in today's economy are expected to:

- Be active members of a team where they are required to have effective interpersonal skills, resolve conflicts and problem solve
- Use technology for specific job related activities such as researching and analyzing job related data and information.
- Use basic foundation skills of reading, writing and mathematics to plan and problem solve.
- Be self-directed so that they take on whole projects and deliver results in the time required.

In the past, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students who were not engaged in school would drop out and in many cases find employment. However, today's workplace requires that anyone entering the workforce needs effective interpersonal skills, basic foundation skills, technology

skills and self-direction. In this post-industrial and technological age, workers need at least a high school diploma to compete (Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison, 2006). Today's workplace does not have room for workers who do not have 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The at-risk student who is drifting toward dropping out will not be able to find a good job.

### **Today's At-Risk Student**

At-risk students more often are on the social fringe of the classroom and community. Many times they do not participate in school clubs, sports or other activities and may have a history of attendance problems and suspensions. And it is in those school and community activities that students begin to develop some of the skills required by today's employers.

At-Risk students need support, nurturing and activities that will help them to develop and meet the social and behavioral expectations of employers.

The educational challenge posed by our at-risk youth is how can we, as educators, help them build and develop the skills and behaviors required for success in today's workplace.

### **Real World Learning: The Avenue to Skill Development**

The focus on the at-risk high school student is not new. Many schools have developed multiple strategies to respond to the drop out problem. These include mentoring programs so that at-risk students connect with adults, smaller classes or learning communities,

intensified support including parental involvement and work-based learning which can include classroom activities, internships, job shadowing and career academies.

One strategy that has shown a positive correlation between at-risk students and improved graduation rates is work-based learning. (Reese, 2005). When internships are the focus of work-based learning attendance improves, student credits earned increases and graduation rates increase (Katz, 1993).

However, many schools shy away from developing a full internship program for their at-risk population because they believe:

- Placements would be too difficult to find and sustain
- At-risk students might exhibit anti-social behavior and thereby jeopardize community relations
- Internships are too difficult to set up and manage
- Learning gained "on the job" is not measurable
- Internships are not structured and at-risk students benefit from structured learning

With a quality internship program all these concerns can be addressed and the at-risk students will graduate with the skills needed for successful employment.

### **Quality Internships for At-Risk Students**

A quality internship is a structured learning experience on the site of a for-profit, non-profit, government or

volunteer organization where academic and workplace skills are strengthened and developed. A quality internship program also includes an opportunity for the students to reflect and practice their new skills and to gain support from a coach or mentor.

Too often schools who do offer internships to their students focus on those students who are already successful in school and do not open the opportunity to their at-risk population. And it is the at-risk students who have the most to gain from an internship.

Quality internships should be part of any strategy that addresses the needs of at-risk students. Employers and community organizations want to be part of finding solutions to low graduation rates (Bailey, Hughes and Moore, 2005). They see the future of their businesses and community dependant on skilled workers and engaged citizens. Many business and community leaders fully understand how an internship experience can turn around a youngster who does not see a future.

Quality internships need a way to connect with local employers and community organizations and to monitor the student intern. Employers and organizations need support from the school that ensures them that someone will deal with any inappropriate behavior, attendance issues and monitor the student intern's learning. In short, a quality internship program needs a coordinator from the school to work with the student and organization or business sponsor.

Quality internships need structure. A quality program will have specific curriculum for each internship placement.

And it is this curriculum that builds and strengthens the students' skills in problem solving, team working, technology, reading and writing and self-direction. The curriculum is composed of specific goals and learning activities leading to outcomes inclusive of all the skill dimensions.

In addition, a quality internship ensures that students have the opportunity to reflect on and practice the new skills they are learning. This is often done through structured seminars or advisories that also offer coaching support.

The learning gained in a quality internship placement can and should be measured. With a structured curriculum students are able to show outcomes of achieving their goals that can be assessed. Portfolios and Presentations are two performance-based measures that enable students to demonstrate what they have learned in their internship and how this learning connects to their classroom.

Nearly half of the students interviewed for *The Silent Epidemic* said that a major reason for dropping out of school was that classes were not interesting. And four out of five said there should be more opportunities for real world learning. They said students need to see the connection between school and getting a good job (Bridgeland, et.al.2006). A quality, structured internship program offers schools the opportunity to address the stated needs of their at-risk students and provide an avenue to graduation.

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Published in:

*Silhouettes*, Winter 2008  
Journal of NAREN (National At-Risk Education Network)  
[www.atriskeducation.net](http://www.atriskeducation.net)