



THE GOLDEN SLATE

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Take Your Future Career For A Test Drive

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As we continue to shape the future of agriculture, we recognize the pivotal role internships play in guiding students towards meaningful career connections. By sharing this insightful article originally crafted for FFA alumni, we aim to highlight the transformative power of internships in bridging classroom learning with real-world experience, ultimately empowering our students to thrive in the agricultural industry.

Consumers are very particular when it comes to purchasing material possessions. It is commonplace to try on a pair of shoes before purchasing. When thinking about buying a vehicle, it's almost expected that you ask to test drive before committing. We place value on experiencing the item firsthand before making a purchase. We may own that pair of shoes for a few years, and we may drive that vehicle even longer. We want assurance that our investment fits our needs, safety expectations, and satisfaction thresholds.

Why Consider an Internship

All too often graduates will apply for a major in college or begin a career without even "test driving" it first. We select a career path based on what we read, observe, or learn, but often neglect the value of practical industry experience: an internship.

According to Forbes.com, internships are an opportunity to network with people in a similar industry and hone in your technical skills before entering the workforce. An internship can also deepen awareness of aspects within a selected career field that may not be as desirable. In many cases, this awareness could be more powerful than learning what field you truly have a passion for. Considering an internship is a strategic way to prepare mentally, physically, and socially for the intended career field. It is also an attempt to "try on" the career to see if it fits right, inspiring you to show up every day with enthusiasm and dedication.

If an internship is not being strongly considered by now, it may be compelling to know that some of the top Fortune 500 companies emphasize its importance in career planning. In a recent survey conducted with these companies, it was found that every

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respondent placed soft skill development over technical skill acquisition for their newly hired employees. These respected companies are looking for young people who possess social awareness and emotional intelligence as they enter the workforce. Internships provide a strategic opportunity to cultivate these attributes.

During an internship, you use existing skills and apply them in a real-world application, all while engaging with industry professionals and learning the social dynamics of the field. Internship mentors are key in this role. They help shape your perception of your career, offer constructive feedback, and provide encouragement. Moments like these provide radical transformation in self-confidence and soft-skill development.

My Journey

I am a product of several agricultural internships after high school. My internships ranged from working in the citrus industry to working for the California Milk Advisory Board. Even though I became an agricultural educator, the professional skills and comprehensive industry knowledge gained from my internship were highly transferable. I grew up in Dinuba, CA, nestled between Visalia and Fresno. I was in FFA all four years, held several offices within the chapter, had plant and animal SAE projects, and was my high school's senior class president. After graduation, I transferred to Reedley College and studied agricultural business. I took advantage of leadership opportunities at the community college level to further challenge and develop my personal skill set. This is where I entered my first official internship. Stepping out of my comfort zone, I worked for somebody who I was not related to, followed a schedule, and accomplished tasks that I never thought I would encounter. This was all because I was willing to take a step of faith and put myself out there. This experience bolstered my confidence, broadened my understanding of production agriculture, and led me to other professional opportunities.

I then transferred to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, where I continued my education in agricultural business. I also strategically remained involved in leadership roles within the College of Agriculture, which provided further personal development, industry connections, and new friendships. I took advantage of an internship opportunity advertised in one of my dairy science classes, little did I know it would immerse me in the incredible depths of the dairy industry. During this time, I traveled across the state, engaging with executives, collaborating with marketing managers, and sampling numerous dairy products. Even though I did not enter the dairy sector as a professional, the connections I made and the transferable skills I developed are still with me more than 20 years later. I am a testament of internships creating life-long change!



Internship Research

Later in my teaching career, I decided to move my family and I to Oregon and pursue my Ph.D. in agricultural education. My dissertation specifically centered around the satisfaction levels of undergraduates who completed internships within the College of Agriculture. I conducted interviews with numerous students who had undergone internship experiences through the internship class at Oregon State University. I wanted to learn more about their lived experience of this work opportunity. What did they value? What did they not value? How did the experience transform them? The findings supported my hypothesis.

Interviewees expressed their appreciation for mentors that supported them and coached them. They also appreciated internships that provided a multifaceted understanding of a business or operation, where they weren't confined to performing the same task every day. Instead, they were allowed to experience different aspects within the company to gain a holistic view. Interview participants also recognized the importance of learning more about themselves in terms of tasks they enjoyed and tasks that did not align with their future aspirations. This allowed them to reassess their career interests using what they learned. These are valuable lessons that we can use as we ponder the value of an internship in shaping our futures.

The Challenge

You might find yourself standing at a crossroads, with the option to continue on your current path—continuing your life, education, and hopefully landing your dream career—or to step out of your comfort zone and push yourself by taking advantage of an internship opportunity in your hometown, state, country, or even abroad. We will never know what transformation and realizations lie ahead. If we listen to the top companies in the United States, a top fortune magazine, and actual internship completers, we will take the road less traveled for the benefit of our own growth and development. Your opportunity awaits. As Dr. Seuss once wrote, “You have brains in your head, You have feet in your shoes, You can steer yourself any direction you choose.” Just as you try on shoes and test-drive vehicles, dare to embrace the challenge of trying on that job through an internship when the opportunity arises.

