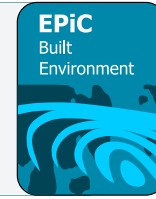




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Understanding Student Expectations for Internships: Conversations with Students

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University students studying construction management participate in internships to gain practical experience, enhance their classroom knowledge, improve their communication skills, and get a glimpse of the industry's work environment and culture. This study aimed to understand students' internship experiences through a student-led, closed-door, moderated discussion with approximately 40 participants. This format encouraged participants to share their experiences openly and suggest ways to improve internship programs. During the session, participants responded to guided questions using sticky notes, collaborated in small groups, and then shared their answers with the larger group for additional discussion. The written notes were collected, transcribed, and analyzed, revealing themes related to the different interaction timelines companies have with students, from initial recruitment to the completion of the internship. Findings indicate that students desire diverse recruiters in the positions they will be hired for, improved communication prior to the internship, challenging work, greater exposure to the industry through a structured internship program, and regular feedback, including an exit interview. This study can serve as a resource for industry professionals to develop stronger internship programs, for faculty members to create classroom content that addresses industry culture, and for students preparing for internships to advocate for clear communication and feedback.

Keywords: Internship Programs, Construction Management, Curriculum Assessment, Anticipatory Socialization, Professional Development

Introduction

It takes a team of skilled trade workers to physically construct the built environment. Additionally, project managers, estimators, schedulers, and other professionals manage and coordinate the work among subcontractor teams on a project. For these positions, a bachelor's degree in construction management is a typical entry-level requirement, and job growth of 9% is expected over the next decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025).

Young people are attracted to the construction industry for many reasons, including influence from family and friends, recruitment advertisements, career counselors, and the prospect of earning a lucrative and stable income after graduation (Bigelow et al., 2015). Since the industry is made up of predominantly white men and is facing a labor crisis, recruitment efforts to attract a diverse pool of talent – especially women – have increased over the past two decades. Government programs and industry support for women have been positive, and women have been attracted to the industry for its

career offerings (Baker et al., 2024). However, although more women have started pursuing construction management degrees due to its promise of high earning potential, they typically lack exposure to the industry's culture before entering university (Madikizela & Haupt, 2010).

During their academic careers, construction management students learn many of the technical skills required to perform in this profession, including estimating, scheduling, plan reading, and document coordination, and many are hired at high salaries with limited industry work experience when they graduate. However, construction companies in the United States report challenges filling salaried positions, citing a lack of qualified candidates with relevant industry experience (NCCER, 2025). Students attracted to construction without direct exposure to the industry's culture and norms – those primarily applying for a high-paying job – often face a “reality shock” upon starting their roles, which can stem from a sheltered university environment that focuses primarily on technical skills rather than industry norms and culture (Hasan et al., 2024).

A way to bridge the gap between classroom and full-time industry employment is through summer internship programs, which enable students to secure entry-level positions to increase their technical skills while exposing them to industry norms. Internships provide valuable hands-on learning experiences for students, and companies use them to create recruitment pipelines, frequently offering students full-time employment after graduation. However, students and employers often do not have shared visions and goals of internship experiences. As a result, students have disappointing, unfulfilling, or unstructured internship experiences, leaving them desiring different or more direct mentoring, professional development, and training.

To understand student internship experiences, an interactive session was held with students during the Women in Construction Research Symposium. This paper analyzes feedback received from students regarding their internship experiences, identifying ways students can better prepare themselves for positions, and offering suggestions for industry to improve the internship experience.

Literature Review

University education and classroom teaching are often not enough to prepare students for construction industry careers (Hasan et al., 2024). Cech and colleagues (2011) noted that professional socialization in the classroom setting (lectures, exercises, and group activities) is not adequate in developing professional role confidence and could aggravate gender discrepancies. Industry work experience through internships helps students learn problem solving skills and improve their communication skills (Lian et al., 2018) and provides a realistic preview of working in the industry (Borg et al., 2025).

Internships serve students, industry, and universities; however, each stakeholder may have different expectations for the internship experience, often unaligned. University faculty provide industry connections, awareness, and career advising to students, but are otherwise hands-off during the internship. Students see internships as learning opportunities for career development, post-graduation employment, the acquisition of marketable skills, and the reinforcement of classroom knowledge (Moore & Plugge, 2008), especially when given tasks relevant to their field, with guidance and timely feedback from a mentor (Lian et al., 2018). Additionally, the internship can ease the transition from being a student to a career professional by providing realistic expectations about the work and workplace culture (Massimino & Turner, 2018).

Employers, alternatively, see it as a recruitment tool to hire full-time graduates (Moore & Plugge, 2008). Internships are a powerful tool to attract young people into the industry to prepare them for

what the construction industry is like (Bigelow et al., 2015). However, interns must have a satisfying experience with challenging tasks and feel organizational commitment to accept a full-time offer (Hurst et al., 2012). Interns also perceive greater organizational fit when they experience structured socialization tactics and positive social interactions with mentors and organizational insiders (Cable & Parsons, 2001).

Women new to the construction field with limited industry exposure encounter barriers, causing them to seek alternative careers (Hasan et al., 2024). Industry culture and sexist attitudes, behaviors, and bias have caused young women to struggle and question their career choice, causing attrition (Baker et al., 2023; Worrall et al., 2010). However, Madikizela and Haupt (2010) noted that women have a general lack of understanding or knowledge of the industry itself, but found that as women's experience increased, their confidence grew as did their ability to persist in a male dominated industry. Massimino and Turner (2018) noted that individuals who are socialized into an organization's culture have better prospects for advancement, which suggests that internships are especially important for women to gain skills while becoming accustomed to industry culture. However, this suggests a complacency for bad behavior or dismissing harassing behaviors or menacing incidents as "occupational hazards" (Watts, 2007).

The benefits of internships for students, particularly in construction management, have been well-documented (Bigelow et al., 2015; Borg et al., 2025; Hasan et al., 2024), emphasizing their role in helping students assimilate into professional cultural norms and reducing reality shock. Despite this, there is a lack of understanding regarding the full scope of construction management students' experiences throughout the internship process—from recruitment to completion. Moreover, limited research has employed student-led, moderated discussions to gather feedback. This study explores students' internship experiences to provide employers with insights to enhance the overall internship experience for both parties.

Setting and Methods

An interactive student-led Internship Feedback Session was held during a Women in Construction Research Symposium. The session was designed by and for students to encourage open discussion, especially around mentorship, gendered experiences, and professional preparedness. The goals were to:

1. Provide a supportive space for students in the construction industry to share and discuss their internship experiences, both positive and negative.
2. Encourage open dialogue to develop workplace strategies and build a sense of community.
3. Gather insights to present to industry leaders, advocating for improvements in internship programs to enhance the experience for future interns.

Discussion questions were selected based on conversations between faculty and students reflecting on their internship experiences. These conversations revealed that, while the experiences were challenging, they also led to significant personal growth. The session was designed to provide students an opportunity to share things they wished they'd known before they started their internships, highlight challenges students face, while providing a space to share strategies for success.

The discussion questions were:

1. If you have had an internship, what is something you wish you knew going in?

2. Can you share an experience in which you've witnessed or overheard a misogynistic or uncomfortable comment in the workplace and how that made you feel?
3. What was one really positive experience you had in your internship?

A subsequent symposium session presented the students' summarized feedback to industry representatives. This paper focuses on student feedback from the initial session as a means to further share these insights with the industry.

The Internship Feedback Session was open to student participants only, facilitated by a faculty member, and moderated by a fourth-year construction management student who had completed two internships. Though open to any student, the participants were primarily construction management students, therefore the focus could be uniquely on construction internship experiences. The room was arranged to promote collaborative discussion, with round tables equipped with large sticky notes, small sticky notes, pens, and markers to encourage notetaking.

Three senior construction management students served as panelists alongside the moderator. The workshop was organized around the three discussion questions above, which were first posed to the panel and then redirected to the participants to discuss at their tables. Participants were encouraged to write their thoughts on the small sticky notes as they talked and asked to summarize their discussions and share their overall findings with the room using their large sticky notes to present from.

A faculty member took ethnographic fieldnotes during the session, capturing dialogue between students and stories shared from the breakout tables. Our research design blended focus-group methodology with participatory research principles, fostering openness and shared reflection while producing qualitative data grounded in lived experience. All written responses were collected, transcribed, and coded for common themes, utilizing a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

Approximately 40 students attended the seminar session, with women comprising about 40% of all participants. To protect confidentiality and encourage open dialogue, we did not have a sign in sheet or record demographic data. All written responses were collected, transcribed, and analyzed, and themes emerged surrounding four different stages of interaction companies have with student interns: (1) first contact during recruitment events or career fairs; (2) communication prior to arriving at the internship; (3) the internship; and (4) the end of the internship.

First Encounters: Career Fairs & Recruitment Events

The first stage of students' internship experiences was interactions with recruiters during information sessions, career fairs, and interviews. This first interaction serves as the student's first look at the industry and company culture, and students wanted to learn about jobsite practices and the role they would fill during these conversations. Students identified a disconnect between recruiters and their understanding of the position they would be filling, especially when interactions were limited to human resource (HR) representatives rather than those from construction operations. Students wanted HR to be "more in the loop about the construction side" and for companies to send women construction workers specifically. One student said, "Send women to events who work in what they are hiring for. Don't have only women be recruiters [from HR] and men be PMs [project managers] or super[intendent]s." Another student agreed, stating, "Bring PEs [project engineers] and PMs to career

fairs and interviews. Recruiters and HR are not always the best impression for the interviewee or company image.” Representation matters.

Pre-Internship: Correspondence Prior to Internship

The second stage of the internship timeline involved the communication shared before students started their internships. Students identified small things that companies could have communicated better regarding first-day job expectations to help relieve anxiety. The most frequently noted item students wished they had known was how to dress for both the office and field settings. One student said, “Prior to our start date, send us either in writing or in a photo, what to wear.” Students wanted to feel prepared to start work and wanted a list of items to bring on the first day. Simple instructions on where to park, when to arrive, and who to report to upon arrival would be helpful. For example, one student shared an experience parking in a “random neighborhood” for a job walk because they were not directed where to park and “felt embarrassed” after later learning parking existed behind a gate.

In addition to requesting clear instructions about first-day norms and expectations, students vented that companies and project teams were not prepared for their arrivals. Poor communication and onboarding practices made students feel unwanted from the start. The way interns were or were not welcomed reflected on the company. One student remarked simply, “Welcome us! We are judging you on your culture!”

Several students felt that their company lacked a structured program or that their team was ill-prepared for them, leaving the intern to feel undervalued. One student suggested, “Have an orientation before I come. My site didn’t know I was coming so I had no work to do for so long.” Another student echoed this, saying, “sometimes it feels like they don’t know why they hired you,” and another recommended that the “team reasonably understand the role of their intern and be prepared for them.” Students wanted “tasks on day one” and wanted the company to present them with the technology needed to perform said tasks upon arrival.

Students want to gain more social and cultural capital quickly. Successful interactions in this stage of onboarding include providing a list of what to bring (and wear) on the first day, a schedule of training activities and project tasks to be completed over the internship, names of people to report to, and an assigned mentor.

Onboarding & Supervision: I’m Here...Now What?

The third stage of the internship timeline is the internship itself. This section describes students’ expectations for the internship, experiences on the job, need for mentoring, and student-to-student advice for success. Student feedback on their internships at construction sites highlights the value in improving technical skills, while demonstrating how organizational culture matters for the overall student learning experience. Social, cultural, and technical capital can be gained by students through day-to-day teamwork experiences.

Panelists and student participants stressed the value of structured internships with shared goals between the intern and supervisor, and a plan to assess intern growth. Formalized supervision and mentoring would support students in overcoming expected challenges and help them navigate uncertainties. One student noted as a general comment that having one-on-one conversations would be helpful because “sometimes it is hard for us to voice our concerns to a group.” Regular feedback meetings could also serve as opportunities to check in on concerns.

Students overwhelmingly yearned for regular feedback during internships as they often felt unsure of their performance. Several students echoed this request for acknowledgement of their work, wanting validation which “can be as simple as a good job from time to time” to specific feedback to know how they could “continue to grow throughout the summer.”

In addition to uncertainties surrounding job performance, students expressed feeling underutilized. One student noted, “We want to be challenged! Give us difficult tasks,” and others similarly noted an eagerness for “the opportunity to show [their] capabilities.” Students wanted a set schedule of tasks and additional access to training when there was no active work to continue building competencies. While students desired more responsibility and opportunities to demonstrate their skills, their experiences also revealed deeper challenges, particularly in navigating the interpersonal and cultural aspects of construction sites.

Students shared instances of problematic language and behaviors that happened during their internships. Most students reported struggling to know how to respond when these things happened at work. For example, one student mentioned a male coworker making “comments about the physique of our female owner. As an intern, it was hard to do anything.” The session questions were designed to have students discuss workplace culture, and a woman intern expressed “how far the industry has to go in this area is frustrating.” A woman shared her experience with allies, advising: “find men who will have your back and speak up in front of other men, **with other men**” (emphasis theirs).

Students who had structured internships and mentors shared more positive internship experiences. Students enjoyed receiving exposure to all sectors of the company, structured programs and training, feeling utilized on worksites, being assigned a mentor, and getting unofficial mentoring. These resources socialized and acclimated student interns to corporate culture and how to fit in. Opportunities to bond was a stated advantage, with one student sharing the “company had a good internship program which allowed the interns to get close.” Another intern said, “we made great connections with the people around us, which was rewarding.” One student noted the benefit of having “a project team that advocated for me and celebrated my accomplishments.” Students desired this positive reinforcement.

Students offered critiques and suggestions for improving internship experiences. One man stated that “mentorship should be more defined during [the] internship” and a woman advised that employees should not “be afraid to take an intern under your wing even if they aren’t directly yours.” Students recommended that team members take interns on job walks, provide training, and occasional check-ins to see how they are doing. Students want mentors who teach transferable skills, offer technical guidance, and also emotional support.

Finally, as students reflected on their internship experiences as a group, they realized they should have had a greater sense of agency to maximize their interactions. Learning to advocate for themselves, to express a curiosity to learn, and to overcome their fear of asking questions were things they would have done sooner to get more out of their internships. One woman said, “I wish someone had told me that it doesn’t matter if you look dumb or stupid but just ask questions because this is your internship and you get out as much as you put in.” In giving advice to younger students, one woman encouraged her peers to set goals and communicate their expectations with your supervisor. Another echoed, “communicate with management and ask for what you want to do.”

Students expressed fear of not knowing enough and worried they would not be helpful or would mess up. However, senior students encouraged them to ask questions and recommended being “trainable.” They said, “you’re not expected to know all the answers.” Another shared about the supportive

environment of their internship, recalling with surprise about “how open everyone was to answering questions.” Students wanted to learn to be better and more comfortable communicating with different people.

Ending & Evaluating the Internship: I'm Done...How'd I do?

The final stage of students' internships was the end, which for some entailed an exit interview on the last day. Exit interviews were mentioned by six out of the seven table breakout groups as something they either highly valued or wished they had advocated for. This closing communication step allows students to understand what their strengths are and identify areas for improvement to work on before securing an industry position. One student reflected the value of her exit interview stating that “it was really helpful in a positive way to look back on summer.” Constructive feedback enabled students to recognize their strengths and accomplishments, but more importantly highlight areas for growth and offering site-specific evaluative feedback on skills professors often cannot holistically assess.

Equally important, the exit interview gives employers, supervisors, and co-workers a chance to offer constructive feedback and gain insight into how to better support and engage future interns. However, although students stressed the importance of exit interviews, they also suggested holding an entry interview and providing frequent feedback throughout the internship. One student said, “having an entry and exit interview would help establish goals and exit would be good for feedback,” while another requested, “please have an exit interview with your intern [and] consistent check-ins and feedback opportunities throughout the summer.” Another said they should have advocated for an interview since the company didn't provide one, saying “I think it's good to leave with personal feedback.”

Discussion

The findings presented above reinforce Moore and Plugge's (2008) claim that students do internships to expand classroom learning and actively build their competencies. During the session, students discussed the importance of structure. They recommended job walks, being invited to meetings, additional training, communication, and a structured onboarding process to increase their knowledge and exposure to the industry. Students expressed their frustration feeling excluded from teams and not being given opportunities to demonstrate or advance their skills. When team members and supervisors were unprepared and unaware of the interns' capabilities, students felt undervalued. Students yearned for a challenging internship experience with exposure to the industry, reinforcing Hurst et al.'s (2012) findings, who suggest that task variety, challenging projects, inviting interns to meetings, and making students feel like a valued part of the organization directly impacts their decisions whether to accept job offers.

Students wanted continuous feedback throughout internships for chances to improve. Students with mentors and supportive teams reported more enjoyable experiences. Hurst et al. (2012) and Lian et al. (2018) advocate for assigned, trained mentors to provide timely skill development and who can assess their performances, give feedback, and ultimately advocate to hire them. If companies use internships as a recruitment tool for full-time positions (Moore and Plugge, 2008), assigned and trained mentors could onboard interns, provide workplace socialization, and give constructive feedback throughout the duration of the internship.

Mentors could conduct exit interviews, providing a tangible mechanism for interns to understand their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and translate their learning experiences into actionable professional development goals. Without such structured feedback, interns are left uncertain about

their performance and unclear about how to improve in future roles. Providing constructive feedback to emerging professionals not only supports individual growth but also strengthens the industry as a whole by ensuring new workers are more skilled, reflective, and prepared to contribute meaningfully.

For some construction management students, especially women, the internship may be their first exposure to the industry, and they are therefore unaware of industry norms and attitudes (Madikizela & Haupt, 2010). Identifying where to park, who to report to, where to eat, and what to wear ahead of time decreases interns' uncertainty, allowing them to contribute sooner without the emotional and cognitive burdens of learning things the hard way. Students, especially young women, mentioned feeling uncomfortable when overhearing comments from coworkers, and wanted safe reporting mechanisms for problematic behavior (see also Hasan et al., 2024). Harassment and discriminatory behavior become "occupational hazards" (Watts, 2007), as noted by one young woman in Hasan et al.'s study (2024) who said there were "some days where you get sexist comments and things like that, but I was prepared. I knew I was going into a male-dominated industry [interviewee 10]" (p. 7).

Finally, the role of HR should be considered during the four different internship stages. While students prefer not to have HR at recruitment events, they raised concerns about onboarding processes, indicating the need for a more structured program for temporary hires. It is also essential to create transparent and safe mechanisms for reporting problematic behavior, including harassment. HR could develop mentor training programs for supervisors and managers. Cable and Parsons (2008) noted that getting feedback from the perspectives of newcomers can help with the socialization process. HR could conduct exit interviews to solicit feedback from interns regarding the company's performance during the internship. Seeking interns' input can help refine onboarding, improve training, and support a more positive and inclusive workplace culture.

Conclusion

We examined construction management students' internship experiences to offer insights for employers to enhance the internship process through a student-led Internship Feedback Session. Key findings highlighted four phases with room for improvement: recruitment, pre-internship correspondence, the internship itself, and exit interviews. Students suggested that recruiters should have relevant job knowledge and that women at recruitment events should represent operations roles to encourage women's participation. Clear communication about expectations is vital before interns start, and teams should be ready with tasks for students to foster valuable learning experiences. Interns value structured, challenging roles with continuous feedback, and support to address any harassment or discrimination. Conducting exit interviews is important for gathering feedback, improving future internships for students and supervisors, and maintaining company reputation.

Suggestions for industry professionals include: 1) sending informed human resource and construction staff to career fairs, 2) develop stronger internship programs by creating formal training programs for supervisors, 3) provide opportunities to learn new skills and set construct challenging goals, 4) provide consistent feedback throughout the internship, 5) give focused mentorship and professional development and 6) conclude with an evaluation and exit interview.

Construction educators can better prepare students for internships by incorporating content on industry culture and workplace procedures. Assigning readings and inviting guest speakers to share industry experiences can strengthen the curriculum and students' career readiness. Additionally, educators can hold similar sessions to continue the conversation, allowing students to share experiences and identify supportive discussions to integrate into the curriculum.

Students preparing for internships are encouraged to advocate for themselves, recognize and demonstrate clear communication standards, and request regular feedback throughout their internship. They should approach their internship as a learning opportunity and be willing to ask questions. Construction education programs have an opportunity to empower students with this information and guidance before their first internship. Finally, returning interns can help create a checklist of recommended best practices for recruiters to reference and use to improve their internship programs, enhancing student learning and support.

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