

## **BUSINESS EDUCATION, INTERNSHIPS AND STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO WORK—ARE STUDENTS MEETING EMPLOYERS' EXPECTATIONS?**

*Héctor López*

The global economy is the new reality and the world, the new workplace. Furthermore, the impact of this new reality continues to expand and intensify. The new reality is that "...the jobs are going to go where the best-educated workforce is with the most competitive infrastructure and environment for creativity."<sup>1</sup> Success in the current high-performance, results-oriented, technology-driven workplace requires knowledge and understanding of global components—economic systems, business practices, political and legal structures and multicultural contexts.<sup>2</sup> The global economic environment and global competition no longer welcomes the 'Lone Ranger' mentality. It seeks organizational members that will identify with the mission and goals of the organization, and are able to make decisions and learn to work as members of a team.

To succeed in this dynamic, constantly evolving and unpredictable environment, students need a variety of academic and technical skills as well as career preparation experiences. There is also a critical need for educators to convey high expectations and the realities in the world of work that awaits them.<sup>3</sup>

While employers provide input essential in identifying skills or competencies considered vital in the workplace, educators and employers partner to develop the structures and support for students to acquire the skills needed for employment and lifelong learning.<sup>4</sup> The latter is an essential element in maintaining and enhancing workplace skills and preparation for possible career changes or adjustments as the nature and demands of the work environment continues to rapidly evolve.

Educators use transition-to-work strategies to engage all students in a rigorous and relevant curriculum, to provide them with life and career connections and to have them explore ever-changing and challenging opportunities in the workplace. Students are motivated and learn best when they understand and identify with the relevance of their instruction—from textbook concepts and theory to practical application.

### **PROGRAMS OF STUDY**

Business education programs provide unlimited opportunities for real-world learning experiences for all students. These opportunities reinforce high academic standards while at the same time providing authentic contexts where students are able to apply what they have learned.

School-based experiences such as student organizations, field trips, guest speakers, and in-school enterprises often becomes an extension of the business classroom.<sup>5</sup> Work-based experiences include internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative work programs, paid work experiences, job shadowing, community services, and service learning.

The unique ability to bridge theoretical classroom learning and actual workplace experiences is an essential component in students' making a successful transition to the work environment. This is also true in terms of career aspirations and expectations. Students must eventually face the following critical questions: Is this career for me? Is this the type of work I want to do during my adult working life? Will this type of work be intrinsically satisfying to me? What other career options are available to me?

Business education provides a coherent plan to create a personalized learning environment. Through business education, and the numerous support activities and initiatives made available to students—from academic advisement, intervention initiatives, centralized tutoring, and counseling, among others—students undertake an ambitious academic program made relevant by its connection to the community, the workplace and the world around them.

At the post-secondary level, students advance from broad to specific career preparation. Business education courses, supplemented with general education courses, are generally grouped into programs that facilitate students' transition to work and further education if students elect to continue their educational goals and career aspirations at the baccalaureate level and beyond. The challenge for business educators and educators in general, is to forge pathways that encourage awareness and exploration activities that can be integrated into ongoing experiences that provide students initial connections to the rapidly changing world and the demands of the workplace that awaits them.

### **ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE**

Today's highly competitive job market has dramatically changed the rules for career success. Business education is essential for the preparation of students as knowledge workers in terms of what the students should know and what they should be able to do once they finish their academic program.<sup>6</sup> Keeping up with the constantly changing work environment means that students' will have to keep learning and maintain a high level of flexibility in order to adapt to new ideas.<sup>7</sup> What skills do students need to bring with them to perform well in the complexities that characterize globalization, world interdependence, and free trade? Some of the basic premises components that have emerged in terms of workplace competencies include:

- Philosophy of lifelong learning—continue to learn to maintain a competitive edge;

- Upgrading general business skills—mathematics, reading, writing, speaking effectively;
- Networking—actively connecting with people within and outside the work environment;
- Critical thinking skills—decision making, solving problems, creative thinking, reasoning;
- Interpersonal skills—participates as a team member, work with cultural diversity, resolving conflicts;
- Personal qualities—taking responsibility, integrity/honesty, self-esteem, sociability;
- Technology—maintaining and upgrading computer and technological skills;
- Allocation of resources and effective use of information; and
- Learning and adapting to change.

To prepare students for the new workplace requires understanding the global economy as the new reality, and finding out what businesses will expect of workers in the new workplace.<sup>8</sup> The competencies are based on cross-industry standards of what entry-level workers are expected to know and do to be considered “fully competent.”<sup>9</sup> Business educators must ensure that students are aware of these basic premises and workplace competencies as they pursue their educational goals and career aspirations. It is then “a question of exploring how best to internationalize the business curriculum when one is under the gun to teach for tomorrow, today.”<sup>10</sup>

Individuals must have the skills to gather, create, and analyze data to produce timely information needed for decision making, commonly referred to as ‘skill sets’.<sup>11</sup> Today’s organizations, therefore, expect employees to be able to make appropriate decisions about lifelong learning needed in their chosen careers. Students can achieve technical competence, understand theory, apply academic skills in a meaningful way, and integrate career development into satisfying career choices when they participate in the business education program.

The ability to bring together theoretical-conceptual learning in the classroom and the actual application in the workplace is the essential component in students’ making a successful transition to the world of work. Business education programs enable students to develop those skills essential for successful transition from school to work and, ultimately, their career goals and aspirations.

In transitioning to work, the essential employability skills for the global workplace outlined in this article are best learned when they are included along with instructional goals and explicitly taught. At Hostos, foundation skills needed and employer expectations for prospective new hires are communicated to students through in-class presentations in the foundation courses for career programs, Career Day, CLIP, Hostos Success Academy, and other venues where students are the audience, e.g., New Students Orientation. In addition, as a means of communicating high expectations, a handout is made available to all students during Academic Advisement and the information is also prominently displayed on the Business Department Bulletin Board.

### **PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE GLOBAL TOMORROW: INTERNSHIPS**

The question that often surfaces is whether business programs should initiate or maintain a partnership or internship initiative with business organizations for students majoring in business curricula. While there are skeptics that question the usefulness of such initiatives, several studies show the practicability of such initiatives.<sup>12</sup> The fundamental requirement for internship initiatives is to provide suitable, substantive internship experiences for students.

The primary beneficiary of business internship programs is the business student, since the primary purpose of internship programs is to provide students with practical work experiences while they pursue academic studies. These work experiences help participating students bridge the gap between theory and knowledge learned in the classroom and the daily activities in the business arena. While students have a good grasp of the theory and concepts upon which jobs in the business world are based, they may lack interpersonal communication and human relations skills, and practical knowledge needed in jobs.

An essential purpose of internship programs is to help students gain employment in good positions when entering the job market by having internship experiences on their résumés. Many employers prefer graduates with internship experiences over those without such experiences.<sup>13</sup> These employers know that knowledge of business-related theory does not necessarily mean that employees can perform the daily tasks of a specific job. Employers also know that considerable time, effort, and expense are required to make productive employees of recent college graduates who have had no practical work experience.

Also, many interns remain as permanent employees after internship experiences are completed. In these instances, internship experiences replace normal job training periods—a major advantage for the student and/or prospective employee.

Colleges and universities also stand to benefit from business internship programs. Business professors are able to keep up to date with the rapid changes in the business world through their contacts with business persons participating in internship programs, especially in the international business environment.

Business professors are often criticized for being out of touch with the real world of business. The daily activities of preparing lessons, teaching classes, evaluating students' work, research and publishing, student advising and office hours, serving on committees, and participating in school social/career events leave little time for business professors to become actively involved with the business community. Therefore, professors may not be up to date on current business activities and critical happenings in the global business environment. Interactions with business representatives or businesspersons and interns provide opportunities for business professors to remain current with the ever-changing and dynamic global business environment.

Of equal importance are the benefits that may accrue to colleges from the public relations values of internship programs. The support of the business community in such forms as monetary grants for equipment, endowed chairs for professors, and subsidies for research, among others, often arises because of interactions between business professor and business leaders in the community.

The business community also benefits from internship programs. Organizations can hire interns at lower costs than they could hire regular employees and can train

interns who may go on to continue employment after graduation. Upon graduation, these interns are trained, productive employees. Furthermore, if interns are not satisfactory employees, internships may serve as screening devices for employers and an intervention device to help the intern get on track.

Employment or 'job-fit' in suitable jobs is essential for an internship to be of value to participating students. This is where a 'Career Services' and 'Cooperative Education' support initiative plays a crucial role in assisting students with interviewing skills, résumé and cover letter preparation, online job search, and guiding students to internships directly related to their field of study and successful career path. Equally as well, businesses must be willing to allow interns to observe and participate in the essential managerial phases of business practices—planning, organizing, directing, control, supervision and teamwork—for the internship experience to be a valuable learning experience for the student. The major objective is a 'win-win' situation or outcome for both the business organization and the internship participant.

This actual business work experience for students is a pathway that enables business organizations to have access to well-qualified workers as well as trained employees for the future. Together, quality business programs and internships enable students to develop skills essential for successful transition from school to work and, ultimately, to intrinsically satisfying careers.

There is no doubt whatsoever that business education in a global economic environment is crucial for all students. We must all be a student of the global economy today. And we must prepare our students to be ready to recognize and to adapt appropriately as the global economic environment around us rapidly changes.

Héctor López  
Business Department

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Friedman, Thomas. L. *The World Is Flat: A Brief History Of The Twenty-First Century*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2006. p.323.
- 2 Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education (PCBEE). *This We Believe About Business Education In A Global Environment*. (Policy Statement No. 74). Reston, VA: National Business Education Association, 2004.
- 3 Glenn, J.M.L. "Internationalizing the Business Curriculum." *Business Education Forum* 61.4 (April 2007): 9-15.
- 4 Boyle, S.L.T., K. Kolosh, J. L'Allier, and J.J. Lambrecht. "Thomson Netg's Blended-Learning Model: The Next Generation Of Corporate And School-Based Learning." *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* 45.30 (Fall 2003): 145-161.
- 5 Kosek, S. "A Coordinator's Advocacy For Success." *Business Education Forum* 60.4 (April 2006): 27-29.

H. López

- 6 Lambrecht, J.J., and P.F. Meggison. *Program evaluation in business education*. Assessment for an Evolving Business Education Curriculum. National Business Education Association Yearbook, No. 45. Reston, VA: Author, 2007.
- 7 Greene, S.D., and M.C.L. Martel. *The ultimate job hunter's guidebook, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001.
- 8 New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce. *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy, 2006. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from <<http://www.skillscommission.org>>.
- 9 Glenn, J.M.L. "Assessing Workplace Readiness." *Business Education Forum* 61.1 (Oct. 2006): 15-16.
- 10 Glenn, "Internationalizing," 9.
- 11 Williams, A.G., and K.J. Hall. *Creating Your Career Portfolio: At A Glance Guide For Students*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001.
- 12 See: Spinks, N. "Student Internships: Real world 101." *Journal of Education for Business* 65.1 (1989):15-17; Spinks, N., and B. Wells. "Student Internships: What AACSB Schools Say!" *Southwest Business Review* 1.2 (1991): 39-54; and Spinks, N., and B. Wells. "Student internships: Viewpoints from AACSB schools!" *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* 36.2 (1994): 81-95.
- 13 Spinks and Wells, "Student Internships."