Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture
Volume 17, Number 1, pp.12-15
DOI: 10.5032/jaatea.1976.01012

AN EVALUATION OF THE TECHNICAL INTERNSHIP IN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION

Vanik S. Eaddy
Auburn University

Department of Vocational and Adult Education

A practical knowledge of agribusiness skills is essential to teachers of vocational agriculture/agribusiness who are preparing students for occupations in agriculture. There is no substitute for occupational experience in teaching relevant vocational subject matter. The recent shift to objectives in agribusiness and rural industry has forced many teachers of agriculture/agribusiness education to teach unfamiliar subject matter. Moreover, technological changes and economic pressures in the agricultural industry have produced demands for job competencies which were not required in the immediate past. A need exists for vocational teachers to remain abreast of the changing occupational competencies.

One of the avenues available for teachers to gain required technical competencies is the technical internship program. The technical internship program was designed to provide a supervised practicum for graduate students to familiarize themselves with technological changes as well as to become acquainted with the basic occupational competencies found in a typical agribusiness concern. At Auburn University this course was entitled, Internship in Vocational and Adult Education, VED 625A. Five quarter hours of graduate credit were awarded for each period of three weeks of work in a selected agribusiness. A total of 15 quarter hours could be earned through successive enrollments. Interns received no earnings for their efforts; however, many received support for their instructional programs. Contacts established through internships provided supervised occupational experience training stations, equipment and materials given or loaned, and sources of technical information.

A study was undertaken to determine the perceptions of interns and agribusinessmen towards the technical internship in Agricultural Education. Responses from these two groups of involved persons served as a basis for improving the administrative process of this course as well as assessing its professional and technical effectiveness.

This research was based upon data supplied by 37 interns and 37 agribusinessmen who participated in the technical internship experience in the Summer Quarters of 1971, 1972 and 1973. A total of 49 interns were placed in 52 agribusinesses. Mailed questionnaires were returned by 71 percent of the interns and 75 percent of the agribusinessmen.

Intern Ratings of Twelve Characteristics of the Internship

Interns rated twelve characteristics of the internship using a graduated scale with values of one to five assigned to poor, fair, good,

very good, and outstanding levels of performance. A range of 4.73 to 3.47 occurred with six characteristics receiving mean ratings above 4.00 and six were below this level. These data indicated that the internship experience was regarded by the interns as a "very good" to "outstanding" way to develop professional and technical competencies. Interns perceived this approach to be a "very good" way to obtain occupational information for counseling students.

Ratings of "very good" to "outstanding" were assigned to the suitability of agribusinesses selected, the attitudes of the agribusiness personnel, and the value of work assignments to the performance of teachers. The data revealed that development of the plan of study with the cooperation of the agribusinessmen may not have been properly consummated in some cases. The failure to clearly convey to the agribusinessmen the purpose of the internship and the specific competencies desired was found to be a contributing factor toward poor understanding in a very limited number of instances. It was observed by the researcher that communication was established, and that all barriers to an effective internship had been cleared, before the end of the first week of the experience in all cases.

A survey of the agribusiness was required utilizing the forms supplied for this purpose. It was intended that interns would collect information in an organized manner for vocational counseling and course planning. The forms provided interns had been developed specifically for the Agricultural Sales and Service Occupational Cluster, hence they required modification for use in some of the instructional program areas in which interns were placed.

The narrative responses of interns provided many comments which were useful in evaluation and further planning for improvement of the course. These remarks were highly complimentary of their personal contacts, opportunity to use the most modern equipment in the application of current technology and information gained which would be of direct benefit to their instructional programs.

Agribusinessmen Ratings of Eight Characteristics of the Internship

Agribusinessmen rated eight characteristics of the internship on a scale similar to the one used by the interns. A range of 3.80 to 4.68 occurred with six of the characteristics receiving a mean rating of 4.00 and above. Agribusinessmen regarded the internship to be a "very good" to "outstanding" experience as viewed from their perspective. As a result of the favorable contact established, many requests were received to send additional interns into businesses previously utilized as internship centers. The agribusinessmen have likewise been very complimentary of the steps taken by Auburn University to bring realism into the instruction program by extending the classroom into the marketplace of manufacturing, production, sales, and service.

Agribusinessmen were generally pleased with the means used to inform them of the program prior to their participation. The data revealed that some agribusinessmen were less satisfied with arrangements made for placing interns in their businesses and the extent to which they were engaged in developing the intern's plan of study. Certain of the businesses were seasonal in nature causing the summer months to be a less favorable time for maximum experiences to be gained. It was also discovered that the internship should be extended over a longer period of time to permit a more comprehensive viewpoint of the total activities of these seasonally sensitive industries. Adjustments were made to correct these deficiencies when they were discovered.

A direct benefit of the internship experience is the opening of channels of communications. A free exchange of ideas is essential to a smoothly operated system of preparation and placement of qualified graduates who are properly attuned to the needs of agribusiness. Interns and agribusinessmen were equally complimentary of the improvements made in the removal of communications barriers. Interns made favorable impressions upon the agribusinessmen by quickly adjusting to company routines and in establishing rapport with the employees. Agribusinessmen rated this program highly effective as a means of public relations, as did the interns. Ample evidence was thus presented to support the hypothesis of dual benefits of participants.

Agribusinessmen were extremely generous in their narrative responses to questions regarding the planning and conduct of the internships which they sponsored. A majority of the respondents reported satisfaction with the program as it was operated. Ornamental horticultural businessmen were especially concerned that the interns were unable to spend time in the winter and spring months to gain a more comprehensive experience. It was also suggested by some agribusinessmen that a sound undergraduate preparation should be a prerequisite to permit the internship to achieve maximum effectiveness. The agribusinessmen were unanimous in insisting that practical experience be obtained by persons attempting to prepare employees for careers in agribusiness.

Twenty-five respondents indicated that no inconveniences or difficulties were encountered by participating agribusinesses, eleven provided amplified remarks to this effect, and one made no comment. Suggestions for improvement centered around consideration for seasonal timing and more thorough advanced planning by interns to involve agribusinessmen in the development of the plan of study. An appeal was made for more interns and longer periods of placement with assurance that agribusinesses welcomed this overture of interest from Agricultural Education.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings of this research, the following suggestions were provided for the improvement of the Technical Internship in Agricultural Education:

1. The technical internship has been found to be an effective method of learning professional and technical competencies and should be expanded to give as many teachers as possible the benefit of a practical experience in a well-managed agribusiness.

2. Internship placements are potentially significant mediums for public relations between agribusiness and education. This natural setting should be effectively utilized by both groups to effect a smooth transition of trained workers to satisfying jobs.

3. The value of communications to establish understanding and good will has been proven. University professors should thoroughly orient interns and communicate with agribusinessmen prior to commencing the internship. Site visits by university supervisors prior to the internship should be encouraged and they should be required during the experience. It is essential that these visits include interviews with agribusiness owners, managers, or at least, the immediate supervisor of the intern. A follow - up report of competencies gained should be prepared for the agribusinessman by the intern when feasible.

4. Preliminary planning of the Intern's Plan of Study must involve the agribusinessman in developing the experiences to be acquired, scheduling, and company procedures to be followed. A plan of study developed in advance is furthermore required for approval by the Graduate School if such credit is to be used as supporting work in the graduate's plan of advanced study.

5. Internships should be scheduled when possible in the season adjudged most beneficial by the agribusinessmen to permit the most comprehensive experiences. It may be necessary to divide the minimum number of working days into several segments to permit observations and experiences in a greater number of operations occurring over an expanded period covering one or more times during the year.

6. A review of the data collection forms should be made with a choice of two possible alternatives. The forms now in use should be continued with the addition of others prepared for the agribusiness family of occupations in which interns are placed. A second alternative would be to develop a universal format which could be used without regard to the placement situation.

7. Prospective interns should be screened to determine that a satisfactory foundation has been obtained in basic processes prior to their placement in internships where advanced concepts are employed.

8. Every possible effort should be extended to insure that undue burdens or problems are avoided for agribusinessmen who agree to accept interns.

9. Participating agribusinessmen should be involved in the evaluation process and reports provided them to continue to gain their good will and expert advice in the improvement of the internship approach to professional and technical competencies in Agricultural Education.