

An Exploration of Employer Participation in Internships and Other Work-Based Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Research shows that employers play a key role in work-based learning (WBL) programs such as internships but are seldom involved in conversations around the topic (Greenfield & Stevens, 2018). While the benefits of work-based learning are well documented, employers are often unaware of the benefits they would receive from participating in an effort to strategically link education and workforce preparation (Greenfield & Stevens, 2018). This study qualitatively examined the experiences of employers that provide work-based learning opportunities, primarily internships, for postsecondary students. Findings illuminated the importance of developing and maintaining strong community partnerships and establishing recruitment pipelines. The results also indicated that lack of information impedes growth, virtual experiences are essential, and financial constraints impact participation.

Keywords: work-based learning, internships, postsecondary education, employers

Introduction

The need for a skilled workforce is a concern that many employers continue to express as they seek qualified applicants. Wilson and Mehta (2017) found that employers are not only concerned with the lack of technical competencies for middle-skill applicants, but they also see a deficiency in soft skills (Wilson & Mehta, 2017). According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2019) “education systems have done little or nothing to help address this shortage” (p. 6). Therefore, while students are entering their respective fields with increased confidence in their abilities, employer expectations remain unmet (Stewart, et al., 2016).

Work-based learning (WBL), “an instructional strategy that enhances classroom learning by connecting it to the workplace” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para 1), is one strategy that has been used to address these concerns. While the definition of work-based learning may vary, experts agree that the work being performed focuses on the learning rather than the teaching (Jacobson, 2015). By merging theory with practice, WBL demonstrates that the workplace offers just as many learning opportunities as the classroom (Raelin, 2008).

Internships, on-the-job training programs, co-ops, transitional jobs, and apprenticeships are all forms of work-based learning that serve different purposes and outcomes (Jobs for the Future, 2021). Many scholars note, for example, that internships can clarify job interest; inform students of employer expectations; enlighten students on what they can expect from the job; and

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assist students in reflecting on whether a particular job will be a good fit both personally and professionally (Hiltebeitel et al., 2000; Lord et al., 2011; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006; Moghaddam, 2011; Rothman, 2007).

In this context, the role that employers play in work-based learning is critical. They “provide input on labor market needs for curriculum development, design opportunities for students to apply skills at the workplace, and foster mentor/mentee relationships (U.S. Department of Education, n.d, para 1). This type of partnership can strengthen academic learning, enhance skills, and provide a temporary or permanent job (Cahill, 2016). Haddad (2002) defined a partnership as a “goal-focused collaboration involving two or more parties operating with equal influence and mutual respect” (p. 29). Smith and Betts (2000) noted:

The effectiveness of work-based learning is directly related to the quality and effectiveness of the partnership, and its ability to deliver the following five key educational criteria: elicit learning outcomes; formal assessment processes; identification and delivery of standards; the application of appropriate higher education quality assurance and enhancement processes; and recognition through the award of credit or other certification. (p. 596)

Thus, employers must be involved in the development of work-based learning criteria if the goal is to continue developing these companies as learning organizations (Smith & Betts, 2000). Advances in technology have made access to knowledge more convenient than ever and the need to gain that knowledge in a classroom setting less necessary. Therefore, work-based learning is often preferred by students and seen by most higher education institutions as a natural fit in their efforts to close the skills gap (Baker, 2020). As the need for easier access to WBL programs like internships grows, partnerships will be essential to develop new models and produce outcomes that support all stakeholders involved.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe, analyze, and draw conclusions about employer participation in work-based learning experiences with a particular focus on internships in postsecondary education. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are the experiences of employers that provide internships and other work-based learning opportunities to postsecondary students?
2. How have employers and educational institutions worked together to provide quality internships and other work-based learning experiences?

The goal was to gain a better understanding of how WBL experiences are perceived by employers and what those employers need from educational partners to ensure buy-in for WBL framework development, implementation, and participation.

Related Literature

Work-based learning can be traced back to the start of civilization with the development

of the apprenticeship (Jacobson, 2015). Apprenticeships are a more intensive form of WBL that are employer driven, they combine flexible on-the job training with classroom knowledge; and typically involve an increase in wages as the apprentice's skills increase (Cahill, 2016; U.S. Department of Labor, 2020). Apprenticeships remain one of the most common forms of WBL, along with other prevalent forms including internships, co-ops, on-the-job training, and transitional work (Cahill, 2016).

WBL experiences such as internships are a common form of learning used in postsecondary education. "To realize successful student outcomes, internship experiences must be well structured and well-integrated with the school curriculum and culminate in products or services that demonstrate learning" (Brown, 2003, p. 2). On internships, students are able to participate in realistic tasks, gain insight into career choices, prepare for future employment, gain an individualized experience, and provide motivation to remain in a chosen career field (Divine et al., 2007; Kosnik et al., 2013).

While the benefits of internship participation are well documented, it is important to identify some of the limitations that internships bring to students, institutions, and organizations in postsecondary education. Examples include (a) an extensive time commitment, (b) logistics and location, (c) placement, (d) costs, (e) variability in the quality of the experience, (f) unstructured learning experience, (g) incomplete learning cycle, and (h) less conducive to teamwork (Kosnik et al., 2013). For an educational institution to effectively manage a structured internship program, it would require administrative expertise and a large network of employers (Divine et al., 2007). Depending on the location and size of the school, a dedicated staff would also be necessary to coordinate student assignments (Kosnik et al., 2013, p. 617). Despite these challenges, internships are "widely viewed across the postsecondary landscape as one of the high-impact practices that campuses should adopt, scale, and sustain" (Hora, 2019, para 1.)

Unfortunately, the number of private employers providing WBL experiences like internships is low. Holzer & Lerner (2014) found that low participation may be the result of insufficient information sharing on the benefits of WBL programs and how to obtain them. They also found that "among workers, a reluctance to forgo higher wages early on creates a form of wage rigidity that can limit a firm's ability to pay lower wages during the training period" (Holzer & Lerner, 2014, p. 4). Setting up a WBL program also involves costs that some small companies are not able to cover (Holzer & Lerner, 2014). According to Holzer and Lerner (2014), "many American employers and their industries simply lack a tradition of investing in the skills of their workers and look for workers to arrive at their firms with the needed skills" (p. 4).

Further, the fear that employers would invest in training workers and then lose those skilled employees to competitors has long been presented as a central reason for low employer support for WBL initiatives (Lerman et al., 2009). Lerman et al. (2009), however, found that only 25% of employers surveyed in their study identified poaching as a significant concern and 29% regarded it as a minor problem. Despite this information, poaching remains a concern that may deter employers from starting new work-based learning programs (Lerman et al., 2009). Regardless of the WBL type, partnerships between employers and educational institutions are essential for a successful program. Therefore, WBL should be viewed as a complement and not

substitute for education (Holzer & Lerner, 2014).

According to Grubb (1996), a school's relationship with employers is a critical component of a graduate's career success; but unfortunately, colleges are challenged by their slow response to shifting labor market demands. As a result, students may miss opportunities to connect with employers while institutions fall short in supporting their student's school-to-work transition (Person & Rosenbaum, 2007). Person and Rosenbaum (2007) found that random faculty/employer relationships do exist, but schools themselves can hinder these relationships due to their structures and practices. These institutional structures "may affect the level of faculty effort directed toward building and maintaining links with potential employers and some may turn out to be barriers" (Person & Rosenbaum, 2007, p. 233). Person and Rosenbaum (2007) found that time constraints, employment of adjunct and part-time faculty, and the division of labor are the most common barriers for connecting employers and instructors. As instructors manage multiple responsibilities, relationship building can become a secondary task. Additionally, part-time and adjunct instructors often experience high turnover making it difficult for an institution to maintain an employer relationship that was sustained by a temporary employee (Person & Rosenbaum, 2007). Furthermore, the management of employer relationships in some institutions is delegated to a specific person or office. While this promotes more sustainability in contacts, it can also "isolate departments and individuals with specific functions" causing faculty to "easily dismiss their own potential role in connecting with the labor market" (Person & Rosenbaum, 2007, p. 226). Knowing the barriers of work-based learning presents an open opportunity for both industry and education to examine and address accordingly.

Employers play a significant role in how WBL addresses the skills gap and develops a diverse pool of talent (Cahill, 2016). Therefore, an increase in learning that combines traditional classroom instruction with industry specific opportunities is expected (Rogers-Chapman & Darling-Hammond, 2013). In this regard, as reported by Greenfield and Stevens (2018), the keys to expanding WBL opportunities may include: (a) platforms that provide opportunities for learners to engage with professionals both in real time and through recorded interactions; (b) non-tech-based solutions that connect students with local businesses; (c) social entrepreneurship projects; (d) micro-badging or micro-credentials, and (e) entry level career certifications or college credit.

As we continue to embrace the information age, partnerships between industry, education, and individuals will take on a different importance if planned management of knowledge remains the requirement (Smith & Betts, 2000). Governments will give incentives; employers will provide more funding for WBL initiatives; the labor market setting will be more conducive to a culture of lifelong learning; the benefits of collaboration and partnership will become increasingly more obvious; and we will see more flexibility and creativity among employers, educators and individuals as they respond to a constantly changing society and global workforce (Smith & Betts, 2000). To wit, in recent years, the COVID-19 global pandemic impacted how we do work-based learning, but despite the challenges, opportunities have emerged for CTE to grow stronger (ACTE, 2020).

Currently, school-based and virtual models include designing the classroom as a business operated by learners and school-based enterprises that serve clients remotely (ACTE, 2020). Other remote options include virtual worksite tours; virtual interviews with industry professionals; virtual mentoring sessions; and virtual micro-internships, internships, and apprenticeships (ACTE, 2020). Blended learning environments that combine various options have also become popular methods for delivering quality CTE in challenging times (ACTE, 2020). Regardless of the option used, maintaining a connection between the learner and industry professional remains a top priority (ACTE, 2020).

Conceptual Framework

To assist in the analysis and interpretation of the findings, the researcher used human capital theory and the workplace learning interrelationships model as the conceptual framework. The human capital theory explains how an investment in a student's skill development provides advantages for the individual, organization, and community (Chavis, 2017; Becker, 1975). Sweetland (1996) and Mincer (1989) noted that human capital theory explains the direct correlation between economic growth, education, and skill development while emphasizing how human capital rises with economic development. When employers provide an internship, they provide a learning experience that allows the student to invest their time and talent into a program with the potential to give them a competitive advantage in the workforce (Chavis, 2017).

In turn, the workplace learning interrelationships model describes a 3-way partnership between the student and their learning plan; the employer and their business plan; and the interface of a university's corporate plan with all three working together (Nixon et al, 2006). The student's learning plan involves career and personal goals, the employer's business plan includes productivity, innovation, and workforce development, while the universities corporate plan involves marketing, recruitment, access, curriculum, research, and innovation (Nixon et al, 2006, Thomas & Angove, 2012).

Companies and educational institutions in postsecondary education have a long history of forming partnerships and collaborating on education, research, and innovation (Albats et al., 2020). However, Chavis (2017) found that those relationships can be "complex because of the highly diverse organizational structures and cultures of academia and business, which create specific barriers and may limit the efficiency and effectiveness of such partnerships" (Galan-Muros & Plewa, 2016; p. 1). To this end, many scholars have used social capital theory to address the "complex phenomenon of company-industry partnerships, but a limited focus has been placed on the human side of these partnerships (Albats et al., 2020). Felin and Foss (2005) found that much of the existing research fails to recognize organizations as entities formed by individuals. Therefore, human capital theory and the workplace learning interrelationships model provide an ideal framework to examine employer perceptions of work-based learning and their interactions between individuals and organizations from a micro-foundational view (Chavis, 2017; Felin et al., 2015; Ghouri et al., 2019). When industry and education work together, new knowledge has a platform on which to emerge.

Method

A qualitative design was used for this study because it allowed participants to share their own experiences. Interviews are the most common method used in qualitative research and according to Patton (2015), “the purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (p. 426). Feelings and behavior cannot be observed; therefore, interviewing provides an opportunity to better understand the meanings that individuals develop from the activities around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted that “there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (p. 9). Therefore, qualitative researchers “do not find knowledge, they construct it” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9) by developing another interpretation of their findings based on “other’s views filtered through his or her own” (Merriam, 1998, p. 23). Thus, the use of this research design was most appropriate.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify employer participants for this study. Purposive sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). As such, seven employers were identified to participate in this study. Each of the seven participants identified as white; six were female; one was male; and the average age was 48. Participants represented the following industries: healthcare, human resource management, government, manufacturing, and non-profit.

Each of the seven employers consistently recruited students from a local community college, a 4-year institution, an HBCU, or combination of all three. More specifically, these institutions included a predominantly white research 1 institution with over 40,000 students, a historically black college or university (HBCU) with over 7000 students, and a large community college with over 35,000 students. At the time of this study, the unemployment rate for this area was 4.4% with 183,246 of its residents employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). The primary recruitment strategy involved sending email invitations and providing follow-up phone calls, as appropriate. To ensure that data was collected in an ethical manner, IRB approval was obtained, and each participant received a detailed informed consent that clearly outlined the purpose, intent, and procedures used in this study. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and all data was stored in a locked office space and in a secured online file management system. As a form of appreciation, each participant was provided a Starbucks gift card after all interviews were completed.

Procedure

Virtual interviews were used as the primary source for data collection. Interviewing provided an opportunity to better understand the meanings that individuals developed from the activities around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured, or guided, interviews allowed the researcher an opportunity to develop a standard set of questions for each participant while still providing flexibility to modify questions and the order for the purpose of

probing more deeply while clarifying key points (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews also guided the researcher on how to respond to the interview situation as it evolved with ideas that may be new to the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Questions ranged from general to specific and each participant possessed appropriate experience with WBL programs making them effective contributors to this study. Interviews continued until the researcher was able to reach data saturation after each interview.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Merriam (1998) found that “analysis that occurs separately from data collection can be “unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 162). By following this procedure, the researcher minimized the difficulty in deciphering large volumes of material (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009). Due to safety concerns surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, six interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing technology and one interview was conducted via phone. Each participant was interviewed once for 1-2 hours. Informed consent was obtained from each participant and each session was audio recorded.

To ensure accuracy and to allow more time for analysis, a transcription service was used to transcribe the recordings. Once the transcripts were received, participants were allowed to review and make corrections, as appropriate. The researcher was then able to review each transcript in detail and then assign an initial set of codes based on the research questions and the overall data. Data was reviewed line-by-line to produce more detailed codes. Codes were individually reviewed and later grouped into broader themes. Themes that appeared most often were identified and further investigated. Throughout this process, it was important to document significant points and review the data multiple times for sufficient comparison of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2009).

The researcher took multiple steps to ensure trustworthiness of the study. First, seven employers representing five industries were identified to participate in this study to secure multiple viewpoints and reducing the effect of researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). To follow up, interview transcripts were sent to the seven participants as a form of member checking. Lincoln and Guba (1985) found that member checking can be a crucial technique for establishing credibility in a research study. Participants were also given pseudonyms to protect their identity. To ensure reliability, thick descriptions and a thorough outline of the research design was shared to provide a detailed account of how the study was conducted and how data was analyzed. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined this process as the audit trail. Thick descriptions of the background data were also helpful in establishing the context of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Results

The research questions used to guide this study focused on exploring the experiences of employers that provide work-based learning opportunities such as internships to postsecondary students. This study also sought to examine the relationships between employers and educational institutions, from the employer perspective, as they worked together to provide quality work-based learning experiences for the students served. Human capital theory and the workplace learning interrelationships model were helpful in the analysis and interpretation of

the findings. Recommendations for partnership improvement were made based on interview results.

Employers' Perspectives on Providing Internships

Research question one asked, “What are the experiences of employers that provide internships and other work-based learning opportunities to undergraduate students?” Based on the evidence gathered, the following themes emerged: work-based learning builds community partnerships and work-based learning establishes recruitment pipelines.

Work-based Learning Builds Community Partnerships

Building community partnerships was one theme that emerged from employer’s perception of the benefits of work-based learning. This theme referred to making connections with specific individuals, offices, and programs within educational institutions for support in developing WBL programs and accessing student talent to fill their WBL experiences. Stauffer (2019) found that WBL programs allow the employer to be involved in what institutions are teaching as they build a workforce equipped with the skills that employers are seeking. This allows the needs of the community to better align with the material being taught in the classroom (Stauffer, 2019). When employers see how working with students can further their mission, partnerships can be a long-term success (Loria, 2018).

Mae, a human resource manager in the manufacturing industry, shared that her organization has connected with many of the educational institutions in the area including the technical and community college. “They have programs that are similar to what you would look for at our facility,” she said. She also noted that they have donated machines to the school so that students can gain additional training.

In turn, Mark, a human resource professional in the healthcare field, noted that many students lack a desire to live and work within the local community. To address this issue, they have worked to implement “sense of place” projects that help retain, attract, and harness local talent (Knight Creative Communities Institute, n.d.). This initiative was developed in 2009 to expand internship opportunities, enlighten college students and recent graduates about what the area has to offer; and engage students in the community as a whole (Knight Creative Communities Institute, n.d.). Through continued community partnerships and more WBL initiatives, they hope to achieve this goal of making the city a place where students choose to live, work, and play.

Developing partnerships also helps provide structure in program development, implementation, and execution. To increase the value of work-based learning opportunities like internships, Hergert (2009) suggests that each experience is structured and combined with the academic knowledge that students learn in the classroom. A customized structure can reduce limitations and produce positive learning outcomes for student participants (Hergert, 2009; Kosnik et al., 2013; Saltikoff, 2017). Joan, a coordinator with a state agency, noted that structure is a key within her organization:

Many meetings have taken place where other departments were considering an intern, but

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they didn't really have a vision for what they wanted. It needs to be mutually beneficial and well-rounded. The students should have structured assignment meetings, progress reports, and one-on-one meetings to make sure they are getting the most out of the program. The structure we provide helps us to address any issues that might come up as they happen instead of being surprised later.

As students gain new skills, employers gain an expanded opportunity to develop strong WBL programs while giving back to the community in which they live.

Work-based Learning Establishes Recruitment Pipelines

Establishing recruitment pipelines was a consistent theme that emerged from this study. Partnerships with the education community helped employers develop an active recruitment strategy which increased their chances of retaining local talent. Employers noted that having connections on campus and a presence at various campus and community events makes it easier for them to fill open positions. Mark, a human resource professional in the healthcare field, shared that this is even more important when recruiting in a difficult job market. He said,

I have a great relationship with the local 4-year institutions, but many of those students have no interest in staying local after graduation. Therefore, the additional connections that I maintain with the community college, technical school, and private college can often provide even more benefit since those students live in the community and are often more open to local opportunities.

Mark also shared that he is very strategic when he establishes relationships with educational institutions. "We look very closely at the recruiting potential for their students," he said. "We clearly prioritize local schools and clinical programs, but we also do it out of a sense of just being a good community partner."

Further, Ella—a state government agency leader, expressed a sense of pride in seeing students convert to full-time employees. She noted,

I am confident in the strong base that our students receive as part of our WBL program. We know they are going to do well. Wherever they end up in the agency, they're bringing that skillset and the knowledge they received through our mentoring efforts.

From each participant, there was a clear connection between community engagement and recruitment. Many of the employers interviewed for this study named specific events and organizations that have been integral in their ability establish pipelines to aid in their recruitment efforts. Those include participation in career fairs, invitations to speak during classroom visits, and opportunities to engage with likeminded business professionals during community organization meetings. Susan, a manager for a staffing firm, noted her participation in multiple community organizations and her connection to the university career centers as key in helping her to build recruiting relationships for her organization. She said,

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These partnerships have given me the opportunity to serve as a classroom volunteer working with high school students under a career curriculum; participate in job fairs; conduct speaking engagements on workforce readiness, resume writing, and interviewing strategies; participate in employer panel discussions; conduct mock interviews at local institutions; and provide internship opportunities to local college students. We invest time in our community because that is where we work, and we want to share our knowledge. We want to be good corporate citizens of the community that we live, and we appreciate how our interns help us get things done.

The relationships that these employers developed play a significant role in their ability to establish recruitment pipelines that produce quality talent.

Employer and Institutional Collaboration

Research question two asked, “How have employers and educational institutions worked together to provide quality internships and other work-based learning experiences? The following three themes were identified: (a) lack of information impedes growth, (b) virtual experiences are essential, and (c) financial constraints impact participation.

Lack of Information Impedes Growth

Difficulty in gathering information and a belief that work-based learning is too time consuming were the most important components of this theme for employers when discussing perceived barriers to WBL partnerships. Difficulty in gathering information referred to having easy access to the people and information necessary to be well informed about starting and maintaining a successful WBL program. The belief that WBL will consume too much time referred to the need for more clear communication on the benefits of WBL and identification of the support systems available to change negative beliefs. Many of the employers interviewed noted that information about WBL is not as readily available as some may believe. Mae, an HR manager in the manufacturing industry, suggested that education do a better job of partnering with employers to share more information on the benefits and processes of WBL. “It helps your organization and students get a sense of the gap that exists between reading about something in a textbook and the actual hands-on experience,” she said.

Joan, a state agency coordinator, mentioned the significance of knowing more about how students can gain academic credit or directed independent study (DIS) credit during their WBL experience. She noted that academic credit can be a way to help hold the students accountable especially when the organizational structure is not strong. Ella, a state agency leader noted that they require students to sign up for credit in some capacity. “If they are not signing up for credit where there’s some accountability through their major, we ask them to sign up for recognition,” she shared. They both mentioned that being knowledgeable in these areas and having support from institutions to provide these options helps to ensure that they are getting something in return. “It needs to be mutually beneficial,” said Ella.

Mark, a human resource professional in the healthcare field, shared that his challenges tend to be more procedural. “We have agreements that meet our needs,” he said, “but invariably, a school will want to revise that agreement before they sign.” Communication about those

agreements and their purpose in the healthcare field can often cause much back and forth between the school and employer, but ultimately, they are often able to reach some type of agreement when information is freely shared.

Multiple employers suggested joining HR groups like the Society for Human Resource Professionals and serving as guest speakers during organizational meetings. Not only can education professionals share information on work-based learning programs, but employers can share important industry trends and market data that could help to shape curriculum and expand the pool of mentors that students need (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Overall, more education, outreach, and creative outlets were recommended to improve the type and frequency of information shared between industry and education.

Virtual Experiences are Essential

The need to embrace a virtual reality was a significant theme that emerged from this study. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many people across the world transitioned to a virtual work environment. Traditional face-to-face interactions were halted and many WBL programs were either postponed or cancelled if the employer was unwilling or unable to offer a virtual experience. While the sudden shift was daunting for some, many adapted well and continue to explore options to ensure that they can provide a quality work-based learning experience regardless of the format.

Joan, a coordinator with a state agency, shared that “part of their future career is going to involve how to work virtually so if we are developing students professionally, we should probably incorporate this into our program.” Ella, a state government agency leader, shared similar thoughts by noting that the post-COVID world will look a lot different from what we were familiar. “Teaching students how to use various technologies has become even more crucial than ever before,” she shared. “It is imperative that employers embrace the change that technology allows.” Kim, a recruiter for a state agency, noted that many of her positions may become remote in the future because they realize that moving to another city or state does not mean that the duties of the job can’t be fulfilled. “We are trying not to be stuck in the past and are really thinking about recruitment for the next generation,” she said. Each employer recognized that the technology is available so there is no reason that work-based learning cannot be offered in a virtual environment.

Penczak (2018) found that virtual work-based learning can address some of the common barriers to participation like transportation, distance, size, type of partner sites, and diverse student needs for support and access. Charlotte, an HR professional, noted that because her organization was able to convert to a virtual environment quickly, she feels that it opened the door for many other students to gain experience that they normally would not have been able to gain. “I think we’ve been so successful with virtual that if we had an applicant who could only work virtually, it would not be a game changer,” said Charlotte. “We realize that there is this cross-pollination that happens when teams are working across their silos and we are really working to recreate that environment,” she shared.

For Mark, a human resource professional, virtual work-based learning can be a bit more complex. In the local community college, a section of their healthcare careers campus is a simulation. “Once you’re inside, you don’t know you’re not inside a hospital ICU,” he said. There are no physical patients, so they use patient simulators to assist with the learning. While simulations provide a huge benefit for work-based learning, Mark acknowledged that most of the accrediting bodies for nursing still want students to have a certain number of hours with hands-on training at the bedside of real patients. Some of this can be accomplished through telemedicine. As a result, “We’ve increased our capacity for telemedicine,” he shared. They use this for standard physician appointments and as an example for specialist physicians to communicate and do patient visits virtually. “The live patient experience is still important,” said Mark, but “we may be able to do more laboratory simulations for students in their own facilities using telemedicine.”

While transitioning to a virtual environment or incorporating virtual components into a work-based learning opportunity has its challenges, all employers agreed that the benefit of still being able to continue the experience with the help of technology far outweighs any challenges that may be present.

Financial Constraints Impact Participation

When discussing barriers to work-based learning, the issue of cost was a point of concern for six out of the seven employers interviewed for this study. While some expressed frustration over the high cost of attending career fairs, others were concerned with their inability to provide funding or increase existing funding for the students that participate. Charlotte, a HR professional, had concerns about both. Her organization participates in smaller career fairs, but she believes the larger fairs are geared toward big employers. She noted that funding for her program is hard to secure so they try to make sure the money spent is where they think they have the best benefit. Charlotte also noted that students need funding too. “If there was a way we could partner with institutions on some grants, that would be wonderful,” she shared.

Ella, an agency leader with a state agency, noted that they primarily use job postings and word of mouth to share their WBL programs, but seldom participate in career fairs. “We don’t have a budget to pay \$200 - \$1000 depending on what school it is or what career fair they are hosting,” she said. Ella also noted that unpaid internship can be a limitation for some students that may already be struggling to pay for school while working. With the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, employers shared businesses are being cost cautious and suggested that educational institutions work more closely with them to resolve this important issue. “There has to be some kind of conversation and some brainstorming to figure out how to address this moving forward to help students from all backgrounds,” said Joan, a state agency coordinator.

Mae, an HR manager, shared that she has participated in career fairs in the past. Her concern, however, lies with both timing and cost. In addition to cost, she noted that several schools hold career fairs on the same day or during the same week which makes it difficult for her to connect with students from multiple institutions. Mae noted that, for a private employer, career fairs can be more about getting their name out there than recruiting candidates. “That’s a lot of money especially when we’re working with several different schools in the same area,” she

said. Kim, a recruiter with a state agency, shared that she often struggles with convincing her manager that the increasing cost of career fairs is a “win-win” for budget purposes. “We often wonder why it costs so much?” Employers interviewed for this study believe that career fairs are a great way to introduce students to the business, but with so many institutions in the area, they are forced to take cost into consideration.

Susan, a manager for a staffing firm, viewed the cost concern from a different perspective. She noted that companies have many responsibilities when taking on employees including confidentiality and workers compensation. “That’s an additional cost to the employer,” said Susan. “I think concerns over the legal risks, the legal ramifications, and costs for workers compensation may be what’s stopping some employers from offering work-based learning opportunities.” Overall, financial constraints weighed heavy on the employers interviewed for this study, but as more institutions consider the value of community partnerships, more interest may arise in developing communication channels that provide ways to overcome this barrier.

Conclusion & Discussion

The data analysis revealed five key themes: (a) Work-based Learning Builds Community Partnerships, (b) Work-based Learning Establishes Recruitment Pipelines, (c) Lack of Information Impedes Growth, (d) Virtual Experiences are Essential, and (e) Financial Constraints Impact Participation. This study was relevant to understanding the experiences of employers that work with various institutional types to provide work-based learning experiences to students in postsecondary education. Research shows that employers play a key role in WBL such as internships, but are seldom involved in conversations around the topic, and are often unaware of the benefits they would receive from participating to strategically link education and workforce preparation (Greenfield & Stevens, 2018). This study gave voice to employer perspectives by describing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions about their experience working with the education community to engage in WBL initiatives.

In general, participants described their experiences as meaningful demonstrating that when institutions and employers work together, work-based learning provides an opportunity to create a space for the development of new learning opportunities (Boud et al., 2001; Roodhouse, 2010). Participants highlighted the relationships they develop in academia, the quality students they engage, and the many community resources made available for them to connect with top talent. The partnerships that employers develop in academia are crucial in establishing a recruitment pipeline, but when those partnerships are severed due to contacts transitioning to new roles or leaving the institution, challenges can develop that place strains on their ability to maintain an effective recruitment strategy. Barriers of this nature are often overlooked, but participants in this study noted that institutions should work more closely with employers to identify needs and make transitions seamless. Employers also noted that these partnerships play a significant role in their ability to gain the information they need for continued growth.

When barriers to partnerships exist, employers find it difficult to stay informed about starting new and maintaining existing WBL programs. This lack of information demonstrates the need for more clear communication and identification of support systems designed to foster

growth and development. These ideas were in line with research by Stauffer (2019) and Loria (2018) indicating that when employers are involved in what the institutions are teaching, the needs of the community are better aligned, and partnerships can be a long-term success. The participant experiences support our framework of viewing WBL as a 3-way partnership as described in the workplace learning interrelationships model. Students have a learning plan; employers have a business plan; and educational institutions have a corporate plan (Nixon et al, 2006). When all parties work together, partnerships and recruitment pipelines have a strong platform in which to thrive.

Similarly, partnerships and recruitment pipelines can also be viewed from the perspective of human capital theory. The human capital theory focuses more on the “human” side of partnerships by emphasizing organizations as entities formed by individuals (Felin & Foss, 2005). Business and academia are diverse in both culture and structure which can create barriers in the efficiency and effectiveness of partnerships (Galan-Muros & Plewa, 2016). When we fail to recognize the value of human capital, partnerships can suffer which ultimately affects economic growth, education, and skill development (Sweetland, 1996; Mincer, 1989). Employers also noted that as the world changes, so does the need for a greater exchange of knowledge and a willingness to modify existing procedures to adjust to different ways of work. By examining the perspectives of individual employers within organizations, the researcher was able to give voice to the successes and challenges that they experience in this WBL space.

The findings also have implications for employers seeking to develop WBL programs in an age where virtual experiences are more common and increasingly necessary. As mentioned, work-based learning can be an extremely valuable tool in the development of our future workforce (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). However, participants shared that the traditional face-to-face format has undergone an evolution that will require more attention as we seek to maintain quality programs regardless of format. Employers embraced virtual experiences as part of their work-based learning program while recognizing that the benefits of still being able to continue the experience with the help of technology far outweigh any challenges that may be present.

Our findings were also similar to that of Kosnik et al. (2013), in which costs were identified as a significant limitation for some organizations. More specifically, participants in this study expressed concern about the increasing cost to attend career events; their inability to provide funding or maintain a competitive salary for student participants; and the overall cost to maintain program logistics. They also noted that with multiple schools in the area, they are often forced to take cost into consideration when deciding on where to focus their recruitment strategy. This may speak to Holzer and Learner’s (2014) assertion that insufficient information sharing on the benefits of WBL and how to obtain those benefits may be a reason for low participation among private employers. Overall, the findings show that establishing partnerships has the potential to minimize barriers to WBL and open doors for students, employers, and institutions to create spaces where all stakeholders can benefit. Albats et al. (2020), found that companies and educational institutions have a long history of forming partnerships. Within these partnerships are individuals that drive change. Therefore, when we view these partnerships from the human side, we are better able to understand the associated individuals

and can be more effective in how we examine employer perceptions of work-based learning (Chavis, 2017; Felin et al., 2015; Ghouri et al., 2019).

Obviously, this study provides some practical advice from a sample of employers with experience working with the education community to provide work-based learning opportunities. However, these results are significant because they directly address the concern that Greenfield & Stevens (2018) noted in the literature that employers are seldom involved in conversations around the topic. Human capital theory and the workplace learning interrelationships model provide an ideal framework to examine employer perceptions of work-based learning and their interactions between individuals and organizations from a micro-foundational view (Chavis, 2017; Felin et al., 2015; Ghouri et al., 2019).

Implications for Employers and Postsecondary Institutions

Wilson and Mehta (2017) found that 53% of U.S. jobs require some form of postsecondary education and training beyond high school, but, only 43% of U.S. workers are trained at this level. This fact alone demonstrates the need to expand work-based learning opportunities such as internships so that a larger percentage of students are able to gain this valuable experience. This study has some practical implications for employers and educators. Opportunities exist for the education community to expand their reach by sharing the benefits of work-based learning, not only with students, but to a broader employer base. Participants in this study noted that their involvement in work-based learning initiatives came as a result of information that was shared with them through existing connections, outreach to career services professionals at targeted institutions, or information that was passed down from their predecessor. While they reap the benefits of these resources, they noted that colleagues in other industries have not been as fortunate and find themselves believing myths that prevent them from taking advantage of the benefits that these programs provide. By organizing workshops and developing creative outreach efforts, the education community can educate more employers on the benefits of work-based learning and increase the diversity of industries represented.

Participants also shared other practical insight on ways education can support their efforts to build a competitive workforce through work-based learning initiatives. They include: (a) seeking insight from employers on industry trends and market data that could help to improve the curriculum; (c) involving existing employer partners in the dialogue to share best practices for WBL success; (d) maintaining consistent and relevant forms of communication; and (e) establishing a primary contact between employers and institutions. In some cases, employers found it difficult to connect with the right person for their recruitment needs. Institutions can streamline this process by developing internal guidelines to handle communication and employee turnover. When employers have difficulty connecting, they cease attempts at participating which negatively affects the students.

Educational institutions can also work with local employers on funding options and more cost-effective recruitment strategies. For many small businesses, it is not feasible for them to pay hundreds of dollars to attend a career event. For others, they may lack the funding to sufficiently pay students for the work being performed. Through enhanced partnerships, employers and institutions can work with local government or through federal grants to secure necessary

funding that supports both students and employers. Institutions can also consider organizing recruitment events that allow employers to participate at a free or reduced cost.

Finally, employers in this study mentioned the need to embrace virtual work-based learning experiences. Many employers experienced a swift transition to virtual work as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the nation. They identified a need to permanently incorporate virtual work into WBL programs moving forward. Educational institutions can help by assisting employers with training and shared resources. Hering (2020) found that there was a 159% increase in remote work between 2005 and 2017. During the COVID-19 pandemic, “66% of U.S. employees worked remotely at least part-time” (Herhold, 2020, para. 1). Therefore, developing WBL programs that prepare students for a virtual work environment is more important than ever and can provide a benefit to students, employers, and institutions alike.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

As a small qualitative investigation, this study had several limitations. One is the potential for researcher bias. The researcher was familiar with some of the research participants from their participation in shared career events and activities hosted by the researcher’s institution. To mitigate the potential effects of these circumstances, the researcher took steps to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Having only seven participants limited the researcher’s ability to share a more diverse group of voices. However, the researcher was able to achieve data saturation and adhere to sample size policies for qualitative studies using in-depth interviews. This study was conducted in the midst of a global pandemic which limited in-person interaction. While in-person interviews would have been preferred, technology allowed for the use of phone and video conferencing options to ensure that observations of behaviors could still be analyzed along with participant responses. Another limitation was that participants were predominantly white and female which limited the researcher’s ability to examine gender or racial differences. “The goal of qualitative research is to describe and interpret rather than generalize” (Lichtman, 2013, p. 193). Therefore, the results of this study cannot generalize to a larger arena, but instead describe ways that employers can contribute to the success of WBL initiatives while educational institutions find new ways to engage employers in this educational strategy.

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several suggestions can be provided for future research. A future study could include focus groups to ensure that fundamental biases are overcome. Researchers could also expand the gender, race, industry affiliation, and geographical location of the study participants to broaden the scope of this inquiry. Participants in this study recruited students from three institutional types: a historically black college or university (HBCU), a predominantly white institution (PWI), and a large community college. Future research could examine how work-based learning programs at each institutional type are similar and different. Finally, given that turnover is an industry concern, understanding the reasons why employers leave recruiting-related positions is another opportunity for future qualitative inquiry.

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