



151. Giving Students Career Experience with Internships with Tammy Cooper

Tammy Cooper: [00:00:00] So, this has been a whole new learning experience for me. When you're an educator, you do not get out, you do not know what there is. And I am learning that there is such an amazing world of different things out there. It just energizes me. This is 40 years of education and I am still energized, so I'm really blessed to have this position.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:26] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, and your host.

We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, welcome to today's episode. As always, I'm super excited about the conversation that we are going to have. And today, we're actually going to be talking about something that many of our listeners have reached out about. And there's a lot of curiosity about this idea of high school internship programs. It's a huge topic. It's a fabulous experience for students and for schools that have internship programs, and have figured out how to do them and do them really well. They are incredibly productive for everybody concerned.

So, joining us today to sort of share about their internship programs and the experiences is Tammy Cooper, who is the Internship Coordinator for the past five years at the Marysville Early College STEM School, which is located in Ohio. As our listeners know, many of our guests, you always work close to home. These are the amazing stories that we're able to tell. And so, Tammy, thank you for joining us today.

Tammy Cooper: [00:01:57] Thank you for inviting me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:59] So, let's start sort of high level. Let's sort of set the stage, if you will. As I indicated, our listeners come from all over. So, first and foremost, tell us what is this thing called the Marysville Early College STEM School. Let's understand that first.

Tammy Cooper: [00:02:16] So, about six years ago, our school district applied for a Straight-A Grant, and with the STEM unit involved, we started working with Honda. And they were a big supporter of this kind of a program, so Marysville ended up receiving the grant. So, we really have an old high school and brought in many robotics lab. Honda helped to supply that, with the help also of the partnership of Ohio Hi-Point Career Center, which is located in Logan County.

Actually, I'm employed through the career center for this building. And we have a mix of five different career pathways. We have transportation, engineering, manufacturing, health sciences, and information technology. So, the students have to make a choice between the STEM or the high school. And they do that mainly due to the pathways, if they're interested. So, we're kind of bringing some career tech this way. We are one of 14 satellite schools for Ohio Hi-Point Career Center.

So, with that being said, as we met, when that first class was getting ready six years ago to be seniors, they knew the cap stones and all of that was going to be needed. And I was asked to develop an internship program for those students. And five years later, here we are. So, within that first year, it's really difficult sometimes. I think it's getting much easier. But five years ago, people would hang up on me if I wanted to have interns under the age of 18.

And with perseverance and you just keep asking to get that conversation out there, it has become easier. And as a result, we started out with maybe 17 job shadows/internships that first year that we developed. And this year, I had 97 interns.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:27] Wow. That's a big difference.

Tammy Cooper: [00:04:29] Yes. And then, that was a senior class of 142. So, the goal is to get 100 percent. But we have companies contacting us now. And it helps that Ohio is a state, especially here in Central Ohio, the workforce readiness and development is still big for our governor. And I think all that they have done and what they continue to do is help us. I'm not a shy person, so I would be networking wherever I go.

One thing that really helped me was our Chamber of Commerce. Eric Phillips is our CEO in Workforce Development. And he will introduce me through email a lot or mention to companies what we do. I attend a lot of their business meetings, so I network that way. But it has been a very good way to reach out and get to know people, get to know jobs that I never knew were available. And, of course, I'm relaying that directly to the students and the staff.

The other part of our school is early college, so we have an agreement with Columbus State. A lot of our students are enrolled as college students, and we've had several. Probably over the five years, we've had over 20 students who actually earned an associate's degree from Columbus State before graduating from here. So, we're in that mix. And sometimes it's hard to place students in the internships and still have them get the classes and what they need. So, that's a little bit about how we started and what we do.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:09] Yeah. But all doable. And, again, as I mentioned early in the program, this is something that I've had a number of listeners reach out. And oftentimes in the course of the interviews that we have, this notion of internship comes up, even if the conversation is not about an internship or it's not about internships in general, somewhere along the way, it's not uncommon for the notion of an internship or internship associate or something else that are happening, it does come up in the flow of the conversation. And it is one of the things, as you've indicated, it's hard to get started.

And quite frankly, I've worked with so many schools over the years in so many different places across the United States and other parts of the world that I've seen some really amazing internship programs, some really great success stories. And I've seen some that you can just tell by talking to the kids, talking to the teachers, even talking to the partners, this isn't quite working right. The mechanics don't really work.

So, one of the things I'm really hoping, Tammy, that we can dig into just a little bit is, let's talk about the structure or the expectations, what makes in Marysville, in the school's sort of eyes, an internship - I don't want

to say what makes it work, I'm really more interested in this point because we're going to get into the what makes it work in a minute because that's a lot of that partnership and the work that you are doing upfront is part of that.

But what's the expectation? So, a student at Marysville who completes an internship, what is it that they're getting out of that or the structure of the success - I guess, we're really trying to get into - what does that look like?

Tammy Cooper: [00:07:49] So, I feel very wholeheartedly deeply that our students need to have continual interaction with me along the way. With 97 kids, that's hard. So, tomorrow is our last day of school. I've been telling all the juniors that have applied for next year - so I have an application process in the spring for the juniors - this is mainly a senior program, but when I can't fill spots, I look for juniors. And so, we had about seven juniors this year completing internships.

So, once they complete the application and they write for me, a writing proper, why do you want to have an internship, why should you be in this program. And then, I ask them to give me a basic resume. Along with that, I will be, next week, checking on grades, and continuing to monitor that because I feel they should not be out on something if they're not doing their part here at school. So, grades are always checked.

So then, in August, when we come back to school, I have a two week boot camp - is what we call it. And in that boot camp, we talk about where they want placed. Not everybody is always placed right away. We talk about social media. We get people in to help them create professional LinkedIn accounts. We talk about Facebook and the realm of that. We talk about current email addresses that are not very professional, and we need to change or get a professional email.

We talk about multi-generations. We all know that there could be someone like I am, and I'm kind of old school, learning the new things. And I can be working beside an 18 year old, and for them to realize what my notion of work etiquette to there's can be different. So, we talk about that. We talk about ethical behavior, work ethic, all of the skills that are the employability skills.

Ohio has set 16 different employability skills which can give the student an OhioMeansJobs Career Readiness Seal. And I require all of my seniors to at least attempt to get that. Some of them then choose, well, they're not going to follow through. It's their choice. But, of course, with this year's juniors next year, they have to have several seals. So, I work on those kind of skills.

And then, throughout the internship, I also do mock interviews. And then, some speakers come in and I have some ex-graduates that were in successful internships come in and talk. So, that's all that two-week boot camp.

Then, they meet with me two Wednesdays a month to come in and report hours, write reflections, tell what they like, what they didn't, just give me a spiel about what they've been doing. They have a mentor interview that's expected for them to do when they first start just to get to know that mentor and what path did they take, what was their education.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:08] And this is the student interviewing the mentor?

Tammy Cooper: [00:11:10] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:11] Okay. That's the main of that. That's a really great element. I've heard lots of what you've said. I've heard bits and pieces. But that's not one I've heard a program say, "Hey, it's a requirement. We want you to actually interview the mentor and not just the other way around." I love that. So, thank you for that innovation.

Tammy Cooper: [00:11:29] And some of those people that wasn't the path they went, they know.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:34] Right. Absolutely.

Tammy Cooper: [00:11:37] The other along with that is a site paper. So, if you're going to enter that Honda at Marysville, you're going to write me what you find out about that company because if someone comes up to you and asks where you internship is being done, and you say you don't what they're doing, that's not a good answer. So, those are the first two things we do. So then, throughout, we'll do the meetings, like I said. At the end, they have a presentation requirement.

In the past with smaller numbers, we did PowerPoint presentations. This year, I broke them into five hour-and-a-half presentations with 17 students in each, because there was just so many. I liked some of that but it was very taxing on me. So, I'm thinking, you know, another way, I'm not going to do without presentations because I think that's very important.

One thing I changed up this year is they had to do display boards. And then, once they introduce themselves and thanked their mentors, they gave them a little gift and their certificate, they went back to their board. And then, anyone, parents, community members, board members, could ask them individually. And a lot of feedback was, "This was great because students had to talk to us." You know, eye contact, know what they were talking about. So, that was really a positive.

Let's see. There was one other thing that they have to do. So, the OhioMeansJobs. And then, the presentation is the end. I guess that's really it. But that has to be, again, all the requirements that I have. Other than that, then we're done.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:25] So, that's the student experience. So, let's flip this around then, and the same sort of question but this time, let's talk about it. So, I'm Honda or I'm any other local industry or business where one of these 96 kiddos could have gotten placed this past year. So, two questions. What's the experience like for me? What are the school's expectations of me, Honda and me, Annalies, the mentor at Honda? What are those expectations and what is that experience at least sort of like or translate for me as a company?

Because that is always one of the things, as you said. And I've lived this with you so I totally understand this notion of I can't tell you how many companies I've called on behalf of the schools that I'm working with saying, "Hey, we would really love to set this up for you to be an internship site." And one of the first responses is, "Because of OSHA or all these other reasons, if they're under 18, we can't take these kiddos." Which, fortunately, it's not actually the case. There are ways around some of those constraints, almost always.

But at the end of the day, though, there is an internal experience that happens. And so, internships don't just happen to kids or to companies. In the most ideal worlds, they happen with these partnerships that can be robust and, quite frankly, transformative in both directions.

Tammy Cooper: [00:14:57] Right. So, when I speak with a company - actually, I was on a phone call this morning with two new companies that I'm going to be going to visit - I always try to make an in person visit to a new company, talk to them about our partnership. Within that, we talk about, our program is kind of strange

because we don't have blocks of times that students go out. So, I usually tell the mentor, or whoever is in charge of looking for the student, we give them on an individual basis when that student has time to come, which we are so fortunate to have all the companies. That's just how I have structured it and we've not ever had a problem doing it that way.

So then, what I do, when I find out the mentor is, when we go in for that first interview, I always go with the student, or if they come to our school. I feel the students, some of them this is their first - well, it won't be their first because they're going to do mock interviews - professional interview. They always ask me. I tell them how to dress, what they need to do, they have a copy of their resume. So, really I get to know you so that the mentor knows what the student's knowledge is.

As I sit there, as what I call the matchmaker, because they will start talking about engineering or whatever they are talking about. I am not the least knowledgeable about any of it and you can see that connection, which is so fantastic.

And then, I have a list of mentor responsibilities that I give to the mentor. Very general, you know, "They are training with you. This is an outside of the classroom experience. You are their mentor/teacher." And so, that was an initial. I went somewhere and the lady had told me that she was assigned a student and didn't know what she was supposed to do with them. And I had never thought about that piece.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:57] Right. Right. Well, yeah, because not everybody knows what to do, right?

Tammy Cooper: [00:17:01] No. No.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:01] I mean, these folks did not go into teaching. They went into industry. So, we have to help them out. We have an obligation to ensure that relationship can, in fact, be functional. Absolutely.

Tammy Cooper: [00:17:10] Right. So then, once they have the expectations, I check in with them every couple weeks. Email has been fantastic. Of course, during COVID, initially, we stopped everything. But when we came back, I was amazed at how many internships I could have because businesses have protocol in place. So, as long as the student follows that protocol, they didn't have a problem. So, we are very fortunate in that.

The other thing I do, like I said, is, every couple weeks, I will send them an evaluation to just touch base with. They always know they can call or email me. Sometimes they'll say, "Hey, can you call?" Or have questions about things. And then, I always make sure we do an ending meeting. So, I'll go in, do the final evaluation, but I will meet with the student and the mentor to kind of close that out. And then, we always invite them to presentations. And then, I ask the mentor to stay with the student when they're doing their gallery walk. And we always make sure that they're thanked.

And I let the students know that they're not just your mentor. They still have obligations and responsibilities of their own jobs. So, you need to know that. But that is generally the ground work that I laid in for our partners and children.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:35] Yeah. And that's fabulous because that's one of those often forgotten pieces, so I'm really glad we're able to touch base on the fact that, yeah, we have to help these folks know how. I mean, lots of these people, they don't have children of their own but it's very different. This is in a professional setting. So, the expectations do, in fact, need to be managed. Don't just, you know, throw these poor kids and mentors to the wind. So, I appreciate that very much.

Sort of follow up question that I have, because internships themselves, the content, I guess, if you will, of the internship can be highly variable. So, there are things that are labeled internship that I would say are more job shadowing. There are also things that are labeled internship that are, for example, kids coming in, filing, doing basic business sort of stuff, and not that there's anything wrong with that. That's totally fine.

But then, there's also internships that sort of fall on the other end of the spectrum which is that the students are participating not just in the actual work but the R&D. They're doing research. They're doing something meaningful and tangible for that company that actually advances the company beyond day to day office operations. So, what are we talking about here with your program on that scale?

Tammy Cooper: [00:19:53] So, sometimes companies don't like the word internship. And so, I've learned that I use the word job shadow, long term job shadow, once a week. Now, there are students who are in situations where they really can't do a lot of hands on. They can do some. But, to me, that's still an internship experience. If they're going once a week for a couple hours, they're still getting something out of that.

And to the other extreme that you asked about, one year, I had a girl hired in the paint department at Honda, the East Liberty plant, her internship was to figure out why the mold was growing in the paint containers. She was all over this.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:37] That's awesome.

Tammy Cooper: [00:20:39] It was. And when she did her presentation, it was amazing that here's this high school student that they entrusted. So, again, you're right, there are times that those students are so involved. There's a lot of students at Honda that get part of a team. They go in, they get their own desk, their computer. They're so excited they have -

One thing that I have tried to make everyone believe - and I really haven't had much of a problem with this - they're not in there to do your dirt work. We're not calling this an internship if all you want them to do is take ten boxes of files and get them caught up for you, that's not why we're doing this. And so, I feel that that's my place and not the students to say, "Hey, I'm not going to do this. This wasn't what I was interning, the reason."

And then, I will step in. So, they know I'm kind of that person that if they have a question they don't want to ask or when I'm checking up with them and they tell me something like that, that's not the intention. This needs to be meaningful.

And we're required on our training plan that we create for the work based learning internship that we have to match some of the standards with what they're doing. So, if you're matching that, then those are the things you go back and say, "I know you didn't have anything for them today but we really need to concentrate on the standards." So, I think that helped that part also.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:14] Yeah. Absolutely. So, that's super, super important. And like I said, you know, internship programs around the full spectrum. And it sounds like your internship program does, in fact, run the spectrum. So, from fairly simplistic internships/job shadowing that are still work based experiences, to fully embedded R&D and research teams, and probably everything in between. So, your internship program doesn't focus one space or the other, which is absolutely okay, but it's really more the full gamut.

So, one of the other things that I'm curious about that was in the materials that you sent ahead was something that you call your career signing, I think is what it is. So, what exactly is that in your program?

Tammy Cooper: [00:22:14] Well, as we are going to log through the years, we had academic signing day. You know, athletes get their signing day. And then, I thought, "There needs to be a career signing day." Because I always kind of felt like we were shoved to the back. And it wasn't intentional. But career tech center, you're going to center on all that. We're kind of a combination in a weird way.

So, last year - and this was with COVID - luckily, I had ten students that were interning at places that then they wanted to continue, and the mentors wanted them. And so, they were going to continue that next step in their career, which some of them were still going to school but they were still employed by this business. So, that, to me, is a celebration. You have made a job option. You have made a decision. The company wants you. This is what you want to do. You didn't know what you were going to do. And, now, that has been solved for you.

So, in our Chamber of Commerce office - they let me have it there - what I did is called the mentors from the company and then the parents of the students. So, we did individual where we maybe had 15 minutes so not everybody was in the same room. Then, they sit down with the mentor. We took lots of pictures. I had a table set up. The company has brought in, you know, posters to put behind them, whatever. My superintendent from Hi-Point was there. The superintendent from Marysville and the principal.

And each of those students signed a paper. All it was, was a certificate that I had wrote out saying, you know, you are now whatever. They brought some swag from their companies to give to the student. And to me, it was so special, especially since we didn't have it in school. So, that's what we do for career signing.

And this year, we did not have very many students continuing on with what they wanted to do. Some of them were just ending. I could have had, like, two or three career signing. And all of a sudden, a year got away. So then, I figured out a way to know that sooner than later. But, to me, that's just as important as military, college, athlete. And I think the kids felt, you know, we're made to feel special too.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:30] Absolutely. I think it's a fabulous thing. And it's one of the things that I was super excited to see that you were doing. Because, oftentimes, we advocate, certainly at PAST, to sort of change up the conversation. And we really need to be talking about career or work readiness, not just college readiness, which has been a trend for many decades now here in the U.S. in particular. And, although, nothing wrong with that, obviously.

But what we know from being in this space for so long, and you certainly know because of where you sit within the academic realm within your community, is that we need all of those professions. We need the kid to want to go on to full on post-secondary. We need the kids who want to go to career tech to earn credentials and to community college. We need the kiddos who want to go directly to work. We need the full range in our communities or we're not going to have the services that we need.

And so, honoring the fact that some of the kids are taking those internships and they're going directly to work, they have so many options. And to celebrate those options with those kids changes the visibility, I think, of the conversation. And so, I applaud you and the community for doing that. That's awesome. That's spectacular. I really love that.

I always like to sort of close the conversation by recognizing that there are folks that are sitting out there listening to Tammy talk about all the amazing work that you've done, and are saying, "Hey, we don't have a program like this in our community but I'd like to be involved in getting one started." I have no doubt that you learned some lessons along the way. And so, for folks that are just getting started and are really just wondering, "Hey, what do I need to know? What should I do differently?" What are two or three things that you

would tell somebody as their thinking about getting this up and running that you wish that you had known along the way?

Tammy Cooper: [00:27:35] Well, I think the first and foremost is we're getting the program started. I was introduced to some key players. And I think today it can still be happening in areas, I'm sure. I never gave up. If somebody told me no, you can guarantee they're going to get another call from me in a few months. One of the gentlemen said, "I think I got weekly calls from her until we got the first intern in our business." But you have to want to be able to just stop that you're bothering them. But is there another way?

You know, another thing that I say, "You may not want interns, can you come and speak to our kids? Would you give us a tour?" So, I try to tell them that partnership, to me, is a lot of different things. And then, I think if you get them as a partner and they start seeing what you're doing, I think that it helps what somebody else is doing, and so then they want to also. So, that was something that was initially difficult.

The other thing, I guess, most career techs don't have a class component with their internship. So, this is kind of unique in itself. When I think of how overworked we are, this is something I surely think I need to take off my plate. But when I want the program to be as good as it is, it has to consist of all of those things, I feel.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:14] Yeah. I think your kids completely benefit from it. The fact, that you have a boot camp, you've got a process, and you meet with them on a regular basis. I mean, at the end of the day, that's that scaffolded support that is necessary for kids to go off and learn to be adults in a professional setting. So, I applaud that component. Absolutely.

Tammy Cooper: [00:29:34] Wow. Thank you. Anything else - I don't know - it seems like I have been put into education, and every time I get put in a position, I'm always starting the program. So, I definitely feel, from groups and different conferences I go to, I pick up a lot with career tech people. And, of course, my motto is, "Why reinvent the wheel?" I've helped several programs with giving them some of my information in what we've done.

And I guess the thing for me - I'll tell you my struggle - I think they thought since I've been in education for so long that I knew everything but I've never worked for career tech. And so, there were things they said, "No. This is how this is done and this is done." But I was never told that until I had done something that wasn't the way they wanted it to be.

I didn't know about what the career techs were doing with internships except this one committee I served on. And I got all the information there but I never got it directly from here. So, if you've taught in a career tech, you're going to know those things. But I did not. So, this has been a whole new learning experience for me.

When you're an educator, you do not get out, you do not know what there is. And I am learning that there is such an amazing world of different things out there. It just energizes me. This is 40 years of education, and I'm still energized. So, I'm really blessed to have this position.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:13] Yeah. Absolutely. It sounds like you really love it. So, Tammy, thank you so much for making time in your day to share your work and your story with our listeners. We truly appreciate it. And we appreciate the work that you're doing on behalf of kids, so thank you for that.

Tammy Cooper: [00:31:28] All right. Well, thank you very much.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:30] Yeah. You're very welcome.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:30] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.