

## **The Need for Flexibility in Practical Training for Professional Degree Programs**

C. Ben Farrow

*Auburn University/Auburn, Alabama*

There are more than five million students pursuing an educational degree at an institute of higher learning outside their home country. Some expect the number of these students to increase to seven million by 2022, although much of the growth is predicted to occur outside the United States. Outside factors including politics and shifting economic factors impact the demographics of international students and may be contributing to apparent downward trends in international student enrollment. For US institutions in 2017-18, the Institute of International Education detailed a two percent decline in international undergraduate admission yield rates. Such a report follows a survey by the Council of Graduate School Deans showing 46 percent denoting a “substantial downward change in admissions yield for international students”.

At Auburn, where the most significant number of international students come from Asia, work continues to develop alternative access routes for students to enter programs while emphasis is placed on student diversity on campus. At the academic level, there is renewed focus on the quality of the student experience. Today’s economy continues to be significantly influenced by technology and the demand for specific skills. A University’s ability to meet the demands of the economy with graduates from across the globe will be a key influencer of employability. How we provide “quality” extends beyond what is taught in the classroom and directly relates to how we attract, retain, and graduate international students.

For colleges of design and construction, most degrees are a first professional degree and provide a direct path to a specific job in industry. These include construction management, graphic design, industrial design, and architecture. Internships within these professions are critical. First, an internship provides a student “the bigger picture” by illustrating how projects “come to life” and how to deal with inherent problems that develop along the way. Second, skills in professional practice expand the classroom to include experiences that are difficult to mimic in academia. Third, internships validate career choices for students. Finally, internships provide cultural diversity for our industry partners.

Currently, our design and construction programs struggle with Optional Practical Training (OPT) and Curriculum Practical Training (CPT) requirements (authorization for those on an F-1 Visa to receive practical training toward the major field of study). “When”, “Where”, and “How” international students can complete internships is complex to both students and faculty advisors alike. University administrators within International Program offices know the rules and requirements, but how this is conveyed to students and faculty is difficult at best. Rules often read like contractual language, and University’s interpretation of that language cannot be clearly connected to what appears on federal websites.

Consider CPT rules. Students can apply during the regular academic year but must remain “full-time” students, or students can apply during the annual vacation break or summer semester. Time limits and hours worked apply, and students must be enrolled for a full academic year before applying. Some exceptions exist for the academic year rule for graduate students whose programs require immediate participation in CPT when internships are required for all students. While direct enough, conveying these details to international students and a multitude of faculty advisors is almost impossible. Requirements are written in a manner to facilitate visa status and not written in the interest of design and construction students who may benefit greatly from internships.

Multiple problems with the process exists. First, there is a requirement that the internship occur in the summer or perhaps the holiday break in December. Limiting internships to this time effectively reduces the “pool” of available internships. Such a calendar may or may not fit with educational programs in design and construction that are dictated by external accrediting bodies. For many of our students, class instruction is required in the summer months. Flexibility could easily be achieved here by allowing the “vacation break” to be defined in any semester as long as two of three semesters were completed in a calendar year. Second, internships in design and construction are often with niche firms in specific markets. Since our

University is located in a non-urban area, being in school full-time while working a relevant internship is difficult at best. Some flexibility is needed for students who attend schools in non-urban areas. Perhaps a trade-off could be realized by allowing an off-site internship after a specific period of school enrollment. Finally, the demands of professional accrediting leave little time in the curriculum for mandatory internships, and market demands force all students to be flexible in order to gain this needed experience.

In sum, flexibility is needed to promote and accomplish needed internships in professional programs like design and construction. Simple changes like allowing students to define their own “vacation” quarter or semester would provide such flexibility. Flexibility is needed in “location” as students may be required to move location to obtain relevant, career related internships. In addition, Universities must do a better job in conveying the expectations and rules of such programs to those front-line faculty attempting to work with students to implement internships. Failure to provide internships to international students will further isolate this demographic and place them at a disadvantage to domestic students in the classroom. Over time, this could further reduce our ability to attract, retain, and graduate international students from our curriculum.