

## **Creating Opportunities Through an Experiential, Community-Based Cooperative Extension Internship Program**

### **Abstract**

Extension is positioned to develop and implement high-quality, high-impact internship experiences for college students in local communities. The creation of the Rising Star Internship program arose from interest in providing experiential work opportunities for Iowa State University students coupled with the organizational goals of promoting awareness of Cooperative Extension and increasing interest in employability within Extension. The program provides a paid county-level summer internship with several unique elements. Evidence collected from student participants suggests that it is a mutually beneficial endeavor for Extension, students, and communities. Extension systems may desire to replicate these efforts if they share similar ambitions.

**Keywords:** [college](#), [internship](#), [outreach](#), [student](#), [experiential](#)

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Fitzgerald et al. (2012) posited that "knowledge is central to the function of higher education and is developed in the community as well as on campuses" (p. 251). One way to create knowledge for students is through internships in local communities as they are an effective strategy for fostering learning (Green & Farazmand, 2012). High-impact internships integrate learning with real-world experiences and help students engage across cultures, receive valuable feedback, and apply new knowledge while clarifying their values and beliefs (O'Neill, 2010). Extension is positioned to develop and implement experiential learning for students by focusing on learning and professional outcomes (O'Neill, 2010) while promoting the organizational goals of creating positive impressions of Extension (Grotta & McGrath, 2013) and actively promoting Extension careers to college students (Arnold & Place, 2010; Wilken et al., 2008).

### **The Rising Star Internship Program**

The development of the Rising Star Internship program in 2014 arose from interest in providing experiential work opportunities for Iowa State University (ISU) students coupled with organizational goals of promoting awareness of Cooperative Extension and increasing interest in employability within Extension. The program provides a paid county-level summer internship. Overall benefits and objectives for the interns include (a) application of academic knowledge in work settings, (b) examination of career interests, (c) assessment of

professional attributes, and (d) acquisition of knowledge of Extension and career opportunities. Table 1 summarizes major elements of the Rising Star Internship. Aspects of the program that are unusual or unique include funding structure, location flexibility, inclusion of housing, project assignments, selection factors, and a postinternship experience.

**Table 1.**  
Rising Star Internship Elements

<b>Program element</b>	<b>Description</b>
Funding <sup>a</sup>	The internship is funded cooperatively by the participating Iowa State University (ISU) County Agricultural Extension Districts; ISU Extension and Outreach County Services; and the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Design, and Human Sciences. Additional funding may be provided by community business partners or grants and contracts.
Location <sup>a</sup>	ISU Extension and Outreach District Councils choose whether they want to participate each year, and regional directors act as points of contact. Interns are assigned to communities across Iowa.
Housing <sup>a</sup>	Students benefit by having housing provided for them by their host counties. Typically, the interns are housed in a dorm or an apartment located at a local college or another communal location to encourage a team environment.
Project assignment <sup>a</sup>	The work foci for the teams of interns are determined by the counties they serve and are based on local needs related to local food systems, nutrition and wellness, and community and economic development. These needs are identified before interns are selected so that each student has the proper skill set for assigned duties. Interns share work with local county staff.
Targeted outreach	The interns target their outreach, such as by engaging in the education of children through county summer camps, participating in partnerships with elementary school to provide summer programs, or conducting farmers market activities.
Eligibility	Any ISU student from the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Design, or Human Sciences who has achieved a cumulative grade point average of at least 2.5 is eligible to apply for the internship. Students must hold undergraduate status during the summer of the internship.
Application	Interested students are directed to apply through CyHire, the ISU employment website. Applications are reviewed by regional directors, and interviews are scheduled.
Selection <sup>a</sup>	Offers are provided after the interview process. Interns are hired as part of a two- or three-member interdisciplinary team. (See also "Project assignment" above.)
Length of service	The internship begins mid-May and concludes the first week in August,

	which allows students ample time to prepare for the fall semester. The internship is 40 hr per week for 12 weeks.
Orientation	Interns are required to attend an orientation weekend on campus in April wherein they learn about expectations and logistics of the internship. More localized orientation occurs in the interns' respective counties during the first weeks of employment.
Supervision	Regional directors for ISU Extension and Outreach provide daily supervision of the interns.
Evaluation	Each intern receives an evaluation at midpoint and at the conclusion of the internship experience.
Postinternship experience <sup>a</sup>	Past interns are invited to become members of the Rising Star Galaxy Club, which helps them stay connected to ISU Extension and Outreach and provides links to job opportunities. They are asked to complete a questionnaire to determine benefits with a goal of implementing future program improvements. Past interns often volunteer to assist with recruitment of applicants and orientation of new interns.

<sup>a</sup> Program element that is unusual or unique.

The program's sixth year was 2019. From its inception through that point, the program had supported 58 interns (8 males, 50 females) in 22 counties across 20 teams (see Figure 1). Several of the program's unique elements may be partially responsible for its continuing sustainability. Dedicated financial resources are available from the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Design, and Human Sciences; ISU Extension and Outreach at the state level; and County Agricultural Extension Districts at the county level. Several of the Extension districts partnered and obtained a 3-year grant in 2017. This multilevel funding allowed for the provision of salary and housing to the interns, an unusual benefit that supported our ability to assign interns in communities far from campus. Housing the interns together in local communities enhanced our intention of creating interdisciplinary teams of interns to work jointly on projects identified by the counties they served. This selection of projects for the interns was intended to increase investment by the county staff, providing opportunities for shared work that positively affected life in the community. The unique postinternship experience is similar to an alumni club and designed to build on the summer experience and develop a cadre of lifelong Extension advocates and potential employees.

**Figure 1.**  
Rising Star Interns at Work



Evaluation of the success of the program is determined through presentations given by student teams on campus at the end of their internships, final comprehensive reports, and a questionnaire that solicits information about the direct benefits students received from their internship experience completed as part of participation in the Rising Star Galaxy Club ( $n = 29$ ). Responses provided through these means offer evidence for the achievement of the overarching goals of the program to provide experiential work opportunities and promote awareness of Extension and possible career opportunities (see Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
Rising Star Internship Evidence of Aim Attainment 2014–2019

Goal	Intern activities/experiences
Promote awareness of Cooperative Extension through activities in communities.	<p>Provided leadership for community donation gardens, including in planning, planting, maintaining, and harvesting.</p> <p>Bought produce from local producers.</p> <p>Prepared simple recipes to promote Indiana State University (ISU) Extension and Outreach resources related to healthful eating.</p> <p>Taught gardening lessons, with resulting produce grown donated to local food pantries.</p> <p>Offered samples to farmers market customers.</p> <p>Hosted food demonstrations at farmers markets.</p>

Interacted with community and economic development professionals in ISU Extension and Outreach.

Assisted communities in the development of needs assessment tools.

Captured daily and/or weekly activities in blog posts and on social media.

Promoted local foods using ISU Extension and Outreach resources.

Shared resources from ISU Extension and Outreach related to community planning.

Identified ISU Extension and Outreach resources to assist communities.

Provided presentations to community service clubs outlining the benefits of the Rising Star Internship in local communities.

Participated in independent and team activities that supported ISU Extension and Outreach education provided in the local community.

Increase interest in employment with Cooperative Extension.

Experienced excitement about working toward the mission of the organization.

Learned the value of autonomy relative to the work of Cooperative Extension professionals.

Learned and implemented duties and responsibilities involved in delivering Cooperative Extension programs.

Experienced the various delivery modes for outreach used by Cooperative Extension in local communities.

Highlighted the position of Cooperative Extension as an influential community partner.

Experienced the direct impact of the internship efforts through interactions with and feedback from community members.

Gained experience in community collaborations, a foundational principle of Cooperative Extension.

Highlighted career opportunities for dietetics students in

the community through Cooperative Extension.

Developed industry-related professional skills.

Gained appreciation for the potential of working with community development professionals in the future.

Benefit students.

Engaged in self-reflection.

Learned how to work independently.

Learned teamwork.

Learned to manage time efficiently.

Created their own goals and deadlines.

Experienced encouragement to take initiative with projects from conception to evaluation.

Experienced encouragement to learn new skills such as marketing, social media, and blog writing.

Improved in public speaking and teamwork.

Built empathy through work with food pantries, community gardens, and local producers.

Observed challenges small towns face.

Raised awareness of individual and community challenges, resulting in responses implemented through the internship.

Gained knowledge about local foods.

Researched education curricula.

Observed learning progression of children.

Practiced teaching and assisting children in various gardening activities.

Applied classroom learning.

Increased knowledge of how to educate people of all ages.

Gained a newfound respect for community outreach.

Experienced the feeling that their accomplishments contributed to positive outreach in the community.

Gained interest in working in rural areas.

Experienced hands-on learning that exceeded that of a semester of classwork.

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## Implications for Extension

Our country faces complex issues. Experiential learning can be a strategy for addressing them and is at the heart of Cooperative Extension (Johnson et al., 2019). The Rising Star Internship program in Iowa may be of interest to other Extension systems as it

- benefits the student through provision of a multifaceted, rich opportunity that focuses on activities and outcomes beyond stuffing envelopes and answering the phone;
- benefits the community through use of experiential learning with students in the real world to solve complex issues in local communities;
- benefits Cooperative Extension by creating a system and expectation for interdisciplinary work across students, staff, communities, and administration;
- positions Cooperative Extension as a dynamic, creative, interdisciplinary, experiential learning environment for students, with the aim of gaining life-long Extension users and future employees;
- affords evidence from several data points demonstrating that students increase their awareness of the national mission of Cooperative Extension and explore employment opportunities with Cooperative Extension;
- transforms student interns into Extension employees (as of March 2019, seven of the former interns worked for a Cooperative Extension system);
- suggests that it is possible to move beyond implications to tangible national consequences if other systems are capable of and interested in investing in an internship effort in their states (Braverman et al., 2012); and
- creates a pathway to systematically and sustainably develop future Cooperative Extension employees with a thorough understanding of what it means to be an Extension professional (Lloyd, 1952).

## Conclusion

The Rising Star Internship program appears to be a mutually beneficial endeavor for students, communities, and ISU Extension and Outreach. The internship is an effective student education strategy as it provides an avenue for the pursuit of personal and professional learning outcomes through experiential opportunities. Students and communities gain advantages through the creation and application of knowledge locally and away from campus. ISU Extension and Outreach benefits as the interns work in concert with employees to address local challenges while developing awareness of Extension and associated professions. Extension systems across the country might have an interest in duplicating these efforts if they share goals of providing

experiential work opportunities while promoting awareness of the organization and potential career paths for college students.

### Author Note

We recognize Cathann Kress and Bob Dodds for their contributions to the Rising Star Internship program. Both played a key role in its creation and success.

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