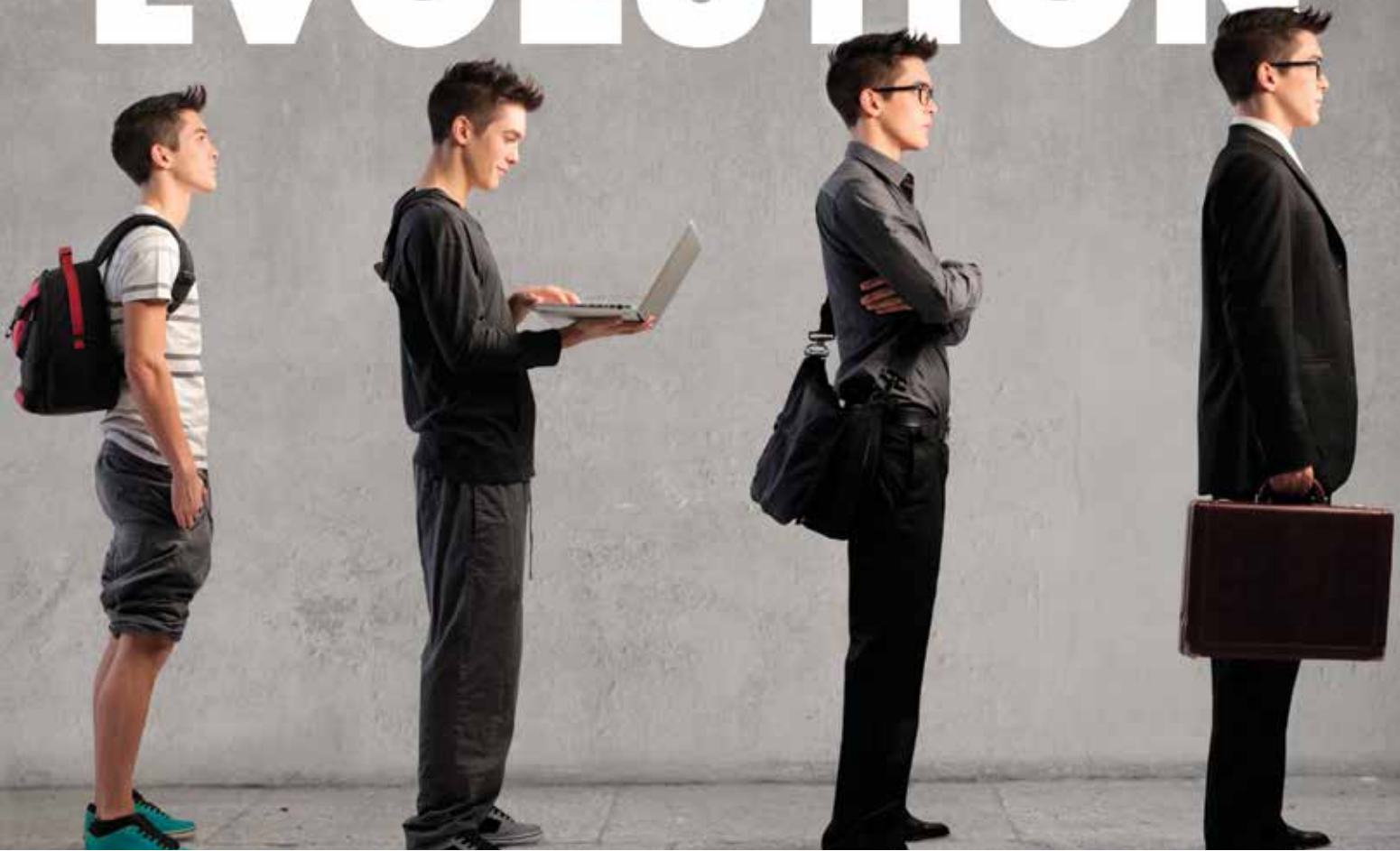


LEARNING EVOLUTION



Noblesville High School Prioritizes Internships

By Katie Coffin

In January 2013, Noblesville High School (NHS) had the same number of students engaged in internships as business partners providing such opportunities – zero.

Fast forward to today, and Jeff Bryant, NHS principal, expects nearly one-third of this year's senior class to graduate with a credited learning experience that took place outside school walls. And the school is working with 47 – and counting – area businesses.

This effort began with a vision at the administrative level to recreate the high school experience with an emphasis on application. Administrators researched and visited 17 different schools to better understand learning models outside the traditional classroom concept.

“We decided that, by the time a student is a senior, they needed to have the opportunity in a situation or environment to begin transferring and applying the things they’ve been learning up to that point,” Bryant recalls.

What they came up with – an internship

program for seniors – is taking off, not just with students, but with Noblesville’s business community as well.

Education-industry partnership

Susan Wiersema, NHS internship coordinator, recalls serving on a statewide panel of educators and business leaders at a workforce development meeting late last year. She says the business leaders voiced concern over school officials not reaching out to get them directly involved with the education community.

Bryant can understand that argument.

“This is probably where I differ from other high school principals, but I would point the finger at us (educators) too. And I think our experience at NHS is proof of that,” he emphasizes. “What we’ve found is the community support is there. As soon as we made the effort with a logical plan and a purpose behind it, they (businesses) accepted.”

The cross-section of industry needs and student interests and aptitudes is exactly where NHS focuses the internship program. Reactivity to both student and business goals is the key.

On the student side, incoming seniors register for the program, write an essay about their career interests and meet with Wiersema at least twice to talk about opportunities.

“Those meetings are very insightful to me because I get to know the student a little bit and learn about their personality and what they’re interested in,” Wiersema states. “At that point, I can discuss with them what I know we have available; though, every year I hope we’re adding new businesses and new partners because of kids’ interests.”

Last year, a student approached Wiersema with an interest in agricultural engineering – now Beck’s Hybrids is a partner. Two years ago, a student expressed culinary pastry aspirations – now Gigi’s

Cupcakes is a partner.

“I’ve done a lot of cold calls. I’m on the board with the Noblesville Chamber (of Commerce) and they do monthly business tours for their members, so I always go to those,” Wiersema says of her efforts to connect with businesses. “The first year I did it, I was walking the streets of Noblesville. Sometimes I’m driving around, I’ll see a business and pull over to write down their information so I can call later.

“Our business partners are not coming on reluctantly. They absolutely want to be a part of this,” she affirms.

‘It really isn’t rocket science’

Bryant says there are two keys to making a high school internship program work. First, the school has to dedicate a person to coordinate the program. Second, it has to be the right person.

“This is a full-time job and then some, and if this continues to grow, it could be two jobs. Other schools attempted to do this and assigned it to an assistant principal or a guidance counselor – can’t do it,” Bryant asserts with a wave of his hand. “Each student and the experience we need to give them is individual, and Susan’s background as an educator and chair of our Resource

Department has been key to this.”

Bryant and Wiersema both emphasize they have not encountered many pushbacks with this program – “I hate to be the Pollyanna here,” Wiersema interjects with a chuckle – and no obstacles have kept it from growing exponentially each year.

One of the biggest hurdles is employer understanding of the high school schedule. Earlier this year, Wiersema fielded calls from employers questioning why their intern wasn’t able to work – it was because the school system had declared several two-hour delays and a snow day.

Students meeting graduation requirements is also not a problem. The internship is part of a class and counts as an elective credit; students either spend 90 minutes every day at their internship or three hours every other day. All internships are unpaid (though many students clock in with their employers after the school day for additional work), with the exception of paid opportunities in the summer as part of a different program.

“I’ve been in education a long time and sometimes educators don’t mean to put up walls, but they do, saying, ‘We can’t do it within this schedule,’” Wiersema notes. “Well, we’re figuring out how to do it within this schedule. We don’t need to be boxed in.”



Seniors Brandon Franz (at left in photo above) and Sam Sigman prepare 3-D models for refrigeration units at Helmer Scientific and also help assemble them.

Logan Flook is the second high school intern that IT Operations Manager Jeff Elmore (right) has worked with at SMC. Elmore admits he was originally skeptical of the value of high school internships, but now he is a true believer.



Another obstacle they've overcome: student liability. NHS was running paid summer internships through Gaylor Electric, and some of the students were age 17. NHS and Gaylor met with the Indiana Department of Labor, learned the laws and found there are many more opportunities for experiential learning when an employer is associated with a school and the internship is part of a class. NHS also offers liability insurance for all students going to an internship site.

"It really isn't rocket science," Wiersema says of making the internship program work. "Everybody asks, 'How are you doing this?' My response is we're just doing it."

Interns in action

Businesses around Noblesville are quickly buying into the value of high school internships. It is an investment in their futures, but the students are also doing important work that increases company productivity now.

Senior Logan Flook works in the IT department at SMC Corporation of America, and he has been instrumental in the process of replacing aging packing and shipping stations in the warehouse. This process involves many steps and pieces of equipment, and Flook, who will be studying computer science at IUPUI next fall, handles the scanner and mini PCs with ease.

"He just gets it done. I can't say enough good things about him," raves Jeff Elmore, IT operations manager at SMC and Flook's supervisor and mentor. "To see the fire and passion in somebody, to see them enjoying the devouring of knowledge is exciting. If Logan wants to come back in four years, I would love to interview him for a position."

The success story is similar at Helmer Scientific, where seniors Brandon Franz and Sam Sigman use Inventor 3D CAD software to model refrigeration units. Armed with safety goggles and power tools, they help do some assembly. They are also taking older instructions and creating 3D models so the manufacturing floor can use those moving forward.

"They're not just doing busy work; they're in real jobs now,"

expresses Kenny Wilson, engineering technician at Helmer Scientific, and the supervisor and mentor of the two interns. "They're putting together documentation that gets sent companywide and being held accountable for it. The work they do is helping the business. (Franz and Sigman) are 17 or 18 years old, and just seeing what they're capable of doing is amazing."

Franz and Sigman both credit Helmer's culture for allowing them room for creativity and the freedom to ask questions, making this an experience that is preparing them for the future. Sigman plans to study informatics at Indiana University Bloomington next school year, and Franz will pursue mechanical engineering at Purdue University.

"Working here has been the best experience," Franz remarks. "It has solidified what I want to do later in life. I knew I wanted to do something that related to the inner workings of things, and that's how I stumbled into engineering. I love it more and more every day."

High school of the future

Bryant and Wiersema plan to keep riding the momentum of the internship program, with the ultimate goal of having as close to 100% of students learning outside the classroom as possible.

Many different partnerships are developing as a result of the success of the internship program. Wiersema says they are expanding their summer initiative, continuing to work with Gaylor Electric and bringing on new employers. Miller Consulting is hiring students now to do low-level CAD work. Through the Project Lead the Way program, the school is striving to incorporate field work at a local hospital into the biomedical students' capstone projects. They are also teaming with the new Ivy Tech Community College campus in Hamilton County to develop additional programming.

"The learning experience here at Noblesville High School is changing," Bryant concludes with a determined look on his face. "The high school that we all may be familiar with is not the high school that it is now. The internship program is a piece in the overall effort of preparing students for college and career."

RESOURCES: Jeff Bryant and Susan Wiersema, Noblesville High School, at www.noblesvilleschools.org | Jeff Elmore and Logan Flook, SMC Corporation of America, at www.smcusa.com | Kenny Wilson, Brandon Franz and Sam Sigman, Helmer Scientific, at www.helmerinc.com