Internships Sharpen Entrepreneurial Edge

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Working alongside the owner of a company is standard practice for interns participating in the Agricultural Entrepreneurship Initiative in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Stacy Noe, program coordinator for the initiative, manages the internship program. It started with three students in 2007, and today more than 40 companies have participated to support 20 internships annually.

“The biggest difference compared to typical internships is that these students are exposed to the challenges of running the business because they are involved in the operation of the entire company,” Noe says.

Entrepreneurial mentors are matched with the right students for the best experience. That match worked for Shane Mairet (‘09 horticulture) when he interned at Wallace’s Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa. The internship served as a springboard for Mairet, who opened his own business two weeks after graduation.

“I met a lot of people, including distributors and suppliers, which turned out to be significantly important when I opened my own garden center,” Mairet says.

Starting a business at the height of the economic downturn was a challenge. But Mairet says he’s surviving because he views his business plan as a living document, which means it could change. At some point, Mairet says, he’d like to offer internships through his company.

“Entrepreneurs always warned me that it’s rough,” Mairet says. “When I talk to students I tend to focus on that message, because if they can hear those negatives and go for it anyway, they are true entrepreneurs.”

Kate Terrell, a nursery manager at Wallace’s Garden Center, mentored Mairet. She says the interns get hands-on, real-world experiences.

“Shane dealt with a lot of our vendors and learned how to partner and network with them. We hope all our interns learn about working with customers and running a smart business,” Terrell says.

Terrell says the interns also are a resource for companies.

“The students add energy, new ideas and the horticultural knowledge to help our customers,” Terrell says. “The internships can lead to new hires for our company. Just this year we hired a past intern as a full-time assistant grower.”

Dakota Hoben, a junior in agricultural business, interned at the Iowa Agribusiness Export Partnership in Des Moines. One of the most important lessons he learned was that partnering with businesses abroad is hard work and requires strong relationships.

“Planning a trade mission requires a lot of communication and trust,” Hoben says. “I really learned to value those personal interactions with trip participants as we strived to make sure all the details for the business mission were ready to go.”

This summer 17 interns are working throughout Iowa and as far away as Detroit. They will sharpen their business skills learning about landscaping, dairy processing, marketing and processing wine, turning algae into feed and making prosciutto.