



# Required Internships in Emergency Management and Homeland Security Higher Education

Supporting Professionalization and Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals

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Cover image: [FEMA Provides Disaster Assistance to Wildfire Survivors](#).

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### Disclaimer

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## Introduction and Overview

The field of Emergency Management continues to evolve as both an academic discipline and an area of professional practice. The field is relatively new as both an academic area of study and an emerging profession. In practice, there is advancement toward a profession (Urby & McEntire, 2021). As an academic discipline, there is also progress, but with remaining challenges (Cwiak, 2019; Urby & McEntire, 2019).

Required internships have been an area of dialogue and even contention for Emergency Management programs over the more than 20-year history of FEMA engagement with higher education. In higher education generally, internship experiences are regarded as a critical component of the development of students, integrating academic concepts into professional practice in preparation to enter the workforce (Kuh, 2008; Stirling et al., 2017). The consideration of mandatory or elective internships is a matter of current debate in the higher education space (Prescott, et al, 2021).

While some Emergency Management and Homeland Security academic programs require internships, others are hesitant about their contribution or administrative workload. Research-based answers to questions surrounding what effect internships have on student growth, employment, career advancement, and professional development specifically to the field of Emergency Management and Homeland Security remain unanswered (Jensen & Kirkpatrick, 2019). This research seeks to address this void with an exploratory examination of internships in the field from the perspective of those who complete them and those who supervise them within the worksite.

Internship programs have multiple stakeholders including the University that designs and manages the program, the professors that manage and assess students on the internship experience, the student who engages the internship, the employer that invites the student to the workplace to learn, and the mentor that works day to day with the student through their internship. Perspectives are generally considered as three groups: the University (and professor), the employer (and supervisor or mentor), and the student. Much has been written in higher education in general from these perspectives including the University and professor (Prescott, et al., 2021; Weible, 2009), the student (Lei & Yin, 2019), and the employer and mentor (Kroon & Franco, 2022). Some research examines this dynamic in the context of differing perspectives and expectations for internships (Sauder et al, 2019). Research shows that students who engage in an internship or job that provided for application of classroom learning and worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete had higher confidence in engaging the job market (Crabtree, 2019). In other higher education academic disciplines, such as business, sufficient research exists on internships to conduct systematic reviews (i.e., Sanahuja Vélez & Ribes Giner, 2015). Knox & Harris (2016) provide one of the few articles that examines the stakeholders and program evolution specific to the Emergency Management and Homeland Security academic enterprise.

The FEMA Higher Education Program hosts several Special Interest Groups (SIGs) with direct or indirect interest and outputs related to internships. Under the Jobs and Internships SIG, a focus group was convened to examine the issue in greater depth and make recommendations (FEMA, 2018a). The Service-Learning and Leadership SIG developed a service-learning guidebook that identified internships as a subset of broader experiential learning programs (FEMA, 2019). In addition, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning SIG has interest in the effectiveness of internships for teaching and learning in Emergency Management and Homeland Security education. This research is a collaborative effort between the Jobs and Internships SIG and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning SIG to explore issues related to internships in the academic fields of Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

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## **FEMA Higher Education Project Alignment**

The project supports the FEMA (2022) Strategic Plan 2022–2026, Goal 3: Promote and Sustain a Ready FEMA and Prepared Nation, Objective 3.1 Strengthen the Emergency Management Workforce. The research focuses on understanding the impact of internships as part of higher education programs that are preparing students to enter the Emergency Management workforce. The project utilizes components and aligns with the Next Generation Core Competencies (NGCC) to identify and evaluate the effectiveness and outcomes of internship experiences (Feldman-Jensen et al., 2017). The design of the research also aligns with the guiding principle (5) of the Emergency Management FEMA (2018b) Higher Education Research Agenda – Maximizing Impacts. This principle calls for “conducting evaluations to assess whether programs and policies are actually achieving a desired change and are being implemented into practice” (p. 2). This project seeks to assess and evaluate internship experience in higher education programs for the development of the current and future Emergency Management workforce.

## **Literature Review: Internships in Emergency Management and Homeland Security**

Studies that specifically and empirically engage internships in Emergency Management and Homeland Security are extremely limited (Jensen & Kirkpatrick, 2019). Generally, the articles touch on aspects of internships as a component of pedagogical concepts of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and/or service-learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994) as a form of experiential learning. As an applied field without an intermediary period of post-baccalaureate required job-specific training, such as exists for most criminal justice professions (i.e., police or corrections academies), academic programs in Emergency Management and Homeland Security engage the experiential elements for student career readiness (Feldman-Jensen et al., 2017).

Service-learning is the core theme among Emergency Management literature that mentions or addresses internships in some substantive way. One of the challenges in the literature is that service-learning is often presented as an umbrella concept under which internships is just one example. Service-learning can be demonstrated with a project or assignment embedded within a single course or designed purposefully within a series of courses in a program or an internship. The broad use of the concept of service-learning makes only certain aspects of the line of literature applicable to internships. The FEMA Higher Education Program sponsored the development of a guide and toolkit for service-learning that identifies internships as one example of many (FEMA, 2019).

## Curriculum and Learning Experiences

Experiential and Service-Learning are the subject of several thought pieces and limited empirical work on application to the Emergency Management and Homeland Security academic enterprise. Kushma (2003) first examined potential application of service-learning to Emergency Management curricula. Carey (2018) examined the concept through client-centered service-learning projects and internships where students reported personal benefits to include networking and job opportunities. Danko (2019) observed a high level of student satisfaction and engagement in Emergency Management courses with experiential education components due to their perceptions of applicability to real-world professional concerns. Collins & Peerbolte (2012) identify internships as a method to bolster critical thinking in Emergency Management curricula. Penta et al. (2019) and Aydiner & Corbin (2022) argue for the inclusion of experiential components in course and program design. Finally, Kapucu & Knox (2013) conducted a study of service-learning in U.S.-based degree programs in Emergency Management. The study did not bifurcate internships from other types of service-learning; some study respondents defined service-learning in terms of “co-ops and internships” (Kapucu & Knox, 2013, p. 42). The research results show that programs see benefits to service-learning as an opportunity to link theory and practice. The results also show that more clarity is needed in how these concepts are understood, applied, and evaluated.

## Program Accreditation and Internships

Internships and/or field experiences are components of Emergency Management and Homeland Security accreditation programs. Ramsay & Renda-Tanali (2018) identify internship completion as 1 of 13 identified domain competencies for Homeland Security programs. The Council for the Accreditation of Emergency Management & Homeland Security Education (CAEMHSE) (2022) accreditation standards require “internships and/or field experiences that offer opportunities to practice professional skills that are also a part of the curriculum” (p. 13). Standards, like the literature, comingle internships and experiential learning as equal experiences. Unfortunately, the lack of specific research does not allow for empirical conclusions on this issue, only supposition.

## Internships and the Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals

Feldman-Jensen et al. (2017) published *The Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals* as a landmark document, crossing professional practice and academia. This important work provides a framework and behavioral anchors of competencies required for success in the present and future of Emergency Management professional practice. As outlined in Figure 1 below, Feldman-Jensen et al. (2017) divide competencies into three interrelated categories: (1) EM competencies that build relationships, (2) EM competencies that build the practitioner, and (3) EM competencies that build the individual, each with associated supporting competencies. While this document does not mention internships or programs, it is introduced as part of the literature as this research seeks to query students who completed internships and those who supervise/mentor them to its utility for framing internship experiences.

**Figure 1: The Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals**

Core Competencies
<b>EM Competencies that Build Relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Disaster Risk Management</li><li>▪ Community Engagement</li><li>▪ Governance &amp; Civics</li><li>▪ Leadership</li></ul>
<b>EM Competencies that Build the Practitioner</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Scientific Literacy</li><li>▪ Geographic Literacy</li><li>▪ Technological Literacy</li><li>▪ Systems Literacy</li></ul>
<b>EM Competencies that Build the Individual</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Operate within the EM Framework, Principles, &amp; Body of Knowledge</li><li>▪ Possess Critical Thinking</li><li>▪ Abide by Professional Ethics</li><li>▪ Value Continual Learning</li></ul>

Note: Adapted from Feldmann-Jensen, S., Jensen S., & Smith S. (2017). *The Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals: Handbook of behavioral anchors and key actions for measurement*. FEMA Higher Education Program.

## Research Design

This research seeks to understand aspects of internships in Emergency Management and Homeland Security education from the perspective of the student and supervisor/mentor. The objective of the project is to examine the impact of internships over time including student reflections/growth, career advancement, and practitioner competency. This study serves as an exploratory project to evaluate outcomes from degree program-required student internships in the field to inform potential modification in the structure, placement, and management of experiences for both improved management of internship programs and the development of the Emergency Management workforce.

The study population is a purposive sample comprised of alumni from the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Program at The University of Akron. The University of Akron is unique as it was the first accredited Emergency Management program and third oldest as part of the original FEMA Higher Education pilot program in 1997. The program required a semester long internship since its inception, making it the longest running higher education internship provider in the field of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. The unique nature of the program and long history of required internships make the program alumni an ideal population for an exploratory research project related to internships. The University of Akron program currently maintains a 225-hour required senior-level internship. This hourly requirement was reduced approximately 10 years ago from a 345-hour requirement. Participants in this study have a mixture of these two different hourly requirements depending on graduation year.

## Research Questions

The research questions for the study include:

1. How do those required to complete an internship experience as a student perceive the value of their internship experience at the current stage of their professional career?
2. Do the Emergency Management Next Generation Core Competencies provide a useful framework to understand internship process and outcomes?
3. How do practicing professionals who completed an internship experience as a student perceive required internship experiences for the development of the next generation of Emergency Management practitioners?
4. What do practicing professionals who completed an internship experience as a student recommend in structuring, content, and outcomes for internship programs to develop the next generation Emergency Management workforce?
5. What are the perceptions and recommendations for internship programs from practicing professionals who completed internship experiences as a student and have subsequently supervised or mentored student interns?

## Study Population, Instrument Design, and Data Collection

The long history of a required internship in the Emergency Management and Homeland Security degree requirements at The University of Akron makes the alumni of the program an ideal population to examine student perceptions, reflections on internship experience after entering practice, and how completion of an internship has impacted finding employment and affected career growth. The study design, survey instrument, and interview guide were approved by the Institutional Review Board at The University of Akron. Participants were recruited from a closed social media group for program alumni and faculty consisting of 264 alumni members. The group is managed by the Program Director who ensures that the population is restricted to program alumni. To maintain continuity with other limited empirical research related to internships in the field, the survey instrument was developed using the basis provided by Kapucu & Knox (2013) in their published survey tool. Although Kapucu & Knox (2013) targeted Emergency Management and Homeland Security programs for data collection, some elements were adapted to target the population of this study, individual program alumni.

A link was posted to the group for an online survey using Qualtrics. Within the responding group, additional members who met the qualifications of having both completed an internship as a student and later or currently serving as a supervisor or mentor for student interns at their place of employment were recruited for an additional semi-structured interview. This group that served in two internship stakeholder roles provides a unique perspective explored in interviews. In total, 68 participants completed the online survey, resulting in a 25.7% response rate. A total of six semi-structured interviews were completed with subjects who both completed an internship as a student and supervised student interns as a practicing professional. Data from interviews was transcribed, checked for accuracy, coded, and analyzed for the development of themes. Not all participants completed each question, so statistics are derived from the completion rate of each question.

## Results

### Demographics

Demographic information was collected for general knowledge and analysis about participants. The age range was 18–51+ with most participants falling into the 18–29 age range (46.2%). Another 22.2% of participants made up the oldest age range of 40 to over 51. Participant gender was majority male at 72.2%, female was 25.9%, and non-binary/third gender was 1.8%. The current professional field of participants was Emergency Management and Homeland Security (41.51%); Public Health/Hospital and Environmental Health and/or Safety fields were both 11.32%; First Responder (Police/Fire) (7.55%) and Other (28.30%). The highest level of education completed was 81.48% bachelor's degree, while 18.52% completed a graduate degree. Time since graduation was predominantly 1–3 years at 38.89%, however another 24.07% reported graduating 10 or more years ago.

## Internship Placement Process

Most participants found their internship location through placement or assistance by a full-time Emergency Management and Homeland Security (EMHS) professor (46.3%). Another 33.33% found their internship independently with faculty approval. 14.81% of participants were already working in the field and took on a specific project or focus to count for the internship. 5.56% found their internship through a family member or friend and received faculty approval. All internships regardless of pathway were reviewed by a full-time EMHS professor to verify it met the internship requirements.

## Internship Sponsors

Most participants stayed within the State of Ohio (the home state of the degree) for their internship (85.19%), with 14.81% going to other states. While historically a few internships have been conducted internationally, there were no participants in this population. Most participants went to public sector EMHS agencies for their internship (46.30%), 24.07% went into private sector EMHS, 22.22% went into the health care sector, and 7.41% interned with non-profit organizations. Most participants did not get a job offer from their internship (68.52%). Another 24.07% did get a job offer from their internship agency and took the job offer. 7.41% received a job offer from the internship agency but chose not to take the job. In total, 31.48% of participants received a job offer from their internship agency.

## Value of the Internship Experience

Most participants identified that the EMHS internship was a very valuable piece of their education (68.52%) or at least a somewhat valuable piece of their education (25.93%). Therefore, 94.45% of participants found some value in the internship experience. 83.33% of participants felt very strongly that an EMHS internship should be a requirement of all EMHS programs. Only 3.7% felt it should be optional with a smaller percentage stating it should not be required at all (1.8%). The internship taught the participants how to handle project management (39.82%), how to interact in a work environment (35.40%), that they wanted to work for the agency of their internship (15.93%), or that they really did not want to work for their internship agency (8.85%). Many of these internships were not paid at 57.41%. 42.59% of participants have not taken EMHS interns themselves but plan to when and if the opportunity comes around to become an internship mentor. Another 27.78% of respondents have already become EMHS internship mentors themselves. This population was solicited for interview for additional insights in the second phase of the study. Overall, 70.37% of respondents reported that they want to or have already given back to mentor the next generation of EMHS interns.

## Internship Outcomes and Perceptions

A series of scaled internship questions were then given to participants for deeper examination of their internship experiences and thoughts on elements of internship programs. Responses ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The results displayed in *Table 1: Alumni-Reported Internship Outcomes* show affirmative responses (Agree and Strongly Agree) by large majorities of

participants to each of the statements. Responses to each statement resulted in Agree/Strongly Agree selections from a low of 62% to a high of 94%.

**Table 1: Alumni-Reported Internship Outcomes and Perceptions**

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	The main goal of an internship program is to link class theory with practice.	0%	1.85%	9.26%	44.44%	44.44%
2	EMHS internships should be mandatory for all EM/HS bachelor's degree programs.	1.85%	5.56%	3.70%	33.33%	55.56%
3	My internship allowed me to be an active participant for an organizational project or program.	1.85%	3.70%	3.70%	38.89%	51.85%
4	The classroom learning helped provide the foundation of understanding to operate in an internship later in my coursework.	1.85%	5.56%	7.41%	51.85%	33.33%
5	My internship allowed me to be involved with other groups and partnerships related to my interning organization.	1.89%	5.66%	18.87%	41.51%	32.08%
6	My internship allowed me to reflect on the field, and where I wanted to job seek after graduation.	1.85%	1.85%	1.85%	46.30%	48.15%
7	Internship programs better prepare students to be in Emergency Management/ Homeland Security.	0%	3.77%	7.55%	28.30%	60.38%
8	My internship contributed to my intellectual growth.	1.89%	0%	7.55%	35.85%	54.72%
9	My internship helped to improve my research skills.	3.77%	9.43%	24.53%	35.85%	26.42%

As Table 1 shows, participants in general agreed that the main goal of an internship program is to link the class theory with practice (88.88% Agree/Strongly Agree). Internship programs should be mandatory for all EM/HS bachelor’s degree programs (88.89% Agree/Strongly Agree). The internship allowed participants to be active participants for an organizational project or program (90.74% Agree/Strongly Agree). The classroom learning helped provide the foundation of understanding to operate in the internship later in their coursework (85.18% Agree/Strongly Agree). The internship allowed them to engage in larger groups and partnerships related to their internship organization (73.59% Agree/Strongly Agree). The internship allowed them to reflect on the field, and where they wanted to job seek after graduation (94.45% Agree/Strongly Agree). They felt that internship programs better prepare students to be in Emergency Management and Homeland Security (88.68% Agree/Strongly Agree), contributed to their intellectual growth (90.57% Agree/Strongly Agree), and improved their research skills (62.27% Agree/Strongly Agree).

### Internships and the Next Generation Core Competencies

Participants were presented with a series of statements on internship behaviors and key indicators from the Next Generation Core Competencies (NGCCs) using responses ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The statements sought to establish the utility of the NGCCs in framing internship programs and experiences. The results displayed in *Table 2: Internship behavioral anchors and key actions related to the Next Generation Core Competencies (NGCCs)* show affirmative responses (Agree and Strongly Agree) by most participants to each of the statements. Responses to each statement resulted in Agree/Strongly Agree selections from a low of 52.83% to a high of 88.89%.

**Table 2: Internship behavioral anchors and key actions related to the Next Generation Core Competencies (NGCCs).**

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	Fostered operating within the framework of Emergency Management, the principles and body of knowledge.	0%	1.85%	12.96%	57.41%	27.78%
2	Fostered critical thinking.	0%	7.41%	3.70%	50.00%	38.89%
3	Fostered abiding by a code of ethics.	0%	0%	18.52%	38.89%	42.59%
4	Fostered the idea of continual learning.	0%	5.56%	9.26%	31.48%	53.70%
5	Fostered scientific literacy.	1.89%	13.21%	32.08%	32.08%	20.75%

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
6	Fostered geographic literacy.	1.85%	14.81%	20.37%	37.04%	25.93%
7	Fostered social and cultural literacy.	1.85%	5.56%	16.67%	40.74%	35.19%
8	Fostered technological literacy.	0%	7.55%	20.75%	37.74%	33.96%
9	Fostered systems literacy (complex information management).	1.85%	12.96%	16.67%	37.04%	31.48%
10	Fostered disaster risk management.	1.85%	3.70%	11.11%	37.04%	46.30%
11	Fostered community engagement.	3.70%	1.85%	9.26%	35.19%	50.00%
12	Fostered government and civics.	0%	9.26%	16.67%	35.19%	38.89%
13	Fostered leadership.	1.85%	5.56%	7.41%	38.89%	46.30%

Across the questions, participants responded positively and agreed that internships fostered and supported behavioral actions and key indicators promoted by the NGCCs. Participants overall felt that internships and internship experiences fostered operating within the framework of Emergency Management, the principles and body of knowledge (85.19%), critical thinking (88.89%), abiding by a code of ethics (81.48%), the idea of continual learning (85.18%), scientific literacy (52.83%), geographic literacy (62.97%), social and cultural literacy (75.93%), technological literacy (71.7%), systems literacy (68.52%), disaster risk management (83.34%), community engagement (85.19%), government and civics (74.08%), and leadership (85.19%).

## Interview Results

As another layer of data to inform the results, a total of six semi-structured interviews were completed with subjects who both completed an internship as a student and supervised student interns as a practicing professional. This population was mostly mid-career, having completed the EMHS Program at The University of Akron EMHS between 17–22 years ago. Each graduate supervisor/mentor was asked the same question set, in the same order, by the same interviewer. All interviews were conducted over MS Teams. Key themes were extracted into the following four response categories: Benefits to the intern, benefits to the agency, benefits and motivations for mentoring, and internship improvement areas.

## **BENEFITS TO THE INTERN**

The now “intern to intern mentors” interviewed believed the internship was vital in putting the classroom material into practice. The internship helps connect what students have learned to the real world, which cannot be replicated in a classroom. The mentors agreed that the intern should be treated like they are applying for an actual job position in the most realistic process possible. The intern should have their resume and cover letter written and be prepared for an interview process. A portion of mentors have this assistance as part of the internship process and help the students directly in developing a professional presence for job applications, making sure a well-structured resume, cover letter, and portfolio are in place at the end of the internship. Training the intern was seen as part of the agency’s responsibilities as well. Interns may need some standard training to be onboarded; therefore, an onboarding plan for the intern is important to provide a platform to build success with the agency.

Interns take quality time to mentor forward, and the mentors felt the agencies should consider how many interns they can take while devoting quality time to building each intern. Many mentors stated they only take one intern at a time so they can adequately work with, prepare, and mentor that student. Mentors agreed students need to clean up their social media accounts before applying for jobs in EM/HS and that area should be reviewed under the internship.

Building resiliency in the interns was also mentioned across the board by mentors. The mentors felt in general that interns were often afraid to fail, easily derailed from making mistakes, afraid to stumble, and easily discouraged. They felt that interns behaved this way mostly because they want to do a good job for the agency. However, the mentors felt interns needed assistance in learning creativity, ingenuity, and in understanding that making mistakes is part of the process.

Making the internship, internship products, and expectations as realistic as possible was a high priority. Having interns speak in meetings and present work concepts to the upper leadership were promoted by the mentors. There was an agreement that interns needed to learn to speak and speak well to various audiences and this was another skill developed in the internship.

Since most internships are unpaid, the mentors agreed that the student “pays to be here.” The student pays in time, gas money, and personal sacrifices. Therefore, the student “loses” income to come to an unpaid internship. Exposing the intern to different groups of people and making sure the intern walks away with good experience and a good product to sell themselves forward is vital. Mentors felt the intern deserved a well-organized and executed internship experience for their own sacrifice of being required to do the hours – paid or unpaid.

Another stated benefit mentioned was that interns get a flavor and understanding of politics. The mentors agreed learning or seeing the politics is a lot different from talking about it in classes and a benefit for interns to understand as part of their process.

## **BENEFITS TO THE MENTOR**

Mentors felt compelled to offer internship experiences and mentor the next generation of Emergency Managers for many reasons. First, these mentors understand what it was like to be an intern themselves. They recall the stress of being unpaid and trying to balance their work and personal lives while getting in their required internship hours. The mentors believe in the value of internship. It was deemed a very important and beneficial experience to extend to other students. The mentors stated they liked to watch students grow from an intern to a professional and bring people up to the next level. This helps the profession and overall field to grow forward. The mentors had a strong connection and appreciation for their academic program and wanted to give back to the professors and program that assisted (and still assist) them. They discuss how the interns have become friends after leaving the agencies and how good it feels to see them grow into their lives and as professionals knowing they had a hand in that step. One respondent stated that if you stick with an intern, even the difficult ones, you will see a change at the end and that is a great feeling.

Mentors felt that their internship was their first big exposure to the working world, where they made their important connections. Mentors recall being exposed to many opportunities and growing into better people by experiencing those aspects. The mentors strongly feel the need to “pay it forward” for the best interest of the program, university, and the profession. They want to have a hand in building their replacements and the profession they will eventually leave behind.

Mentors liked the challenge of finding the intern’s combination of interests and tailoring tasks to bring out the intern’s confidence and strong points. They liked the challenge of assisting the intern in finding their strengths to build upon. The mentors stated learning from the student was a large benefit of mentorship. Students come to internship agencies with fresh ideas, education, and technology skills. Mentors appreciate learning the latest ideas and being pushed into new ways of thinking by interns. They also are motivated to pass on their knowledge. Interns are also an especially important staffing help to agencies since many agencies were noted as short staffed.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNSHIP IMPROVEMENTS**

Mentors described the stress of having an unpaid internship. They recall the sacrifice themselves; however, they understood it was an investment in their own futures. They feel unpaid internships are not fair to the student. Mentors agreed in the interviews that more needs to be done to value the worth of interns. Students that are not offered adequate compensation and cannot just stop their employment are unable to get the full experience of an internship. Those unpaid students are balancing their life and time differently. Mentors also suggested that interns should have a project they work on during the time of their internship to show their time and effort.

Involvement with planning, exercising, and vulnerability analysis would be beneficial before seeking an internship. Mentors agreed that interns should have at least a couple years of EM/HS education before jumping into an internship. Mentors felt that EM/HS agencies should have closer relationships with universities or several universities to collaborate on projects. Universities could allow students to do multiple internships or organize them into specific tracks to help them choose specialties in the field.

Mentors agreed internships should have more “teeth” to gain traction across academic programs. Mentors mentioned some ideas such as a reward or incentive for agencies to take interns or better backing from FEMA to promote agency internships with more ties to FEMA programs. Mentors felt that there should be standardized evaluation guide for them to use at their agencies for internship performance feedback. The standardized intern evaluation forms would better track internship data.

## Discussion

This research sought to understand aspects of internships in Emergency Management and Homeland Security (EM/HS) education from the perspective of the student and supervisor/mentor. The study examined the impact of internships including student reflections/growth, career advancement, and practitioner competency. Placement of interns and the internship process is a discussion that has cycled through Emergency Management higher education and practitioner conferences as a point of discussion for more than a decade.

It is important to note in this study that almost half of the participants (46.3%) were placed by a full-time Professor of Emergency Management and Homeland Security in the state of their degree program (85.19%). These percentages speak to the importance of having a dedicated full-time Professor of EM/HS involved in student placements. If a program does not have a full-time faculty member connected to the field, placements become more difficult as EM/HS can still be a field more friendly inside the network of relationships. The person conducting, managing, and matching students to placement agencies must be well connected in their relationships in all sectors of EM/HS as students go into various sectors. While most students do not get job offers from internship experiences and should be advised that internships open networking doors rather than guarantee employment out of their degree programs, 31.48% of surveyed respondents were offered a job through their internship, or 1/3 of interns. This statistic is significant in support of internship programs. In addition, 73.59% of respondents felt the “internship allowed me to be involved with other groups and partnerships related to my interning organization.” Exposing students to personnel in the EM/HS world and wider networks assists students in job prospects and career navigation even outside the internship agency itself. This finding supports previous work by Carey (2018).

The survey data for participants ranged from 1–3 years out into the workforce to 10+ years into the workforce. The data overwhelmingly supported internships throughout the survey with 94.45% believing they were valuable experiences in hindsight. Another 83.33% believed they were so valuable that they should be required for all EM/HS degree programs nationwide. The respondents were supportive of perpetuating the internship programs as practitioners’ post-graduation. One of the most meaningful statistics is that 70.37% of the respondents either take interns now as field professionals or aspire to take interns when they can provide those experiences to benefit others and assist in furthering the field of EM/HS for the next generation of graduates. This is critical for the continuing development and professionalization of EM/HS.

The NGCCs provide a useful framework to better understand how internships support the development of student core NGCC competencies. Prior to this research, there was nothing in the

research literature to establish a relationship between EM/HS internships and the NGCCs. Overlaying the NGCCs in this research project has demonstrated that a relationship exists in the importance of EM/HS internship programs and supporting the goals of implementing the NGCCs in the educational realm and then moving them into the workforce. The results of the survey have overwhelmingly tied EM/HS internship programs to supporting and fostering NGCCs. While more studies are needed in this area, this exploratory research shows support for this linkage. In this study, internships have been shown to support the components of the NGCCs. Interestingly the participants identified “foster critical thinking” as the highest rated NGCC component from their internship experience. This also supports assertions by Collins & Peerbolte (2012) related to critical thinking. Conversely, and as expected, participants reported internships provided the least support for “scientific literacy” as this is more of an academic component than professional practice. From participant responses, the NGCCs provides a useful frame for internship experiences.

Mentors had several suggestions and insights into the internship program and process for both consideration when building an internship program and for continuous improvement. Internship programs should be guided by a connected program faculty member in partnership with an internship agency mentor. It is important for the student to have support anchors on both sides of their learning experience. The internship should be vetted carefully to make sure the student is getting a beneficial experience. As one internship mentor stated:

*It is the real-world experience here. You study it, you write about it, you lecture about it, and how does it all blend together? That's where that internship program comes into play, and I can tell you from our internship program – I try to make it as real as possible.*

Further introducing students to the idea of failure and improvisation becomes important, especially if they have never experienced points of failure. As one mentor stated:

*We want to show them that you have to be able to pivot in certain situations, actually in all situations because it is probably not going to go how you think it will in the plans.*

Helping to find the student’s strengths and passion area in the field of EM/HS was also important to the mentors. Building confidence, homing in on a student’s professional growth, and bringing them into the next level of career ready was important to mentors. Teaching the interns knowledge, politics, and the field of EM/HS was important to mentors in both “giving back to the academic program” and in “paying it forward to help the student and the next generation of EM/HS evolve.”

All mentors mentioned the issue with unpaid internships and felt the field needed to do more to address this issue. Unpaid internships were deemed “unfair” because the student is losing money. Students overall lose money completing unpaid internships from being away from their jobs and in spending money in fuel to drive to the agency. More needs to be done to foster the idea that internships are valuable. Mentors agreed that interns assist with staffing shortages, produce work that advances the agency, and educate the mentors on latest ideas and technologies. There is a clear benefit to the agency for having an intern. It is not a one-way relationship.

A mentor stated:

*There are parts out there about the field that maybe we don't know about that would be beneficial to us, for example, I didn't use GIS for years and I was having a casual conversation with one of our interns and I started looking into it again and now I am in GIS every day.*

Paid internships need to be discussed, and the benefits of having an intern should be acknowledged. If an intern is splitting their time between working and being an intern, their experience will be lessened since they just cannot focus on being an intern and building their career.

## Conclusions and Future Research

The review of literature and this exploratory research on internships in Emergency Management and Homeland Security education show the lack of empirical work in the arena. It remains a blank slate for specific examination. The review of the literature showed one of the limiting factors as the broad grouping of experiential lessons or projects that may be a component of a single class and internships under the umbrella of experiential learning. From the limited research in EM/HS, but with the support of research in other related disciplines, the value of experiential learning is without question. The challenge comes in the size of the umbrella and understanding potential differences in outcomes for a semester-long internship versus an experiential-learning course project. These components are co-mingled in both limited research and in the standards for program accreditation. Future work must bifurcate these elements and compare differences in outcomes for students who engage in an internship versus an experiential-learning project within a course or courses. Under accreditation standards, both would suffice as “internships and/or field experiences.” (CAEMHSE, 2022, p. 13). Evidence-based answers are needed to support whether these result in the same outcomes for students. At face value, the nature of an internship supports broader elements of the NGCCs particularly among the competencies that build the individual. These skills may be developed in working in a structured experience embedded in an organization and practicing in the field for an extended time. At this point, this is only an assertion that is not supported by empirical evidence but requires examination.

The role of the NGCCs in the development and implementation of internship programs also requires further examination. The NGCCs provide an opportunity for students to conduct a pre-placement self-assessment as part of an internship process where they can then target competencies that they seek to develop through the internship. It can serve as a guide for mentors and a point of discussion for the student/mentor relationship. The NGCCs can also serve as a tool for the post-internship evaluation of experiences to assess the development of competencies.

This research serves as an exploratory start into an area of importance for both academic programs and professionalization of the field. Focused research is necessary to inform the development, management, and assessment of internship experiences.

## Appendix A: Survey Instrument

### Survey on the EMHS Internship at The University of Akron

The following short survey collects information about Emergency Management and Homeland Security internship experiences and perceptions at The University of Akron in time blocks post-graduation. The survey takes about 10–15 minutes to complete. Your responses are confidential and will not be revealed without consent; only aggregate results will be available to interpret and apply to the larger research study. Results can be requested upon completion.

Starting this survey electronically or completing the survey and mailing it back to the researchers is your consent to participate. Please do not put your name on the survey instrument.

#### Part I:

1. Age

- a. 18–28
- b. 29–39
- c. 40–50
- d. Over 51

2. To which gender do you most identify?

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Nonconforming/gender variant
- d. Prefer not to answer

3. Current professional career field

- a. Environmental Health and/or Safety
- b. Public Health/Hospital
- c. Emergency Management and Homeland Security
- d. First Response Agency (Police and Fire)
- e. Other

4. Is your current position in

- a. Public sector
- b. Private sector
- c. Non-governmental organization or non-profit

5. Level of education
  - a. Bachelor's degree
  - b. Master's degree
  - c. Doctoral Degree
6. What year did you graduate from The University of Akron Emergency Management and Homeland Security (as later renamed) program \_\_\_\_\_?
7. When you were an intern in The University of Akron EMHS program, how did you find your internship?
  - a. My placement was assisted by a faculty member.
  - b. I found an internship searching and calling agencies on my own.
  - c. I was already working in the field.
  - d. I was assisted by a family member or a friend with a lead.
8. Where did you complete your EMHS internship?
  - a. In the State of Ohio
  - b. In a state outside of Ohio
  - c. Internationally
9. What area of EMHS was your internship?
  - a. Public sector EMHS
  - b. Private sector EMHS
  - c. Health care sector of EMHS
  - d. Non-profit sector of EMHS
10. Did you get a job offer after completing your University of Akron EMHS internship from the internship agency?
  - a. Yes, and I took the offer.
  - b. Yes, but I didn't take the offer.
  - c. The host agency expressed interest in me working there but had no open positions.
  - d. No.

11. To what extent do you feel the EMHS internship was a valuable piece of your education?

- a. Very valuable
- b. Somewhat valuable
- c. Not valuable at all
- d. It made no difference in my education

12. To what extent do you feel an EMHS internship should be a requirement of all EM/HS undergraduate programs across the country?

- a. Very strongly.
- b. Somewhat strongly.
- c. It should not be a requirement at all.
- d. It should not be a requirement but should be optional.

13. (Check all that apply) My University of Akron EMHS internship experience taught me:

- a. How to interact in a work environment
- b. How to handle project management
- c. That I really wanted to work for the agency of my internship
- d. That I really did not want to work in the agency of my internship

14. The internship was paid:

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. N/A as it was already with my employer

15. In your experience, did having a required internship experience make you more competitive in seeking post-graduation employment?

- a. Yes
- b. No

16. Did you become a mentor to other EMHS students after graduation and take/foster University of Akron EMHS interns with your organization?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. No, but plan to in the future if I have the opportunity

17. My internship mentor

- a. Was helpful and supportive
- b. Was present but not very supportive
- c. Was not helpful nor supportive

**Part II:**

Please assess the following statements regarding the internship experience in your EMHS degree program at The University of Akron. Please use the following scale:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

1. The main goal of an internship program is to link class theory with practice.
2. EMHS internships should be mandatory for all EM/HS bachelor's degree programs.
3. My internship allowed me to be an active participant in an organizational project or program.
4. The pre-internship classroom learning helped provide the foundation of understanding to operate in an internship later in my program.
5. My internship allowed me to be involved with other groups and partnerships related to my interning organization.
6. My internship allowed me to reflect on the field and where I wanted to job seek after graduation.
7. Internship programs better prepare students for jobs in Emergency Management/Homeland Security.
8. My internship contributed to my intellectual growth.
9. My internship helped to improve my research skills.
10. Internships are an important component in the overall professionalization of the field of EMHS.
11. My internship supervisor/mentor was supportive of my experience and growth.
12. My internship assisted in preparing me for the job field.
13. My internship helped me connect the classroom learning to real-world application in bridging the classroom/work-ready gap toward graduation.

**Part III:**

In 2017, FEMA published *The Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals: Handbook of Behavioral Anchors and Key Actions for Measurement (NGCCs)*. We will

use this framework to examine elements of your internship experience. The NGCCs examine three elements: (1) Competencies that build relationships, (2) Competencies that build the practitioner, and (3) Competencies that build the individual. Please use the same scale to rate if your internship fostered the following behavioral anchors and key actions as defined by the NGCCs:

- My internship experience:
- EM Competencies that Build the Individual:
  - Fostered operating within the framework of Emergency Management, the principles, and body of knowledge.
  - Fostered critical thinking.
  - Fostered abiding by professional ethics.
  - Fostered the idea of continually learning.
- EM Competencies that Build the Practitioner:
  - Fostered scientific literacy.
  - Fostered geographic literacy.
  - Fostered social and cultural literacy.
  - Fostered technological literacy.
  - Fostered systems literacy (complex information management).
- EM Competencies that Build Relationships:
  - Fostered disaster risk management.
  - Fostered community engagement.
  - Fostered government and civics.
  - Fostered leadership.

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

### Part IV:

Open-ended questions for focused interview candidates. See informed consent form for permission, risks/benefits, and signature.

1. Please explain your current position, career pathway since graduation, and any future career aspirations within the next 5 years.
2. Do you feel an internship experience is important? Why, why not? Please explain.
3. Why did you choose to take interns after graduating from The University of Akron? What benefits do you see? What were the factors involved in this decision to mentor?
4. When you were a student, what did you think about the internship requirement? What was a fear or feeling around knowing you had to complete this requirement?
5. Do you feel the internship served you well? Why or why not?
6. What do you get personally out of hosting interns? What benefits do you feel come to the organization or you personally?
7. What are the good and difficult pieces of being an internship mentor?
8. Do you feel all students should complete an internship before getting an EM/HS degree? Why or why not?
9. How can the internship process be improved if we look at a holistic viewpoint across the country for academics?
10. What should be standard across all EM/HS internship experiences to make the experience stronger?
11. Do you have anything else to add or thoughts that have not been shared?

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