

# BUILDING BRIDGES IN HOSPITALITY

The transformative power of internships



*Drs. Cynthia Mejia and Jessica Wickey Byrd's research explores the pivotal role of internships in shaping the future of the hospitality and tourism industry through boundary crossing—a transformative journey that bridges academic theory with professional practice, fostering a resilient talent pipeline poised to revolutionize the sector.*

In the rich tapestry of the hospitality and tourism (H&T) industry, internships are not merely transient experiences but are critical pathways, forging connections between the rich theoretical knowledge acquired in academic settings and the vibrant, fast-paced practicality of industry. This dynamic landscape, with its pulse on global travel and leisure trends, has faced its share of tribulation. Labor shortages have long been a simmering issue, only to boil over as the pandemic and existing stigmas surrounding service work have amplified

the industry's challenges. In such times, the bridge that internships represent becomes not just a pathway but a lifeline, supporting a sector in urgent need of rejuvenation.

At the intersection of academic rigor and industry savvy stands UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management, where the pursuit of hospitality education is seamlessly blended with the spark of innovation. Here, a conceptual approach to internships spearheaded by Drs. Cynthia Mejia and Jessica Wickey Byrd delves into the essence

of 'boundary crossing'—a transformative journey that equips interns with the tools to effectively translate their classroom learning into the competencies and insights needed for their future careers. This intricate process of knowledge transfer is more than an academic exercise; it's a developmental journey ensuring that the flow of skilled professionals into the hospitality and tourism industry remains steady and strong, even as the industry itself continues to evolve and expand. Through this lens, internships are elevated from functional assignments to experiential catalysts, bolstering the industry with a fresh talent pipeline and novel perspectives that keep it moving forward, even in the most challenging of times.

## **BOUNDARY CROSSING: AN INTERNSHIP'S JOURNEY**

The journey from the classroom to the



Internships help students become innovative thinkers, capable of bridging the gap between knowledge and practice.

Internships are no longer seen as mere stints of work experience but as crucial stages of cognitive and professional growth. As interns navigate new environments, they encounter a reality different from their academic training, a discovery that is both daunting and enriching. The process not only enhances their employability and career satisfaction but also imbues them with essential life skills such as time management and effective collaboration. It's through these experiences that students emerge not just as workforce-ready graduates but as innovative thinkers capable of bridging the gap between knowledge and practice. Drs. Mejia and Wickey Byrd's research suggests that when students cross these boundaries through internships, they're not just observing—they're engaging, challenging, and connecting dots in ways that transform both their own perspectives and the practices of their host organizations.

#### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INTERNSHIP RESEARCH**

This conceptual paper adopts a theory adaptation approach, which is crucial for reframing traditional views of internships

growing specialization of knowledge within organizations. As an interpretative framework, boundary crossing delves into how interns merge their educational identities with their emerging professional roles, illuminating the often challenging transition from academia to the professional world. The initial stages of internships are highlighted as periods rich with potential for growth, where interns not only adopt new skills and improve their employability but also develop essential coping strategies. These processes are paramount in equipping interns with the capabilities necessary to navigate the complexities of the H&T industry successfully.

#### **MECHANISMS AT WORK IN THE H&T INTERNSHIP BOUNDARY ZONE**

Interns often face the daunting task of reconciling academic theories with the practical demands of the industry—a challenge intensified by the dichotomy between theoretical constructs and applied workplace structures. Drs. Mejia and Wickey Byrd's research scrutinizes these transitional mechanisms, pinpointing where the bridge between school and work is formed, traversed,

## *INTERNSHIPS BENEFIT ALL PARTIES INVOLVED. STUDENTS GAIN INVALUABLE REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE THAT PAVES THE WAY FOR THEIR FUTURE CAREERS.*

workplace is a transformative experience for interns, marked by the process of boundary crossing. It's in this critical phase that interns weave their theoretical knowledge into the very fabric of practical experience. This complex fusion is at the heart of the research, suggesting that the leaders in hospitality and tourism are forged in this transitional space where academic concepts are applied to real-world challenges.

Drs. Mejia and Wickey Byrd's research focuses on turning educational experiences into real-world success. Internships serve as crucial gateways for this transition, providing more than just a glimpse into the industry. They are active engagements where students challenge norms, connect disparate ideas, and apply classroom lessons in ways that can reshape both their own viewpoints and the practices within their host organizations.

within the H&T industry. By examining the established body of literature on boundary spanning and crossing, the research expands on the concept of knowledge transfer from academia to practical settings. This approach acknowledges the evolving complexities of hospitality education and the role of internships as pivotal, experiential learning stages that extend beyond the scope of typical classroom instruction. By grounding this research in a rich array of prior studies, it draws a comprehensive understanding of how internships can be strategically re-envisioned to enhance the learning and adaptability of hospitality and tourism management (HTM) students.

#### **BOUNDARY CROSSING: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The concept of boundary crossing gains prominence against the backdrop of rapidly advancing technology and the

and sometimes, where it needs support. The implications are significant, suggesting that internships, if well-designed, not only facilitate personal growth but also seed organizational innovation. They become crucibles for developing a talent pipeline that can sustain and propel the industry forward.

#### **INTERNSHIPS AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ACADEMIC PROGRAMMING**

The delineation between internships and traditional jobs is made clear: internships are structured, educational experiences, often characterized by a higher degree of supervision and assessment. Within these roles, interns engage in experiential learning, where critical reflection and professional development are paramount. Such internships offer more than just work; they provide a scaffolded environment where theoretical knowledge is



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applied and tested, ensuring that the student's journey into the professional sphere is both informed and introspective.

#### RESEARCHING THE BRIDGES

Diving into the mechanisms of knowledge transfer, the researchers employed a qualitative approach, analyzing the experiences of interns and the operational dynamics of the organizations they serve. The findings emphasized that internships should be transformational, not transactional. Rather than perceiving interns as temporary labor, the industry is called to embrace them as potential innovators, who can contribute fresh insights and drive organizational change.

#### FINDINGS: A TWO-WAY STREET

Internships, as uncovered by the research, benefit all parties involved. Students gain invaluable real-world experience that paves the way for their future careers; institutions like the Rosen College reinforce their relevance by producing industry-ready graduates, and the hospitality sector itself is endowed with a

stream of fresh talent, eager and capable of leading the industry into the future.

More importantly, the research identified the reciprocal nature of internships. While interns learn from their immersive experiences, they also bring fresh new ideas and approaches into the professional environment, prompting a cycle of continuous learning and innovation.

#### MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this conceptualization is far-reaching. For educational institutions, there is a clear mandate to design internship programs that are not just placements but are rich, integrative experiences that prepare students for the complexities of the industry.

For the hospitality and tourism sector, the call is to engage with academic institutions like Rosen College in crafting these experiences, investing in the interns not as temporary aides but as the architects of the industry's future. Drs. Mejia and Wickey Byrd advocate for a strategic, collaborative approach to

internships, with a focus on nurturing the intern's ability to navigate, negotiate, and network across the boundaries of school and work.

#### CHARTING THE FUTURE

Looking ahead, the research emphasizes the longitudinal studies as essential in unlocking the long-term benefits of internships in the hospitality and tourism industry, facilitating a deeper understanding of career progression and the effectiveness of various internship models. This approach is vital for the industry to refine its strategies and maintain a steady supply of skilled talent. The emphasis on cultivating boundary spanners through internships is a pivotal strategy, as these individuals bridge the gap between academic learning and industry application, driving the evolution of the H&T sector. Such internships are more than experiences; they are critical for building a resilient, innovative workforce poised to tackle future challenges.

Amidst debates on the value of higher education in the H&T sector, evidence points to the significant benefits of paid internships and part-time work during college, such as accelerated loan repayment and wealth accumulation. The decline in enrollment in HTM programs, attributed to perceived industry disadvantages, underscores the need for innovative industry-academic partnerships. These collaborations can create a mutually beneficial scenario for students, institutions, and the industry, emphasizing the shift towards purpose-driven, long-term internship models that focus on boundary crossing and organizational innovation.

As Rosen College continues to pioneer in hospitality education, the lessons drawn from this research are clear. HTM educators play a crucial role in preparing students for their internships, using case studies, discussions, and guest lectures to equip them with the necessary soft skills and confidence to navigate the transition from school to work. This preparation not only sets students up for success in their internships but also fosters long-term careers as effective boundary spanners in the H&T industry. By focusing on boundary crossing, the industry and academia can collaboratively ensure students are ready to contribute to the industry's growth and adaptability.

*THE RESEARCH ADOPTS A THEORY ADAPTATION APPROACH, WHICH IS CRUCIAL FOR REFRAMING TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF INTERNSHIPS WITHIN THE H&T INDUSTRY.*

# RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Taking a theory adaptation approach, this conceptual paper explores the pivotal role of internships in shaping the future of the hospitality and tourism industry.

## REFERENCES

Mejia, C. Wickey-Byrd, J. (2023). Boundary crossing, internships, and the hospitality and tourism talent pipeline. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*. 33, 100441. [doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2023.100441](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2023.100441)

## PERSONAL RESPONSE

**What are the long-term career outcomes for hospitality and tourism management students who have engaged in boundary crossing internships compared to those who have not?**

“ We are still in the beginning stages of pilot testing transformational internships; however, early evidence shows that students who have completed progressive internships with intentional support around boundary-crossing have a higher internship to industry conversion rate, thus staying within the same organization upon completing their internship. ”

## Dr. Cynthia Mejia



Dr. Cynthia Mejia has over 20 years of industry experience in F&B and hotel operations management, primarily working for luxury hotel brands both in the U.S. and in Singapore. Her areas of research include hospitality human resource management, cross-cultural organizational management, technology acceptance, empathy across the services industries, and hospitality education.

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## Dr. Jessica Wickey Byrd



Dr. Jessica Wickey Byrd holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership with a focus on Higher Education from the University of Central Florida. Dr. Wickey Byrd is the Director of the Internship Program at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management and oversees recruitment for the college. She has more than 25 years of experience working in the hospitality industry including lodging, restaurants, live entertainment, events, and non-profits.

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