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For more information, contact Dr. Miriam Weber Nielsen at 517-432-5443

Undergraduate internships: an important consideration when preparing for a future career



*Above: Animal Science junior Garrett Slavik of Ashley and Animal Science sophomore Kayleigh Gratz of Allegan participated in the internship roundtable.*

Internships are as important to the undergraduate learning experience as what's learned in the classroom. These opportunities help students build skills, network with fellow industry colleagues and peers, and explore career fields. Securing an internship can be a formal process – completing an online application and one-on-one interviews scheduled by your university placement program – or a more personalized one, in which you hand-pick a potential employer and approach him about creating a specific experience just for you. Meet four Michigan State University (MSU) undergraduates who pursued internship experiences in summer 2013 and find out what they gained from their individual opportunities.

The roundtable participants were:

- **Kayleigh Gratz**, of Allegan, is a sophomore studying animal science in the production animal scholars program. Gratz completed an internship at Sand Creek Dairy, L.L.C., a 1,000-head dairy operation in Hastings, from May through August 2013. Her responsibilities included herd health, maternity care, working with show animals, assisting the veterinarians, caring for calves, maintaining herd records, and assisting with various other jobs on the farm as needed.
- **Katy Kesler**, of Hastings, is an animal science junior who also completed an internship at Sand Creek Dairy, L.L.C., from May through August 2013. She was also responsible for herd health, maternity care, working with show animals, assisting the veterinarians, caring for calves, maintaining herd records, and assisting with various other jobs on the farm as needed.
- **Garrett Slavik**, of Ashley, is a junior studying animal science in the production animal scholars program. Slavik was a dairy sales consultant intern with Cargill Animal Nutrition based out of Minneapolis,

Minn., during summer 2013. His responsibilities included collecting data for a research project involving Cargill's butterfat prediction model for their ration balancing programs, giving presentations in front of other interns and Cargill employees and collecting feed samples and recording data while walking cow pens on dairies.

- **Meredith Woodward**, of Greenville, is an animal science senior at MSU. Woodward completed an internship at Ri-Val-Re Holsteins (Aaron Jorgensen), a renowned Registered Holstein herd known for marketing high-value genomics in Webberville, from June through August 2013. She spent the majority of her time training heifers to lead and be handled in anticipation of the farm's record price averaging sale last fall.

1. Summarize your experience.

**Gratz:** I learned a lot of things that Sand Creek did that were different from what my uncle does on his dairy. For instance, certain vaccines are given to calves at birth at Sand Creek, yet my uncle vaccinates the cow when she is dry to provide that protection to the calf. On the large farm, the main reproduction management was done actively with PCDART and Afimilk, yet on our 30-head farm, we still have a dairy wheel on the wall. Sand Creek houses their animals in freestall barns whereas we pasture ours except during the winter when they stay in the stanchions. Neither way is right or wrong, it just depends on the management, goals, necessities and resources of the farm.

**Kesler:** What you put into your internship is what you will get out of it. This experience could be the best or the worst time of your life, and networking in today's society is huge. Knowing someone in the industry could mean landing the job of your dreams or finding a new dream.

**Slavik:** If you are a student that has never done an internship away from home, I suggest trying to search for one and take advantage of the opportunity. It is typically only for a little while, and while you are gone, you discover so much about yourself.

**Woodward:** From my experience at Ri-Val-Re Holsteins, I got to learn about a farm that was very involved in genetic excellence and successful at marketing. I got to handle livestock and become comfortable with doing it. I also got to learn about embryo transfer and career opportunities in reproductive technologies. This was something I had some interest in, but in which I had no practical experience. This is now an area I am very interested in and would pursue as a possible career after college.

2. Why did you choose to pursue this internship? How did it come about?

**Gratz:** My only day-to-day background on a dairy up to this point was on my uncle's 30-head pasture dairy. He milked in a stanchion set-up and was a one-man operation. I want to go into the dairy industry so I needed experience on a large-scale dairy operation that employed current technologies.

I personally sought out this internship. I had another summer internship lined up, but in April – a month before my internship was to start – I learned that the farm was unable to take me on. I scrambled, calling farms around Michigan that I was familiar with, and then asked Joe Domecq for help. He spoke highly of Sand Creek, and so I called the farm and spoke to one of the owners to set up an interview. The owners are very supportive of education and welcoming younger generations into the industry, and they offered me the summer job.

The main milking parlor at Sand Creek is a double-20 parallel parlor; they also have a double-six parallel parlor in the hospital barn. They have four separate freestall barns. They use Afi activity monitors to detect heats. A lot of pregnancies are through embryo transfer, and they test genomics on all of the calves. When I started, they were starting to raise Jersey bull calves for stud contract, as well.

**Kesler:** I wanted to gain hands-on dairy experience. They were a local dairy so I contacted them for an interview.

**Slavik:** I pursued this internship because I really enjoy participating in events such as the MSU Dairy Challenge, and from my understanding, being a dairy nutritionist or consultant is very similar to doing a Dairy Challenge on a daily basis! This internship came about through my experiences in the MSU Dairy Challenge. I had initially applied for the internship online, but my final interview for the internship came on the same day as our Dairy Challenge presentations. I chose this specific experience because I wanted to gain extra dairy experience away from our family's 150-cow dairy farm. I had tremendous amounts of experience gained on my home farm, but it was much more beneficial to do this internship than to spend an additional summer helping at home. I learned so much more and discovered that I have an interest in dairy nutrition.

**Woodward:** I was lucky enough to fall into this position. I was discussing with a friend how I wanted to get more experience working on a farm, and she was interviewing for another position at this farm the next week. My friend contacted the owner and he interviewed me as well for a job caring for calves. I was especially interested in working on this farm because of their dedication in pursuing strong genetic pedigrees for their Holstein herd.

3. List the three most important things you learned during your internship.

**Gratz:** The three most important things I experienced during my internship experience were developing my Spanish-speaking skills, learning different skills related to herd health, and learning how to operate antique Farmall tractors.

Most of the employees working on the animal side of the dairy were Hispanic. I took five years of Spanish starting in eighth grade, but I never really had a chance to use what I learned outside of the classroom. Very few of the farm employees knew how to speak English and some didn't speak any. I spent much of my time at work communicating entirely in Spanish and translating for others on the farm. It was difficult at times and I know I made mistakes, but the employees were very welcoming and understanding. They encouragingly corrected my mistakes and I taught them some English. It wasn't just the language barrier that I overcame, but the cultural one, too. I would explain American cultural aspects to them and they would describe Mexico's culture to me.

I learned a number of herd health skills, including proper injection procedures, how to treat different illnesses, and ideal fresh cow checks. I worked with the veterinarians extensively, watching them work, and assisting with treatment. Every morning I worked with the fresh cows, checking them for post-calving health issues such as displaced abomasums, ketosis and retained placentas.

The farm owners had a number of antique tractors, mostly Farmalls. Most of these tractors were collector's items and used at tractor pulls or shows. My grandfather's first tractor was a Farmall H and that was the tractor my dad learned to drive when he was young. By the time I was born, our family farm had switched entirely to modern New Holland equipment. It was always a dream of mine to learn how to drive antique Farmalls. Towards the end of the summer, after fair, I didn't have much afternoon work so asked if I could take some time to learn to drive the old tractors. I spent a few afternoons driving up and down the road and around the property.

**Kesler:** It made me realize just how much I really want to be a large animal veterinarian. Second, it showed me that there is always something new on the farm. No matter how many years you have been in the business or how much experience you have, you've never seen it all. Lastly, I gained valuable experience working with dairy cattle. I've been around beef cattle most of my life, but dairy cattle require a whole new approach.

**Slavik:** The three most important things I learned from this experience were to stretch your comfort zone and go to different places, always look for the simplest solution first, and make your name known (for good reasons).

**Woodward:** The three most important things I learned during this internship were how to properly walk and handle calves, having patience with calves, and working as part of a team to get everything done.

4. What came about because of this internship that you didn't expect?

**Gratz:** I didn't expect to gain experience in cow photography or work with bull stud contract animals. As I apply for internships in different areas of reproduction, this background is helpful to have.

I also met a lot of industry people from veterinarians to NorthStar employees to area farmers and sales reps. One day we had some technicians out to fix a wiring problem in the parlor. I was exposed to a lot of different aspects of the industry that I hadn't really thought about before the internship.

**Kesler:** I learned that I have a passion for dairy cattle and becoming a large animal vet. I was nervous that I'd discover that being a vet wasn't what I really wanted to do, but now I know for sure that no other profession will be as rewarding to me as this one.

**Slavik:** The major thing that came about during my internship was realizing the opportunities available to me and so many others in the dairy industry in different parts of the world, away from my family and comfort zone. These realizations are important to me moving forward because I always anticipated living relatively close to home as I was growing up, but I'm beginning to realize that may not be the case.

**Woodward:** During my internship, I was able to job shadow the technicians who performed embryo transfer. I knew only a little about embryo transfer before this, but after seeing it done I've become very interested in learning more about reproductive technologies through my studies and finding out what career opportunities may be available.

5. Would you encourage other students to apply for internships?

**Gratz:** Yes, in a heartbeat. Internship experiences can either present a once in a lifetime chance or open new doors that you never knew existed. If you are confident in what you want to do and don't need to explore options, it at least offers a different perspective and definitely can help with networking. Also, having that internship looks great on resumes and you never know the connections your internship will bring. At the very least, it's a learning and work experience.

**Kesler:** Go for it! It's nerve-wracking thinking about giving up an entire summer, but it's so worth it. And remember that what you put into an internship is what you'll get out of it.

**Slavik:** I would highly encourage students to pursue internships. They are great because they are typically only for a summer and not a long-term commitment, which can be great for both the student and the employer. If the student decides that it is something they would strongly dislike doing, they can search for something else; similarly, if the employer doesn't feel the student is a good fit for their company, they can move on to another person with limited investment in a person. Additionally, internships are a great way for kids that have grown up on dairy farms, like myself, to get off-farm experiences to improve their potential credible references.

**Woodward:** I would definitely recommend that students pursue internships! The networking opportunities and knowledge you gain from an internship experience is so important to prepare for success after college. College is a wonderful time to make contacts and learn about different career opportunities, and taking advantage of these experiences when they're available is one of the most important things you can do.

6. If you could only share two things with fellow students, what would those two things be?

**Gratz:** Seek out internships early on. Don't limit yourself to one area, whether that is a field within the industry or a geographic location.

Don't be afraid to reach out to companies. Last year I was sending letters in the mail, but I didn't get much response until I started calling farms. In my internship search this year, I am emailing companies left and right asking if they have any opportunities or know of any available for me.

**Kesler:** You never know who is watching you, and not necessarily in a bad way. Working hard while at my internship last summer has opened up a lot of other doors for me that I never thought possible. It earned me references and landed me interviews that I probably wouldn't have gotten otherwise. People saw how hard I worked at this internship, so they offered me positions for next summer; whereas I know of other students who didn't work very hard at their internships and now they are having trouble getting another one.

It's really worth the experience. When I originally applied for my internship, I did not think I would get it, nor was I 100 percent sure I wanted it. Once I had the position, I was committed and worked really hard. I had a lot of fun and wouldn't change anything about what I did.

**Slavik:** Take advantage of opportunities presented to you and treat everybody with the same respect and kindness that you desire to have shown to you by others. Also, work with integrity and honesty: these are difficult values to find in our generation.

**Woodward:** Don't be afraid to make contact with people who are involved in a career you may be interested in pursuing. Also, make the most of your college experience by getting involved in as many different things as possible, from sports to organizations and part-time jobs.

7. What will you reflect on 10 or 20 years from now as the most important part of your experience?

**Gratz:** I will look back and realize how valuable the learning was. Not only did I learn about hands-on stuff with the cattle, but I learned how to run PCDART and I improved my Spanish. This internship gave me insight to a different part of the dairy industry than I had known previously.

**Kesler:** You never know what will come out of new experiences until you try them.

**Slavik:** The one thing that I will look back on 10 or 20 years from now and remember as the most important part of this experience was the fact that I spent a majority of the summer on my own and was a completely independent person. It may not sound really impressive to some other college students, but I go to school relatively close to home and could go home whenever it was necessary. However, I was unable to do that during the internship, which I believe was healthy for me.

**Woodward:** Continuing to network and learn about different areas of the dairy industry.

8. Would you do it again? What might you do differently?

**Gratz:** Yes. I loved my experience as an intern. I would do the actual internship again and will continue to pursue internships throughout my college career.

**Kesler:** Yes! I learned a lot and would love to do it again! I think this year I am going to try to step my game up a level and find a new place and learn even more.

**Slavik:** I would definitely do it again because I learned so much about myself and got to experience another level of independence. The only thing I would do differently would be to check more into my housing arrangement and make sure it is bed bug-free.

**Woodward:** I would do it again. I met some wonderful people and learned more about what I wanted to do after college.