How one company structures its internship and development programs to produce top-notch future employees and give students invaluable real-world experience.

By Lloyd Kennedy, PE
DEAR FUTURE PARKING PROFESSIONAL: Whether it’s your first internship or third, finding a company to work for during your summer break or even while you are taking classes can be a daunting task. Ideally, you want to work for a company that will allow you to learn as much as possible about your industry rather than limiting you to one aspect or department. Post-graduation, you may also be looking for a professional development program or apprenticeship that can give you an opportunity to work for a company during a six-month period as a way to test the waters or get your foot in the door.

**Getting Started**
The first step for students seeking an internship is to research companies they want to work for and compile a wish list of skills they want to obtain. Most companies will include information about their philosophy, unique value proposition, and case studies about past projects or press releases announcing new projects won. Social media is also an excellent way to gain insight into a company’s culture. For example, a company may post information about projects under construction on its LinkedIn page or post pictures of employee events or community service projects on Facebook. Doing some due diligence to look into a company’s culture is a great way to prepare for an interview.

In addition, personal references are important. If you can find students who have previously done internships at the company of your choice, you can ask them about the type of work they got to do and whether they were able to add any of the project work to their portfolio. (Fetching coffee and being stuck in the copy room are not going to help you build your portfolio!)

Another important factor to consider is compensation. Some companies offer a stipend, which is payment for the duration of an internship. Others will pay on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. This is important to know up front.

Geographic location and desirability, as well as knowing where you will live and how you will get to your internship, are also high on the priority list. If you
choose to do an internship outside of your hometown or your college town, it is important to take these factors into consideration.

Real-World Experience

Our company offers internships for college students along with a professional development program (PDP). Our PDP offers a unique opportunity for qualified candidates with degrees in civil/structural engineering, architecture, and building construction among many areas of interest. The program includes hands-on training in design, estimating, drafting, architecture, engineering, manufacturing, quality control, construction, and project management.

We typically seek out college students majoring in engineering design (civil/structural or industrial), architecture design, manufacturing processes, construction management (design-build or project management) software development, and marketing. When evaluating candidates for our PDP and internship programs, we generally look for open-minded, objective-thinking individuals with an entrepreneurial spirit. We are particularly interested in people who have an inquisitive mindset, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a drive to succeed.

FINFROCK’s full PDP typically lasts between 18 and 24 months. During this period, participants are full-time employees given the opportunity to develop a comprehensive toolkit to prepare for future leadership positions in business and technical areas. Program participants perform rotational assignments, collaborate on company-wide projects, receive specialized leadership and technical training, attend in-house training programs, and are encouraged to complete higher levels of education and licensure or certification when applicable.

Our internship program provides the same cross-departmental training opportunities for college students on an abbreviated three-month basis. During this period, the intern will typically work in two departments and gain skills and hands-on experience in our design-manufacture-construct process.

A Holistic View

Everyone in our company has an understanding of the many roles that go into a project, and we communicate well cross-departmentally to deliver the best end result. The PDP fosters a sense of camaraderie and teamwork focused on the greater good of every project. The camaraderie also expedites the project delivery process by preventing problems downstream. For example, an architect who has firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by engineers and manufacturers can apply that
knowledge to his or her design. He or she can actually anticipate how that design will work in the building construction stage and how it will affect the performance of the people who are in the field assembling the building.

Many of our internship participants have been hired as full-time employees. Travis Henriques is an internship and PDP graduate who came to us with an engineering background from the University of Central Florida. He tells me, “The PDP at FINFROCK helped me bridge the gap between what I was learning in school and what I needed to know for real-world applications. I was able to get firsthand experience in precast concrete manufacturing, drafting, and design.”

Emily Jones went through the program and is now employed with FINFROCK as the architectural manager. Being a PDP allowed her to gain valuable insight into the everyday activities of the departments that make up Finfrock outside the field of architecture. “It allowed me to be able to make connections between all steps: from the initial design and cost in project development, to the engineering and coordinating behind each precast piece, to the actual building of the structure while on the erection crew to closing out the project through the construction department,” she says. “The PDP process opened my eyes up to the elaborate coordination that must go on between all departments in order to complete a project. The field and office knowledge I have gained throughout my rotations in different departments at FINFROCK will help with future projects as I advance toward becoming an architect.”

**Steps toward Leadership**

Other PDP participants—including me—have not only stayed on in full-time positions but advanced to executive leadership positions. I came to the company in January 2004 as a graduating senior from Penn State University with a bachelor’s degree in civil engineering.

I thought I was well-prepared to begin my career in the construction industry; but once I landed on the company campus, I quickly realized that there was much hands-on learning to be done. On day one, I put on my hard hat and safety vest, rolled up my sleeves, and got to work in the manufacturing department. For the next three months, I learned as much as possible about how we manufacture our precast concrete product. From there, I began working in the construction department. For the next nine months, I got my hands (and boots) dirty working on an office building project in the Orlando area and then managed a parking garage as the jobsite superintendent in South Florida.

After one year of being with the company, I hadn’t been in the office yet, but I had been given a unique opportunity to learn in a new type of classroom—one without walls and without boundaries. The PDP essentially gave me a holistic view of our business and one that would yield long-term benefits for me and for the company.

Following my PDP experience, I continued to learn by working in the engineering department as a precast drafter, design engineer, and project engineer. Each of these roles solidified my comprehensive understanding of how our company works.

Thirteen years later, as executive vice president of design, I oversee a department of more than 60 employees that work for me directly or indirectly under a manager. Most of our executives have experienced some portion of the PDP. This training program allows young professionals to experience more than just their field of study.

**Final Things to Consider**

After you have done your initial research and compiled your wish list of companies you want to pursue, it is important to understand how to market yourself as a good candidate. If you are pursuing an internship for the first time, you will want to demonstrate initiative by learning about the company prior to an interview. You will also want to bring an enthusiastic attitude as well as references from your college professors to the interview. For those who have an internship already under their belt, show and tell will be as important as a great attitude and stellar grades. Be sure to build a great portfolio with examples of your experiences that include renderings, pictures of project sites, examples of marketing materials, and a written reference from your supervisor describing the skills you gained during your internship, an example of a stellar project you contributed to, and your proven ability to be a team player.

In essence, you should approach an internship or post-graduate professional development program with the same vigor you would when applying for your first full-time job.