Two International Graduate Students Turn Rejection into Industry Experience

Internships are among the most competitive opportunities students pursue; a single opening can draw hundreds of applicants. In 2020, for example, when NPR shifted its internship program online, the organization received 20,520 applications for just 27 fall internship positions—a reminder of how intense the competition can be in communication-focused fields. In that kind of pressure, communication students must find creative ways to distinguish themselves.

For graduate students Bahar Gholinejad-Pirbazari and Nhyira Sackey, the pressure was greater still, because not only were they technical communication majors in a campus dominated by engineering, but they were also international students navigating an unfamiliar system in the U.S. Gholinejad-Pirbazari is from Iran, while Sackey is from Ghana.

They began their search side by side, shoulder to shoulder in resume uploads, portfolio adjustments, and cover letters. Every application was a gamble. Many companies responded with silence. Some answered with polite nos. But none of that broke them. The silence taught them to amplify their own voices.

The search started the same way for both of them, with high hopes, open browsers, and a spreadsheet to keep track of the chaos. Gholinejad-Pirbazari filled hers with listings from Handshake, Indeed, and LinkedIn, watching rejection emails appear almost as fast as she applied. “Job rejections come faster than confirmation emails. You usually get the rejection immediately,” she said. “Except when you apply on Friday, then you get the rejection by Monday.”

For Sackey, the rhythm was nearly the same. She remembers opening her inbox each morning, scanning for a miracle. “Sometimes I’d see the same

line, ‘Thank you for applying,’ and just laugh,” she said. “I had to find a way to stay motivated.” But you can wait only so long for a door that won’t open. So they both began looking elsewhere.

Gholinejad-Pirbazari turned to direct company searches, narrowing her Google terms to match her field: *technical communication, writing, project support*, and *user documentation*. That led her to Engineered Plastic Components (EPC) in Columbia, Missouri, a manufacturing firm she hadn’t heard of before. “I just thought, why not? I have nothing to lose,” she said.

For Sackey, the break came through persistence and follow-ups. She had attended campus career fairs, events where recruiters spoke briefly about internship roles, and instead of letting the moment pass, she emailed them afterward to thank them, reminding them she had applied, and attaching her resume again. One of those recruiters from Walgreens replied. That message changed everything for her.

When the interview invitations finally came, they both felt the mix of relief and fear that follows long silence. Gholinejad-Pirbazari’s was a formal panel at EPC. The company’s plant manager, HR director, and senior engineers joined the call. “At first, I thought I was in the wrong meeting,” she said. “It was intimidating, but they were friendly. They wanted to know how I solve problems, not how many machines I knew.”

Sackey’s interview with Walgreens was more conversational but no less serious. “They wanted to know how I handle customers, how I deal with fast decisions,” she said. “I didn’t overthink it. I just told them the truth about what I can do and what I’m still learning.”

Both interviews ended with offers. For a moment, the months of rejections didn’t matter. The world that had once gone silent finally spoke back. Then came the move from classroom theory to real-world rhythm.

Gholinejad-Pirbazari relocated to Columbia for a three-month internship at EPC. She stepped onto a factory floor alive with the sound of machines and the smell of molten plastic. Safety glasses, gloves, earplugs—the entire language of industry was new to her. "I had never worked in a place like that," she said. "But they were patient, and I was curious."

Sackey imagined an office job full of writing tasks and team meetings. Instead, she joined the energy of the retail floor, stocking shelves, handling customer questions, and learning inventory systems. "I thought I'd be behind a desk," she said, "but I ended up learning that communication happens everywhere, even behind a counter."

Each day brought a new test. At EPC, Gholinejad-Pirbazari was drawn into quality control and documentation. She learned to read production sheets, write clear instructions for operators, and log reports that decided whether products shipped or got scrapped. "Every document mattered," she said. "A single number in the wrong place could cost thousands."

At Walgreens, Sackey found her classroom lessons in design suddenly useful. The store was promoting a new MasterCard, but the verbal pitch wasn't connecting. "People didn't want long talks at the register," she said. "So I suggested creating a simple visual, bright, short, easy to read. Once they saw it, they started asking questions." Her supervisor approved the idea, and the store used her display. "That moment showed me that what we learn in class really works," she said.

For both of them, the lesson was the same: the job description never tells the full story. The real work happens in the space between learning and improvising.

By the end of summer, they were no longer the same students who had opened those early rejection emails. Sackey said she left Walgreens with a new respect for teamwork. "It wasn't just a store," she said. "It was people who cared about how they spoke to customers, how they supported each other. I learned that tone matters more than title."

As for Gholinejad-Pirbazari, she calls her internship "a lesson in patience and precision." She smiles when she talks about the noise, the long days, the late decisions. "You can't predict a factory," she said. "But you can learn how to stay calm inside one."

Both discovered that technical communication isn't limited to writing reports or designing pages; it's in how you react, listen, and adapt when the plan changes mid-day.

When asked to give advice for anyone still trying to land that first offer, Gholinejad-Pirbazari said, "Start early. Don't wait until everything feels perfect. Apply widely and check company websites directly. You never know who's hiring until you look."

Sackey emphasizes directness when it comes to career preparation. "If you want an internship, say so clearly on your résumé. Don't bury your goal under flowery language. List your skills, user design, web writing, graphics. Let employers see what you bring."

They both, however, echo one thing: don't let silence define your search. Follow up. Reach out. Ask questions. Keep your name in sight.

Their paths were not smooth, but they were theirs. Two international students, both learning to communicate across borders and expectations, found their place in systems that seemed difficult to navigate. They faced rejection, confusion, and doubt, and kept moving anyway. They urge their peers to apply again, send the next email, and take the risk, because success is often at the other end of fear.