

ENHANCING THE VALUE OF THE UNDERGRADUATE MARKETING INTERNSHIP PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The number of business students participating in some form of internship prior to graduation is growing due to employers' preference for graduates who have completed an internship. Thus, it is surprising that so little has been written, at least recently, regarding the changing role that internships play in the overall business curriculum and, more specifically, concerning whether and how the internship program *content* should be redesigned. The focus of this paper is on how one particular internship – a marketing internship program at a Northwest Public University – was recently restructured in light of trends and research findings.

INTRODUCTION

The number of business students participating in some form of internship prior to graduation is significant and growing, with one third of AACSB schools reporting that over 50% of their students had completed an internship in 1999 (Coco 2000). This renewed interest in internships is driven by a number of factors. First, employers report that marketing graduates lack critical professional and career development skills (Kelley and Bridges 2005; Schibrowsky et al. 2002) and internships are one curricular means of developing them. AACSB's new standards for student skill development and learning outcomes reflect the perspective that we are training professionals for a career in business, not liberal arts graduates (AACSB 2005; Schibrowsky et al. 2002).

Second, students perceive internships (and other experiential, active, real-world learning activities) to be more enjoyable, challenging and, most importantly, of strategic importance in gaining employment in their field after graduation (Cook et al. 2004; Frontczak 2000; Gault et al. 2000; Karns 2005). Third, empirical support for the positive relationship between a business internship and career success has been increasing (Gault et al. 2000; Knouse et al. 1999; Sandvig et al. 2005): students who complete an internship are more likely to obtain their first job more quickly after graduation, list more networking contacts, report higher entry level salaries, and have greater overall job satisfaction. Last, and perhaps most important, a greater number of employers are beginning to utilize internships as a tool for recruitment and retention of

college graduates (DiLorenzo-Aiss and Mathisen 1996; Gault et al. 2000; Pianko 1996; Watson 1995).¹ Given the increased importance placed on the internship experience by both students and employers, it is surprising that so little has been written, at least recently, regarding its changing role in the overall business curriculum and, more specifically, concerning whether and how the internship program *content* should be redesigned. Thus, the focus of this paper is on how one particular internship – a marketing internship program at a Northwest Public University – was recently restructured in light of these trends and research findings. We begin with a brief look at how the objectives and timing of business internships have evolved over the last three decades.

EVOLUTION OF THE UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Traditional Business Internship Model

Up until the early to mid 1990s, business/marketing students typically participated in an internship during the summer between their junior and senior years of their undergraduate business program (Henry et al. 1988). Students had typically completed only one "Principles" course in each of the functional areas, e.g. marketing, finance, management. The most common objective was to learn about the different business careers in order to determine which business discipline to major or concentrate in. Thus, students possessed minimal skills and internship employers could not and did not expect interns to carry out in-depth projects in any one functional area. The internship consisted of a significant amount of administrative (as opposed to managerial) tasks and was, as a consequence, typically unpaid (Henry et al. 1988).

21st Century Business Internship Model

By the mid-1990s, employers were beginning to see the value of the internship as a recruiting tool, while students began to see how an internship could give them a competitive edge in the job market with a

¹ There are certainly other important benefits associated with internships (e.g. fund-raising opportunities due to closer ties with the business community, improved student recruitment efforts due to better a placement record), but these are not the focus of the present study.

particular company or industry (Cook et al. 2004). For both groups, these benefits accrue only when the intern is able to move into an entry level position soon after completing the internship. Thus, the timing of the internship began to shift toward the end of the college career; many more students now participate in an internship during the last quarter of their senior year.

With the shift in objectives and timing, students are consequently better trained in a particular major/ concentration, having almost completed their degree. The type and nature of the internship have changed as well. Interns are able to locate intern-ships in their major (finance, marketing, etc.), take on more responsibility within the firm, and complete more complex, managerial projects (e.g. marketing plans, media analyses, marketing research projects). These increased responsibilities have resulted in the creation of more paid internships. Interestingly, in the last six years, personal experience suggests that a significant number of students are delaying their graduation and using the last quarter of their senior year to do their internship in the locale – and with the firm – where they plan to relocate after they graduate.

Challenges and Unresolved Issues

With the increase in the number of students participating in business internships, and the recent empirical evidence that demonstrates a positive link between internships and job placement/success, it is extremely important that the *quality of the internship program* be monitored and continually improved. The reputation of the University, relationships with the business community and most importantly, the learning outcomes realized by the intern are all at risk if the internship program is not designed properly. At a minimum, it should include (1) clear learning objectives and activities, (2) assessment methods to evaluate these objectives, and (3) consultation with and feedback from the business community regarding the internship program. The curriculum or learning activities should reflect recent pedagogical research such as that reviewed in the introduction. In the next section of the paper, an example of a recently re-structured internship program that attempts to follow these suggestions is described.

CASE STUDY: A MARKETING INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Overall Objectives/Goals

The primary objective of the internship program is to prepare marketing students for a career in business by giving them the opportunity to apply their textbook knowledge (theory and best practices) in the real

world of business. The internship also serves as an experiential learning activity that will assist students with their leadership, interpersonal, teamwork, communication and other skills identified as critical by employers (see Table 1). Finally, the internship provides a low risk method for employers and interns to “check each other out” for possible post-graduate employment.

Enrollment Trends

The internship course or program is currently a 400 level elective in the marketing major, attracting 35-40 students per year over each of the past three years. This is a significant increase over the previous ten years, as students now recognize the importance of the internship as a portfolio-building experience. The re-structuring of the program discussed in this paper was implemented during Fall 2006, precluding a comparison of interns’ and employers’ experiences before and after the restructuring. However, this comparison will be made at the end of the 2006-07 academic year, once there are sufficient data.

Timing

Consistent with the discussion above, students are encouraged (through advising, a GPA minimum and the course pre-requisites) to participate in the internship program during the last quarter of their senior year, and to find an internship in the location where they plan to live after they graduate.

Unlike other traditional courses, students prepare for the internship well in advance of actually participating in it. They usually meet with the professor/internship coordinator up to a year before they plan to enroll in the program, at which time they are told to begin by writing a one page reflective essay on their career goals and strategy. This essay includes a rationale for the type of internship they seek, the location in which they want to complete their internship, and which courses they believe they will need to complete as pre-requisites. This exercise serves to focus their thoughts and energies in preparation for the next steps of the process, resume preparation and internship search. Students are made aware of the minimum GPA criterion at this early stage, which allows them time to improve their grades if need be.

Sources of Internships

A database of internship employers in the region is maintained; this database is updated through the use of an annual survey sent to organizations (both in the database and new to the area). Many internship opportunities come in via marketing alumni, while some students find their own. Interns complete a one

page evaluation of the internship employer at the conclusion of the internship and this is added to the database for other students to review.

Screening of Students and Qualifying Employers

Students. Students must be marketing majors, maintain a 2.75 GPA in their marketing courses, have completed the Principles, Marketing Research, and Consumer Behavior courses. Additional electives may be required depending on the type of internship. For example, if a student plans to do an Account Services internship at an advertising agency, he/she must complete the IMC course first.

Employers. All employers are screened with a visit to their place of operation. The firm must operate out of a commercially zoned location (no home offices) and must have a desk for the student. The internship supervisor must know more about marketing than the student (this is supposed to be a mentoring situation). The firm puts together a job description after preliminary discussions with the Professor/Internship Coordinator. The projects or tasks cannot involve personal selling, nor can more than 10% of the intern's time be devoted to data entry or administrative tasks. Employers are asked to include one project that the student can be responsible for from start to finish, and one formal presentation to management. Employers are also informed about the portfolio requirement (see below) and the importance of generating tangible output to include in this portfolio. It may take several drafts or iterations before the employer develops a job description that is approved and ready to be posted for students to peruse.

Information Dissemination regarding Internships

Students find out about the availability of marketing internships in a number of different ways. All marketing majors are invited to subscribe to a listserv to which internship job descriptions are posted. In addition to the "hard copy" internship database maintained in the internship coordinator's office, there is also an online, interactive internship database, accessible by employers and students, that is currently being populated. In-class announcements and the Student Marketing Club website are other important sources of internship opportunities. While these listings of internship availabilities are useful, students also receive training on how to search online internship databases, particularly when they plan to re-locate elsewhere to complete the internship. Finally, students are reminded to consider the career goals they identified in their reflective essay when considering various internship options.

Hiring Process Mirrors Real-World

Students apply directly to the firm offering the internship; the professor/internship coordinator does not get involved. Insofar as possible, employers are asked to use a hiring process similar to "real-world" procedures. This means that students must create a resume and a cover letter, seek approval from three references, prepare for at least one interview and follow up "thank you" note, and negotiate compensation. Students are directed to the Career Center for classes in interviewing techniques and resume preparation. Rehearsing these skills in a lower risk environment like an internship is an excellent means of gaining self-confidence.

Internship Contract and Syllabus

Once the student has been "hired" based on an approved employer and job description, a contract signed off by the three parties – intern, internship supervisor/employer, professor/internship coordinator – is completed. The contract includes: (1) contact information for all three parties, (2) the job description, (3) start and end dates, hours per week and total hours; 160 hours total for 4 credits, (4) due dates for all assignments/activities, (5) compensation (if any), and (6) signatures of the three parties. There is also a syllabus that specifies the responsibilities for each party. For the employer, these include a weekly critique session with the student to provide feedback on his/her performance, and midterm and final letters of evaluation. The student intern must meet with or email the internship coordinator weekly with summaries of his/her internship activities. At the end of the internship the intern develops a professional portfolio of all work performed. These responsibilities, or learning activities, are derived from the overall learning objectives developed for the internship program.

Learning Objectives/Methods of Assessment

As noted in the Introduction, practitioners believe that certain professional and career development skills are important (and in some cases, lacking) in our marketing graduates if they are to succeed in marketing careers (Kelley and Bridges 2005; Schibrowsky et al. 2002). A marketing internship can be an important avenue for acquiring these skills if it is structured appropriately. After reviewing the literature concerning which skills are deemed most important by practitioners (see Kelley and Bridges 2005 for a review), a number of these skills were selected as appropriate for including as learning objectives in the current marketing internship program, and methods of assessment were designed to ensure that students do acquire these skills. Table 1 specifies the

relationship between each skill and learning activity. Note that the learning activities (i.e., responsibilities or "assignments") are in chronological order, and in **bold**. "Instruction" refers to a one-on-one discussion between the student and the professor or internship coordinator.

Importance of Portfolio

The portfolio showcases the work the student has done during the internship and as such, is a powerful self-marketing tool when the student is interviewing for jobs after graduation. Both students and employers have reported that the portfolio has often given the student a competitive advantage over others interviewing for the position. For this reason, emphasis is placed not only on the substantive content of the portfolio, but on its organization and its professional "look." Prose is minimized in favor of displaying actual work samples with accompanying explanatory text. Each portfolio is organized along similar lines, but the work samples differ in content and media (e.g., CD of web site, photos, Power Point slides, SPSS printouts, etc.). As marketers, students are encouraged to be creative in the presentation of their work and whenever possible, the graphics and letterhead of the internship organization are evident throughout the portfolio.

Feedback from Employer and Intern

Informal communications between each internship employer and the professor/internship coordinator occur regularly. However, **each employer** is contacted at the completion of the internship and a "debriefing" session is held to ascertain whether the employer has had a satisfactory experience. Changes to the job description and screening criteria are made as needed based on this conversation. As noted earlier, **each intern** completes a one page evaluation of his/her internship experience that is screened for appropriateness and then added to the internship database. Unsatisfactory internship experiences are handled by either working with the employer to correct problems or, if this approach is unsuccessful, by terminating the internship relationship with this employer (rare).

Tracking of the Internship-Career Success Relationship

All interns are required to complete an exit survey (www.wvu.edu/~bryce/exitsurvey) to be handed in with the Portfolio. The exit survey asks them to reflect on the internship experience, indicate whether they received a job offer from the internship organization and provide a permanent email contact address for a follow-up survey in one year. Tracking marketing

interns after graduation allows an assessment of whether, as previous studies have demonstrated (e.g. Gault et al. 2000; Sandvig et al. 2005), students who complete a marketing internship have more career success than those who do not complete an internship (the exit survey is completed by all marketing majors). Insufficient data exists at present to make any conclusions regarding this hypothesis.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines how one undergraduate marketing internship program at a business school in the Northwest has recently been restructured to address changes in the role of internships and concerns about the adequacy of the skills that marketing students are acquiring in our undergraduate business programs. It is too early to determine whether the quality of our marketing graduates will improve with these modifications to just one course, particularly since the internship program/course is an elective course in the marketing major, not a required one. However, if we are to transform marketing education so that a more "professional school" approach to teaching and learning marketing is taken (Schibrowsky et al. 2002) – a transformation that is sorely needed if we are to meet the demands of the 21st century marketplace – then changes to the internship program such as those suggested in this paper are a step, albeit a small one, in the right direction.

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TABLE 1

Learning Objective * (Skill Acquired)	Method of Assessment (Learning Activities)
Career Goals and Strategy	One page reflective essay on topic with rationale for type(s) of internship sought (e.g. ad agency, marketing research firm) and locale
Resume Preparation	With career goals in mind, review/revise resume drafts prior to submission to internship employers
Job Search Methods	Instruction** on how to search internship databases; criteria to use in light of career goals
Interviewing Skills	Career center class taken + instruction on pre-interview preparation, post-interview follow-up
Salary Negotiation	Role playing exercises and instruction ; determination of how important compensation is to student
Business Etiquette and Attire	Instruction given; books recommended ; discussion of corporate culture based on observations during interview
Written Communication Skills	As part of job description, intern must produce several written documents (e.g. marketing plan, marketing research report, web site, press releases); employer letters of evaluation (midterm and final) ; Portfolio ; weekly meetings/ emails between student and professor
Presentation Skills	As part of job description, intern must make one formal presentation on an assigned project; employer letters of evaluation ; Portfolio ; weekly meetings/emails
Leadership Skills	As part of job description, intern is responsible for one project start to finish that requires initiative and teamwork; employer letters of evaluation ; Portfolio ; weekly meetings/emails
Portfolio Development Skills	Professional Portfolio of all work completed during the internship, to be turned in at the end of the internship; employer is made aware of the importance of assigning projects with tangible output for the intern's Portfolio
Skills Assessment	One page summary of skills acquired ; included in Portfolio; midterm and final letters of evaluation from employer
Ability to apply text-book marketing concepts	Examination of these documents in Portfolio

* These skills are taken from Kelley and Bridges 2005.

**"instruction" refers to a one-on-one discussion between the student and the professor or internship coordinator.