

THE VALUE OF COMPANY SUPPORTED INTERNSHIPS IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

Janis Dietz, College of Business and Public Management, The University of La Verne,
1950 Third St., La Verne, California 91750; 909-593-3511, ext 4213, dietzj@ulv.edu

ABSTRACT

A survey on learning was conducted of participants in the General Motors Marketing Internship class. Teamwork and relationships were cited by 30% of the respondents. Several instances of improved job opportunities because of the GM Internship were noted as evidence that this program can make a difference to students when they search for their first jobs. The benefits of this program are not easy to quantify, but are qualitatively reported.

INTRODUCTION

Internship programs, both those supported by outside corporations and those obtained by individual students, provide value to employers because they give the interns experience in some of the "real-life" skills that employers find lacking in new-hires. This project reports on a General Motors initiated project, its elements and results with regard to student learning and the enhancement of job possibilities.

Edventure Partners, a college and high school marketing agency based in Berkeley, created the General Motors Marketing Internship. For a fee of between \$12,500 and \$17,500, Edventure Partners acts as the liaison between the sponsoring dealer and the class. The buzz created by student word-of-mouth can be considerable and companies such as General Motors feel that these programs are good investments. Although some critics find the General Motors program a way to circumvent rules against corporate advertising on campus, professors view the classes as hands-on experience that brings the classroom into the real world (Daniels 2000). The program offers business experience in the following areas:

- *Project management
- *Market research
- *Advertising/PR
- *Event production
- *Business presentations
- *Business writing
- *Budget management
- *Teamwork/conflict resolution

The classes start with an introduction to the participating dealer, and establishment of objectives. They are told that their class will:

- 1) Create a marketing agency, including name and logo;
- 2) Plan and implement a promotional campaign featuring GM vehicles;
- 3) Develop a comprehensive plans book;
- 4) Manage a \$2500 budget;
- 5) Make a

formal agency-style presentation to GM executives and their client dealership.

The students divide into teams to carry through the responsibilities of the promotion. By creating attention-getting events, the students engage in the difficult business of evaluating the consumer behavior they have studied in class. Often they conduct research for the dealer, such as attitudes about the specific cars the dealership markets or their customer service record. The expectation by General Motors is that the students will become life-long product ambassadors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many industries are reporting the growing importance of internships in their recruiting and hiring process (Knemeyer and Murphy, 2002). This project covered two areas where internships are important to the evolving nature of business today: teamwork and critical thinking skills. Both are mentioned when interviewing employers who recruit on college campuses, and they are mentioned as areas of discontent once the graduates are performing their new roles in their chosen jobs. Some employers continue to feel that graduates are not properly prepared for their jobs (Gardner, P.D. and W.Y. Liu 1997; Neumann and Banghart, 2001). In addition, projects such as this offer the chance to "practice" in the "real" world, in a situation where there is less risk and where they can be monitored. Internships are one of the best ways to connect academic material with what happens in the world of commerce (Linthicum, 2002). There may be an increase in confidence and less anxiety when areas they will face in their careers are made available to them while they are still in school (Knouse et al, 1999). When interviewing employers, the weight put on a student's internship experiences is increasing (Dietz 2002). Internships are also one of the best ways to explore and experiment with career decisions (Daughterty, 2002; Henry, 2002). "The National Association of Colleges and Employers suggests that internships are the most effective method of recruitment among companies hiring college graduates." (Sullivan 2003) Given the increasing costs to hire and retain employees in every kind of labor market, the skills learned during the kind of program discussed here can have long-term effects and benefits for future employers. Research shows that, of students who

have landed a job by graduation, more of them have participated in internships than those who have not (Knause, et al, 1999).

Teamwork

The growing use of teams has been well documented. But, how do we in educational institutions teach that teamwork? One way is through group internships such as the General Motors program, where a group of up to 20 students plans and implements a promotion for a General Motors dealer over a semester of 15 weeks. They accept the challenge of "a lot of group work and compromise." (Slater 2003) They accept the acknowledgement that accountability is important. When Donald Kennedy, the former president of Stanford, wrote, "Why, employers are asking, are we being sent young men and women who know how to compete but find it difficult to harmonize their efforts with each other?" (1997, p.275), he was referring to the need to prepare students for the flattened hierarchical world of today's business world. In addition, Kennedy recognizes, as many of us who have taught these courses do, that "frequently, the most important lesson of a group project is only loosely connected to its primary academic purpose: students have to deal with the skilled colleague who has a difficult personality, or solve the "free rider" problem" (p.276). Research has documented that hiring firms value work experience and leadership experience more than students do (Siebert et al 2002), so this project can really provide a lot of benefit for the investment.

When the job market is difficult, as it has been recently, the more related experience a student brings to prospective employer, the better. Beverly Madden, director of career services for Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, says that an internship is "training, and it's an absolute stepping stone to a job." (2003). Although un-paid internships are not very popular with new grads, she points out that an internship can be a key opener when a paid job comes along.

The benefits of promoting a team experiment on a college campus can have benefits for all sides (Daniels 2000). Corporate marketers need an entrée into the minds of their future consumers, just as McDonald's did in the 1950's, when they targeted the children who are now making the country's marketing decisions. General Motors has a particularly challenging job, because the students in this program tend to be the children of the baby boomers who flocked to Japanese cars during the 1970's because Detroit did not meet their needs. GM has a whole generation to work on, and this program does that 15

or 20 at a time. There is little literature available to quantify the benefit of this program in financial returns, but the idea of "viral marketing," which has been used successfully by many consumer products companies to spread word about their product through a network of young people, does lend some credence to the idea.

Dr. Jennifer James has published a number of books with an eye on changes in society. She writes, "Companies...rely largely on self-managing groups of workers." (1996, p.75)¹ The flattening of hierarchical organizations necessarily requires the reliance of teams and self-management. Internships can be beneficial in teaching people the impact of their actions on others in their company, and how to relate to the team on which they will undoubtedly be placed (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001).

Critical thinking skills

In many of the liberal arts classes taught at colleges and universities, the critical thinking skills being developed are expected to become more important to the workforce as graduates are expected to integrate learning from several areas (Chew and McInnis-Bowers 1996). In a study done with the National Association of Colleges and Employers in 2002, critical thinking skills were among the most mentioned areas where the employers felt students were less prepared than necessary (Dietz 2002). With the flattening of hierarchies within organizations, non-supervisory employees need to pick up skills once expected only of managers and supervisors, skills that require a broad set of general and problem solving skills (Rao 1999). Their ability to engage in critical thinking about the future of business may very well make the difference in terms of what opportunities come their way (Ackerman et al, 2003). Internships allow students to hone their skills in understanding the theory they have learned in the classroom, communicating with fellow workers, and practicing the professionalism that will undoubtedly be expected of them in the workforce (Daughterty 2002). Regardless of the specific career aspirations of internship participants, every occupation has ties to the business world in some way (Shure 2001). Of course, not all internships are paid, and more and more budget cuts are impinging on this learning experience. Even so, students are often told that the best places to learn may be the same places that do not have the resources to pay them (Whalen and Barnes 2001). With the program reviewed in this project, the students at least have the funds to create a real-life promotion as well as gain academic credit, which does not take away from their ability to hold down a paying job outside of school.

Developing critical thinking strategies in the classroom, of course, can only go so far. The strategies and skills needed for jobs such as pharmaceutical sales are a major benefit to students such as those at the College of St. Catherine, where an internship partnership with Pfizer helps students taste what a career with Pfizer is like before they get out of school (Breitstein, 2001).

OBJECTIVES

1. To document skills learned in the eight years the program has been taught.
2. To support the investment that General Motors has made in this program.
3. To confirm that lasting skills are learned with this type of program in ways that cannot be duplicated in the traditional classroom.

This project sought to record long-term benefits of the program and to query past students on its effects.

METHODOLOGY

The General Motors Marketing Internship (GMMI) has been taught by this institution since the fall of 1995. The program has evolved into a formal 4-credit course that is part of the marketing concentration.

Starting in the spring of 2002, past and current participants in the GM Internship were surveyed on what skills they felt they gained in the program. (N=100). The survey was administered to past students via email (using Perseus survey software) and to current students in class. Questions asked were:

1. Did you learn any specific skills when you took the GM course?
2. In general, what did you learn during this experience?
3. How did it benefit you in your personal life?
4. How did it benefit you in your business life?
5. What would have made it a more worthwhile experience?
6. Other comments.

The results, treated with confidentiality, were entered into SPSSX and the qualitative comments were analyzed for consistent comments. In the interest of space, the responses are not tabulated here, but the response was 31% of a total of 100 students surveyed. Question 1 asked a general question

about skills learned in the program. Table 1 represents the answers:

TABLE 1
Question 1: Specific skills learned with GMMI

Skill mentioned	Frequency	Per cent
Teamwork	12	39%
Communication	7	22%
Planning, scheduling	7	22%
Working with a real client	7	22%
Conflict resolution	4	13%
Presentation skills	2	6%
Creating press kits	2	6%
Computer skills	2	6%

Only those who had the necessary assignments mastered skills such as Photoshop® by Adobe and SPSS, but others may have learned those skills as well. The large response that teamwork was learned supports the desire to document the contribution that this program makes toward learning teamwork skills.

Question 2 asked, "in general, what did you learn?" Table 2 represents the comments.

TABLE 2
"What did you learn?"

Comment:	#	%
Teamwork	9	29%
Business processes	6	19%
Business is 24/7	3	10%
A good promotion does not necessarily bring the people you expect.	3	10%
How to write ads	2	6%
Other: How much time and dedication it takes to create a promotion like this; each department is important; I want to work in promotion.		

A total of 68% answered the first two questions with the affirmation that they learned teamwork and how to work with people who have different personalities. This supports the literature on the need to master teamwork in the workplace.

Question 3, represented by Table 3, asked about personal benefits.

TABLE 3
Question 3: Personal benefits

Comment	#	%
Made friends	9	29%
Understanding different views	5	16%
Self-confidence, self-discipline	5	16%
Communication skills	4	13%
How a large group can come together and accomplish something this big.	3	10%
This is what I want to do in the future	3	10%
Real life experience	2	6%
Stress/ time management	1	3%

This project showed how closely business and personal lives are related in the minds of the participants. Table 4 discusses the benefit to their business life

TABLE 4

Question 4: How did the program benefit you in your business life?

Comment:	#	%
Addition to my resume	7	22%
Working with a group and making everything come together.	7	22%
Helped me to grow professionally. I was able to do things I did not know I could do.	7	22%
Experience	6	19%
Experience not covered in other classes	2	6%
Taught me about dead success is more than hard work.		

It was expected that many of the students would comment about the addition to their resume, but it was gratifying to see how some of these students were able to demonstrate skills in this project that were hidden in other class endeavors. As many educators do, I took a chance a couple of years ago and assigned the role of coordinator of the project to a marginal student in whom I saw great leadership potential. He rose to the challenge and oversaw a particularly successful promotion.

In terms of critical thinking skills and teamwork, the answers to these last questions clearly show the contribution the program makes toward putting to use these skills when working with a large client.

The last question, represented in Table 5, was for purposes of evaluation and changes in the future:

TABLE 5
Question 5: What would have made it more worthwhile?

Comment	#	%
If the dealer and the salespeople had been more involved with the class	6	19%
Better turnout at the event	6	19%
Small class	4	13%
If communication were better	2	6%
Nothing, it was all fun!!!	2	6%

This question elicited comments on some areas that are correctable, such as the number of students in the class and some that are affected by the external variables of the promotion. Working with a client whose main responsibility is to sell cars means that the client is not always available to students.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has reinforced the expectations about the usefulness of experiential learning. In addition, the responses open a window into the ways the participants can grow as individuals.

The objectives of the project were:

1. To document some of the skills learned in the eight years the program has been taught.
Teamwork skills, skills in conflict resolution, communication and planning skills were important
2. To support the investment that General Motors has made in this program.
Only time will tell if the students who have participated in the program become loyal GM customers.
3. To confirm that lasting skills are learned with this type of program in ways that cannot be duplicated in the traditional classroom.
Skills were learned that would not have been possible in a classroom.

Given these results, the plan is to continue to fine-tune the program based on the comments, and to work with other schools that offer this program to identify quantifiable results for the sponsoring organizations. Whatever happens, this experience is one that 100 of my students will never forget.

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