

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Formal academic internships are generally agreed to be desirable experiences for students. Much anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of internship experiences are positive, and that many employers prefer to hire interns. Many employers use internships as an employee selection tool. From a student's perspective, the most positive benefit or outcome of an internship is a specific job offer, while experience gained in a specific field is the next most obvious benefit. The general definition of the word internship is considered inadequate in the context of a formal academic internship, therefore the following definition is suggested:

"An opportunity for a student to obtain real life work experience in an applied environment over a specific period of time, which will be the equivalent of an academic learning experience gained in a typical three unit class."

The basic objective of this preliminary study was to determine students' perceptions of their internship experience. Specifically, a number of factors deemed to be important in determining the "value" of the internship experience were included in the study. The survey was conducted during the Spring semester of 1999, using a questionnaire specifically designed for the study, and 63 valid questionnaires were returned, 52.4% from female students and 47.6% from males.

The results indicated that the overwhelming majority of the respondents (82.5%) worked more than the required number of hours (to obtain academic credit), while only slightly more than half (50.8%) said they were paid. This is encouraging, since it would appear to indicate that financial considerations were not the main motivating factor, and that students probably enjoyed working at their internship sites.

Slightly more than half (52.4%) of respondents said they were provided with a formal job description, which is a concern. If, as one would expect, the internship is intended to provide students with a meaningful learning experience, it stands to reason that a clear understanding of the scope of the position is essential. This can best be accomplished by

means of a formal job description. In the area of supervision and guidance, only 57.1% of respondents said they were assigned a specific mentor, a situation considered somewhat unsatisfactory. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that only 46.1% of the respondents rated the quality of supervision as 'good' or 'excellent,' while 30.1% rated theirs as 'fair' or 'poor.' The majority of respondents, 77.8%, said they were given meaningful tasks to perform, which is somewhat encouraging, in view of the fact that interns are often considered to be menial workers and are frequently given only "grunt" work!

Although 54.0% of the respondents said they were required to wear formal business attire at work, only 47.6% considered the working environment at the internship site to be 'professional' or 'very formal.' It was encouraging that the majority of the respondents, (81%) said their internship provided them with a genuine learning experience. This tended to support the responses by 74.6% of the students who said that their internship contributed to their professional development, and 76.2% who said that their internship related to their major.

While 65.1% of the respondents said that their internship experience enhanced their prospects of employment, only 38.1% said their internship resulted in a specific job offer. The concluding question asked students to give an overall rating of their internship experience, to which 73.0% responded 'good,' 'very good,' and 'excellent.' However, it was disappointing to note that 17.5% of respondents considered their experience only 'satisfactory,' while 9.5% even considered it 'unsatisfactory.' Clearly, it would be important to establish the reason(s) for this dissatisfaction.

In sum, the results were not as encouraging as might have been expected, although the sample size was relatively modest. A much larger follow-up study is planned, and the results of this preliminary survey will be used to refine the questionnaire used in the first study, since the results indicated some areas for improvement. Specifically, respondents in the next study will be asked for the reasons why they respond negatively to some of the questions. This should provide the internship program administrators with guidance for employers in order to improve the overall quality of students' internship experiences.