

Internships Not Worth a Dime of Tuition Dollars?

HOW TO ENSURE ACADEMIC VALUE AND A RETURN ON INVESTMENT IN COLLEGE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the explosion of unpaid internships in the U.S. since the 1980's (Perlin, 2012), many colleges and universities offer academic credit for internships in exchange for tuition dollars. Yet the pedagogical structure of the internship program and the manner in which credit is earned varies widely across institutions of higher education. At the same time, as tuition across the nation has increased, so has the student demand for a clear Return on Investment (ROI) (Markovich, 2012) — in terms of skills development and learning outcomes as well as direct exposure to industry practice and professional norms (Burrows, 2015). This article argues that many unpaid internships for college credit simply are of little value to the student by these measures, and institutions cannot ethically charge tuition for internship programs that are poorly designed. This article identifies precise pedagogical elements that college internship programs should include in order to deliver a >>>

Return on Investment (ROI), comply with the U.S. Department of Labor (founded by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1937) — Fact Sheet #71 (Bacon, 2011, Curiale, 2009), be ethically and pedagogically sound, and meet both students and employer’s needs. Analysis of a multi-site case study comprised of data collected from internship advisers, representing a variety of campuses and internship program structures, through a survey as well as responsive interviews — presents eight themes that emerge from the qualitative data, and concludes that the program structure and its pedagogy are integral to the academic experience and hence the academic value offered through internships (Braun, 2012, Burrows, 2015). Specifically, the intern should earn academic credit through directed curriculum, which includes structured reflections, discussion, and a formal presentation of learning outcomes. Regular collaboration and communication between academia and industry should be initiated and maintained and assessment of learning outcomes by both faculty and employer should be conducted (Alpert, Heaney, & Kuhn, 2009).

INTRODUCTION

Since 1906 many educators have known, with the birth of the cooperative education movement, that experiential education offered a tremendous learning opportunity for college students. Since that time the manifestations of experiential education have taken many different forms, been administered in various ways with varying educational philosophies governing

the pedagogical foundation of the curriculum across different countries, campuses, and now, delivery platforms. In the past few decades, across the U.S., internships have been increasingly incorporated into the curriculum in both liberal arts and pre-professional academic programs. In some programs, at some colleges and universities, internships are credit bearing, in others — even on the same campus — internships do not carry academic credit. Regardless of the structure of the program, when academic credits are earned, tuition is charged. This article will examine the inter-relationships between internships, academic credit, a meaningful learning experience, a Return on Investment (ROI), and compliance with the Department of Labor (DOL) for unpaid internships in the for-profit sector (Bennett, 2011). What has loosely been termed, “the perfect storm,” has created the need to examine these relationships and the ethicality of charging tuition for academic credits earned for an internship, without the concurrent delivery of a robust academic experience. Drawn from a doctoral study conducted in 2014, the author will present an argument for how to ensure academic value and a ROI from college internship programs.

THE ETHICAL CHALLENGE OF CHARGING TUITION DOLLARS FOR INTERNSHIPS

While some liberal arts colleges and universities have never offered academic credit for internships, other colleges and universities have increasingly supported credit bearing internships as their value has almost become

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a mandate for employability for college graduates. The experiences, many inside and outside of academia believe, provide direct exposure to industry practice and professional norms as well as the opportunity to build and/or hone professional skills. The latest issue now under the microscope is whether credit bearing internships — and the requisite exchange of tuition dollars — are a worthwhile investment. The pedagogical structure of internship programs and the manner in which credit is earned varies widely across institutions of higher education. And, herein lies the problem with painting all credit-bearing unpaid internships with the same brush.

Recently some have argued that many unpaid internships for college credit simply are of little value to the student by these measures (Mangan, 2014), and institutions cannot ethically charge tuition for internship programs that are poorly designed, with no clear strategy for how to deliver meaningful learning outcomes associated with an internship experience. A recently published Inside Higher Ed article — *Paying to Work — New twist in the debate over unpaid internships is whether colleges should charge tuition for them* (Wexler, 2016) — identifies elements of collegiate institutional support that warrant charging tuition for credit bearing internships. This author believes that

there are precise pedagogical elements that the internship programs must include in order to deliver a ROI, comply with the DOL, be ethically and pedagogically sound, and meet both students and employer's needs. The internship program structure and its pedagogical framework are integral to the academic experience and hence the academic value offered through internships, warranting the cost of tuition. Specifically, the intern should be engaged in directed curriculum, concurrent with the internship experience, which includes structured reflections, discipline and industry-specific readings, facilitated peer discussions, and a formal presentation of learning outcomes. Regular collaboration and communication between academia and industry should be initiated and maintained by an assessment of learning outcomes by both faculty and employer. Without a commitment to providing an academically structured field work curriculum, which includes evaluative feedback and assessed learning outcomes, the question arises, what are students being charged tuition for?

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ON THE LEGALITY AND VALUE OF UNPAID INTERNSHIPS

Discovering what learning outcomes are achieved through an unpaid, academic

internship is important to those in academia, industry, and experiential education as a whole. Data for the doctoral study was collected using an online survey, composed of 28 questions, which was sent to 60 participants, with the goal of receiving 20 responses. In addition, in-depth, responsive interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) were conducted with eight participants. The survey was designed with some multiple-choice questions and several open-ended questions that encouraged comments. The study this article draws from was an in-depth examination of the perspectives and practices of internship advisers. The structure, processes, and personnel involved with internship programming varies widely from institution to institution. The participant sample for the study represented that variety. The participants were representative of large and small, public and private, urban, suburban and rural institutions of higher education. They all advised undergraduates, and in addition, as indicated on the survey, 59% advised both graduate and non-traditional students. The titles of the participants represent both faculty and staff positions, and range from Coordinator to Assistant Dean and include key words such as experiential, career development, and internships. All of the participants worked or had worked directly in an advisory capacity with students completing unpaid internships in the for profit sector. The findings represented variations in student population size, campus type, geographic location, type of student populations served,

and the role the participant plays and the title they hold in regard to internship programming. The survey respondents indicated that the percent of unpaid internships ranged from 15% to 100%, with the average indicating that 64% of academic internships are unpaid. The study examined how advisors' approaches and processes had shifted in response to the increased media attention (Schorr, 2014) on unpaid internships, the reissuance of the DOL fact sheet #71(DOL, 2010), and increased demand for a ROI from a college education.

Utilizing the framework of informal learning theory (Eraut, 2004) and the 5-stage model of skills acquisition (Dreyfus, 2004) one can evaluate if an unpaid internship falls within the guidelines of the DOL (DOL, 2010). If an intern effectively demonstrated mastery of discipline specific skills, as outlined by Dreyfus (1984), through their unpaid internships, and if the internship was conducive to informal learning (Eraut, 2004), the lack of compensation was justified, according to the law, and implied a ROI. What was not fully addressed in the data was the socio-economic inequality that is perpetuated by unpaid internships (Edwards & Hertel-Fernandez, 2010). Unless all students have equal access to the learning opportunities and skills acquisition currently available through unpaid internships, this practice will continue to negatively impact the economy and further perpetuate a deepening class divide (Gregory, 1998), as well as increase the scrutiny for a ROI from unpaid internships.

ABBREVIATED LITERATURE REVIEW — ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT FOR THE FINDINGS

The literature reviewed for the study revealed that unpaid internships have become a vital component of the labor market, can demonstrate a return on investment of a college degree, a rite of passage, and a complex social justice issue that must be addressed. The U.S. DOL laws have not kept pace with the prevalence and importance of internships as integral to a college education and yet the federal government has a critical responsibility to ensure that workers of all kinds are not subject to discrimination, are compensated fairly for their contributions, that social injustice is not institutionalized through unpaid internships, and that employers do not have an incentive to replace full time workers with unpaid interns (Edwards & Hertel-Fernandez, 2010, Bacon, 2011, Curiale, 2010). Additionally, institutions of higher education are responsible for the experiences of their students and delivering a ROI on a college education. As institutions are responsible for providing a safe living environment and a dynamic learning environment, so too are they responsible for their students' field based learning experiences, particularly if they are collecting tuition for such opportunities (Fink, 2013). As the literature demonstrated, there is accountability, for all stakeholders in experiential education, in this case unpaid internships: employers, students, academic advisers, and the federal government. The quandary remains, however, are experiential educators taking the appropriate steps to

ensure we can demonstrate a return on investment from unpaid internships, particularly as "regulation itself may deprive student interns' considerable opportunities and diminish individual prospects for employment" (Gregory, 1998, p. 253). One would hope that this deprivation in the short term may result long term in employers offering compensation for internships and as FDR hoped in 1937, "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work" (as cited by Curiale, 2010, p. 101).

ESTABLISHING A ROI FROM INTERNSHIPS THROUGH ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

Almost all the participants noted that students were under more financial pressure since the economic crash in 2008, and were more responsible for personally supporting their education. While record numbers of high school graduates are attending college, the cost of college continues to rise, and family incomes are not keeping pace with this increase. Most families are not able to contribute significantly to the cost of their children's education. Since 1982, the cost of tuition has been increasing at triple the rate of inflation (Odland, 2012). As a result, the affordability and the value of a college education are being called into question (Wildavsky, Kelly, & Carey, 2011). There is significant data, however, which indicates that despite the increasing costs of tuition, a college degree has never been more valuable. In the U.S., a child from a family living in the bottom quartile of wage earners, who earns

a college degree, has an 84% probability of rising above the bottom quartile, whereas a child from the bottom quartile, who does not earn a college degree, has only a 5% probability of rising above the bottom quartile (Markovich, 2012). Later in life, graduates enjoy substantially higher earning potential, but most graduating college students initially struggle to obtain an economic foothold. This scenario has added significant pressure for colleges to deliver a greater ROI, as the stakes have become so high. Effective internship programming has become one way that colleges and universities have attempted to deliver a ROI. It now behooves experiential educators to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that when charging tuition dollars for unpaid internships, we can, in fact, document a return on investment from those internships. Assessment of learning outcomes from traditional academic courses has become more important in academia in the past few decades. With the pressure to demonstrate a ROI from a college degree, evidence of concrete learning is critical to many stakeholders in academia. Additionally, assessment of learning outcomes from internships has become critical in establishing the value of internship programming, in regards to both ROI from a college degree, as well as compliance with the DOL Fact Sheet #71.

The interface with employers and the requirement of a performance evaluation of the intern are important components that keep the focus on the learning. Sapp and Zhang (2009) assert, “a more systematic approach to using industry feedback is

warranted as a valuable component of the overall assessment of student learning outcomes” (p. 280). Assessment practices of experiential education are not well developed across the globe, yet are critical to understanding the value inherent in unpaid internships, as well as other forms of work-integrated learning. Determining the value of unpaid internships by assessing the learning outcomes of these experiences is of primary importance to all stakeholders involved with experiential education.

Sturre Von Treuer, Keele and Moss (2012) promote the use of formative assessment (using judgments for the purposes of ongoing improvement), as this facilitates learning and reflection, appropriate in education. What is learned from formative assessment is incorporated into adjustments made to the content or context of the learning. The formative assessment process is utilized in a developmental way to further the student’s learning from the placement and the activities therein. There is a feedback process inherent in formative assessment protocols. Attention is given to the development of “tacit competencies that enhance the immediate and future employability of students” (Sturre et al., 2012, p. 73). The assessments may determine how successfully a student is moving through the 5-stages of skills acquisition (Dreyfus, 2004) while participating in an internship. While there are many effective outcomes from formative assessment practices, there are some limitations as well. Sturre et al. (2012) discuss the limitations of formative assessment practices, including

the facts that it is resource intensive, assessors should be trained, and how there is a need for multiple assessors. Dunn, Shier, and Fonseca (2012) developed an assessment model for multidisciplinary workplace settings. The model promoted the use of a multi-faceted portfolio, which included “a series of structured written reports, the development of learning objectives and reflective summaries, the development of an experience record sheet, a map of students’ graduate attribution development, and the submission of a cumulative collection of work as a portfolio” (p. 139). According to Dunn et al. (2012), “The authenticity of this approach was increased as the employer was required to authenticate the portfolio” (p. 141). Alpert et al. (2009) developed guidelines for what should be included in a formative assessment. The components that Alpert et al. (2009) recommended for inclusion were a draft of the internship project proposal, a mid-semester progress report, and a major report applying textbook principles, to be reviewed by both the employer and the faculty supervisor. Alpert et al. (2009) found that a portfolio of work, activity logs, weekly reflection journals, literature reviews, article analyses, oral presentations, and final reflection papers had “all been used as part of assessment” (p. 38). Jaekel, Hector, Northwood, Benzinger, Salinitri, Johrendt, and Watters (2011) postulate that students should be assessed through a variety of methods that are not only objective (tests), but also subjective (portfolio review, observations, oral presentations), so they

can “reflect on their performance and make necessary adjustments that will foster growth” (p. 22). Whatever the methodology used for assessment or what artifacts are included in assessment; findings should be aligned with the DOL criteria, employer expectations, and institutional learning goals.

The literature reveals that there is tremendous variability in the responsibility for whom conducts assessment. In some cases, assessment is conducted entirely by faculty, in some cases, assessment is balanced between employer and faculty; additionally, in some cases, students’ self-assessment, peer-assessment, and portfolios are a significant part of the final evaluation, at other times portfolios are not included at all. In a majority of the models reviewed, in the literature as well as the empirical data collected here, a student’s final evaluation was a combination of feedback from the employer, the faculty member, and from a student’s demonstration of capabilities via written work and reflection. Alpert et al. (2009) found that grading and “maintaining the integrity of the grading process,” (p. 39) was a challenge. Some employers’ welcome being involved in the students’ evaluation, others do not. This was evidenced in the data collected through the survey and the interviews for the doctoral study (Burrows, 2015).

Maxwell and Lopus (2001) identified a “Lake Wobegon effect” (p. 201) in student self-reported data. In short, self-perception was inflated positively and did not reflect objective reality. This calls into question the

validity of students' self-assessment data in evaluating their internships. Cooke and Cambell (1979) also identified self-reported data, using surveys, as potentially biased, as students have a tendency to report what "reflects positively on their abilities, knowledge, and so forth" (as cited by Jaekel et al., 2011, p.15). The portfolio assessment model, put forth by Dunn et al. (2012), required the engagement of students, faculty, and employers. While this triangulation approach lends itself to greater authenticity, it requires a great amount of time and other resources. Ferns and Moore (2012) indicate that assessment of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a multidimensional task, which blends "teaching, facilitating grading, grading, and organizational and interpersonal skills for successful implementation" (p. 219). Ferns and Moore (2012) also recognized this process as resource heavy, but saw it as a necessity for universities to move to an "evidence-based and standards-focused regulatory framework" (p. 219). As the demands for a ROI from a college degree and compliance with DOL regulations increase, assessment protocols will become a more visible requisite in internship programming.

The introduction of assessment protocols as a standard component of any internship program will require another layer of diligence. Some colleges and universities have assessment practices for internships in place. Some would need to be developed. The steps involved in establishing assessment practices for field-based learning would involve a program evaluation, a defined list of desired

learning outcomes, an assessment tool, and an excellent communications strategy to roll out the assessment initiative. Accountability for administering the program, collecting the results, analyzing the data, and reporting the results would have to be assigned. While this is resource intensive, this research (Burrows, 2015) indicated assessment as an essential component of internship programming yet to be fully developed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION FOR INTERNSHIP PROGRAMMING

What emerged from *Giving and Getting; the Changing Landscape of Unpaid Internships* (Burrows, 2015) are implications for practice, which are greater educational and governmental oversight prior to and at the conclusion of an internship placement. Requiring a detailed description of the responsibilities and supervision available at an internship from an employer as well as a commitment to post the DOL Fact Sheet #71 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the workplace is crucial. Semi-regular contact or visitation at the internship work site by the academic internship adviser ensures that effective learning, evaluative feedback, and supervision are occurring. Assessment of learning outcomes from the internship allows for demonstrated evidence of a ROI and compliance with the DOL criteria for unpaid internships. Stipends for students with demonstrated need, or federal-intern study funds, could be institutionalized to enable

greater access across socio-economic lines to the educational and professional benefits derived from an unpaid internship.

The area in which internship programming is housed in the academic institution has implications in regards to its integration with academic learning outcomes and curriculum. This stems from the educational philosophy of the institution and the value placed on experiential education. Across the globe, the value in academia of experiential education, service and global awareness has risen in importance and become a more central message in many academic institutions' mission statements. This shift has meant that more internship advisers hold faculty rank, or the reporting structure for the internship initiative is on the academic affairs "side of the house." There are common assumptions of administrators, faculty, and advisers about "best practices" and learning outcomes for internships, yet it appeared at first glance that oversight was left to happenstance and the learning outcomes from internship experiences are not assessed effectively or reported on, nor are they always communicated to employers (Bull, 2014). Burrows (2015) discovered this happenstance is not typical on the campuses studied. At Messiah College, "we make sure that the employers

understand what our expectations are of them, and those expectations primarily are a clear position description, regular feedback, and a willingness to evaluate the student at the mid-semester point and at the end of the semester" (M. Train, personal communication, Nov. 10, 2014, as cited in Burrows, 2015).

Through the lens of informal learning (Eraut, 2004), the study looked at how internship programs were structured, including systems for establishing learning outcomes, communicating with employers, and articulating the underlying pedagogy guiding the reflective activities through field-work classroom discussions and written reflections. If the internship was credit bearing, as was indicated by 94.1% of survey responses, this lent academic weight and credibility to the experience. The academic components typically associated with earning academic credit, as indicated by 88.2% of survey responses, included some or all of the following components: a learning contract, a face-to-face or virtual class with faculty facilitated peer discussion, written reflections or journals, a learning portfolio, and an oral presentation. Of the survey participants, 48% reported that internships were a graduation requirement, and 76.5% of these internships were graded.

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The structure of internship programming includes the employer's program as well. In any job, one's supervisor plays an important part of the overall experience of that job. One of the first rules for a successful internship is there has to be somebody on site who is going to be a supervisor, who is a specialist in the student's field, and can provide effective guidance and evaluative feedback that is specific to that discipline. One guideline an adviser communicated is that, "there needs to be someone who's interested in supervision and that's usually the person who has the credentials, who's interested in an active mentoring situation" (A. Botts, personal communication, Oct. 31, 2014, as cited in Burrows, 2015). There are some activities which are particularly beneficial to the learning outcomes of the interns, such as, "sitting in on regular meetings, working with a client to see how a professional reacts when a client says 'I hate this,' and the intern learns what to do and how to handle that" (A. Botts, personal communication, Oct. 31, 2014, as cited in Burrows, 2015).

The structure of the internship programming at all the colleges and universities studied appeared tied to the individuals in charge at that time. Some advisers had developed the systems they were using, others had inherited them, but most processes had not been institutionally initiated. It became clear through the process of the research that

the role of the specific adviser was critical to the way the programs were structured. Summed up in this way by one adviser, "You know how it is in higher education, things change, people leave, I don't want to say it's a revolving door but these programs are changing hands and if someone's in place that might not be as proactive or takes more of a reactive approach in running a program like this I can see where the outcomes are not clearly as rich anymore" (J. Cates, personal communication, Nov. 14, 2014, as cited in Burrows, 2015).

The issue of accountability on the part of all stakeholders is important; it is up to educators, employers, and students, to ensure that educational elements and established learning outcomes beyond the day-to-day tasks are incorporated into internships, and to ensure that the learning experience from an internship can demonstrate a ROI. Employers need to know what is considered legitimate and beneficial and educators need to be comfortable holding employers accountable. Students need to ask good questions and make good decisions as these components are how students develop critical thinking skills, a sought after attribute. Effective communication can play a key role in guiding stakeholders through the changes that arose as a result of the DOL guidelines and the increased demand for a ROI from a college education, including credit bearing internships.

CONCLUSION

The implications of the doctoral study (Burrows, 2015) study established that there are clear linkages between all the themes that emerged from the empirical data (see Figure 6, Burrows, 2015). The way in which internship programming is structured and positioned within the academic institution can ensure an integration of academic rigor into the internship experience, the effective interface with employers, compliance with the DOL guidelines, and an ability to demonstrate a ROI. If centrally positioned institutionally and adequately resourced, internship advisers can focus on maintaining an adequate supply of quality internships for their student body, work on addressing the issue of non-compensation as a serious obstacle for

some students, and ensure that assessment of learning outcomes from internships is institutionalized. For successful cultivation of meaningful, educational internship experiences, which are in compliance with the law (Durrant, 2013), and can demonstrate an ROI, there needs to be a collaborative approach, with clear communications, among academic internship advisers, academic institutional leadership and industry internship supervisors (Bull, 2014).

Figure 1 represents the consistent themes that emerged from the data collected from internship advisers for *“Giving and Getting - Examining the Changing Landscape of Unpaid Internships”* (Burrows, 2015). The theme most often referenced as critical to quality internships that delivered a ROI was the

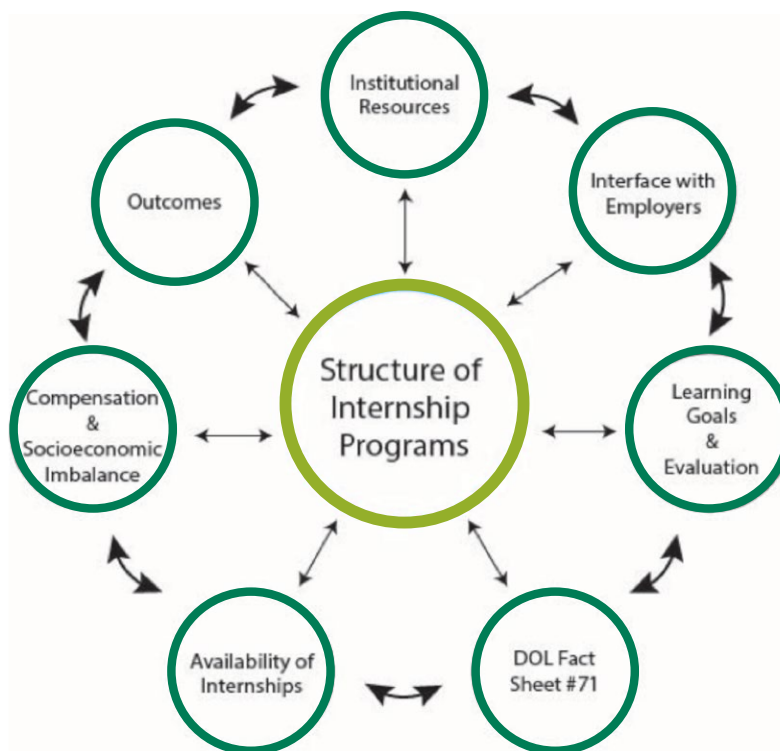


figure 1.

structure of internships programs — as outlined earlier in this paper. The participants in the study, while they worked in very different academic contexts, spoke the same language about experiential education. The focus on the learning, along with the commitment to guiding the interns through the internships to ensure maximum benefit gained and demonstrate a ROI, were common threads for all these participants. With an increasing emphasis on global and 21st century competencies to be gained through higher education, along with increasing pressure from many stakeholders for a ROI from a college degree, experiential education will very likely play a larger role in a student's academic plan. It was clear that greater cross-fertilization of ideas between practitioners would be fruitful, and possibly generate more common systems for the administration and assessment of experiential education. There was a sense of frustration expressed by internships advisers that they worked in a silo, not only on their own campus, but also across the spectrum of institutions of higher education. The professional associations, aligned with experiential education — CEIA, WACE, NACE, and NEACEFE — to name a few, all play a role in breaking down these silos and fostering best practices for internship programming, nationally and internationally. Cross fertilization of ideas for assessment processes, positioning experiential education centrally in the institutional mission and infrastructure, promoting experiential education as an integrated, academic experience, which

produce a verifiable demonstration of a ROI — indicate that the learning outcomes from internships are unique to that domain and will have irreplaceable value as part of a college education for the foreseeable future.

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