Do Family and Child Development Internships Make a Difference? Evidence from the Auburn University Experience

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Professional internships are hypothesized to benefit students by easing the transition from school to work setting through promoting vocational crystallization, lessening the reality shock associated with work-force entry, and affording greater employment opportunities. In recent years, many family and child development programs have incorporated a professional internship into the curriculum. This paper describes one such internship program and presents results of a survey of its graduates. Alumni ratings of internship adequacy were significantly correlated with overall satisfaction with training in the department, and alumni who affiliated themselves with the family and child profession rated the quality of their internships higher than alumni who did not associate themselves with the profession. Directions for future research are based on theoretical and empirical work regarding the value of internships for student development.

In recent years an increased emphasis has been placed on the inclusion of internship experiences as an integral part of a wide range of university undergraduate curricula (e.g., family science, business, engineering, pharmacy). The salience of undergraduate internships is at least partially due to the fact that institutions of higher education are being held to a bidimensional standard of "accountability" and "employability" (Meszaros, 1978). In addition, employers are pressuring colleges and universities to prepare students more adequately (i.e., more realistically) for the demands of their first position (American Society for Personnel Administration, 1984).

BENEFITS OF INTERNSHIPS

As we have already suggested, the value of internships as an integral part of an undergraduate curriculum is recognized by academicians, students, and employers alike (Hall, 1976; McCaffery, 1979; Taylor & Dunham, 1980). While we generally think of

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Internships as offering direct benefits to students, we also should recognize the fact that internships can similarly benefit sponsoring universities as well as the agencies and organizations who participate in the internship program (McCaffery, 1979).

Benefits to Students

It is well documented that students often experience difficulty in moving from the school to the work setting (Taylor 1985). From the students' perspective, then, perhaps the foremost benefit of an internship is its usefulness in easing the transition from school to work (Taylor 1988). This notion is supported by the hypothesis that performing job tasks relevant to one's chosen career field facilitates the identification of relevant vocational skills, career paths, and work values, thus helping to solidify one's professional identity (Hall, 1976; McCaffery, 1979). As a result of this vocational "crystallization" fostered by the field experience, Taylor (1988) suggest that former interns are more likely to be satisfied with their first jobs and remain in them longer than students who did not have an internship experience.

In addition to greater professional clarity, it also has been suggested that internships aid in the transition from school to work because former interns are less likely than those without an internship to experience the reality shock often associated with entry into the work force (Hall, 1976; Kramer, 1974; Taylor, 1988). In general, reality shock occurs when students discover that practices, standards, and values taught in the classroom conflict with those of the workplace. As Taylor (1988) and others (e.g., Atkins, 1980; McCaffery, 1979) have suggested, interns are exposed to a more realistic view of their future professional role than are typical students. Therefore, interns experiencing student versus professional role conflicts have a greater opportunity to resolve them before entering the career arena than students without the benefits of an internship.

Finally, it appears that the transition from school to work may be made easier for interns because of the greater employment opportunities afforded students who participate in an internship (Henry, 1979; McClam & Kessler, 1982). Specifically, interns may be able to secure jobs through more informal networking sources (e.g., work colleagues, professional organizations) rather than having to depend on more formal means such as placement services and newspaper ads. Interestingly, research findings suggest that informal job contacts tend to be associated with more satisfying job opportunities than those discovered through more formal sources (Granovetter, 1974; Taylor, 1984). Additionally, Taylor (1988) hypothesized that interns generally are evaluated more positively by prospective employers and receive more job offers at higher salaries than students without such experience. This positive evaluation may be due partly to the fact that the professional training received during the internship enhances students' "interpersonal literacy" skills (McCaffery, 1979). That is, interns learn the art of effective communication within an organization in order to achieve specified goals. Certainly, these improved communication skills are an asset to students during career interviews when it is necessary to articulate clearly and concisely one's career objectives.
Benefits to Universities and Organizations

While our primary interest in internships relates to the benefits undergraduate students derive professionally from participating in such an experience, we also are concerned with ways in which internships benefit the university and host organization. For instance, a university internship program supplements classroom instruction by providing an inexpensive learning medium (McCaffery, 1979). Through the feedback received from interns and organizational supervisors, curriculum development can be enhanced as faculty examine the degree to which what is being taught in the classroom matches what is expected professionally of students in the actual work situation (Blase & Fixsen, 1981; McCaffery, 1979). Furthermore, interns who return to school after the completion of their internship can serve as role models of professional competence as they relate to other students the roles and responsibilities of a professional in a specified work situation.

Organizations who host interns also stand to gain from their participation. Specifically, many organizations such as family and human services agencies suffer from manpower shortages and welcome the addition of a young professional at little or no cost to assist in the completion of a special project. Additionally, organizations often find value in having bright, talented students contribute a new perspective (McCaffery, 1979). Last, but not least, a quality internship program is a good public relations tool for both universities and organizations. Since highly motivated and well-trained interns are a positive reflection of the sponsoring university and the host organization, both groups will likely have their reputations enhanced within the community and among their colleagues.

THE AUBURN UNIVERSITY FAMILY AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Since we consider the internship program to be a vital and necessary part of our undergraduate curriculum in the Department of Family and Child Development (FCD) at Auburn University, we would like to share our department's program with others. Internships have been a required part of the undergraduate curriculum for all majors in Family and Child Development at Auburn University since 1984. Prior to that internships were offered on an elective basis, although almost all students chose to participate.

Objectives

The major objectives of the FCD internship program are:

1. To provide the senior level student with an opportunity to acquire skills in the delivery of family and human services.
2. To familiarize the student with the overall structure, functions, and methods of operation in a family and human services organization.
3. To put into practice in a field setting the theories and principles learned in formal coursework.
4. To facilitate the student's understanding of the role of a professional, including responsibilities associated with a job as well as the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of a career.

5. To enhance professional growth and development through increased self-awareness.

Framework of the Program

The internship is a one academic quarter (i.e., approximately 10 weeks) learning experience set within the framework of our departmental program. The field experience carries with it specified course prerequisites and normally comes within the last two quarters of the senior year. The amount of course credit assigned to the internship varies from 5-15 credit hours. A minimum of 2 1/2 clock hours of field work per week is required for each credit hour taken.

Criteria for Quality Internship Sites

Internship placements should provide our students with educational direction, supervised professional practice, and other safeguards that promote student learning. We expect that the agency will be committed to following through with the intern in the prescribed manner contractually agreed upon until the end of the placement. We specifically request that intern assignments be easily understood, visibly accomplished, helpful to those receiving services, and of educational and professional value to the student.

Procedure for Selection of Quality Internship Sites

Our students are responsible for locating an appropriate internship site in accordance with the following guidelines:

1. Contact the prospective agencies or organizations and arrange an interview with the appropriate personnel to discuss potential placement. (Student are strongly urged to interview with at least two agencies before deciding upon a placement.)

2. Send a resume to personnel in the prospective agency prior to the scheduled date of the interview.

3. During the interview, students should be sure the following concerns are addressed: (a) purposes and requirements of the FCD internship; (b) reasons why the student wishes to work in a particular specialty area (e.g., child life, adolescent drug and alcohol rehabilitation, adult day care); (c) agency expectations and requirements in regard to the student and the FCD department; and (d) dates and number of hours student will be working in the agency.

After placement is approved, an Agreement of Cooperation between the FCD Department and the selected agency is signed and all written materials relating to internship objectives and evaluation procedures are sent to the agency supervisor.
In addition to working in an assigned agency, all interns must complete a senior internship project. This project is a comprehensive four-part written assignment covering the following areas: (a) historical overview of the agency (e.g., brief history, organizational chart, goals and policies of the organization); (b) self-examination of issues related to professional growth and development (e.g., position statement summarizing intern's evolving philosophy as a family and human services professional, discussion of roles and responsibilities of professionals in the intern's specialty area, outline of short and long-term goals); (c) summary of internship (e.g., objective overview focusing on services offered and population served, responsibilities as an intern in relation to responsibilities of other professionals, specific contributions made by the intern; subjective impressions including insights about human behavior in regard to self, colleagues, and clients served); (d) evaluation of internship (e.g., discussion of fit between goals and purposes of agency and those of department, strengths and weaknesses of experience, overall level of satisfaction with internship).

Evaluation of the Internship

The intern's final grade is assigned by the internship director and is based on the following criteria: (a) mid-quarter and final written evaluations by the agency supervisor (consists of 6-point rating scale of 20 items related to the quality of intern performance as well as a written narrative by supervisor and intern); (b) periodic consultations with intern and agency supervisor; (c) on-site observation by internship director if distance permits); and (d) quality of the senior internship project. Two-thirds of the intern's grade is contingent on the quality of performance within the agency setting, and the other third is based on the quality of the senior internship project.

Internship Sites

Since 1984 when the internship became mandatory for all Family and Child Development undergraduates, we have been observing the growth in the range and quality of placements selected by our students. Although space, unfortunately, does not permit us to detail the wide variety of approved placement sites, we would like to offer our readers a sampling of the types of internships our students are doing as well as their locations.

As might be expected, a large number of our students intern in traditional FCD-related family and human services agencies within the local community or their hometowns. Examples include family life education programs in hospitals, day care centers and church-sponsored preschool programs, youth development programs, adult activity centers and nursing homes, state/country day care licensing offices, state-supported child welfare programs, substance abuse rehabilitation agencies, Cooperative Extension/4-H programs, pregnancy prevention programs, and programs for teenage mothers.

More recently, others have begun securing placements that represent less traditional family and child development internships. To illustrate, one intern worked in the human
resources department at the regional medical center in our area. A portion of her time was spent assisting the Director of Development in raising funds for hospital projects such as the new pediatric wing. Another intern accepted a placement in a large resort hotel working under the supervision of the hotel's activities director. Among other things, the intern had major responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating recreational camps for children of conventioneers.

Many of our students are interested in working as child life specialists (i.e., professionals who are responsible for meeting the psychosocial needs of children and families within a medical setting) and have been fortunate in securing placements in such prestigious teaching hospitals as The Children's Hospital of Alabama, Vanderbilt University Hospital, University of California Davis Medical Center, and Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Additionally, a few of our undergraduates complete research internships in their specialty area (e.g., infancy). For example, in recent years we have placed one student at the National Institute of Mental Health as a research assistant. Likewise, another student completed her research internship at Harvard Medical School's Children's Hospital working closely with one of our nation's leading pediatricians. Research internships provide students who are interested in graduate school with some research skills and a preview of the rewards and frustrations of an academic career in family and child development.

EVIDENCE OF THE VALUE OF THE INTERNSHIP

Although our data are limited in many respects, a 1985 survey of our graduates provides some support for the value of a high quality internship program. In this survey, which was returned by 183 of our approximately 800 alumni who graduated between 1970 and 1985, alumni were asked, among other questions, whether or not their first job had been in a family and child related profession, and whether they identified themselves as a family and child professional. Furthermore, alumni were asked to rate the adequacy of their internships and their satisfaction with their training in family and child development. Using a 4-point Likert scale on which 4 = very adequate and 1 = very inadequate, alumni who affiliated themselves with the family and child profession (n = 97) rated the quality of their internship higher (m = 3.56, sd = .66) than alumni who did not associate themselves with the profession (n = 24, m = 3.17, sd = .92) (F (1,119) = 5.68, p < .02). There was also a trend for alumni to rate their internship as more adequate if their first position was in family and child development, although this analysis fell short of reaching significance (m = 3.57, sd = .69, n = 73 and m = 3.31, sd = .87, n = 35 for alumni whose first job was in a family and child position vs. was not in a family in child position, respectively, F = 2.88, p = .09). Thus, alumni who saw themselves as family and child professionals perceived their internships to be of higher quality than those who did not associate themselves with the profession.

In addition to contributing to professional development and affiliation, the quality of the internship may affect the student's overall perception of his or her training. Alumni ratings of the adequacy of their internships were significantly related to their ratings of overall satisfaction with the training they had received in the department (r = .33, p = .0003). Furthermore, ratings of internship adequacy showed a negative correlation with age (r = -.23, p = .01), indicating that younger alumni saw the
internship in a more favorable light. This pattern may reflect the department's efforts in recent years to professionalize the internship experience. While these data must be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and the retrospective and self-report nature of the survey, they suggest the important role internships can play in a student's professional development.

The value and success of our internship program is probably best demonstrated by the feedback we get from students and organizational supervisors. As the literature suggests (e.g., McCaffery, 1979; Taylor, 1988), students consistently report that the internship is an invaluable educational experience which gives them first-hand knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of a family and human services professional. It is heartening to note the degree to which our students report feeling more confident in relating to clients and other professionals over the course of the internship. One student wrote, "This experience really gave me a chance to learn a lot about myself, my abilities, and my weaknesses as well as what I want out of my career in child life. I know now that I am truly capable of working with children in a hospital setting." Reflecting on her ability to relate to other professionals, another intern stated, "I feel I have gained confidence in my abilities and my ideas. I am now not afraid to voice my opinion when appropriate) on child development issues." As illustrated by the above statement, interns also are quick to point out that the experience fosters a high degree of personal growth. For many, the internship helps clarify career goals and provides a base from which to begin a job search. In fact, we have noticed over the past couple of years an increase in the number of interns who are offered permanent jobs with their host agency or organization.

Supervisors are also extremely positive about our internship program. We consistently receive feedback about the high degree of professionalism our interns exhibit and the innovative perspectives they bring to the organization. One supervisor wrote, "Let me begin by saying that (the student) has contributed significantly to our Child Life Program during her internship. If a position were available at our facility, I would not hesitate to offer it to her...In her time with us, (the student) has enriched the lives of children, families, and staff. What helps us accept her leaving is the certain knowledge that she will bring her unique gifts to another facility and that, in the larger picture, she will be a tremendous asset to the Child Life Profession."

Looking at our internship program from a departmental perspective, we would have to attribute much of its success to the emphasis that we place on it as an opportunity for further professionalization. As we have noted, prospective interns are required to locate their own placements rather than being assigned one by the department. This experience is similar to a job search, and the student must be prepared to submit a resume and to have an on-site interview with a potential organization. By going through this process, we think students are more apt to find placement compatible with their goals than if we assigned an internship. Furthermore, there are no geographic restrictions placed on internship sites, as long as a placement meets our criteria for a quality site. Thus, interns have many more alternatives from which to choose than if they were restricted to the local area. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the program is successful because it has the full support of faculty within the department.
DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Research directions. Although our attempt to evaluate quantitatively the efficacy of our internship program is promising, it represents only a crude effort in this regard. While there is virtually no research on the value of internship experiences for family and child development students, and recent research and theory development within other fields is very limited, the little information available provides a rich source of guidance for family and child development research. For instance, work within the field of management indicates that the simple presence or absence of an internship experience may not be as important as qualitative differences in internship experiences (Taylor, 1988). Specifically, although any type of internship appeared to enhance a student's employment opportunities in Taylor's sample, only students who were given high degrees of autonomy in their internships exhibited advantages in career crystallization and job reality shock. Thus, moderator variables, such as degree of autonomy given in the internship, probably play an important role in student professionalization and deserve our attention. Other moderator variables that may influence the value of internships in student development include the amount of structure and organization in the work environment (Morris & Haas, 1984), similarity of the internship to actual work, and the degree of supervision students receive. Thus, one important question for family and child professionals is, under what conditions do interns experience professional growth?

Recent research in other fields also suggests ways of assessing the impact of internships on students. As previously mentioned, Taylor (1988) hypothesizes that internships mediate the difficult transition between school and work in at least three ways: (a) facilitating crystallization of vocational self-concept and work values, (b) decreasing the reality shock of the first job, and (c) providing students with better employment opportunities. Taylor found at least partial support for each of these effects and these data provide tentative support for some of Taylor's hypothesized relationships. Specifically, or data suggest a relationship between quality of internship and identification with the profession. This conclusion must remain tentative due to the retrospective and self-report nature of our data, but it suggests at least one direction for future research. Thus, another important question for family and child professionals is, in what ways does a high quality internship impact on a student's professional development?

Practical issues. Obtaining answers to research questions such as those we have suggested should help family and child professionals provide better internships for students. In the meantime, however, several practical steps can be taken to strengthen internship programs and their value to both students and the sponsoring academic units. First, there is a need to expand internship placement sites beyond those that are traditional for family and child students. As noted earlier, over the past 5 years, students in this department increasingly have sought out non-traditional sites such as research facilities, teaching hospitals, and family resorts. Among the benefits of a wider range of internship placements is an expanded job market for students and greater visibility for the department.

A second issue involves compensation for interns. Although students in our internship program are not paid, monetary compensation is common in some academic fields such as business and engineering. Financial compensation or a cost of living stipend for interns is a practice in some internship programs (Brown & Balzer, 1978). In addition, large corporations are now able to provide financial compensation or stipends to interns rather than pay students for their service.

Finally, it is important to note that internships are not right for all students. Without careful planning, programs can make internships so onerous that interns may experience negative outcomes that interfere with their academic work.
stipend may be essential for some students who have identified a non-traditional internship placement out of state but who cannot afford to move to that location for a quarter or a semester. One possibility is to write grants to fund internships (Meszaros, 1978). In addition, if students branch out into less traditional internship sites such as large corporations (e.g., manufacturers of children’s products), some sponsors may be able to provide a stipend.

Finally, in order to provide adequate supervision to students, faculty in charge of internships must be given sufficient release time to stay in close contact with interns. Without a faculty member who has time to coordinate and supervise interns, the program is likely to be handled in a slipshod and unprofessional manner, and both the students and the departmental reputation are likely to suffer. This, of course, implies that internships must become a high priority of family and child departments and must be seen as a critical experience for student professionalization.

REFERENCES


