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Internships in Public Relations and Advertising: The Nature of the Experience From the Student's Perspective

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Internships in Public Relation and Advertising:
The Nature of the Experience From the Student's Perspective

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my good friend, Esther Kleiman, for inspiring and encouraging me throughout this journey. Esther taught me through example that you are never too old to follow your dreams.

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Abstract

This qualitative content analysis examines the nature of experience of public relations and advertising interns. Three decades of scholarly inquiry into the internship experience has provided little insight into the actual experience of the interns themselves. Yet what is learned directly from their individual experience can provide both educators and professionals valuable insight for enhancing the learning process. The following study is a qualitative content analysis of journals and focus groups of undergraduates enrolled in public relations and advertising internships/practicums. The interns' experience follows four themes: (1) the perception of importance; (2) perceived learning benefits; (3) influence of supervisors; and (4) the quest for meaningful work. Through these themes, the experiential learning cycle is evidenced as students reflect, conceptualize, and experiment through their experience.

Chapter One

Introduction

So widespread is the use of interns that it is difficult to find an organization within communications and the media that has never drawn on the nation's pool of 57,000 undergraduate communications majors (Neff & Arata, 2007). The media provides a highly charged, perpetually changing, and often frantic work environment. The inner workings of a newsroom, an advertising agency, a public relations firm, or production studio cannot be understood through textbooks and lectures alone (Stroup & Speight, 2000). Hence, academic studies are complemented by "real world" experience, putting classroom-learned knowledge to work. Moreover, hands-on experience provides students with a diversified education that provides the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their job duties well (Stroup & Speight, 2000).

Studies conducted on the benefits of internships for public relations students also suggest those who engage in internships are better positioned to be successful in the job market following graduation (Filak & Pritchard, 2008). Further results show that employers appreciate the ability to "test drive" a job candidate, and that universities benefit from being able to use internships to assess their graduates and academic programs (Filak & Pritchard, 2008). Ganahl's (2003) research found that professionals in advertising cite internships and extracurricular activities as the students' most meaningful educational

experiences. Some practitioners went so far as to say they only hire graduates who have internships listed on their resumes (Ganahl's, 2003).

In general, professional communication programs, such as public relations and advertising, attract students with strong vocational goals (Cohen, 2001). Internships provide an outlet for students who desire to master the skills they will need and move quickly to professional practices of writing, editing, and visual media (Cohen, 2001).

Over three decades of scholarly inquiry into the internship experience provides little insight into the actual experiences and perspectives of the interns themselves. Williams' (2010) study revealed that although participants acknowledged the importance of employer feedback, faculty study participants repeatedly underscored the value of direct feedback from students regarding their internship experience. Beard (2007) found post-internship debriefings with students could impact curricular as well as teaching and learning strategies. What we learn directly from their experiences can provide both educators and professionals valuable information assuring a learning environment that enhances the learning process.

The overwhelming endorsement of internships by students punctuates the need for renewed interest and implementation of internship programs. The operation of an internship program requires finding worksites, interviewing potential worksite supervisors, completing paperwork, overseeing student experiences, and visiting work sites. The all too common reality for faculty is these responsibilities are often in addition to already busy schedules (Daugherty, 2000). With budget cuts straining the higher education system, lack of sufficient resources (specifically faculty) could put effectively run internship programs at risk. The literature and the present study support the need for

inclusion of internships in the mass communications academic plan. The task of providing internships in the form of experiential learning opportunities for students requires the ongoing attention of educators.

The purpose of this thesis is to collect qualitative data from interns to garner understanding of the internship experience as seen through their eyes. The study focuses on the nature of the internship as experienced by university public relations and advertising students. The study begins with a review of the literature on the experiential learning process with emphasis on David Kolb's experiential learning theory. In addition, the literature on internships in mass communications is surveyed, which positively endorses the benefits of experiential learning, but highlights very little information on the actual experience from the intern's perspective.

Secondly, the method of qualitative research design utilized for the study is detailed. The study employed qualitative content analysis of student journals and focus groups to examine the nature of the interns' experiences. Because of their utility in gathering rich, descriptive information, focus groups enhanced the journal data, providing more depth to the content analysis.

Thirdly, the findings of the study are examined, which reveal the interns' experience through four themes: (1) the perception of importance; (2) perceived learning benefits; (3) influence of supervisors; and (4) the quest for meaningful work. Finally, the researcher concludes with the students' overwhelming endorsement of internships, accentuating the value of internships as significant learning opportunities and a necessary element of a comprehensive academic plan.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Communication scholars and professionals positively endorse the value of internships throughout the U.S. college and university system. In the late 1980s, a nationwide survey reported nearly every radio-television department had implemented a professional internship program (Meeske, 1988). Similar findings were discovered in the early 1990s with 98% of schools offering advertising degrees with internships (Keenan, 1992). Inskster and Ross (1998) define an internship as "a three-way partnership among the educational institution, the student intern, and the organization where the interns take on the challenges of a program of systematic experiential learning." Such programs bring together teachers, students, and professionals to maximize the learning experience (Alderman, 2007).

The literature supports the merits of experiential learning as posited by educators and site supervisors, but lacks the depth and detail of the experience as expressed by students. Further, the literature shows that site supervision affects student learning outcomes, emphasizes that faculty guidance is essential, and that students believe internships provide valuable educational advantages.

Experiential Learning Theory

As a holistic theory of learning, experiential learning theory (ELT) provides an advantageous framework for examining students' perceptions of their intern experience. ELT has become a foundation for framing learning centered educational innovation, including instructional design, curriculum development and life-long learning. (Kolb et al, 2000). Further ELT research is interdisciplinary, addressing learning and educational issues in many fields (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Experiential learning provides an interactive appeal that has been praised by educational philosophers. Nineteenth century theorist and education reformer, John Dewey, hypothesized that it is habit built through reflection on experience rather than of explicit choices that consistently apply self-conscious goals to forecasts of consequences (Dewey, 1958). Dewey believed that experience was founded in knowledge. Differing from many philosophers' views that theory was separate and apart from experience, Dewey saw theory as integral to experience, believing experience was a key factor in knowing and rethinking theory (Dewey, 1958).

Today's experiential education paradigms are rooted in Dewey's educational philosophy of "learning by doing" based on the premise that students must be presented with real world problems to solve (Cross, 1999). Kolb's (1984) work expands on Dewey's thinking as well as the work of Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget who along with Dewey gave experience a central role in their theories of human learning and development. Lewin believed in the importance of people being active in learning and Piaget described intelligence as the result of the interaction of people and the environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Drawing on the work of these scholars, Kolb

developed a holistic model of the experiential learning process based on the following six shared propositions.

1. Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning - a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts.
2. All learning is relearning. Learning is best facilitated by a process that draws out the students' beliefs and ideas about a topic so that they can be examined, tested, and integrated with new, more refined ideas.
3. Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world. Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process. In the process of learning one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking.
4. Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving.
5. Learning results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment.
6. Learning is the process of creating knowledge. ELT proposes a constructivist theory of learning whereby social knowledge is created and re-created in the personal knowledge of the learner. This stands in contrast to the "transmission" model on which much current educational practice is based, where preexisting fixed ideas are transmitted to the learner.
(Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p.194)

Kolb (1984) posits, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 4). This combination of formal learning and experience makes this an appropriate theory for the examination of internships in a higher education mass communication program. Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning suggests that learning is "cyclical," involving four stages: (1) concrete experience – simply carrying out an assigned task without intention, (2) reflective observation – stepping back from the task and reviewing what has been experienced, (3) abstract conceptualization - interpreting the events that have been noticed and understanding the relationships among them, (4) active experimentation - applying learning to new situations and experiences for observation and analysis.

Further explaining the "the learning cycle," Kolb (2005) wrote that learners "must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences; they must be able to observe and reflect on these experiences from many perspectives; they must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories; and they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems" (p. 236).

The four stages of the Experiential Learning Theory delve into a deeper understanding of the learning process, providing a learner centered approach based on the premise that people learn best from experience, in other words "learning-by-doing." This approach addresses the cognitive, emotional, and the physical aspect of the learner. Kolb portrays the process as "an idealized learning cycle or spiral where the learner touches all the bases' — experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned." He further explains that "immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005 page 194). These reflections are then absorbed and translated into abstract concepts with implications for action, which the person can actively test and experiment with, which in turn enable the creation of new experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Kolb's (1984) four stages of the ELT learning cycle can provide a useful framework to study the experiences of interns in public relations and advertising. Concrete experience would occur during the internship within the actual time spent with a supervisor or coworkers learning about the company as well as discussing and actually working on assigned projects. Concrete experience would also epitomize the classes

within the specific sequence where students were first exposed to the knowledge and skills of their profession.

In the reflective observation phase, the intern develops certain feelings regarding the internship and these feelings are what motivate them to maintain a level of involvement in the project. The reflection observation occurs as interns contemplate this learning as they acquire new skills and learn new terminology. In this phase the intern reflects informally on their own about the experience or more formally through keeping their assigned journal. Reflection also occurs when interns reach out to their instructors, coworkers, or other students engaged in internships.

In the stage of abstract conceptualization, the intern begins to develop their own theories, as well as contemplate theories of others. This stage is the in-depth thinking phase, which involves integrating theories and concepts into the overall learning process. This is the active experimentation stage or what can be referred to as the "doing phase" (Kolb, 1984). The intern has ideally observed, learned concepts, and considered theories; and is actively and deliberately applying them in further experiences.

Experiential learning takes the student outside academic learning in classroom courses to hands-on learning in the professional world. Through working in a professional setting, learners gain experience for future employment, focus their goals, and understand the relationship between interests and abilities. Knowledge is best learned when there is an opportunity for application; thus, learning becomes significant through making personal connections while going through the process (Bell, 1993). Experiential learning integrates group process, simulations, and field experiences (Stanton, 1999). Competent professionals can be characterized by "their ability to link

technical knowledge with appropriate values and attitudes when making complex judgments" (Stark & Lowther, 1988). Considering this premise, a communication student should be able to develop three other essential professional competencies: "technical, integrative (melding theory, practice, and setting), and marketability" (Moore, 1992).

Incorporating these types of competencies into the curriculum will provide opportunities for students to learn how to use their knowledge and the information they gather to plan, design, and produce original projects that integrate various types of expression (Moore, 2000). Educators teach students the skills to become a "complete communicator (who) must be able to write well, speak and listen intelligently, communicate through media, develop a sense of aesthetics, and demonstrate creative expression" (Moore, 1994).

Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman (1995) defend the components of experiential education to include, "a mixture of content and process, absence of excessive teacher judgment, engaged in purposeful endeavors, encouraging the big picture perspective, teaching with multiple learning styles, (integrating) the role of reflection, creating emotional investment, re-examination of values, presence of meaningful relationships, (and) learning outside of one's perceived comfort zone."

Internships benefit students' self-efficacy and help them apply class material to practical experiences (Ladany, Ellis, & Friedlander, 1999). Those who have completed internships are reported to have higher levels of confidence toward securing a job as well as the likelihood of receiving a job offer upon graduation as compared to those who have not had an internship (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999).

Internships have grown to be a mainstay of the college undergraduate experience, with statistics showing three out of four students are involved in an internship during their college career (Coco, 2000). The importance of translating formal classroom instruction into professional knowledge is affirmed by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications through its accrediting standards. Standards retain and reinforce the importance of "internship and other professional experiences outside the classroom," as well as the requirement for supervision and evaluation when academic credit is given (ACEJMC, 2010).

Moore (2000) argues experiential learning is a key component of an overall well-designed communication curriculum. Only when accompanied with a curriculum grounded in critical thinking, problem solving, and a wide variety of educationally accountable experiences can the internship complement the intellectual learning process (Moore, 2000). If internships are separated from actual learning, the value of the experience is diminished. As part of a well-rounded curriculum, internships can make substantial contributions to the psychological, social, and intellectual development of the student (Moore, 2000). To ensure the experience is meaningful and lasting, the learner needs to be assisted prior to, during, and after the experience (Moore, 2000).

Predictors of internship success offered by Beard and Morton (1999) include academic preparedness, taking initiative, the ability to speak up and make wants and needs known, and a positive attitude towards learning. Site supervisors who provide interns with specific direction and examples, some autonomy and independence, and constructive feedback also influence positive internship outcomes (Beard & Morton, 1999).

Applying these predictors to mass communications majors, academic preparedness would assume the student intern has completed skills courses necessary to exhibit an acceptable level of proficiency to perform job requirements. For example, the ability to compose, edit or proofread a basic press release or commercial script. Also, crucial to academic preparedness is the ability to engage in critical thinking – skills gained through classes that emphasis reading, verbal communication and comprehension skill along with analytic skills (Saewitz & Maynard, 2008)

Drawing from an extensive body of research representing an array of professional disciplines, Beard and Morton (1999) put forth five constructs to evaluate the success of an internship. These constructs include: "(a) acquisition of technical skills, (b) career-related benefits, (c) career focus, (d) acquisition of interpersonal skills, and (e) outcomes of a more practical nature" (Beard & Morton, 1999, p. 44).

The view of on-site supervisors

In order to benefit from hands-on experience, interns need to have a set of soft skills before they step in the door (Neff & Arata, 2007). These skills include being able to "monitor their own work, make up fulfilling work tasks, often go long periods without interesting (or any) work, take initiative with co-workers, and do it all with seeming enthusiasm, performing their passion for the career" (Neff & Arata, 2007, p. 17). Echoing these findings, Brown and Fall (2005), found employers in public relations expect interns to possess writing, oral, and organizational skills in addition to being motivated and enthusiastic (Brown & Fall, 2005).

From an intern supervisor's perspective, students are often enthusiastic and have developed strong informal social skills but are less confident and proficient at applying the more specific communication theories and skills taught in their courses (Sapp & Zhang, 2009). Levine and Todd (2010) found when evaluating interns, supervisors emphasized students' personality traits and professional characteristics more than concrete job tasks that communications educators normally teach students in the classroom. In the same vein, Land and Andrews (2006) found supervisors assessed intern strengths as the ability to work independently, learn quickly as well as interns' highly enthusiastic attitudes toward their jobs. Supervisors also surmised, "interns needed more experiential learning, had to further hone their writing ability, and be more assertive" (Land & Andrews, 2006).

Students who have completed internships believe that the quality of supervision in the workplace is often the most important factor in determining the quality of the experience (Ryan, Toohey & Hughes, 1996). Worksite supervisors recognize the importance of their role in the intern experience, yet find it difficult to invest the time needed (Daugherty, 2000). In their responses to survey questions regarding the greatest challenge in providing internships, site supervisors' overwhelming response was lack of time – "Making the time to ensure the intern is truly learning and growing from the experience rather than it being a part-time job" (Daugherty, 2000, p. 20).

Faculty perspectives

The internship coordinators play a key role in helping improve the internship experience of their students by communicating to interns and site supervisors what is

expected of them in their roles (Alderman, 2007). Internship coordinators say their worst fear is an unproductive internship experience. They worry that site supervisors will not provide a suitable experience, students will be treated as go-fors, or students will be unprepared for their experience (Daugherty, 2000). One coordinator's concern was that, "the supervisor will see the student intern as slave labor and will treat him or her as a go-for" (Daugherty, 2000). Another respondent points out the responsibility of "keeping track of what they're doing –is the work really valuable for them or not?" (Daugherty, 2000).

Like their partners in professional organizations, internship coordinators believe their greatest challenge is finding time to ensure a worthwhile learning experience for their students (Daugherty, 2000). The necessity of finding sites, interviewing potential site supervisors, completing paperwork, overseeing student experiences, and visiting sites is often in addition to the instructor's already busy schedule (Daugherty, 2000).

Adding to the time commitment, a successful intern supervisor must spend a great deal of time building good rapport with the professionals who supervise interns (Alderman, 2007). This allows the internship director to have enough knowledge about the supervisor to make the right fit with the student (Alderman, 2007). Site visits perhaps represent the largest time commitment, so much so that many programs must forgo them. The site visit can hold great value for the internship director, providing the faculty with important feedback including industry changes (Alderman, 2007). Through site visits, internship directors can evaluate the need for curriculum changes to better prepare students for careers (Alderman, 2007). The visits can provide insights on the knowledge, skills, and

abilities graduates must have to succeed. Site visits also assist in gathering important information about students' preparedness, strengths, and weaknesses (Alderman, 2007).

The internship experience overall allows faculty to reflect on the entire program of study and answer the question: “Are our students capable of combining the knowledge, theoretical ideas, and practical skills they have been taught in the classroom into the working/professional world?” (Alderman, 2007). Williams' (2010) study revealed faculty participants supported the need for direct conversations with students upon completion of their internship. In doing so, the faculty has an opportunity for follow-up questions about internship experiences and to confirm or disaffirm classroom teaching/ learning tactics (Williams, 2010).

Student perspectives

For the student, internship programs provide the opportunity to experience a real-world work environment that they believe is the most credible means of gaining information about the realities of the workplace (Fonner & Roloff, 2006). Seventy-seven percent of undergraduate students enrolled in upper-level communications classes reported internships as their preferred career planning strategy (Sidelinger & Banfield, 2007). Journalism graduates viewed their practical experience as a more valuable teaching tool than classroom academics (Vaina, 2007). Without the experience, interns believe they will be ill-prepared to thrive in a professional, full-time capacity (Vaina, 2007).

Journalism students surveyed by Getz (2001) reported positive perceptions about the value of internships as well as the belief that internships help validate career choices.

Communication interns exhibit high levels of satisfaction with their experiences, ranking learning job skills, having a good relationship with a supervisor, and having opportunity for advancement more important than the need to receive compensation (Beebe, Blaylock and Sweetster, 2009). Student motivation to participate in an internship include "to practice what they have learned, to acquire new skills, to sample potential careers, to assess their employability, to seek mentoring, and to make contacts, as well as to earn academic credit or payment" (Basow & Byrne, 1993 p. 52).

An internship challenges mass communications majors to fit into the professional world by acquiring new skills and learning what is expected of them when they start their professional careers. It can provide the contextual framework the student needs to specialize in his or her chosen field (Stroup & Speight, 2000). Interns have the opportunity to gain experience for future employment, focus on goals, and understand the relationship between interests and abilities (Gora, 2000). Benefits for mass communication majors include resume building, enhanced practical knowledge, improvement in writing and production skills, and access to professional-level equipment (Grady, 2006).

A survey of students' hopes and expectations from internships found they are looking for internal immediate rewards and external future rewards (Daugherty, 2000). Internal immediate rewards include skill acquisition such as writing, editing, reporting, and production. Other motivators are to obtain "real world" experience as well as class credit to graduate. The internship also allowed students to better understand the field and discover if it was right for them (Daugherty, 2000). The external future rewards include

making industry contacts, getting hired by a supervisor, and developing a portfolio or work samples (Daugherty, 2000).

The quality of an internship can counterbalance pay issues. Filak and Pritchard (2008) found that students working for little or no pay still find satisfaction in their jobs. Data revealed that not paying students in no way undermined their motivation to learn and engage in the work assigned to them. Further, the participants, both paid and unpaid, reported satisfaction with their overall intern experience (Filak & Pritchard, 2008).

The present study builds on the literature supporting internships as an essential part of mass communications education, adding to the store knowledge of public relations and advertising students' assessment of the internship experience. A qualitative content analysis of data collected through student internship journals and focus groups were used to extract the deeper meanings that students attribute to their internship experiences.

Chapter Four

Method

The purpose of this study is to examine the nature of internships as experienced by undergraduate students. The overarching focus of the study is to describe thoroughly and accurately the lived experiences of interns in the public relations and advertising sequences. A qualitative research design was utilized for the study. A qualitative approach was determined to be most effective in this case because the purpose of the study was to understand the nature of the internship experience through the perceptions of students. The study employed qualitative analysis of journals and focus groups of students enrolled in public relations and advertising internship/practicum courses at a large urban southeastern university. The journals and focus groups provided data for analysis of the nature of the interns' experiences.

Qualitative methods allow for discerning perceptions with richer description as opposed to statistically analyzed surveys. Qualitative research is inductive in nature; that is, reasoning occurs from a part to a whole. For this reason, broader generalizations are drawn from specific events. Qualitative researchers are observant in nature and allow the data "to speak for themselves," when describing and interpreting context (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999, p. 244). Words, not numbers, serve as data in qualitative research and the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through the data. Qualitative methodology is further characterized as exploratory in

nature, less structured than quantitative methodologies, and attentive to details (LaFountain & Bartos, 2002).

Rather than approaching the research with defined concepts or predetermined hypotheses, the researcher was guided by the process of the unfolding of data through the discovery of emerging themes. Like the quantitative researcher, the qualitative researcher strives to be unbiased and impartial, yet the defining component of the qualitative investigator includes openness toward the richness of the participant's personal story (Heppner et al., 1999).

Qualitative content analysis was employed for the study to allow for an inductive approach focusing on the particular experiences of the students involved in a mass communication internship program. This technique served to best interpret what affected the students' transformation in the context of the internship experience. Hence, to be able to discern the student transformative experience and what affects it from a variety of perspectives, qualitative methods, which "generate data rich in detail and embedded context" were most appropriate for this study (Maxwell, 1996, p. 127). Maxwell (1996) notes that "collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods . . . reduces the risk your conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases or limitations of a specific method, and it allows you to gain a better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations that you develop" (pp. 75-76). For this reason, two distinct sources of data, student journals and focus groups, were employed.

Student Journals

Documents used for qualitative data analysis can be of a personal, official, or popular culture nature and analysis of select documents can be "very revealing of attitudes of individuals or groups" (Payne, 1994, p. 159). First person narratives (journals) about the intern experience written by interns who participated in the experience were a source of data for this study. The researcher explored ways to extract useful data from journals. The journals provided direct experiences of the interns, providing in-depth, in context, and holistic data concerning their thinking. The researcher was committed to representing the subjects in their own terms, placing a high value on the students' thoughts expressed in their own words. Through content analysis, the revelation of meaning emerges within the original context of the student's story; in this case, within the context of the journal reflections. The researcher focused on the students' perceptions to gain understanding of the topics they perceive as significant in their experience.

In an effort to be as comprehensive as possible, data included a census of all 191 internship journals available for study at a large southeastern university through the mass communications department. All 131 journals of students enrolled in the public relations internship/practicum course from the Summer Semester 2006 through the Summer Semester 2010 were archived and available to the researcher for study. The advertising department had archived journals of all 60 students enrolled in the advertising internship/practicum course from Summer Semester 2009 through Summer Semester 2010. These journals were also available for study.

The public relations sequence internship/practicum course is an elective course in

the public relations sequence. Prerequisites for admission into the course included approval by the internship coordinator as well as completion of three upper level public relations skills courses. Students were responsible for direct contact with the internship site and securing a position on their own. Students enrolled in the practicum course were required to work a minimum of eight hours per week throughout the semester and received one credit hour. Students enrolled in the internship course were required to work a minimum of 30 hours per week and received three credit hours. Students were required to keep a weekly journal covering each work session by outlining assignments, accomplishments and observations. Students also submitted a reflective essay of the experience, which for the practicum required a 500-word paper and a 1,500-word paper for the internship. Syllabus guidelines for the reflective essay instructed students to critically compare their experience to the principles and techniques previously learned in their public relations' courses by evaluating lessons learned, and offering personal observations relevant to the course. Students received a pass or fail grade for the course.

In the advertising sequence, students were required to complete one supervised internship. Course prerequisites included consent of the internship coordinator, completion of an introduction to advertising course with a grade of C- or higher, completion of at least one specialized advertising course appropriate to the internship and a 2.5 or higher mass communication grade point average. Students enrolled in the advertising practicum were required to work a minimum of 100 hours of supervised work over six to 14 weeks. Students were responsible for direct contact with the internship site and securing a position on their own. Students were required to turn in a five-page report at the end of the semester. The interns were instructed to describe the firm's background,

history, facilities, and organizational structure. Secondly, students were asked to describe work experiences and give examples of a typical day. Thirdly, provide an evaluation of the internship, reflecting on the practical value of the knowledge and experience as well as the academic value in relation to course work and appropriateness of the internship for future students. Students were advised that it was important to be honest; comments would not affect their grade and confidentiality was assured. Students received a pass or fail grade for the course.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were used to further examine public relations and advertising interns' experiences, attitudes, and opinions of their intern experience. Focus groups provided an opportunity for interns to reflect outside the bounds of academic assessment. Because of their particular utility in gathering rich, descriptive information, focus groups expanded the collection of data, bringing more depth to the study. Focus groups are used when the researcher is trying to identify a range of thoughts about a particular topic (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus groups provided the researcher the opportunity to probe deeper for a better understanding of the interns' perspectives. Conducting focus groups was the most effective method of gathering these perspectives while including the actual "voice" of the participants. The focus groups allowed participants to exchange ideas and to provoke thought in each other. This led to participants discussing ideas and issues they may not have considered in the journals or in a one-on-one session with the researcher (Morgan, 1997).

Sims (1998) outlines numerous advantages to using a focus group in the collection of data. He noted that focus groups allow a researcher to obtain views of a number of people without the time-consuming interviews; encourage more spontaneity in response than a one-on-one interview; allow a person not to feel obliged to answer every question posed as he/she may feel during a one-on-one interview; empower people as they listen to others who share their same views (Sims, 1998).

The focus group participants were students enrolled in the public relations and advertising sequences of the same southeastern university mass communications program used for the content analysis. Focus groups were conducted during the spring semester of 2011. Participants were recruited through senior level classes selected for the likelihood of having students enrolled who would have participated in the internship/practicum course. Professors granted the researcher time at the beginning of class to ask students who had participated in an internship to volunteer to take part in a focus group. The researcher explained the study was about students' perceptions of the internship experience. Students were told participation was strictly on a volunteer basis and a sign up sheet was passed around for students interested in volunteering to provide their name and email address to the researcher.

The sessions were divided into three groups, two consisting of public relations interns and one consisting of advertising interns. The students were contacted through email and invited to join the appropriate group. Each focus group took place on campus during the lunch hour and participants received a meal. The public relations focus groups included one session with four participants and one session with four participants. The advertising focus group included six participants.

The timing and location of the focus groups allowed the research to take place among an existing homogenous community. These students were accustomed to interacting with their fellow students; thus, these groups provided a naturalistic setting for the focus groups and enabled students to interact in a relaxed, non-threatening, familiar environment free of judgment (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Since the topic of internship experiences is normally not shared in a group setting, the focus group method allowed for exploration of issues of relevance that were not anticipated prior to the group but were brought up by students during the discussion (Leslie, 2010). In addition, students had the opportunity to compare their experience to that of others which encouraged deeper reflection of previously held perceptions of their individual experience.

Before the focus group began, students were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire consisting of nine questions: (1) the semester and year of their internship/practicum; (2) amount of hours per week worked; (3) class preparedness for internship; (4) training and equipment on job; (5) level of respect between intern and internship site supervisor; (6) support from coworkers and supervisor; (7) level of responsibility; (8) overall rating of the experience; and (9) would the intern recommend the internship to other students. The following statement preceded the questions: Thinking about your internship experience, please answer the following questions. Questions three through six employed a five point likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly or disagree. Question eight used a five point likert scale to rate the overall experience, excellent, very good, good, poor, and unacceptable. Question nine required a simple yes/no reply as to whether the student would recommend the internship to another student.

The researcher, using broad open-ended questioning, facilitated all three groups.

Each session was audio recorded for the purpose of transcribing and better analyzing the comments and interaction of the groups. The focus groups were structured utilizing a facilitator guide with standard question formats and the researcher served as facilitator. According to Bender and Ewbank (1994), "The initial job of the facilitator is to create a non-evaluative environment in which group members feel free to express their opinions without concern for the agreement or disagreement of others in the group" (p. 66). Each session began with an introduction that discussed the purpose of the research and the procedure the focus group would follow. The facilitator advised participants they should feel free to comment whenever or on whatever topic they wished throughout the course of the meeting.

Each focus group followed a list of standard questions created for the sessions, which included opening, introductory, key, and ending questions (Krueger & Casey 2000). The opening question was designed to get the conversation started. The introductory questions, according to Krueger and Casey (2000), "introduces the topic of discussion and gets people to start thinking about their connection with the topic" (p. 44). Next, key questions were used to guide the research. Finally, ending questions served to bring the discussion to a close while allowing participants to add any other information they felt was pertinent. The list of questions for the focus group included:

1. Let's get to know a little about your individual internships. Tell the group where you interned and how you selected the location.
2. What kind of tasks were you asked to complete?
3. Compare what you encountered on the job in relationship to what you have been learning in class?
4. How would you describe your supervisor?

5. Talk to me about the involvement of your faculty supervisor after you started your internship.
6. Would you change that level of the involvement?
7. Overall, what was the most valuable lesson you walked away with from your internship?
8. Suppose you had one minute to talk to the chair of the department about your internship experience. What would you tell him/her?
9. Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?
10. Have we missed anything?

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Upon completion, each session was transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

According to Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002, p. 31), the purpose of analysis is to "bring meaning, structure and order to data." In qualitative research analysis, an inductive process is most often used, allowing for themes to be derived empirically rather than by priori (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Through content analysis, collected data is examined and summarized into themes using codes. These codes often culminate as themes emerge during the process of data analysis. For this reason, qualitative research is commonly characterized by the fact that the collection and analysis of data are simultaneous, thus helping to mutually shape each other (Sandelowski, 2000). Data analysis for qualitative research follows three central strategies: (1) coding the data; (2) reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments; and (3) combining the codes into broader categories or themes, and displaying and making comparisons (Creswell 2007).

A systematic process of sorting through data to find common themes or categories was used to analyze the data collected from journals and focus groups. Qualitative research often produces a substantial amount of data. As discussed, an important part of qualitative data analysis is to condense the information by developing codes to discover common meanings and find significant patterns (Creswell, 1998). The researcher analyzed data collected from journals and focus groups using a series of steps outlined by Creswell (1998): (1) reading through the journals and focus group transcripts; (2) delineating units of meaning by highlighting significant phrases, statements, and quotes; (3) grouping the highlighted information into clusters of similar meaning units, or themes; and (4) developing a structural description of "how" the students experienced the internship experience.

Following the steps, the researcher must first get a sense of the entire picture. In order to get a sense of the whole, each journal was read twice and each focus group was listened to twice. The researcher made notes and highlighted words, phrases and sentences that exemplified the nature of the intern's experience. Next, a spreadsheet was built containing an identification code for each journal and focus group participant. Journals and transcripts were then reread and words and phrases interns used to describe their experience were entered into the spreadsheet. In a third step, spreadsheet data was analyzed to develop clusters of meanings into categories. After reexamination of the categories, four overarching themes emerged that described the nature of the internship as experienced by undergraduates.

Chapter Four

Analysis

The analysis reveals the nature of the internship experience for public relations and advertising undergraduates can be grouped into four fluid and sometimes overlapping themes: (1) the perception of importance; (2) perceived learning benefits; (3) influence of supervisors; and (4) the quest for meaningful work. Through these themes encompassing the "real life experiences" of undergraduate students, evidence of how interns reflect, conceptualize, and experiment in their quest to make meaning out of their internships is observed.

The interns considered the overall experience a learning bonanza exceeding their expectations. Students applied and expanded their classroom knowledge to actual work situations, learned new skills relevant to future employment, and focused career goals. Most were able to identify the importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace and found ways to navigate through and around difficult situations and people.

In keeping with Beard and Morton's (1999) five constructs of a successful internship, the data reveals interns gained technical skills, career benefits, career focus, interpersonal skills, and practical outcomes. Evidence of the constructs of career focus, career benefits, and practical outcomes emerged within interns' "perception of importance" of the experience. They described the experience as an important, if not the

most important, part of their educations, linking the internships to success in their future careers. The ability to list professional organizations on their resumes, produce samples for their portfolios, and start a base of contacts for future jobs were perceived benefits.

Interns recognized professional growth through the acquisition of technical and interpersonal skills. They assigned value to the acquisition of these skills as well as made a connection between classroom learning and on the job learning. This concept of what students consider "hands-on" learning in the "real world" is illustrated through the theme of "perceived learning benefits." Through this theme, the experiential learning cycle is most evidenced as students reflect, conceptualize and experiment through their experience.

In keeping with Beard and Morton's (1999) predictors of a successful field experience, the data reveals the quality of site supervision was an important factor in the nature of the internship experience. The interns viewed site supervisors as teachers and mentors, an element that had a profound effect on the interns' experience. This effect is reported through the theme "influence of supervisors."

The concept of "meaningful work" emerged as an essential element of the internship experience. Although interns had a propensity to assign learning value to most tasks, they struggled to find work that aligned with their specific interests and career goals. They found external influences of organization, delegation, scheduling, and time constraints as barriers to receiving meaningful work and sought ways to remove them.

Perception of Importance

The perception of importance for both public relations and advertising students can be seen through their overwhelming endorsement of internships, their perception of career benefits, reports of career focus, and belief that internships should be a mandatory requirement for all students. Out of the 191 student journals and 17 focus group participants, no student totally negated the value of his/her internship experience. Although some interns found faults and many gave suggestions for improvement, they remained positive on overall value.

Many interns hailed their experience with broad declarations of importance in their journals.

PR31: This internship has taught me more in a few months than I have learned in 3 ½ years of schooling. What I have learned has been solidified into a concept that is now practical and applicable.

AD48: I can say that that it [the internship] was the most remarkable experience of my academic career. I learned 10 times more from experiencing it than I have from sitting in a classroom. Even things that I wasn't sure of in class, I am now crystal clear about because I was able to do it and experience it firsthand.

AD8: My internship has been beneficial to me beyond belief. There is no way I could ever imagine what working in an agency was like just from my school experience . . . just because you are great student doesn't mean you will make it in the real world.

PR40: I have great expectations for my career in public relations and I believe that [removed name of company] is going to help me accomplish my goals of success.

PR29: In summation, there are countless lessons that I've learned during my internship. Every student majoring in public relations should seek an internship before graduation. The lessons and knowledge gained from an internship is not something one can be taught in a classroom. My internship experience proved to be one of the most valuable tools I will need when pursuing a career in public relations.

The focus group participants were also strong advocates of internships, aligning the importance directly to the job market. One advertising participant enthusiastically proclaimed, "students have to be involved or they will be irrelevant." A public relations intern explained he had started a post-graduation job search and found, "everything says two to three years experience for even entry level positions and to have those internships, that's experience." The undergraduates perceived internships as a necessary component for securing a job after graduation. Without such hands-on experience in their field, they felt they would be at a disadvantage in the job market as evidenced in the following focus group exchange.

PF1-3: I don't think it's smart to graduate without an internship.

PF1-4: Oh god no – it's suicidal - At least one, like all of us are trying to get as many as possible.

PF1-2: I can't even stress how important it is to have an internship.

PF1-3: You need to have a real world experience somehow.

PF1-4: Something you can put on your resume. I can't even imagine graduating and not [having an internship].

Building a resume and portfolio along with networking were strong motivators for undergraduates to secure and perform well in an internship.

AD18: I feel like people are impressed when I tell them I'm interning [agency name]. . . it will look great on a resume . . . [I'm] getting things produced which is great for portfolio purposes.

PR17: Meeting people and making contacts is a majority of what an internship is all about.

P106: Networking comes in all forms and it just may be who you know, more than what you know, that lands you a certain job or account.

P106: My portfolio has grown far beyond anything I could have hoped.

P50: All together I wrote 12 different press releases. These releases have helped build my portfolio.

P36: I have been able to meet tons of media professionals. I feel I would have a huge advantage when applying to a job with the organization if a position was to open up. I also feel like my boss would help me find a job elsewhere using all of his connections if need be.

PR35: I met and built an amazing network and contact list with people and organizations that not only look good on a resume but also could help me in the future when I need them.

The perception of such future career benefits are commonplace throughout the data. Focus group participant AF1-2 emphasized: "If you are getting to do all these internships, you are making connections and forming relationships with people." AF1-5 reasoned that even an internship she felt held little practical experience in her field, got her "foot in the door and helped get my next internship." She further explained even though the internship was not ideal, it looked good on her resume to have the professional reference.

The interns also recount how the experience served as an opportunity to reflect and focus their careers goals. PF1-2 aptly framed this career need: "I need to get out there and see if this is even what I want to do." Interns reported career focus in terms of both confirming and changing future plans.

AD21: I learned more about myself, and what intrigues me, as far as career paths are concerned.

AD50: This internship opened my eyes to what I thought I wanted to do and proved to me it is what I want to do.

PR40: I could never have guessed that this internship would change my life forever. I now know that public relations is definitely the field that I want to be in.

AD4: I felt that this opened me up to a career that was never

discussed much in class.

PR104 I have definitely found what I want to do with my degree and hope I can further pursue this.

Learning what they did not want to pursue in their career was perceived equally as important by undergraduates.

AD20: If I had not done an internship, I would have been searching for an agency job and then been unhappy. Now I am able to more clearly define what I want to do.

AD23: Ad sales are the absolute worst part of the job. I felt like a beggar the entire time . . . getting people to pay is hell.

PR42: I realized that I like to do event planning, however not for a nonprofit organization.

PR86: After doing my practicum, I am not sure that I want to have a career in sports. The sports industry is very demanding and pay is very minimal for the most part. The hours are really long and the morale is affected by the success of the team. I think that I need more security in my future.

Such career reflections were discussed by focus group participants as well.

AF1-3 surmised from her experience: "I know now for sure I don't want be on the account or client side, that world is of no interest to me, I would be miserable there." PF2-5 explained she was, "on the fence" as to whether or not she wanted to work for a nonprofit. Her internship helped her clarify that decision.

Several of the focus group participants had the benefit of experiencing two internships, which afforded the opportunity of direct comparison between jobs.

PF1-3: I'm learning a lot more because nonprofits don't have as much money . . . it has made me see what I want to do. I never thought I wanted a field in internal public relations and now I love it.

PF1-2: I love supporting the arts, being part of the arts culture but I hate nonprofit. I hate writing grants. I hated working nonprofit so being with a worldwide company that does events is absolutely amazing.

For the majority of the interns, their career choice measured up to their expectations, which is typified by PR56: "I feel passionate about the career I am pursuing because I now understand what it requires." The need to affirm their field of study in the "real world" is an important aspect of the internship experience. P83 explained: "It helped me get a real feel for my chosen profession, and the opportunities will hopefully help me professionally, whether I work here or somewhere else." Taking the experience to personal level, AD21 believed: "I learned more about myself and what intrigues me, as far as career paths are concerned. I feel this trade is motivating and fulfills my desire to do good for the community and others."

Another career discovery a number of interns mentioned was in regards to the physical working environment.

PF2-8: I don't want to do public relations in a traditional sense . . . I didn't like sitting at a desk at all – all day just writing emails back and forth.

AD49: I can't stand being in one place all day. I need to be moving around in different environments, so I seriously could not have had a better set up for my personality.

AD58: I appreciate the opportunity to see how business is really done from all facets, instead of just being stuck to a desk and computer all day.

PR99: This experience has helped me learn more about myself and that I do not like to be tied to a cubicle all day.

Another measure of the perception of importance of internships can be seen through the interns' assertions that all students should experience an internship.

PR104: Our classes can't show us what the real world is like. Internships are so important to a field like public relations. They should be required.

P29: Every student majoring in public relations should seek an internship before graduation. The lessons and knowledge gained from an internship is something one cannot be taught in a classroom. My internship experience proved to be one of the most valuable tools I will need when pursuing a career in public relations.

P104: I was convinced that I did not need the experience of an internship to prepare me for life after graduation. . . . I was incorrect in my previous assumptions and will further testify to the significance of an internship experience as one that is crucial in preparing

graduates for a lifestyle of professionalism.

When asked about the importance of internships all three focus groups unanimously said they should be mandatory. In the following exchange public relations students discussed their thoughts on the subject.

PF2-6: I think they should be mandatory.

PF2-7: I hear some of my friends say 'I wish I had done an internship when I was in school.' Make it [internships] mandatory, maybe provide a grant. Structure the internship over two semesters.

PF2-8: I would say they need to be required too. Professors haven't really pushed it to students that much and supported it as strong. There are professionals out there that want interns, yet there are students who don't seem able to find internships.

PF2-9: I have a full time job so making an internship work for me is really hard. You just have to find time to make it work. It's such valuable information you are learning, it is necessary.

A second public relations focus groups followed a similar line of reasoning.

PF1-1: We need to stress the importance of internships; I mean they're not talked about enough.

PF1-3: They say you can't force it and people don't have time, it's true, but I mean I think all four of us are very busy and we understand . . . it's an education, they're not going to do it for you. You have to make what you can out of it.

PF1-2: I need to get out there and see if this is even what I want to do.

The advertising students' internships are a requirement of graduation and students affirmed they believed they should be. AD58 wrote: "I feel that especially in today's job market, more than one practicum course or internship should be required to graduate. If students want to be successful, and if they want to continue in the advertising industry, they should have as much experience as possible following their graduation."

Students held their importance so vital to their education that they were willing to make financial sacrifices.

AF1-1: Students have to be involved or they will be irrelevant.

Involvement takes away from working which causes student loans but it's that important.

AF1-4: The fact that it is required is probably the only reason I did it. Like I know it's great, you can tell me its great to have an internship but I was working basically fulltime . . . and I'm struggling now. I hate being broke. I hate relying on my family and I would have not given up my income and my independence if it wasn't required. So painful as it is, I do coming out of it feel like it is worth it to require one.

The perception of importance in part is motivated by students' fear that they will be ill-prepared for the job market without the chance to experience a true work environment. What the interns see as a competitive job market is made even more so by their recognition of a difficult economy. AD44 made note of staff members having to take cuts in pay due to the "struggling economy" and because of layoffs employees "had to adopt new skills and tasks in order to make up for lost talent." The perception of an

internship as an essential experience in making the transition from student to employee elevates the importance for undergraduates.

Perceived Learning Benefits

Interns strove to make the transition from student to professional. Undergraduates found themselves trying to acclimate to an unfamiliar culture. Although their primary goal was the development of specific job competencies relevant to their intended career, they found that in order to function in their new environments they had to learn interpersonal and professional skills. Students recognized the significant role communication plays in the business world, citing the importance of knowing how to work with people one-on-one, in meetings, through writing, by phone, and through email.

PR28: The final valuable learning experience I took away from my internship was my development of interpersonal skills. When first entering the office of my internship I was very quiet and nervous, and felt out of place due to my status [of intern] with the company. As time went on at my internship, I began communicating more with my co-workers which made my experience so much more enjoyable. I developed the understanding that interpersonal skills are a must in the workplace, and more than likely, something that future employers will be looking at.

PR24: One of the biggest lessons I learned is that effective communication is key to being successful in anything that I may want to do. Whether it is communicating with someone via

telephone, email, or face-to-face, I need to demonstrate effective communication at all times.

PR31: My ability to talk and relate to people was honed.

AD45: I attended the Monday meeting which is when the whole agency meets to discuss the upcoming week. This experience was very beneficial because it showed me the kind of communication it takes to make sure something is done right and on time. It also showed me the kinds of fights that can happen because people are under so much stress.

Such journal entries demonstrate the experiential learning cycle in action as interns were able to step back from the experience to make the observation of the importance of communication and reflect on how communication affects the operation. Interns interpreted the need for effective communication and conceptualized ways they could better communication to contribute to their success. Through experimentation, interns applied what they learned to new situations and experiences, deciding what did and did not work.

PR82: Up until now, I have always been the kid and been very wary of not stepping on anybody's toes. At [company name] they made me feel more like a professional by letting me in on executive meetings and letting me voice my opinions. In the beginning, I was more reserved and shy, but towards the end I felt more apt to stand up for myself and be more assertive.

PR26: I did not like how they talked about other employees behind their

backs. I have seen the lack of communication at [company name] take its toll on several employees and clients.

AD 25: There was little to no accountability for any of the work I did so I had to be responsible for finding accurate information and passing it along in a timely fashion.

AD54: I began to take the tasks they gave me and exceed their expectations. I think that this is what showed them what kind of person I was and that I really wanted to learn.

The learning cycle was evidenced as students developed other interpersonal skills including dealing with conflict, taking direction, and accepting constructive criticism. They learned it was up to them to take initiative, ask relevant questions and be aggressive in asking for work.

AD60: When I started working everyone was very friendly but reluctant to give me assignments. . . . It was faster to complete their own work then to teach me how to help. Eventually I asked to sit in on meetings with the clients and continuously asked for work and reminded everyone that I was there to aid them in anyway I could.

PR112: I wish I would have taken more initiative. My supervisor would get sidetracked and I did not push her to teach me.

AD 24: Sometimes the value of any experience comes from the effort you are willing to put forward and should not come from people dictating to you what you should and shouldn't be doing.

PR96: If I'm not given the opportunity to perform some of the tasks I

want to do, I will do them on my own time.

AD63: An important aspect of this internship and past internships as well is that the intern must ask for things to do and come up with suggestions or ideas for things to do. It is very easy for busy staff members to leave interns hanging with nothing to do, but since I continued to offer ideas and help, I was never bored.

The focus groups also emphasized the need to be proactive at their internships as demonstrated by the advice they gave in the following exchange.

PF2-8: The person interning needs to take a lot of initiative - have an open schedule because I worked a lot of events on weekends. Go in there with an open mind for your schedule.

PF2-6: Always take initiative and go well above and beyond what they ask you to do. I know how competitive it can be and how amazing you have to be if you want to get a position at a company. If you can impress them and show them that you do more than they give you; or that you go back in and say 'I've got that done, what else do you have,' and you are constantly doing that, they will definitely notice that and remember you.

PF2-9: Defiantly be proactive – know them, remind them that you are there.

PF2-5: Give it your all. Because I worked my butt off . . . my supervisor knows I'm trustworthy . . . even though the other intern has been working there longer, I get to do things she never has.

Confidence was a word found repeatedly in the journals as students wrote about their transition from campus to the workplace. The interns were forced outside of their familiar environments and into places where they needed to exhibit a level of professionalism, which meant overcoming fears and gaining confidence.

PR38: This was the real world. Mistakes result in more than a point off a grade. This knowledge can either be paralyzing or motivating depending on one's reaction to it. . . I took that fear and chose to use it as a motivation to do my best instead of letting it paralyze me. This was a wonderful lesson that I am sure will stick with me for the rest of my life.

PR28: After interning with [company name] I feel more prepared to join the field, more certain in my performance as well as more confident working with professionals.

PR80: I am confident now in the fact that I will be an asset to anyone that takes me on. I trust now that when I am given an assignment, instead of panicking, breaking a sweat, and wondering whether or not I can do it, I will instead tackle it head-on, and be able to logically and rationally work my way through the necessary components of any project.

PR27: I also feel that my level of confidence has risen to the level that I'm now able to go into organizations and workplaces without feeling completely afraid of what is going to happen next. Although I still have loads to learn, I now have the confidence to go and learn and

ask the questions I would have previously been intimidated to ask.

PR104: The most important thing I have learned from this job that I believe I could never be taught in a classroom is a level of professionalism and confidence, both during good moments and bad ones as well, particularly in event planning positions.

The interns believed the confidence they gained from their internship would propel them into the job market. For many, because of the internship, they could see themselves as part of a professional community. Their opportunity to inhabit the professional world equated to a confidence builder.

AD27: I feel much more confident going into the business world and feel much more knowledgeable.

PR31: They have given me the confidence to go for a position in pr [sic] or marketing and the ability to back it up. I truly believe that when I graduate I can, and will, do great things.

AD11: I felt important when they would ask for my opinions and especially proud when we agreed on things and seemed to be on the same page. I feel confident graduating in a few weeks knowing that I have real world experience.

PR105: After interning with [names company] I feel more prepared to join the field, more certain in my performance as well as more confident working with professionals.

PR35: I would recommend that all students take advantage of the internship/practicum opportunity to grow as a young professional.

I feel confident that I am now equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills required to be successful in my career!

The predominant source of confidence stemmed from the development of specific job competencies relevant to their intended careers. Interns had the opportunity to gain skills specific to their interests and were tested on their ability to perform the job. They noted skill acquisitions such as researching, layout and design, editing, and production in their journals. In particular, writing was a skill both sought after and developed during the internship experience.

PR35: Press releases were a HUGE concept I learned this past semester. . . . Being able to write a well-written press release that gets to the point, contains all the necessary information and leaves the reader wanting more info [*sic*] is a skill I believe that can only be learned from practice.

PR9: Having this opportunity to write sharpened my writing skills and locked in my comfort with writing. This breakthrough shows me that I have transitioned from student to soon-to-be professional.

PR69: I always knew that I loved writing, but now that I have had a chance to do some real-world writing, I found that I enjoy it more than I thought.

PR94: School gave me a lot of basics about how to write a press release and the sound that a feature story should have, but writing is a skill that needs practicing. . . . I will need to better train myself how to write in a corporate style.

On-the-job technology was another area in which the students relished opportunities to gain experience. In many cases, the technology in the classroom had not caught up with technology on the job. Although referenced in class, specific tools and programs as well as application opportunities were often not available.

AD14: When I started interning, I felt that I was completely competent at the Adobe programs. After the second day, however, I realized that I was far behind where the working world required me to be.

PR127: I would have never truly learned how to use this program unless in a situation such as this where I absolutely had to keep fighting through it to get the job done

The focus groups elaborated on the benefits of directly working with what they considered the tools of their trade.

AF1-3: I've been practicing these little computer skills for years now and I'm not even where I want to be. It's so hard to present ourselves as creative advertising people. You get an internship where your expectations are higher and you're like shit - I don't know if I can do what they expect. I'm not that tech savvy although I've done a little bit of this. They haven't taught me hands-on a lot .

AF1-5: I've learned so much - shortcuts. Things that used to take me tons of hours now takes me like ten minutes because I know the tools and that's extremely helpful.

AF1-3: I think that the internship is the best place to really practice, like a forced practice, like it is really applicable. If you are put into an

internship position where you have to really produce something that other people are going to see, you can get the practice and get a feel for what is professionally expected and certain aspects of what business you are in.

Students had a desire to "use" what they were learning both on the job and in class. They felt it necessary to practice and develop skills such as writing, editing, computer and production. The term "hands-on" is found repeatedly in student journals and is a highly valued aspect of the intern experience.

AD17: I found that you learn a lot from actually/physically doing a certain activity. I feel that what I learn from hands-on experience stays with me longer than if I were to have just read about it in a textbook. It is a lot different then learning in a classroom.

PR125: It was a good learning experience to get thrown in and learn how to do something hands-on by myself.

PR132: I think I understood the topics better because I had real-life experience in which to compare them.

PR131: Unless you implement these skills into an actual job or project, it is hard to strengthen them.

AD55: [Company name] is my third internship and I can safely say it has been the most enjoyable. They provided me with the most hand-on experience out of any of the other internships that I previously had.

The focus group participants further explained the importance of "hands-on" experience to the value of their internship.

PF1-2: I'm very hands on – learning to work with people, learning how to be in a business, an agency where everyone is an adult and you have to not be the student for awhile. Writing is a big thing, so is Fusion [public relations software].

PF2-5: I got the most value getting to go out and do hands-on stuff and getting to put what we've learned into practice, I've probably gained more from that than anything else.

AF1-4: [responding to question of what is most important in the internship experience] It's really the hands-on experience of what I learned . . . just the experience of being at an agency.

Many students linked the ability to perform hands-on duties to the level of preparation they received in the classroom. Public relations students were prompted in their course syllabus to critically compare their internship experience to the principles and techniques previously learned in public relations courses. Advertising students were asked to reflect on the academic value of their internship in relation to course work. Overall students were most comfortable when they could connect a job directly with a skill learned in class, thereby directly applying that knowledge.

AD6: I found that my internship allowed me to use the knowledge I acquired from my courses and has allowed me to improve upon it by interacting with other professionals in the field.

AD17: I think this internship had a lot of academic value . . .to reinforce the skills/knowledge I acquired at [school name] as well as introduced new skill sets and knowledge that one can only gain

from actual experience. For example, I was able to use the advertising terms/basics almost everyday [*sic*] . . . without the knowledge I acquired [through classes] I would have been completely lost.

PR130: This week was filled with new and exciting tasks that I could relate back to my current and past classes.

PR124: The meeting was successful because I used what I learned in my classes and thought critically about the public I was trying to connect with.

AD11: I felt like all of the [advertising] classes I had taken over the past year were all applicable to the everyday experiences of my internship.

By making the connection between what they learned in class to what they encountered at the internship, students were able to interpret and understand what they observed. Students applied their classroom learning to new situations and experiences enabling them to function with more confidence, make better decisions and solve problems. Students recognized the importance of their sequence classes as the foundation of their internship experience.

AD21: Pay close attention to the terms and advice you are hearing from your teachers – a lot of things that I had learned in classes, such as terms and processes, came to life for me during my internship. Advertising is a trade, you have to learn as you go, but if you don't have the fundamentals to build on you can't be successful.

- PR104: I would have been lost if I didn't have a good basis of writing skills.
- PR131: I can sharpen my skills because I can take what I am learning, apply it, and then get feedback.
- AD48: It is one thing to listen to a professor talk for hours in a controlled environment about advertising, but it is a whole other thing to actually take what you have learned and apply it. Even things I wasn't sure of in class, I'm now crystal clear about because I was able to do it and experience it first hand.
- PR80: I couldn't have learned as much as I did this semester without my background knowledge acquired through textbooks and classroom experience, but I also learned things during my practicum that could not be replicated in a classroom.

The focus groups brought a deeper understanding to the relationship between class and internships. They expressed a need for more relevance between coursework and what they called the "real world." Although they recognized the importance of class, they were adamant that classes alone could not sustain their education.

- PF1-1: If I hadn't had the internship I have now, I wouldn't know what the hell I'm doing from going to class.
- PF1-3: Let's be honest, in class they don't have the time to be one on one so internships are vital.
- PF2-6: I'm a strong believer in that you are not going to learn unless you do it. It [class] provided a little background information like, oh I

remember them talking about that, but it's not the same as actual experience.

AF1-3: This is the real world. We are under pressure and we are a little more motivated to do it because sometimes the motivation in class just isn't there. . . . The internship is the best place to really practice, like a forced practice, like it is really applicable. If you are put into an internship position where you have to really produce something that other people are going to see, you can get the practice and get a feel for what is professionally accepted and certain aspects of what business you are in.

Journals and focus group comments made clear the internship helped students make connections to their course work they might not otherwise have made. A connection between course work and the internship resulted in a more in-depth learning experience from the utilization of both.

Influence of Supervisors

The quality of supervision at the workplace emerged as an important factor in determining the value interns placed on their experience. They frequently used the terms "mentor" and "teacher" to describe their supervisor. The interns were searching for role models and were more than willing to cast their supervisors into the role.

PR35: I not only gained a great deal of experience during this internship, but I gained a mentor as well, who helped me begin to learn the ropes of the 'real world' public relations field.

PR54: I quickly learned a lot and by having such a smart boss it made me want to improve myself.

AD44: Most importantly, I had the opportunity to work closely with the owner of the company . . . he was able to share his knowledge of advertising and give me some excellent advice.

The interns looked to their supervisor to provide a comfortable working environment. They wanted to be included in projects and have a voice at their workplace. "Patient," "supportive," and "caring," were characteristics associated with a good supervisor. "Making time," "helpful," and "supportive" were described as important supervisor traits in the eyes of the interns.

AD4: On my first meeting with [supervisor] we immediately clicked. [Supervisor] taught me so much and also gave me leeway to do my own thing. I was free to share my ideas and opinions with clients and also assist with client discussions and proposal ideas.

AD45: They told me from day one to ask all kinds of questions, and this type of willingness made me feel at ease for the duration of the internship.

AD48: Many times I felt like she was a professor giving me my own personal, private media lesson.

PR31: The management was very helpful in editing my work and giving me constructive criticism.

PR56: [Supervisor] taught me so many useful things that I will take with me; both involve my personal writing and work style as well as

helpful hints for networking and communication.

PR54: They see that I'm someone that wants to learn from the best so they take time to answer questions and instill their knowledge upon me.

The focus group participants were specifically asked to reflect on the role of supervisors in their internship experience. One group collectively described their supervisors as mentors and agreed they were "extremely important." Another focus group member summed up for her group that the "defining factor for all of us is that we had a mentor figure." Yet another group came to resounding agreement that they "would have been lost without them" and drew a comparison of supervisors to instructors. A discussion ensued on the importance of supervision.

PF1-2: My boss is honestly the best teacher I've ever had . . . she corrects my work, gives me feedback, tells me when I do something wrong, but she won't scold me for doing it wrong or make me feel stupid.

PF1-4: My supervisor was exactly like that.

PF1-3: It's 100% essential. It all depends on your supervisor. You have a great supervisor you're going to have a great experience . . . throughout the whole thing it was amazing and I learned so much because she was a great teacher.

Other focus groups participants also spoke to the positive impact of a good supervisor.

AF1-6: My media manager took me under his wing and said he was going to teach me everything. He said knowledge is power so that's what

I'm going to give you. It was intense, it was a great experience.

PF2-8: I felt like she wanted to see me grow and improve. I got to go to the Monday meetings, everybody got together and shared clients and each of us would bring something.

Site supervisors as teachers and mentors provided a positive learning environment for students. While some interns spoke with a sense of awe about what they learned from their supervisors, others reported a negative experience.

AD6: Sometimes my superiors would get frustrated and become curt with me making me feel discouraged to ask them further questions. I do not want to say that my experience was bad, but at points in time, I felt discouraged and upset with how I was being spoken to. I'm a person, not just a body, and I think people forget that.

AD16: I understand that as an intern I cannot jump straight into real work and I will be working simple tasks, but I was hoping I would be able to shadow professionals and see exactly what they do.

PF2-7: She [supervisor] was used to taking on the company by herself . . . she couldn't trust me enough to give me some assignments. I feel like I really didn't do much so I really didn't learn as much. Not every company knows how to supervise an intern, especially when you're used to taking it on alone."

Students who had more than one internship were able to distinguish between what they considered good and bad supervisors. One intern wrote in her journal that the workplace was an "exclusive society," and lamented that she was "used as a secretary" -

given jobs others did not want to do.

AD27: It was very hard to connect with any of the employees and they did not seem to want to help nurture and grow my internship experience. [As opposed to the second internship] They involve me in every activity in the business. When I don't do something right they offer me constructive criticism which has aided my learning experience immensely.

PF2-9 described working with a supervisor who was more of a "mentor" because the supervisor, "would go out of her way to do whatever she could for me to get experience." She compared this supervisor to a supervisor from another internship: "I felt I should have been paid working for her, she had us do things to help build her company instead of teaching us things that would be useful in my future . . . I felt used and abused."

An advertising focus group participant also compared the impact of supervision through two diversely different experiences.

AF1-3: When you don't have one [a good supervisor] like I didn't in the first one [internship], you don't know who to go to. I felt like a nuisance, and that's like the worst feeling because you are there and you are trying as hard as can. You feel like they don't know, don't care, don't have anything for you to do, so it's rough. [referring to second internship] Everybody has instilled a lot of knowledge in me, it's not just one person. It's extremely important to have a relationship with someone, because when you don't, you

feel lost and out of place.

The interns viewed site supervisors as teachers and mentors, an important element of their experience. Effective supervisors enabled students to discover new knowledge and skills and to reflect upon them. To do so, supervisors had to be approachable and available, allowing the student to be active and engaged in learning. To engage in the benefits of experiential learning, students needed more than simple exposure to the process. Supervisors who encouraged their interns to reflect on the implications of their experiences provided interns with the possibility of lasting impacts on their future careers. The experience of working with supervisors as reported through journals and focus groups provided evidence of learning not simply by doing, but thinking about what they learned through interaction with their supervisors.

Meaningful Work

Students were engaged in a battle throughout their internship to experience what they considered "meaningful work." The definition of meaningful work varied from student to student, but the consensus is they want work that relates directly to their career goals – that they are given the opportunity to gain skills specific to their interests and skills they perceive they can "use." The differentiation between meaningful and menial work was often blurred in students' minds, confused by their desire to feel productive and appreciated. The following student captured what many fellow students strived for through their experience.

AD41: I love every day of work. My inbox is always full of assignments.
I have never been asked to get coffee or make copies. I am given

responsibilities that an employee would be assigned. Every assignment presents something new to learn.

Bolstered by their overall positive assessment of the value of internships, students were anxious to assign learning value to tasks, choosing to find a positive in the most menial of jobs.

PR35: Each duty, no matter how small, contributed to the successful running of a business. I learned something new almost everyday, whether it was learning how to use MicrosoftExcel/Publisher/Outlook, or facilitating important functions in the Human Resources Department.

AD23: I also consider things like the occasional errand and random jobs useful because it helps other employees better spend their time working on perhaps more important things and it lets people in the office know I'm there to help.

Students were able to view menial tasks in a positive light, PR61 going so far as to say, "tedious tasks are there for a reason." It was important, however, that they felt they were not being signaled out to do menial work.

AD38: Though some of this work was tedious and repetitive, I had no problem doing it because I saw other account people doing it too.

AD49: They didn't treat me like some assistant who went and got coffee. I had lots of freedom, which I liked and they also gave me real jobs to do. I feel like they treated me like part of the group rather than just some intern.

Interestingly, one of the greatest fears of interns was "being treated like an intern." Descriptions of perceived stereotypical internship duties were often referred to in the journals as a fate to be escaped.

AD49: They didn't treat me like some assistant who went and got coffee.

AD48: I didn't even have to go get anyone coffee.

PR35: I wasn't pushed to the side or used as an errand girl.

PR132: [Supervisor's name] didn't expect me to get coffee or make a million copies so much as she gave me true responsibility and put a lot of faith in my skills.

AD25: I wasn't used as a secretary like some places would.

With making coffee and photocopying as the perceived low, it was easier for interns to loosely define "real jobs." Examination of students' journals revealed evidence of many menial and monotonous duties. However, the majority of interns assign what they consider learning value to such tasks. Positive task framing is found throughout the interns' journals. For example, PR132 wrote about doing "housekeeping" duties for her supervisor by building an excel spreadsheet of donors' addresses and donation amounts. She notes that this will be "more than helpful for next year." PR124 explained that during a presidential candidate's visit she "just stood around and told reporters where the restroom was" but immediately assigns meaning to the job: "I learned a great deal of planning and even strategy goes into coordinating a visit from a high profile celebrity." PR125 admitted that she found "filing to be extremely boring." Nevertheless, she quickly rationalized that it told her more about what was involved in a sales career. AD38

assigned a great deal of importance to receptionist duties: "I sat at the front desk and everyone had to come through me. I met every client that came in for a meeting and was the face of the agency for any other random visitors."

PR4 rationalized: "You have to be willing to do the not so glamorous tasks along with the really exciting ones." Writing about directing traffic at an event, he explained: "I learned to be flexible with the tasks I was assigned." Focus groups participants were not as willing to put learning value on what they considered menial jobs. However, they recognized such tasks were part of the job. Prompted by an example of stuffing envelopes at a nonprofit organization the following exchange occurred.

PF1-3: I just felt like that was an internship thing, a typical stereotype internship thing.

PF1-2: I feel like it is appropriate for an internship because everybody has to put in their dues.

PF1-4: I have no problem with picking up slack at internships . . . you are free labor but they are also giving me the position.

One focus group lamented that "Google searches" and "photo searches" are considered necessary research on the job, but they found them tedious, monotonous and often busy work. One participant coined the phrase "typical internee duties" to describe such jobs. When asked if they considered such jobs as part of the learning process they responded:

PF1-2: I think so to an extent. I would get creative with the searches . . . I learned pitching techniques basically.

PF1-3: I can learn from them but I wouldn't want to do it as a profession.

PF1-1: Now I can go and research anything and I know what I'm doing.

Another focus group participant defended what she considered "grunt work" because it afforded her other learning opportunities. AF1-4 said: "They [supervisors] were really good, they would have us do the grunt work but always explained what the numbers meant." AF1-4 also explained that photocopying and preparing things for meetings "may be considered insignificant," but in return, she was able to sit in on the meeting, which, "was a valuable learning experience." Fellow focus group member, AF1-2 did not share her positive view: "I didn't learn shit from pulling images." However, he justified the job by saying, "it's a small shop and you do whatever you can to help."

Most focus group participants agreed that a mix of menial and meaningful work is "basically what you sign up for," making menial tasks acceptable.

PF2-5: It's expected, almost a little bit to have a little bit - like you're an intern. They want to get the most out of your time there but it needs to be more about you getting something out of it versus them getting something out of you.

PF2-6: Most interns are doing internships to get a job and if you are doing a task that you feel you probably shouldn't be doing, you can't really say anything because you want a job. They have that leverage on you even if you are miserable and you're doing things you shouldn't, it's against the law to stop.

PF2-8: You want your foot in the door. Honestly, that's where I am at. In this job market, if I really want a job somewhere and they want me

to do office work for however many hours - I'll do it. If that is what is going to make them happy and they give me a good letter of recommendation, like this person was cooperative, did everything they said, I'll do it.

PF2-7: I feel like there is a line, you have to feel like you are getting something out of it. Even if it is just one thing.

Both journals and focus groups defined some tasks as unacceptable. These tasks centered on the outlay of cash or use of personal vehicles and phones to complete tasks. One student described spending a day delivering gift baskets with no reimbursement for gas. Another intern explained her frustration of exceeding monthly cell phone minutes making company calls. PR26 said, "I am a college student interning for free, and I should not have to use my own money to purchase supplies for the company."

In addition to the type of assigned duties, students also had significant issues with not having enough work to keep them busy. Often students felt frustrated by a lack of work assignments, which resulted in boredom or what they considered busy work.

PR37: I feel like the [name of company] wasn't prepared for me. . . . I felt like in order for me to have something else to do I had to ask for it, and I did. I just wish there could have been more for me to do.

AD6: I felt they did not give me enough things to do and I was left exploring the web.

AD20: She was not used to having an intern or assistant so a lot of times I felt like I was wasting my time because there would be nothing for me to do.

P53: I felt that she didn't have enough work for me to do, which is why I got stuck researching stuff on the computer. I felt like she just gave me boring research work to keep me occupied.

AD31: Another negative was the lack of delegation at times. There were times when I had nothing to do, but it seemed that I could have been helping someone in the media department, but they just did not want any help at that time.

In addition to spending long periods of time without work, students were intimidated and felt bothersome when they asked their supervisors for duties to perform. They recognized supervisors and co-workers were busy, yet felt frustrated at the lack of direction they were given.

AD16: I did get a general grasp of the way the office works, but I felt like I mainly did a lot of "busy" work that didn't really teach me much. It seemed like more a hassle to teach me than if the staff just quickly did it themselves.

AD7: I felt like the account executives were too busy to teach me.

AD10: Anytime [supervisor] had to find something for me to do, she always made it sound like it was this major inconvenience for her. I never felt welcome or useful.

The desire to stay busy with meaningful assignments was discussed in more detail by the focus group participants. PRG1-2 expressed that she knew she was fortunate to have a boss who "always had a to-do list for me . . . every day I was doing something, always productive and always learning." Focus group members agreed that this type of

situation was ideal but not always reality. They explained the frustration of being put in a position of having to continuously ask for work.

PF2-9: I would constantly have to check in with them. Oh, is there anything for me to do?

PF2-5: I feel like an inconvenience to them, everybody in the office I'm almost like scared to follow-up with them because every time I walk by their cubicles they look like they are so intense in their work and I just don't want to bother them.

PF2-6: I almost wish he had a list of things for the day before I got there, or ready when I got there, so I just wouldn't be sitting there. Last Wednesday, I sat there at the desk for literally the entire day - like on social media sights trying to find something to do.

PF2-7: I would rather have my butt kicked for not doing something right then just sitting there; I want to learn.

PF1-3 I would just be there with admin and not doing anything. I'm the kind of person where I like to have my list, know what I need to do and get it done, and if I don't have anything to do, I'm kind of bored to tears.

Focus group members who had the advantage of experiencing more than one internship accented the importance being assigned meaningful work.

PF1-1: I want to know my tasks. I was never given expectations in my first internship, now I know what I need to do and can even do some work from home.

AF1-3: They [first internship] gave me the most tedious tasks. I did not have a lot of responsibility. I didn't feel respected. I didn't feel acknowledged. I felt very mousy and annoying asking: "Oh do you have any work for me?" [Second internship] They really embrace you. I really feel like part of the team. I'm making stuff that gets used, my ideas are heard and embraced. I really love that. It is conducive to creativity. I was questioning whether or not this was for me and after this internship, I'm like I can do this, I'm good at it.

In their quest for more meaningful work, interns identified the need to spend more hours at their internship sites. They expressed frustration at not being able to see a job through from beginning to end. They considered this a missed learning opportunity.

AD36: One way to improve my internship position and to make it a more valuable experience is to have more time available to be at the agency.

AD39: I suggest future interns make a conscious effort to adjust their class schedule to appropriately accommodate their internship. As my internship progressed, I realized that I was completely missing out on certain things just by missing the second half of the day.

PR28: I think the practicum is not enough time, rarely did I get the chance to complete tasks or get the chance to work on projects I wanted to.

Focus group participants also believed they needed more time on the job. PF2-6 expressed that she was discouraged because she only worked two days a week and felt

lost because, "so much happens between the times I'm there." She said: "It's beneficial to be there more days throughout the week, at least three or four. PF2-9 also wished she had an, "open schedule during the week because I feel like a lot happens the days I'm not there."

Speaking from experience AF1-6 advised: "You should have internships where you can experience eight hours a day because you learn things you can't learn with a couple of days or a couple of hours at a time." AF1-4 explained that it was difficult for her to be involved in projects because she worked only two days a week. She said she found tremendous value on the occasions she was able to work a third day during the week. AF1-1 agreed saying that when she went from part time to full time, she learned much more quickly: "I have that much more time to be a part of everything"

Chapter Five

Discussion

The theoretical framework of experiential learning theory helps explain the impact participation in an internship program had on students. Kolb (1984) felt experience has a primary role in the learning process and based his ELT model on a cycle of observations, reflection and action through experience. As interns reflected on their experience, they cited numerous learning outcomes resulting from their participation in the internship program, often pointing out they learned more through their internship than through class. Further, they demonstrated Kolb's (1984) idea that experiential learning allows participants to apply new knowledge to a different setting. PR38 reflected: "One of the biggest challenges I faced during this internship was taking the ideas that were in my head and turning them into something tangible."

Because of their experience on the job, students indicated their realization of the need to put their class work into action. P38 explained: "School prepares you by teaching you what to think, while interning prepares you by teaching you what to do." She further makes the connection: "Interning is about getting experience that you can't get in school. I believe that true experience comes by turning concept into reality. This is a process fraught with trial and error but the result is worth far more than anything you can get in a textbook."

This type of first-hand reality was exemplified by AD17: "I think that advertising is needed more now than ever because companies have to set themselves apart from one another and have a strong presence in the community in order to survive these hard economic times." Such theoretical connections were made profound and authentic by the opportunity to engage in "real life" situations through their experiences. PR69 wrote: "I also spent some time thinking if this is a place that I would like to work in the future. I thought about the Excellence Theory [*sic*] while making some determinations." Other students brought up various public relations, advertising and design theories learned through class and explained how they applied to what they were doing on the job. Students involved in the study at hand were able to extract lessons from their internships, and analyze and conceptualize future application.

Interns pondered their actions and strategized ways to improve the experience. This process had an effect on learning outcomes, as participants were able to revise their behavior through reflection, thus influencing the eventual result. P29 demonstrated the importance of reflection: "Good communication amongst co-workers is essential. Since e-mail runs communication in nearly every business today, it is imperative for one to write exactly what he or she means in an email. I've learned the importance of properly communicating what I mean, in email or face-to-face."

As students discussed their internship experience in the focus groups and reflected in their journal entries, they were led to a better understanding of their role in the professional world. The study found that the role of reflection helped students make sense of what they were learning on the job. The learning outcomes, as reported by the students themselves, were as numerous as they were varied. According to intern observations,

such outcomes could not have been achieved by attending class alone. PR80 wrote: "This entire semester has drawn upon the multitude of knowledge and skills I acquired in my classroom experience, and tailoring them into a practical application."

This study speaks to the high value students put on the internship experience. In the minds of students, an internship is an endeavor well worth the commitment of time and effort. They believed they would be better prepared for post graduation jobs and have increased marketability compared to students without internships. Students reported the internship provided them numerous career benefits, including the opportunity for professional networking and building resumes and portfolios.

For many, the internship experience helped them garner a better understanding of the workplace culture; and whether or not they fit into that culture. Through this realization came a clarification of career goals. PR26 wrote: "I found out things I do and don't want in a company. I feel better prepared for what is ahead of me in my future." PR35 confirmed their career choice: "I know that I have much more to learn, but I am no longer scared or unsure of the major I declared. I love the public relations field, with the negative and positive."

The data revealed students perceived what they were learning had great importance to their education. They started seeing themselves as professionals rather than students, which had an empowering effect. Interns were pushed out of their comfort zones, finding it necessary to take initiative and ask pertinent questions. The regular practice of skills led to increased levels of confidence. Many professed a deeper understanding of the importance of communication in a professional setting. The experience exposed students to a workplace setting where they had the opportunity to develop interpersonal skills such as

taking direction, dealing with conflict, and accepting constructive criticism.

Students had a strong desire to adapt to the work environment. They appreciated the skills they gained from applying the knowledge they learned in the classroom to the "real world." The data indicated there was an important connection made between course work and the internship and that an increased and more in-depth learning experience resulted from the utilization of both.

The value of hands-on experience was highly touted by students. The concept of hands-on experience included mere exposure to the operation. To be physically present in a professional setting provided the opportunity to learn through observation. AD25 wrote: "If you want the true fly-on-the-wall experience this is the place to be. . . . I heard nearly every client complaint, frustration with media reps, internal company quarrels, complaints about the client, external factors affecting media buys and the like." AD47 also learned through observation: "I was able to listen to all of his [the boss] work calls and conferences. Listening to his pitches and bargaining/selling tactics was really interesting and a great example for how negotiation works in the 'real world.'"

Hands-on experience was appreciated most when students were learning and practicing what they considered 'real world' skills. Students were anxious to test their skills and become competent in jobs they perceived they would "use" in their future careers. The opportunity to work with technology and software programs unavailable through their classes was especially advantageous.

The study corroborated Beard and Morton's (1999) finding that site supervisors who provide interns with specific direction and examples, some autonomy and independence, and constructive feedback influence positive internship outcomes.

Mentoring and teaching qualities were important to interns with the qualities of friendly, patient and helpful cited most often. Interns reported that it was often a challenge for supervisors to find time for them. This caused the interns to be overly cautious in seeking work or asking for help or clarification resulting in unproductive time.

Students had a strong desire to contribute and be useful on the job. To accomplish this, they expressed the need for challenging assignments, clear instructions, and regular feedback. The varying degrees in which these needs were met contributed greatly to their overall experience. Students assigned meaning to many menial tasks and considered them part of the internship experience as long as there was a balance between menial tasks and meaningful work.

Periods with no available work were a barrier to learning for interns. Keeping busy was an ongoing struggle and interns attributed lack of meaningful work to a barrage of reasons. Organization, delegation, scheduling, and time constraints were the most mentioned obstacles. The lack of meaningful work hindered learning outcomes and caused interns to complain of boredom and the assignment of "busy work."

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This study confirms and strengthens the argument for inclusion of internships in advertising and public relations programs. Internships provide significant learning opportunities necessary to a mass communications academic plan. The study speaks to the value of an internship experience and how it prepares a student for the professional world. Understanding the points of view of the interns in this study illuminates the practical and educational opportunities of the internship experience.

The students' words express the importance of applying what they learned in class to "hands-on" job experience. They found learning opportunity in almost any task, whether through direct performance or through observation. The interns engaged in critical thinking and learned lessons that will ease their transition into the working world.

Further, the findings from this study give voice to the student, who is ultimately responsible for his/her individual career development. In preparation for the job market, each must build a resume/portfolio and make professional contacts. Such development requires an investment of resources beyond the classroom. Internships provide an outlet for students to transition from academia to the post-graduation workforce. Focus groups were passionate about the role of internships in securing a job in their field. As AF1-2 explained: "My 3.95 GPA isn't even looked at. The grades do not matter. They [employers] want to get to know you as a person and see your portfolio." Students

strongly advocated internships and believed the internships would help launch their careers.

Implications of findings

The implications for public relations and advertising internships are twofold. First, provide students with ongoing guidance and reflection opportunities throughout their internship. Second, create more flexibility in the internship programs in the form of scheduling, and credit hours.

In this study, the interns' greatest challenge was to find relevance on the job. They struggled to be productive and find meaningful work. They cited such barriers as poor organization, scheduling, and training in prohibiting the optimum experience. In light of these findings, students would benefit from a formal structure to provide ongoing guidance during the internship.

The data reveals students were primarily left to their own devices once the internship began. For the most part, the focus groups believed this system was adequate. PF1-3 received full group agreement when she stated: "If you need help you find it. If you don't [need help] just let me do my thing." PF2-1 explained her faculty intern coordinator was available if needed, "but she also has her own course work. Basically, it is just turning in your paper at the end. She did check in halfway through the semester, but basically there is no direct contact." Fellow focus group participant PF1-4 added: "Basically we have each other to talk too." The group as a whole felt if they had questions, they could go to any member of the faculty and receive help.

One could argue this type of thinking is a deterrent to maximizing the learning potential of the internship experience. Outside the traditional classroom, Ash and Clayton (2009) argued students need a critical reflection structure to help them obtain meaningful learning through their experience. Without such guidance, reflections become "little more than descriptive accounts of experiences or venting of personal feelings" (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 28). Without a formal outlet to process the experience, problems for interns perpetuated. Students had no basis of comparison; therefore, they were too accepting of what they conceived as normal. This was evidenced through their positive spin on menial tasks and inability to secure enough work to stay busy on the job. If students work in a vacuum, trying to figure out everything on their own, learning outcomes are diminished. Interns are most effective when they collaborate and receive support from instructors and peers (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

To strengthen the internship experience, educators must provide students opportunities to reflect upon their experiences and provide feedback. Much needed perspective could be gained from regularly debriefing with peers and instructors in the form of a weekly or bimonthly internship class. This type of ongoing reflection could change the course of the internship. Focus group participant AF1-3 suggested there should be a formal, "internship class, where agencies are set up and would take certain kids. Go there a couple days a week and then come back into the class and really hone your skills . . . talk about what's going on."

A collaborative setting would remove many of the work barriers expressed by the students in this study. Through a formal outlet, students could discuss what is happening at their internship sites, how they feel, and how to solve problems. Interaction with peers

would afford students the opportunity to compare workplace cultures and jobs, thus not blindly accepting their internship as the optimal experience. They would see they are not alone in their struggle to stay busy and productive. The chance to brainstorm with an instructor and peers on how to be proactive in securing significant work experiences would have an immediate effect on the internship.

This collaborate approach would also help bridge the gap between the "how" and "why" philosophies of public relations and advertising education. Most tasks on the job are of the "how" type, emphasizing the practice of advertising and public relations. A course would offer a setting for examining the "why," helping students apply a more theoretical nature to what they are practicing on the job.

An internship course scenario would also guarantee the instructor is aware of what is happening on the jobsite. There would be more accountability for employers, thus eliminating those who are looking for "free labor" in favor of those who understand the educational experience. Because each student is involved in a different internship, an added benefit is gained for students to learn from one another about career options.

This type of program would enhance the interns' transition from students to professionals, with the instructor guiding the students' connection between their work experiences and what they have learned in their courses. A program of this nature supports the value of internships and must be supported by sufficient resources to become a reality. Resources should include a dedicated director/instructor for the course and, potentially support staff.

The second implication of the study underscores the need for more flexibility in scheduling and available credit hours. Not having enough time on the jobsite was a

common concern for students. Interns believed they needed to spend more hours at work to benefit fully from the experience. Because they were not present on the job for what they deemed enough hours [two days, less than 16 hours], they were unable to take part in many ongoing projects. In addition, some interns felt a semester was not long enough. They believed, by the time they were trained and able to accomplish tasks on their own, the semester was nearing completion.

A partial solution to these challenges is increasing credit hours and/or the option of spending consecutive semesters at a worksite. This would allow interns more time to put newly acquired skills into action. Instead of taking concurrent classes that compete for time, the intern could concentrate more hours on the job. Schools should consider offering academic credit of up to six semester hours for part-time internships, and up to a semester's worth of credit for full-time internships.

Increased credit hours would open up the opportunity for more than one internship. Basow and Bryne (1993) found when students completed more than one internship; the advantages of some seemed to compensate for the disadvantages of others. The present study found students who took more than one internship were able to compare the two experiences, which led to greater awareness and critical thinking about the experience. These students were highly committed to the value of internships and were willing to take a second, and even a third internship, for no credit or pay. However, students found many employers would not accept them into the internship unless they were receiving academic credit.

Recommendations

In addition to the above recommendations, the present study suggests the following considerations for educators when implementing public relations and advertising internships. First, teach students how to advocate for themselves. Their ability to effectively communicate, negotiate and assert themselves will not only enhance the quality of assignments they receive, but also provide students with interpersonal skills that will serve them throughout their career.

Second, encourage site supervisors to provide both challenging assignments and regular shadowing opportunities. Hands-on experience for skill development fulfills much needed vocational education, but shadowing also offers valuable learning opportunities through observation. Students in this study learned and gained career insight through inclusion in client meetings, creative sessions, sales calls, and production sessions. All interns should experience a mix of hands-on and shadowing opportunities.

Finally, the internship coordinator should regularly screen internship sites, focusing attention on the intern's immediate supervisor. Site supervisors should be aware of the importance of their role in the internship. Students viewed their site supervisors as teachers, mentors and even role models. This study found supervisors had the single greatest effect on how students viewed their experience. Site supervisors need to create an internship environment in which meaningful, professional work assignments are balanced with routine office chores. It is important for site supervisors to provide students with feedback and opportunities for reflection to maximize their learning experience.

Suggestions for further research

The concept of "virtual internships," the ability to work from anywhere at any time, was introduced in the data. A small number of students in this study worked outside the traditional office environment, receiving assignments, projects and feedback through the internet. These students had little to no face-to-face meetings with their employers. Students conveyed some concerns with communication, but overall endorsed the experience.

AD19: One of the benefits of an all-virtual internships is no wasted time. I literally had no time when I was forced to be at work with nothing to do. I did no clerical work or filing; I did work that really made a difference for the organization . . . It [internship] offered an incredible alternative that I truly enjoyed.

AD25: I got twice the work done that I would have gotten done in a busy distracting office in the time I actually worked.

AD 33: The world today has gotten so much smaller and people are now conducting business from all across the globe. I learned how to deal with people in a non-physical manner and still get things accomplished and I therefore will be able to better function in today's society.

Limited data prevents drawing conclusions on virtual internship experiences in this study. However, as the trend continues toward work being conducted outside of the traditional office setting, there will be substantial growth in opportunities for virtual internships. Improving technology and the growth of social media opens the door for

endless possibilities. Future research should explore if and how a virtual internship should be designed. Further, how providing internships in a virtual modality encompasses experiential learning theory - what is the role of reflection, conceptualization and experimentation in the experiences of undergraduate virtual internships?

Limitations

A possible limitation of this study is that students were required to keep a journal and write a final essay in order to receive credit for the internship. Students were instructed to critically assess their experience in relation to skills and knowledge learned in coursework. This directive may have influenced how students described what they learned in the classroom relative to what they encountered on the job. However, interns received pass or fail grades, not letter grades, which may have lessened the influence.

Another shortcoming of the study is the small sample size of the focus groups. The size of the individual focus groups ranged from four to six participants and does not represent the entire population of interns. However, as qualitative fieldwork, the intent was not to generalize but to gain a richer understanding of the thoughts and feelings of interns within the mass communications department. The study was conducted within only one university's mass communications department. Future studies should address these limitations by expanding the study across different universities and sampling the entire mass communications' program.

The strength in this study lies in the reflections of the interns themselves. Their perspectives speak to the value of internships. It is also important to note that although the literature review encompassed internships in a variety of mass communications

disciplines, this study focused on public relations and advertising students. Public relations and advertising studies involve the direct application of substantive knowledge to vocational ends, which is consistent with other mass communications disciplines. Whereupon other mass communications disciplines could be assumed to follow a similar pattern, further research is needed to confirm such assumptions.

In summary, the literature and the present study support the need for inclusion of internships in the mass communications academic plan. This research furthers the understanding and awareness of the nature of the internship experience from the students' perspective. The data reported in this study helps educators determine how best to work with students to maximize learning outcomes and meet the challenges and expectations of their internship. The task of providing such internship opportunities requires the ongoing attention of educators.

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