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Student Perceptions of Internships: What Are the Perceived Benefits for the Interested Parties?

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 259 marketing students from two universities provided their perceptions of the benefits associated with marketing internships. They agree that an array of benefits accrue to the student interns, the organizations for which the students serve in internship positions, the university, and the general student population at their own university. Among the benefits that are strongly acknowledged by the students are that an internship helps the student interns learn more about their chosen career path, that organizations benefit from the enthusiasm of an eager subset of workers, that successful internships help their university develop strong partnerships with the hiring organizations, and that successful marketing internships help students in other majors secure their own internships in their respective disciplines. It appears that the benefits far outweigh the students' concerns, the most meaningful of which is the requirement that they pay tuition for internship credit. The results still document the need for Career Services to do a better job of allaying their concerns. One might say they need to do a better job of marketing.

INTRODUCTION

A fact of life for many college students today is the role that an internship can play in their quest to gain employment within their chosen career path. Perhaps this reality is no more evident than it is in marketing. And if that path within the field of marketing traverses one of the more crowded career paths such as advertising or sports marketing, it is likely that this internship will be unpaid. When the university adds the cost of tuition for internship credit, many students likely question the benefits. Perhaps they see the benefits accruing to the other parties in the relationship, but do they fully comprehend the benefits that they gain as a result of their efforts?

There are several potential beneficiaries in this relationship. Easily identifiable are the student and the organization that has hired the student as an intern. But it can be argued that other beneficiaries include the university and its students. The extant literature provides a vast inventory of what those presumed benefits are and exactly who might be considered a

beneficiary. However, the literature generally fails to document the perceived importance of each of the presumed benefits that accrue to those beneficiaries.

LITERATURE

While there is a meaningful amount of literature on internships, there is a dearth of literature specific to the field of marketing. Thus this literature review will address internships from a broad perspective whereas the empirical component of the current study will address marketing interns in particular. Before delving into the literature, it should be noted that a number of studies on internships have identified three stakeholder groups; the students, the host organizations, and the academic community (Alpert, Heaney, and Kuhn, 2009). For the purpose of the current study, the academic community is deemed to be comprised of two constituencies: the university and the general student body, irrespective of their involvement in any internship program.

In identifying beneficiaries of an internship, Coco (2000, p. 42) stated that “internships are a win-win for students, host companies, and universities” and “the end result is almost always a positive experience for each of the parties.” This exact conclusion was more recently articulated by Boose (2004). A basic premise of an internship has long been that it helps the student better prepare for a career after college. Yet as recently as the year 2000, authors pointed to the fact that little empirical research concerning that relationship had been performed. In that study, it was shown that “supplemental career preparation experiences proved to be...asset enhancers for those with specialized preparation,” especially in light of an overabundance of graduates in some disciplines that result in intense competition for the available jobs (Sagen, Dallam, and Laverty, 2000, p. 763). Regarding these *asset enhancers*, it has been stated that interns reported acquiring research skills, professional skills, and a better understanding of the theoretical underpinnings germane to their career path (Hynie, Jenson, Michael, Wedlock, and Phipps, 2011). Often characterized as experiential learning, internships are said to provide those students with a definitive edge in the job market (Clark and White, 2010). As a result, significantly more jobs, often at higher starting salaries, are available upon graduation for students who have internship experience on the résumés (Gault, Leach, and Duey, 2010). Thus, it can be implied that students learn from internships and that this knowledge can serve as a differential advantage in the students’ job search. A more recent study suggests that students do learn, but that the supervisor’s role and contribution can either enhance or inhibit the extent to which meaningful learning is achieved (Holyoak, 2013).

In one somewhat recent study, students were found to attach great value to the internship experience, especially when that internship was inextricably connected to the students’ career goals (Hergert, 2009). Interestingly, it was determined that internships can help students make good career choices, thus implying that students can use insight gained during an internship to differentiate between good and bad decisions thereby helping them to make a better transition from school to work. In an interesting and meaningful study of graduates with business degrees, it was determined that students who had completed an internship not only had higher starting salaries, but also experienced a higher level of success in their professional careers (Gault, Redington, and Schlager, 2000). Another benefit for the interns themselves is that they enter

their career path with a more realistic set of expectations regarding the so-called *real world* (Knouse and Fontenot, 2008; Moghaddam, 2011).

Interestingly, one study looked at two student demographics. While confirming what much of the research has articulated, that internships are associated with receiving a job offer upon graduation, the authors found that students who had completed an internship had a higher GPA and were younger upon graduation (Knouse, Tanner and Harris, 1999). Of note is the fact that students who had completed at least one internship, and those who had not done so, exhibited exactly the same average ACT score. Yet another study offered an interesting demographic consideration that likely raised a couple of eyebrows when it concluded that job satisfaction is higher in those situations where the intern and the direct supervisor are of the same gender (Smayling and Miller, 2012).

Brislin (2010) offered his assessment that not only do the students benefit, but so does the host organization. In essence, Brislin asserts that an internship serves as an extended interview between the intern and the employer. In support of this assertion, the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2010 Internship and Co-op Survey indicated that 53.3 percent of all internships were converted to full-time positions, and even when that conversion did not occur, the internship still increased the likelihood of the student securing a position in his or her career path upon graduation (NACE, 2010). This finding was further supported by research focusing on undergraduate business students (Callanan and Benzing, 2004). In the aforementioned study by Coco, a study that also focused on business schools, it was essentially stated that one benefit associated with an internship is the ability to “try before you buy” (Coco, 2000, p. 41). Intuitively this could be viewed from two perspectives. One is that the intern is *trying out* a job and a potential employer before committing to a long-term career decision; however, the more likely scenario is that the employer is trying out a prospective employee.

Beyond the aforementioned benefits, host organizations reap an array of additional benefits from their internship-based employment operations. Among these additional benefits are the forming of relationships with potential future employees, the reduced cost-per-hire of recruiting new employees, an enriched pool of workers, a meaningful job-related evaluation of a specific candidate prior to making a hiring decision, an enhanced reputation on campus, and better networking with the intern’s peers at the university (Boose, 2004). Furthermore, many universities impose standards such as a minimum GPA for eligibility thereby providing some assurance that nonqualified candidates will not be in the pool of prospective interns (Kim, Kim, and Bzullak, 2012). Perhaps this is the logic for the recent proclamation that “employing firms highly value internship experience” (Rigsby, Addy, Herring, and Polledo, 2013, p. 1131). For example, it has been stated that accounting firms perceive students who have worked in an internship capacity to be better entry-level accountants, thus less risky hires (Green, Graybeal, and Madison, 2011).

It has been stated that there is a paucity of research that has sought to examine the benefits that successful internships provide to the students’ university. Yet, some positive results have been delineated. Specifically, it was determined that 87 percent of the business schools felt a stronger connection with the community while 81 percent cited an enhanced reputation. Furthermore, it

has been stated that internships have the potential to lead to smarter students, new scholarships, external curriculum assessment, and practitioner input (Weible, 2010). These benefits are important to the university and its administration, but they also have the potential to provide a positive impact for all students enrolled at the university.

What is evident from the literature is that a meaningful body of qualitative assessments and empirical research about internships in general has been disseminated. Collectively, the extant literature provides support for the premise that internships have the potential to benefit four distinct entities: the student intern, the host organization, the student's university, and the student body at-large at the intern's university. And while there is a growing body of literature focusing on business students in general, what is also apparent is that there has not been a lot of research directed specifically at marketing students and the organizations for which they intern. The current research project is designed to address this deficiency.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives essentially involve answering the following question:

- How do marketing students, irrespective of their past internship experience, perceive the potential benefits emanating from an internship for each of the following groups of interested parties:
 - the student interns themselves,
 - the host organization that employs the interns,
 - the university where the intern is enrolled, and
 - the university's student body at-large?

METHODOLOGY

The target population for this component of the study is current undergraduate marketing majors. The survey instrument was developed by two of the coauthors. The third and fourth coauthors then provided input regarding the scales developed in the initial iteration. The instrument was revised based on this input. Then it was passed on to the directors of Career Services for the Colleges of Business at the authors' two universities. Appropriate edits were made and questions deemed pertinent by the directors of the two Career Services offices were added.

The final instrument consisted of three primary components. The benefits, irrespective of who the beneficiary is, comprised the first part. In addition to the benefits, information regarding the students' past, present, and future intentions regarding internships was provided. Part three addressed the requisite demographics; these included age, gender, major, and the number of hours worked per week in a non-internship based position.

Business classes were selected for distribution of the survey at the authors' two universities. These classes included Introduction to Business classes, Principles of Marketing classes, and a varied array of upper division marketing courses that were either required classes or restricted electives for marketing majors. Based on this selection process, the sample was comprised of freshman, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and a few post-graduate students. Because of this

diversity, it is believed that the sample is relatively representative of the population of marketing students.

The perceived benefits were evaluated via simple descriptive statistics. Each of the benefits was evaluated using a balanced six-point Likert scale anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree with lower values representing agreement with the statement under consideration. As such, lower means generally reflect the students' beliefs that the benefit under scrutiny is an outcome associated with an internship. Therefore, the decision was made to use means and percentage distributions as the bases for assessing the students' perceptions.

RESULTS

A total of 836 students provided input that was deemed acceptable for inclusion in the analysis stage. A number of surveys were excluded because of illogical responses to the two questions regarding the number of internships completed and the level of satisfaction associated with one's most recent internship. Exclusion was predicated upon a student indicating that they had not participated in any internship, then responding to the question that addressed their level of satisfaction with their most recent internship. Of the 836 respondents in the final database, a stratum of 259 marketing majors formed the basis for subsequent analyses.

Table 1
Perceptions of *Benefits* for Students Who Complete Internships

Potential Benefit	Mean	Percent in Agreement
Learn new concepts in one's chosen field	1.37	99.6
Internship is a résumé builder	1.40	98.8
Helps develop network of contacts	1.55	99.6
Gives student advantage in job search in general	1.62	97.3
Gives student advantage for job with that company	1.65	98.1
Help student learn about a specific industry	1.74	96.5
Help acquire positive letters of recommendation	1.76	98.1
Help better understand culture of profession	1.82	98.8
Open doors not otherwise available	1.90	93.8
Help students learn professional communication	2.00	93.1
Help determine what student does not want to do	2.00	95.0
Helps uncover student weaknesses	2.14	93.1
Reinforce what our professors teach us	2.42	89.2
Internships offer opportunity to earn good income	2.67	82.2
Boosts student GPA and/or adds to credit hours	3.08	84.5
Internships involve relatively menial tasks	3.64*	47.1
Internship is more important than a master's degree	3.64	44.7

Strongly Agree = 1 Strongly Disagree = 6 *Disagreement (higher mean) is positive

The initial assessment focused on 17 benefits that are generally presumed to accrue to the students who have completed at least one internship. The specific metrics associated with these 17 criteria are presented in Table 1. But certain generalizations can be drawn from these results. Overall, the metrics presented in Table 1 indicate a positive response for 16 of the 17 issues. Furthermore, fully 11 of the items exhibited means of 2.00 or lower thereby reflecting a relatively strong sentiment that the issue under scrutiny is a meaningful benefit gained by the student intern. Students tend to see an internship as a learning opportunity, a résumé builder, a chance to develop a network of professionals, and an advantage in their future quest to secure full-time employment in their chosen field. There are other benefits for which their support is more subdued. In this regard, they see an internship as a means of identifying things they do not want to do while concurrently reinforcing what they have learned in the classroom. There is weak support for the premise that internships allow students to improve their GPA or otherwise increase the number of credit hours they have completed such that it improves their position regarding their upcoming graduation. They slightly disagree with two assertions. Their very modest disagreement with the assertion that internships involve menial tasks should actually be viewed as a positive outcome. Thus the only negative outcome is the belief that a master's degree is more important to the student than is the experience of having worked in an internship capacity. The results associated with these 17 potential benefits are presented in Table 1.

The second focus is on the perceived benefits accruing to the host organization for which the intern toils. In this regard, student perceptions of seven potential benefits were assessed. As can be seen in Table 2, the respondents indicated their agreement with all seven benefits. However, there were no item means below 2.00; therefore, it can be stated that the potential benefits derived by the employing organizations are perceived to be less significant than are those attained by the student interns themselves. Essentially, the primary benefits accruing to the host organization – from the students' perspective – are inexpensive labor, a cadre of eager workers, workers who are up-to-date with emerging marketing trends, and opportunities to identify good – and bad – candidates for future full-time employment as a regular employee. Table 2 provides an overview of these results.

Table 2
Perceptions of *Benefits for Organizations* that Hire Student Interns

Potential Benefit	Mean	Percent in Agreement
Get workers who are eager to participate	2.00	97.3
Identify future permanent employees	2.07	95.7
Benefit from inexpensive labor	2.39	86.4
Get workers in insight into newest techniques	2.61	86.8
Temporary employees who receive no benefits (vacation)	2.62	81.0
Interns perform task regular employees prefer not to do	2.77	75.6
Organization learns technology from tech-savvy interns	2.92	76.7

The third focus is directed towards the students' perceptions of a set of three issues specific to their university. In this regard, students expressed moderate agreement with the assertion that internships have helped enhance the overall image of their university. Slightly stronger

agreement was in evidence for the belief that their university has leveraged positive internship outcomes into a stronger partnership with the broader community. Universities benefit from the ability to charge students tuition for credit to be granted for completion of their internship and including it as part of their official transcript to be viewed by potential employers. Thus they collect valuable revenue while devoting limited resources to the interns themselves. In this regard, respondents of this survey agreed ever-so-slightly that the tuition imposed upon them is a fair price to be paid for the benefits that students reap from their internships. Since there was not universal disagreement with this premise, one can argue that it translates into a benefit for the university. Table 3 provides an overview of the results pertaining to university benefits.

Table 3

Perceptions of *Benefits for the University Where the Student Intern Is Enrolled*

Potential Benefit	Mean	Percent in Agreement
Helps university build partnerships with community	2.33	87.6
Enhance the image of my university	2.46	87.0
Tuition is a fair price for the benefits gained by students	3.46	56.8

The fourth and final segment to whom benefits potentially accrue comprises the aggregate student body at the intern’s university. In this regard, a set of five potential benefits was delineated. In general, internships are deemed to make positive contributions whereby those students contribute more in the classroom while encouraging other students to participate in a synergistic learning environment, particularly in the area of class discussion. They are also seen as helping to create more opportunities for their peers in their efforts to secure their own internship positions. Finally, it is believed by marketing students that a positive track record for their own internships will further help other students in their efforts to secure permanent positions in their chosen field, even if their field is not marketing. Table 4 provides an overview of the results germane to the benefits accruing to the general student body at the interns’ university.

Table 4

Perceptions of *Benefits for the Student Body at-large Where Interns Are Enrolled*

Potential Benefit	Mean	Percent in Agreement
Help future students secure employment	2.09	93.8
Other interns feel internships were beneficial	2.21	90.0
Interns provide encouragement to fellow students	2.34	86.0
Interns contribute more to class discussion	2.64	78.3
Helps students in other majors secure internships	2.92	72.0

DISCUSSION

This study has provided a reasonable snapshot of marketing students’ perspective of the value of internships today. The results verify the premise that benefits accrue to four distinct constituencies: the student interns, the host organizations that employ the interns, the university,

and the general student body across all majors. Among the benefits that are strongly acknowledged by the students are that an internship helps the student interns learn more about their chosen career path, that organizations benefit from the enthusiasm of an eager subset of workers, that successful internships help their university develop strong partnerships with the organizations that hire their students, and that successful marketing internships help students in other majors secure their own internships and jobs in their respective disciplines. Yet everything is not positive. For instance, there are concerns articulated regarding the common requirement that students pay tuition for credit hours attained by virtue of an internship. The mean of 3.46 is just shy of the scale's midpoint of 3.50. Furthermore, fully 43.2 percent of the respondents expressed their disagreement with the statement that tuition is a fair price to pay. Furthermore, more than 47 percent of the respondents indicated their belief that marketing internships typically involve menial tasks; clearly not much is learned in this situation. Fully 53.9 percent of the marketing students believe that a master's degree in marketing is more valuable than having worked in an internship capacity.

The objective of the next phase of this study is to examine this relationship from the employers' perspective. The survey will be retooled as required so as to measure that population's attitudes on the same phenomena addressed in the current study. This being done, the differences between the two groups can be documented.

Another area for future study is the relationship between the perceptions regarding each of the potential benefits and an array of variables germane to the individuals. These variables include the respondents' age, gender, hours worked in a typical work week, and major. But perhaps more importantly, future analysis will look at the relationship between the benefits and one's experience in an internship capacity. This will be accomplished two ways; it will focus on the number of internships in which the student has participated and the level of satisfaction attributed to the students' most recent internship.

CONCLUSIONS

Benefits are seen as accruing to the interns, the hiring organization, the university, and the general student body. But there are concerns that are articulated by the sample of marketing students. Thus, the results document the need for Career Services to do a better job of allaying these concerns. One could say they need to do a better job of marketing. Perhaps they could benefit from the services of a marketing intern.

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Tammy McCullough is a professor of Marketing at Eastern Michigan University. Her doctorate was granted by the University of Washington. Her research has appeared in numerous journals including *the Journal of Applied Marketing Theory*, *Health Marketing Quarterly* and *Research Technology Management*. She has also presented papers at numerous conferences including AMTP, the ABA, and ACR. She is an avid sports participant who cycles, plays organized ice hockey, has twice run in the Boston Marathon, and has completed several Ironman Triathlons.

Robert Twells is an instructor of Marketing and Management at Eastern Michigan University. His BBA was awarded by Baylor University and his MBA was granted by James Madison University. He has also taught at Miami University where he was the recipient of two Outstanding Faculty awards. At the University of Toledo, he served as the Recruitment Coordinator for the College of Business. His case studies have appeared in *Business Case Journal* and *Case Research Journal*.

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