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# Disney's Internship Program: More than Hands-On Experience

## **Abstract**

The vast majority of hospitality management programs require students to participate in a hands-on work experience, which helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing the student with an opportunity to practice the theory learned in the classroom. The Walt Disney World Co. developed, implemented, and operates one of the most successful internship programs in the hospitality industry. It recognizes the need for business practitioners to become more involved in the education of future hospitality managers. The authors summarize the company's program and offer suggestions for other employers looking to give interns more than hands-on experience.

# Disney's Internship Program: More Than Hands-On Experience

by  
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*The vast majority of hospitality management programs require students to participate in a hands-on work experience, which helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing the student with an opportunity to practice the theory learned in the classroom. The Walt Disney World Co. developed, implemented, and operates one of the most successful internship programs in the hospitality industry. It recognizes the need for business practitioners to become more involved in the education of future hospitality managers. The authors summarize the company's program and offer suggestions for other employers looking to give interns more than hands-on experience.*

Internships are an extremely important part of the education of hospitality management students. There are 128 baccalaureate degree-granting programs located in the United States that are members of the Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education (CHRIE). Of these, 103 have an internship requirement for their students;<sup>1</sup> some are for academic credit.

Of the programs specifying an internship requirement, 51 provided the number of clock hours required, averaging 723 hours. The remaining 52 programs described the length of their required work experience in months, semesters, or credit hours, or only reported that an internship was required and did not specify a length.

## **Internships Contribute to the Educational Process**

A need exists for internships as a part of an academic curriculum. Educational programs that require students to have field experiences bridge the gap between theory and practice<sup>2</sup>. Without these experiences, students would not have an opportunity to practice the theory learned in the classroom. Students cannot learn everything within the confines of schools<sup>3</sup>. Cunningham<sup>4</sup> studied learning in the workplace, and concluded that everyone

learns at work, with new employees learning more than experienced workers.

Practicum work provides students with an environment in which they can learn to adapt and handle situations far different from those highlighted in their textbooks. A goal of practicum programs is to prepare students to become reflective practitioners who are able to make real life decisions in light of sound theory.<sup>5</sup> Gormley reported that graduates cited the practicum experience as the greatest contributor to their success<sup>6</sup>.

Benefits to students participating in an internship program include gaining real world experience, adding a line on a resume, being exposed to the hospitality industry as a provider of service, gaining an appreciation of the industry, enhancing career evaluation, obtaining sensitivity to lower level employees, allowing for a better understanding of the subjects covered in the classroom, and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Students can learn about service first hand, and are able to find out early in their college career if this is a career for them.

In order for the intern to benefit from practicum work, the internship program should be designed to provide some of these benefits. All too often student internships are seen by employers as a source of highly qualified temporary employees to fill lower level positions. While this view is economically appealing, the value of the work experience to the interns should not be ignored. The students' experiences should be the primary concern of educational institutions and employers participating in college internship programs.

If the job assignment does not allow the intern to observe or develop managerial skills, then efforts should be taken by employers to foster an "educational" experience for participating students. There is no one perfect approach in designing an internship program. However, the educational element should not be ignored. The Walt Disney World Co. has utilized interns for short-term employment needs. Disney offers a unique approach to an internship program by including a classroom experience to supplement the work experience component for the students. Disney's experience demonstrates an employer's effort to create a win-win internship program for all participants.

### **Walt Disney World Had Early Internship Program**

In 1980, when the Walt Disney World Co. in Florida consisted of one operating theme park and a second one under construction, management ran into a major staffing problem. The labor base of quality workers needed to cover peak periods was dwindling. In response to the human resource need for qualified people to fill temporary positions, the Walt Disney World Internship Program was established. The intent of the program was to hire, on a short-term continual basis, college students to solve this staffing problem. What developed was an effort on the part of this company to give back

to the students and educational institutions something in addition to hands-on work experience.

Walt Disney World Co.'s decision to use interns as a source of qualified temporary employees was strongly influenced by its past experience with an informal internship program sponsored by Paul Smith College. As early as 1972 the company participated in an internship program developed and managed by Harry Purchase, a professor from Paul Smith College which offers a two-year program in hospitality management. Professor Purchase, a strong believer in "hands-on experience" for hospitality students, convinced John Brownlee of Walt Disney World Professional Staffing to allow about 20 students to intern in the summer months. The success of this early program motivated Disney to use interns on a much larger scale to supplement the work force during peak periods. Duncan Dickson and John Brownlee took the idea to Dick Nunis, head of Disney attractions, who then became champion of a larger vision. From the start, Nunis saw an opportunity for the Walt Disney World Resort to become involved in the education of future managers of the hospitality industry.

It became apparent to all involved that the objectives of the program should be clearly defined before implementation could begin. To help develop the foundation for the program, Disney invited approximately 40 educators to participate in a forum to discuss the goals and objectives of an internship program.

### **Quality Learning Experience Is Paramount**

Both the educators and Disney agreed that a major emphasis of any internship program is to give the students a quality learning experience. However, the two groups disagreed on the type of experience needed. Educators wanted interns to develop their management skills by job shadowing management. Such an arrangement would not have worked for Disney who needed the students to work in operational areas. In order to address the exposure to Disney's management style, a classroom learning experience was added to the program. The classroom component, which requires 45 contact hours from the interns, was developed by working closely with selected academic institutions. Most schools now allocate a total of six academic credits for participation, three for the hands-on experience and three for the classroom experience. However, the decision to offer academic credit is strictly up to the institution.

The goal development stage of the forum helped Walt Disney World Co. recognize the need for business practitioners to become more involved in the education of future hospitality managers. Disney now views the internship program as a means to influence the educational experience of hospitality students. The company believes students who have experienced the controlled job exposure of an internship program are better prepared for the real world than non-interns. Therefore, an objective of the program is to provide a cooperative effort between business and educational institutions to encourage the inclusion of practical experience in students' curricula.

Another objective of the program was to recruit the brightest and best students early in their academic careers to expose them to Walt Disney World Co.'s management style. Rather than compete with other companies for graduating seniors, the company decided to recruit sophomores and juniors. An advantage of early recruitment to the students is that it enables them to assess up front if a hospitality career is appropriate for them. The hospitality industry is known for long hours with weekend, night, and holiday work requirements. If such hours are not compatible with their goals, then students should find out early in their academic career so they can make a change.

Even though the Walt Disney World Co. program is useful for screening potential full-time employees, the company does not emphasize this as a major objective of providing internships. The large amount of students participating in this program, numbering in the thousands per year, has prohibited Disney from offering potential full-time employment upon graduation as part of the program's package. This is made clear to students during the interview process. Because many internships are a prelude to full-time employment, it is imperative for Disney recruiters to be up front with students about what the program does and does not offer students.

The College Relations Department was established to oversee the program and manage the recruitment of interns. On an annual basis they handle approximately 3,500 students from across the nation and the world who come to Orlando to participate in the internship program. These students are exposed to a controlled program that involves three areas: work experience, programmed study, and living experience. Representatives from the College Relations Department serve as a third party relative to relationships between the intern and Disney in the three content areas of the program.

### **Students Receive Hands-On Experience**

The objective of the work experience component of the program is to expose interns to Disney's business and entertainment philosophy in a real world context. The company still follows the philosophy established by its founder, Walt Disney, who coined the phrase "quality will win out." Walt Disney linked success to service and stressed giving people everything one can in a clean and friendly environment to create a real fun place to be. The theory guiding the Walt Disney World Co. management approach is "A Quality Guest Experience and Quality Cast Experience within the guidelines of Quality Business Practices."

Through an on-the-job training technique, the company demonstrates the Disney approach and teaches valuable lessons about human nature. While the students, who are called hosts/hostesses of their assigned areas, do not assume management responsibilities, they are exposed to a variety of the operations of the Walt Disney World Resort including food, merchandise, attractions, custodial, hospitality, recreation, tickets, and transportation.

The students' work responsibilities are definitely not glamorous, and are designed to provide the students with hands-on experience. For example, students in fast foods have at least three job rotations: taking orders, filling orders, and working in the kitchen. Those assigned to merchandise stock shelves and work the cash register. Attraction assignments range from collecting tickets and stamping guest hands to greeting, loading, and unloading guests and operating rides. Those assigned to custodial clean restrooms and tables and empty waste cans. Students with lifeguard certification may work as lifeguards. Transportation assignments entail parking and loading and unloading monorails and ferry boats. The students learn their responsibilities and gain their skills from the existing work force. It is made clear to the full-time employees that their help is necessary in training these interns.

Students work in one area during their program, mutually chosen by them and Disney, and have a minimum 30-hour work week. They must be flexible to work day and evening shifts and can be assigned overtime should attendance levels increase. The hourly rate of pay is \$5.60.

In order to provide feedback to both students and their schools, standard written performance evaluations are done at the end of the internship by the student's direct supervisor. Exit interviews of students and campus meetings with educators are also used by Disney to assess the work experience as well as all aspects of its program.

### **Programmed Study Provides Insight into Business**

If the work experience was the only component of the program, it is doubtful the interns' time at Disney would warrant college credit. The supply of labor for these particular job assignments is truly a benefit for Disney. Disney's approach for incorporating managerial skills through the use of an additional component outside of the work experience enhanced the program by providing an education benefit to the interns.

An integral part of the internship program is a programmed study component where seminars taught by working professionals are used to promote an interchange of ideas and encourage a mutual flow of questions to provide further insight into the way business is conducted at the Walt Disney World Resort. The emphasis is on the "why's and what's" rather than the "how's" of doing things the Disney way. The business concept curriculum developed by the Disney University includes a core unit of four sessions, a task unit of one independent learning assignment, a specialty unit of three sessions, and an elective unit of two sessions. These are non-accredited seminars; however, academic credit may be granted by the student's college or university. Students are not paid for the time spent in these seminars.

The Core Unit consists of four sessions covering Walt Disney World Co.'s business philosophy of providing the highest quality experiences for guests and cast members using quality business practices. The Traditions session exposes the students to the Disney way of providing

quality entertainment to both guests and cast members and introduces the company history and philosophy. The corporate culture is investigated in the Walt Disney and You session. Managing the Company explores how guest expectations and consumer perceptions influence business success. The final session, Disney Leader, synthesizes students' total experiences by having students develop possible action plans to enhance operations.

The Specialization Seminars allow students to explore the company's business techniques and internal structure in a specific area of the company and includes Theme Park Management, Resort Management, Managing and Communicating, and Human Resource Management. The Elective Sessions allow students to investigate two of six topics by relating the company's operation of a particular area to academic training and professional careers. Areas include Finance, Marketing, Business Presentation Skills, Professional Staffing, and Human Resources.

Students are required to attend one of the two-and-one-half-hour sessions weekly for a 10-week period; seminars are offered Monday through Friday. Strict attendance guidelines are set by Disney. If two seminars are missed, a meeting is scheduled with College Relations, and the student's school is notified. Three missed seminars usually result in termination of the student from the program. For students who participate in all 10 seminars, fulfill their housing contract, and receive an "Excellent" rating on final performance evaluations, the "Ducktorate Degree" is awarded. A "Mouster's Degree" is awarded to students who do not quite reach these high levels of performance.

### **Living Experience Provides Multicultural Environment**

The Living Experience component of the Disney internship program was developed out of necessity. Internships range between 12 and 32 weeks, depending on the time of the year, student availability, and work requirements. The typical internship is 16 weeks, although many students "double block" to include a summer. Because short-term leases were not available in the Central Florida area, the company built 456 apartments on its property to satisfy the program's year-round need. These apartments are occupied by about 1,300 students in the spring, 1,500 in the summer, and 700 in the fall. Students are charged for cost recovery during their stay, deducted from their weekly pay. Interns are required to sign a housing contract for the duration of their stay. Participating students in this internship program are attracted to the Walt Disney World Resort for the experience, not the financial rewards. After payroll deductions for housing and other expenses that may be incurred, there is little remaining to help students with their college costs.

Since student housing is provided for all internship participants from around the world, students are exposed to a multicultural environment. The Living Experience brings to life Walt Disney's dream of having people of different backgrounds and nationalities living and



working together. Students see first hand how cultural diversity has been used to create authentic details and "theming" to enhance the guest's quality experience.

Operation of the Walt Disney World program is not cheap and requires a large monetary commitment. Annual expenditures include about \$250,000 for classroom seminars, \$750,000 for recruitment, and \$350,000 for salaries directly associated with the program. The housing component is set up to break even.

A major reason for the success of the program is the carefully orchestrated recruitment effort. Schools are initially selected to participate in the intern program if they allow their students to intern during the fall and spring semesters as well as the summer. Since Walt Disney World Co.'s staffing needs are year-round, only schools that can accommodate this need are selected for recruitment purposes. Students usually apply through their school where the initial screening is done. Currently, there are about 180 schools participating in the program; all majors are welcome to apply.

Campus recruitment takes place twice a year. Advertising is done through campus sources such as newspapers and radio stations. A two-hour group presentation is made to interested students to explain the program in detail. It is very important to Disney that students have a realistic picture of the program before they are interviewed individually. Alumni of the program are encouraged to participate, and videos are used to enhance the Disney Experience. The presentation includes descriptions of job responsibilities, living conditions, pay scale, and college credit granted by the institution. By discussing the generic details of the program at the group meeting, individual interviews can focus entirely on assessing the personal attributes of the interviewee such as personality and attitude. This method of recruitment has enabled Disney to reduce individual interview times from 45 to 20 minutes.

### **Program Is Highly Successful**

What started out as a solution to a staffing problem has evolved into one of the most successful internship programs in the hospitality industry where students gain experiences not available to them in the traditional classroom. The Walt Disney World Co. Internship Program added new dimensions to hands-on training in the form of classroom and living experiences to expose student interns to multiple levels of the hospitality industry. The program satisfies a business need while serving as a model and training ground for future managers in the hospitality industry. Disney has entered into a partnership with the academic community and has given back to students and academic institutions something more than hands-on experience. It has recognized that if one gets something (labor) one has to give something (work experience, programmed study, and living experience).

Having been involved in all phases of the program, Duncan Dickson has some advice for those considering an internship program. The first is to obtain the commitment of the highest levels of management in

order to secure the resources necessary to establish and maintain an internship program. Without the enthusiastic support from Dick Nunis, the Walt Disney World Co. Internship Program's scope would probably have never developed beyond being a source of temporary employees. Nunis' efforts and visions helped acquire the financial backing required to incorporate an educational dimension to the program.

The next suggestion is to formalize the program, with a beginning and an end. Goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bounded. In addition, meaningful feedback should be provided to students and their schools to aid in the assessment of students and the program. Having a clearly defined program with feedback mechanisms elevates the internship experience to a higher level than merely obtaining work experience.

Another way to enhance the interns' experiences and make the program more attractive to educators is to offer something unique in the program for educational purposes. Two of the biggest selling points of the Disney program are the living experience and the formal classroom learning sessions. In addition, the opportunity to earn college credit from some institutions helps to validate this program for educational purposes.

Involvement of the existing work force is a vital part of the internship program. Interns rely heavily on these people's skills and experience to become proficient in their assignments. Therefore, their cooperation is necessary for the program's success. Disney involved its work force by explaining the interns' roles and utilizing employees for training.

Internship programs should be used to build relationships with academic institutions to allow businesses to influence the learning experience received by students. If businesses are viewed as a major customer of academic institutions, it is logical that partnerships need to be formed between the two. When academic institutions provide the business community with students prepared to meet the demands of the industry, this partnership is a success.

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