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A National Profile of Experiential Education Trends in Communication Master's Degree Programs

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THERE is a growing demand for colleges and universities to provide a connection between theoretical knowledge and life experiences (Gowin, 1992; Greene, 1988; Hutchings and Wutzdorff, 1988; Lightfoot, 1983; O'Keefe, 1986; Sellnow and Seekins, 1992). Internship programs offer students the opportunity to integrate the theories and skills they have acquired in the academic setting with their practical work experience. The popularity of such programs has increased in recent years (Hyre & Ownes, 1984; Phelps and Timmis, 1984; Staley and Shockley-Zalabak, 1985) to a point where "most undergraduate communication programs include departmentally sponsored internships" (Watson, 1992, p. 429). Little information is available, however, regarding the popularity and characteristics of such internships on the graduate level.

McCroskey (1979) aptly predicted the changing needs of a growing faction of students entering graduate studies in the communication discipline. He described a trend of students who were seeking graduate degrees in communication to enhance their careers outside the academic setting. To meet the changing needs of graduate students, especially at the master's level, McCroskey argued for "a shift from a single-minded emphasis on research and theory generation to one which recognizes the importance of both knowledge generation and the application of that knowledge" (p. 353). The Speech Communication Association's Graduate Council Departmental Review Guidelines (1991b) reflected these changing needs by suggesting that curriculum offerings be diverse enough to fulfill employees' needs for both well-prepared practitioners and researchers of communication skills (p. 11). The

Speech Communication Association (1991a) also affirmed that “improvement in speaking and listening skills is a lifelong project which does not stop when basic speech and language skills are in place” (p. 3). Experiential learning options provide students with a timeless model for identifying, altering, and evaluating their organizational communication. The number of students, like those McCroskey described, has continued to grow as “health care professionals, business administrators, government administrators, secondary education teachers, representatives from nonprofit agencies, and individuals from myriad other occupations have turned to the communication discipline for a graduate education to serve them in the context of their chosen career” (Sellnow, Littlefield, & Sellnow, 1992, p. 2). Although the specific number is difficult to calculate, few directors of graduate programs in communication would deny that inquiries from potential graduate students who do not intend to teach at the university level have increased during the past decade.

As McCroskey (1979) noted, our approach to graduate education has had a disproportionate emphasis on learning the process of scholarly research. Obviously, these research skills can benefit individuals outside the academic setting. However, internships serve as a viable means of affording graduate students an opportunity to apply their knowledge to a context outside the academic setting that is more directly related to their career aspirations. As Kinsky (1982) explained, “A primary function of internships is to integrate theory and research with practice—to apply communication theory and research to a wide range of problems in business, industry and social service, as well as academic settings” (p. 39). Clearly, this function is valuable to both undergraduate and graduate students.

Despite the potential value of internships to graduate students seeking to enhance their careers outside the academic setting, little research has been completed to describe the form and function of such learning opportunities at the graduate level. This essay seeks to provide a profile of internships used at the master’s level by answering five questions: (1) To what extent are internships available nationally in communication graduate programs? (2) Where internships are available, what percentage of graduate students choose to complete them? (3) How does the evaluation of internships for graduate students differ from the evaluation of internships for undergraduates? (4) To what extent are internships used as a basis for theses or final projects? (5) How much release time is granted to graduate faculty members who work with graduate interns?

Further, through this profile, three relationships are explored: (1) Does size of an institution or size of a graduate program affect a department’s decision to offer the option of internships to graduate students? (2) Does an institution’s or graduate program’s size have an effect on the number of graduate students electing to include internships as a part of their programs of study? (3) Are internships used by graduate students planning to remain in the academic settings of teaching or advanced graduate study?

METHOD

During the winter of 1992, surveys were sent to chairpersons of 144 communication departments listed in the Speech Communication Association’s *Directory of Graduate Programs in the Communication Arts and Sciences 1986-1987*. Only programs offering graduate degrees in speech communication, mass communication, or both were included. Programs offering graduate degrees only in theatre or speech pathology were excluded. An initial mailing was completed early in December; a follow-up letter and another copy of the survey were mailed three weeks later. One hundred twenty-seven (88%) of the surveys were returned. Five institutions indicated that they no longer have active master’s programs in communication.

For purposes of this study, an internship was defined as receiving graduate credit for practical experience gained outside the classroom, with some degree of supervision by a

faculty member. Eight questions from the survey related directly to this study. Four questions asked about the availability and management of internships on the masters level. Two questions focused on the potential relationship between internships, and theses or papers as part of degree requirements. Two questions asked about the frequency of graduate students engaging in internships and the amount of release time available for graduate faculty members who supervise them. Respondents were encouraged to write explanations for their answers at any point on the questionnaire.

RESULTS

Profile of Graduate Programs Offering Internships

Of the 127 respondents, 69 (54%) indicated that they offered graduate credit for internships. However, most graduate students do not capitalize on this opportunity. As is indicated in Table 1, three-fourths of the departments indicated that 25% or fewer of their graduate students completed internships. Eleven respondents wrote on the questionnaire that internships were available for credit, but they were rarely completed. Conversely, two respondents indicated that all master's students were required to complete an internship, and another indicated that use of graduate internships was steadily increasing. The data in Table 1 suggest that simply making internships available to graduate students does not necessarily lead to frequent use.

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF MASTER'S STUDENTS COMPLETING
INTERNSHIPS

Percentage of Students	n	%
1%-25%	53	(77%)
26%-50%	8	(12%)
51%-75%	5	(8%)
76%-100%	3	(4%)*

*Total N answering the question was 69. Total of percentages does not sum to 100% because of rounding.

The respondents from a majority of departments with graduate internships indicated that their expectations differed between undergraduate and graduate students who completed internships. As is seen in Table 2, more than half of the respondents offering graduate internships required that graduate students select a more complicated task and that they apply more theory when analyzing their experience than was typical of undergraduates. Nearly a third of these respondents also required more faculty supervision for graduate interns, while

12% indicated that less supervision was needed. Respondents from those departments making no distinction between the demands on undergraduate and graduate students completing internships were clearly in the minority. The data suggest that the graduate student internship is more complex and there must be a more detailed application of theory in the student's assessment of it.

TABLE 2

DIFFERENCES IN EVALUATION FOR GRADUATE INTERNSHIPS VERSUS UNDERGRADUATE INTERNSHIPS

Expectations for Graduate Students	n	%
More application of theory	41	(60%)
More complicated task	40	(58%)
More faculty supervision	20	(30%)
No difference	10	(14%)
Less faculty supervision	8	(12%)
Less application of theory	3	(4%)
Other	10	(16%)*

*Total N answering the question was 69. Since respondents could mark more than one category, the total does not sum to 100%.

The means for evaluating internships did not differ greatly from undergraduates to graduate students. As is depicted in Table 3, input from the on-site supervisor and a student journal were frequently mentioned as evaluation criteria by respondents. However, the most frequently mentioned means for evaluating graduate internships was a formal paper. Requiring a formal paper appeared to be consistent with the expectations described in Table 2. The respondents also mentioned that the collection of data was emphasized for graduate students. Few respondents indicated that an oral examination or presentation was used as a means for evaluation. Two types of comments were recorded under the category of "Other." Four respondents explained that evaluation procedures were kept flexible and that a contract outlining expectations was developed collaboratively by the graduate student, faculty supervisor, and on-site supervisor. Two respondents indicated that a formal presentation to the organization where the internship was completed was a required step in the evaluation process.

TABLE 3
MEANS FOR EVALUATING GRADUATE INTERNSHIPS

Student Requirements	n	%
Formal paper written by the graduate student	50	(72%)
Input from the on-site supervisor	43	(62%)
Journal written by graduate student	30	(43%)
Data collected by the graduate student	28	(41%)
Oral presentation by graduate student to the faculty	10	(14%)
Other	12	(17%)*

*Total N answering the question was 69. Since respondents could mark more than one category, the total does not sum to 100%.

As is indicated in Table 4, over 40% of the respondents allowed graduate students to complete an internship as part of their thesis or final paper required for graduation. These respondents were asked to describe the content of such theses or papers based on internships. The word "paper" was included because some departments no longer used the word thesis. For purposes of this study, a thesis/paper refers to a requirement or option that is completed in addition to course work. Six (21%) of the 28 respondents allowing an internship-based thesis/paper, described it as a case study. For example, one respondent described an internship-related thesis/paper as "a scholarly paper that either grows out of the internship experience or uses the internship as a case study." Five respondents (18%) stressed that this type of a thesis/paper must emphasize the use of theory. One respondent explained that the thesis/paper "would not be based on the internship alone; it would meld theory and practice." Another respondent was more specific regarding theory when s/he indicated that a thesis/paper based on an internship must have "a substantial basis in communication/management theory." Two other respondents (7%) indicated that both case studies and theoretical examinations were appropriate for a thesis/paper based on an internship.

TABLE 4
INTERNSHIPS APPLIED TO THESES OR FINAL PROJECTS

Based on Internship	n	%
No	34	(52%)
Yes	28	(42%)
Unsure	4	(6%)*

*Total N answering to the question was 66.

Few respondents indicated that release time was available for graduate faculty who directed internships. As is indicated in Table 5, less than one-fourth of the respondents granted release time. Of those respondents offering release time, one class was customary. The infrequent use of internships in some departments may explain the established procedure for granting release time. For example, 43% of the respondents who indicated that more than 25% of their graduate students complete internships also revealed that graduate faculty may be given up to a class of release time for directing internships.

TABLE 5
RELEASE TIME FOR DIRECTING GRADUATE
INTERNSHIPS WHERE OFFERED

Amount of Release Time Granted	n	%
None	53	(77%)
One class	7	(10%)
Varies	4	(6%)
25%	3	(4%)
Undecided	1	(1%)*

*Total N answering the question was 69. Total of percentages does not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Relationship of Program Size and Use of Graduate-Level Internships

Initially, the effect of the institution's size on the option of offering internships was explored. Having established the frequency of response for the various questions related to the existence and use of internships in graduate programs, Chi-Square and Fisher's Exact Test (2-Tail) were performed to determine the nature of any relationships that might exist. Both the Chi-Square ($X = 2.348$, $d.f. = 3$, $p < .503$) and Fisher's Exact Test (2-Tail) ($p < .505$) supported the assumption that there was not a relationship between size of institution and decision of departments to offer internships as part of their programs.

To determine if the size of a department's graduate program had an effect on the offering of internships, a Chi-Square was again executed ($X = 2.172$, $d.f. = 4$, $p < .704$). The Fisher's Exact test (2-Tail) was also performed ($p < .698$). Based upon the data, no relationship appeared to exist between size of program and the offering of the internships by a department.

Next, the effect of institution size on the percentage of participants using internships was examined. The use of the Chi-Square test ($X = 5.734$, $d.f. = 9$, $p < .766$) was not sufficient to determine this relationship because 81% of the cells had expected counts less than five. Subsequently, a Fisher's Exact Test (2-Tail) was performed ($p < .895$). This follow-up test suggested no relationship between percentage of participants and the size of the institution.

Similarly, the relationship between the percentage of those participants using internships and the size of graduate program was examined. A Chi-Square was executed ($X = 14.653$, $d.f. = 12$, $p < .261$). Because 80% of the cells had expected counts less than five, a Fisher's Exact Test (2-Tail) was performed ($p < .311$). Program size appeared to have no effect on percentage of students using internships.

Finally, the relationship of internship use was compared with the number of students going into teaching or Ph.D. programs. A Chi-Square test was executed ($X = 3.758$, $d.f. = 3$, $p < .289$), as was the Fisher's Exact Test (2-Tail) ($p < .307$). There was not a significant relationship between the use of internships and the decision to teach or pursue doctoral studies; meaning students completing internships were no more or less likely to enter doctoral studies or the teaching profession than those who had not.

DISCUSSION

Based upon these data, experiential opportunities in communication serve to connect theory and practice. Justification exists for including internships in communication graduate programs. The profile generated from the data, suggests that internships are available in a majority of communication graduate programs. The frequency of use by graduate students, however, may suggest that the option is not viewed in a uniformly positive way.

The nature of an internship at the graduate level appears to be more complex than at the undergraduate level. More complicated tasks and more application of theory necessitate more faculty supervision. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents indicated this was, in fact, the case. The experiences of some schools in assessing their students have enabled them to develop procedures and practices to maintain the level of quality they expect.

The formal paper, along with input from the on-site supervisor, appears to be the most common means for evaluating graduate internships. This differs from the undergraduate internship, which has often been viewed, in and of itself, as a capstone experience, providing hands-on experience in the major field of study. There may be several reasons why a more formal paper is used by those assessing the internship experience at the graduate level. Formal papers are consistently used in academia to measure student understanding of concepts and experiences. For those who believe that the graduate experience should be theoretical and comprehensive, the formal paper serves as a bridge. By using this common form of written evaluation, accepted across disciplines, the internship experience becomes

legitimized.

The use of the internship as a basis for the thesis/paper may also provide graduate students with a way to integrate their experiences into the more traditional form of disquisition required by those seeking graduate degrees. On most campuses, the final thesis/paper represents a symbol of completion. Deans and Directors of Graduate Programs often review these papers as a means of assessing program outcomes. While quality may vary among students, the graduate committee's review of the written thesis/paper enables the department to monitor the quality of experiences their students are having. In this regard, release time becomes less important for the graduate faculty members serving on the examining committee than for the adviser. Intuition suggests that those faculty who encourage internships find ways to get support for their activities and those of their students. These institutions are likely to be supportive of their faculty by offering release time.

The size of the institution and graduate program seems to have no effect on the option of offering internships or graduate students electing to use them in their programs of study. This speaks well for any institution wanting to create the internship option for graduate students. As long as there is a faculty member who is willing to coordinate the experiential option, students can participate and benefit. As McCroskey suggested, there is an appeal for those entering master's programs from business and industry to use the experiential option as a meaningful addition to their graduate education.

As communication faculty in graduate programs continue to expand and modify their curricula to provide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds and professional orientations, the use of internships will grow. With the data provided in the study, graduate faculty who might want to provide internship opportunities for their graduate students may find they are not alone. Replication of successful programs will enable these aspiring faculty to develop internship programs of their own.

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