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ACADEMIC PAPER

A Comparison of Student and Practitioner Perspectives of the Travel and Tourism Internship

Brent Beggs (babeggs@ilstu.edu)

School of Kinesiology and Recreation, McCormick Hall
Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA

Craig M. Ross (cmross@indiana.edu)

School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation; Recreation, Park and
Tourism Studies Department, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

Bryan Goodwin (bgoodwin@luc.edu)

Department of Campus Recreation, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago IL, USA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in the perceptions of internships between college students studying travel and tourism and practitioners in the field. Using a web-based survey of 48 items, the study explored how students and practitioners differed in their view regarding the role of the internship experience; the role of the internship agency, the intern's abilities; and factors in selecting an internship.

Using t-test analyses, the results of the study revealed that students and practitioners were in disagreement on 13 of the 48 items in the survey and had significantly different perceptions regarding intern skills, the role of the intern, responsibilities that interns should be given, and factors to consider in selecting an internship. This study examined these differences and implications for practitioners in travel and tourism.

Keywords: Internships; Travel; Tourism; Student; Practitioner; Perceptions

Brent Beggs is Assistant Professor at Illinois State University where he teaches in commercial recreation and sport management. He received his Ph.D. from Indiana University, where he was also a faculty member and Internship Coordinator. He has published extensively and is co-author of the Mastering the Job Search Process in Recreation and Leisure Services textbook. His research interests include the role of recreation in higher education and leisure behaviour of college students.

Craig Ross is Associate Professor in the Indiana University Department of Recreation and Park Administration, where he earned his Doctorate in Recreation and has been on the faculty at since 1993. He co-authored Recreational Sports Management (3rd ed.) and Mastering the Job Search Process in Recreation and Leisure Services texts. His research interests include recreation internships, sport management and administration, computer technology, career planning and organisational behaviour.

Bryan Goodwin is the Assistant Facilities Director at Loyola University Chicago. He previously worked for the Chicago Fire of Major League Soccer. He received his Bachelor's degree in Commercial Recreation and Master's degree in Sport Management from Illinois State University.

Introduction

Experiential education provides the opportunity and the learning landscape for students to experience, first hand, professional practice activities which directly relate to the application of knowledge. Experiential education, including internships, has a long and noteworthy history in higher education. Not unlike other aspects of the recreation industry, experiential learning and fieldwork experience are critical in a travel and tourism academic programme's curriculum (Breiter *et al.*, 1995; Cho, 2006; Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006; Kay and DeVeau, 2003; Petrillose and Montgomery, 1998). According to Clark and Whitelegg (1998: 326), "learning by doing reinforces classroom understanding by contextualising knowledge".

In this context, 'travel' and 'tourism' are used to encompass the various businesses that provide fee-based leisure travel and guest related services. For the purposes of this paper, the travel and tourism services focus on commercial recreation agencies such as resorts, hotels, travel, cruise ships, event planning, and tour operations. The travel and tourism industry generates tremendous economic activity and, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council, in 2005 travel and tourism activity accounted for some 16.8 million jobs, representing 11.9 per cent of total employment across the USA (WTTC, 2005). Given this magnitude, it is critical that existing and new travel and tourism education curricula develop and expand training, educational courses, and programmes that produce quality graduates competent to perform in these organisations (Williams and Buswell, 2003). Without professional preparation in higher education, this multi-billion dollar industry risks a stunt in its growth (Williams, 1990).

A successful travel and tourism academic programme produces graduates with high quality learning, knowledge, skills, and the ability to meet the needs of the industry (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2006; Harris and Zhao, 2004; Kok, 2000). To achieve this, there has always been significant emphasis placed on students gaining practical experience outside of the classroom learning environment (Szambowski *et al.*, 2002). These types of experiences often take place in the form of an internship.

An internship gives students the opportunity to examine career possibilities in a realistic and 'real world' environment and to explore a possible fit with a particular agency (Kapoor, 2000; Waryszak, 1999). It is an excellent opportunity to acquire transferable skills and the specific detailed knowledge necessary in today's workplace (Busby, 2003). The internship "is an opportunity to have an intensive, work-based exposure to a broad range of operations within a company" (Crossley *et al.*, 2007: 312). In addition, internships afford student training under both academic and practitioner supervision. This supervision allows students to gain interpersonal skills with industry workers and to potentially earn money while learning (Thiel and Hartley, 1997). However, in order to ensure that the internship experience meets the needs of both the practitioner and the student intern, it is important to understand how each views the internship as well as the expected outcomes.

Travel and tourism educators have identified several strengths and benefits of the internship programme from an education perspective. Educators believe that the real life experience and professional development of students is one of the most beneficial aspects of an internship programme. Students should have the opportunity to put theory into practice and achieve a "balance between vocational and theoretical content" (Airey, 1996: 17).

Articulating the responsibilities of interns and internship supervisors prior to the internship is a key element in a successful internship (Beggs *et al.*, 2006). However, this understanding does not necessarily resolve discrepancies in what internship supervisors expect interns to be able to do. In many internship experiences, there is an inconsistency between what students believe they are capable of doing and what internship supervisors believe the student intern can do (Beggs *et al.*, 2006). In addition, there are differences that exist in regards to benefits that should be sought in an internship. While students and practitioners agree that students benefit by obtaining hands-on experiences in a position directly related to their career aspirations, students often believe that other aspects such as full-time employment and remuneration are of great importance in selecting an internship experience

(Hite and Bellizzi, 1986; Garrett and Bauer, 1995). In addition to articulating responsibilities, it is important for educators to help students understand the types of experiences that they should be seeking in an internship.

There is also a discrepancy that exists in relation to what interns and educators expect travel and tourism internship supervisors and agencies to provide and do for the intern. Interns often expect that the internship experience will provide them with vast responsibilities and that is not always the case (Beggs *et al.*, 2006; Stratta, 2004). There may also be situations where interns feel that agencies should provide employment after the internship or, at the very least, assist the intern in obtaining a full-time position (Beggs *et al.*, 2006).

While it has been identified that internships in the travel and tourism industry provide the opportunity for students to apply what they have learned to the actual work environment (Downey and DeVeau, 1987), there has been very little research conducted to determine how an internship in this field enhances one's career and employment opportunities (Airey and Tribe, 2005). In addition, the literature written about higher education in this industry has not comprehensively studied and compared student and practitioner perceptions regarding the benefit, or lack thereof, of travel and tourism internships (Petrillose and Montgomery, 1998). There is a need for this type of knowledge in order to better understand the internship experience to prepare students for a future career; to provide educators with information useful for curriculum design and development; and to assist internship supervisors and agencies with information to have a better understanding of the student needs and interests (Leslie and Richardson, 2000; Petrillose and Montgomery, 1998). The focus then of this study was to examine similarities and differences between the perceptions and expectations of travel and tourism students and practitioners.

Methods

This study employed survey research methods for data collection and was administered on-line. The instrument, which was a modification of the Knemeyer and Murphy (2002) instrument, consisted of 48 items that were divided into four sections: 1) the role of the internship experience; 2) role of the internship agency; 3) intern abilities; and 4) factors in selecting an internship. Each item was evaluated using a five-point Likert scale where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 5 represented "strongly agree". Cronbach's Alpha was 0.91, indicating strong test reliability for the instrument as a whole. Cronbach's Alpha was 0.92 for section one; 0.91 for section two; 0.93 for section three; and 0.90 for section four. These measures indicated strong test reliability for each section of the instrument.

While Knemeyer and Murphy's (2002) research and survey instrument was not specifically related to the travel and tourism field, the questions used were very appropriate and well suited for this research study. A few questions were slightly reworded to better reflect the travel and tourism industry and jargon.

The sample consisted of practitioners in the travel and tourism industry and undergraduate students majoring in travel and tourism. The practitioner sample consisted of 123 practitioners who were randomly selected from the Resort and Commercial Recreation Association. This organisation was selected because over 95% of its members are affiliated with the travel and tourism industry. Every fourth member in an alphabetical list was selected and sent an email inviting them to participate in the study. A 60% response rate was achieved from the 123 surveys distributed to practitioners. The student sample consisted of 89 students from ten universities across the United States who were in their final year of study and preparing to start their internship experience within the academic year.

The universities were selected based on the provision of an academic curriculum in travel and tourism and whether they were accredited through the National Recreation and Park Association/American Association of Leisure and Recreation Council on Accreditation. This accreditation ensured that these programmes included a culminating internship experience as a part of the undergraduate curriculum. Ten universities that met this criteria were selected based on convenience through the researcher's relationship with a faculty member

at each of those universities. Students in their final year of study were selected based on their enrolment in a management class in this curriculum and their self-selection as a travel and tourism/commercial recreation major. Instructors of the management classes provided the students with an email which included an informed consent statement and a link to the on-line survey.

T-tests analyses were conducted to examine differences between students and practitioners. To account for planned multiple t-test comparisons, a Bonferroni strategy was applied reducing the alpha level in this study to .001 (Keppel and Wickens, 2004).

Results and Discussion

Overall, students and practitioners were in disagreement on 13 of the 48 items in this study. While there was considerable agreement between the groups, it suggests that students and practitioners do not have all the same expectations and perceptions of internship and there are several areas of disagreement that warrant further discussion.

Role of the Internship Experience

Both students and practitioners strongly believed that internships should develop job skills (Table 1). This item was the highest rated item for students and also rated very highly by practitioners. Students and practitioners were also in agreement that internships should enhance job placement and develop the interns' human relation skills.

Practitioners felt more strongly than students that those participating in internships should be able to enhance their problem solving and communication skills. These findings support previous work by Thiel and Hartley (1997) and Busby (2003). As Busby indicated, the internship is an excellent opportunity to acquire transferable skills. Communication and problem solving skills fall into this category. A reason for the disparity between practitioners and students could be because practitioners have a much better understanding of the importance of communication and problem solving in customer service situations than students do. Communication and problem solving are skills that a student cannot truly appreciate until they have had a number of hands-on practical experiences and opportunities to work with the public.

<i>Internships should:</i>	Student		Practitioner		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Develop job skills	4.77	0.53	4.92	0.28	-1.81
Enhance placement	4.70	0.52	4.75	0.44	-0.46
Enhance instruction	4.10	0.83	4.48	0.58	-2.12
Develop problem solving skills	4.54	0.67	4.96	0.20	-4.84*
Develop communication skills	4.76	0.46	4.96	0.56	-3.07*
Develop human relation skills	4.73	0.55	4.68	0.54	0.36
Provide technology training	4.47	0.67	3.92	0.86	3.30*
Count towards GPA	4.04	0.99	4.40	0.76	-1.58
Be paid	3.55	0.52	3.36	0.57	1.60
Aid agencies in selecting employees	4.30	0.74	4.08	0.95	1.14
Foster link between universities and agency	4.61	0.59	4.56	0.65	0.40
Provide seasonal employees	3.88	1.05	3.60	1.08	1.17
Be a source of employees for projects	3.94	0.89	3.84	0.98	0.51
Inject new ideas into an organisation	4.33	0.69	4.56	0.58	-1.51
Enhance agency's image	4.14	0.79	4.24	0.87	-0.54

Table 1: Practitioner/Student T-Test Comparison – Role of Internship Experience

Note: Practitioner N=74; Student N=89; *p<0.001

In contrast, students were in more agreement than practitioners that internships should provide technology training as a component of the practical experience. Students could be entering the internship believing that they will have the opportunity to make use of advanced technology and software employed in the travel and tourism industry. However, it appears that practitioners do not see this as quite as important as students do. This may be because there is not a considerable amount of specialised technology being used in the industry or that interns are not given the opportunity or responsibility to use this technology as part of the internship process. Considering the importance placed by practitioners on programme leadership and developing programmes, it appears that practitioners believe the purpose of the internship is to enhance those skills more fully as opposed to technological skills.

Role of the Internship Agency

The highest rated item for practitioners was that internship agencies 'should provide opportunities [for students] to lead programmes' but students' response to this item was significantly lower (Table 2). Practitioners also believed significantly more strongly than students that internship agencies should provide opportunities for students to develop programmes. Both practitioners and students felt that internship agencies should provide orientation and training for interns. Another highly rated item for students and practitioners was that internship agencies should provide opportunities for professional development.

<i>Internships should provide:</i>	Student		Practitioner		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Orientation and training	4.79	0.43	4.88	0.33	-0.89
Opportunities for professional development	4.78	0.47	4.76	0.43	0.23
Opportunities to develop programmes	4.40	0.67	4.84	0.37	-4.09*
Opportunities to lead programmes	4.49	0.63	4.92	0.28	-4.60*
Opportunities to write press releases	4.17	0.87	4.12	0.97	0.22
Opportunities to prepare a programme budget	4.18	0.78	4.48	0.71	-1.72
Opportunities to manage part-time staff	4.13	0.85	3.88	1.09	1.19
Full-time employment after the internship	4.25	0.72	3.36	0.95	4.96*
Assistance in finding full-time employment	4.39	0.83	4.20	0.82	1.01

Table 2: Practitioner/Student T-Test Comparison – Role of Internship Agency

Note: Practitioner N=74; Student N=89; *p<0.001

Students indicated significantly higher responses than practitioners to the item stating that internship agencies should provide full-time employment after the internship. This result supports the findings of Beggs *et al.* (2006) who examined the role of the internship agencies in regard to students of different specialisations. Regardless of the area of specialisation, students expected that agencies would provide full-time employment at the completion of the internship. As Beggs *et al.* suggest, this difference in expectations may be because students view the internship as a probationary period where they can demonstrate their skills to the agency and earn the opportunity for employment whereas internship agencies view the experience as an opportunity for students to develop skills and get hands-on experience in order to better prepare them for the job market. This discrepancy in expectations can be reduced or eliminated by discussing post-internship employment possibilities during the interview process so that students understand employment prospects prior to accepting and internship. The disparity may also be diminished if educators explain that agencies do not typically hire interns on completion of the internship.

Intern Abilities

The highest rated item for both groups was that 'interns should be able to lead programmes' (Table 3). However, all practitioners in the study indicated "strong agreement" for this item

which was significantly higher than the student response. Practitioners also believed more strongly than students that 'interns should be able to develop programmes'.

Practitioners not only believed that internship agencies should provide the opportunities to develop and lead programmes (Table 2), they also felt more strongly than students that interns should have the skills to do these tasks (Table 3). This may be because students are not confident in being able to apply their classroom training. Another reason may be that practitioners have been in the field and understand the importance of programme development and leadership, and realise that students coming from college programmes have been trained in this area and should therefore be able to handle these types of experiences.

	Student		Practitioner		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Interns should:					
Be able to develop programmes	4.11	0.72	4.75	0.44	-5.26*
Be able to lead programmes	4.31	0.73	5.00	0.00	-8.37*
Be able to write a press release	4.07	0.93	3.96	0.93	0.54
Know how to programme budget	3.94	0.92	4.24	0.72	-1.44
Expect to work more than 40 hours	2.79	1.13	4.32	1.07	-5.92*
Be treated the same as employees	4.18	0.96	4.28	1.13	-0.39
Be willing to do any job task	3.82	0.99	4.60	0.71	-3.62*
Be able to manage part-time staff	3.78	0.95	3.64	0.99	0.65
Interns have good communication skills	4.07	0.69	3.96	0.79	0.71
Interns have good budgetary skills	3.68	0.79	3.32	0.85	1.96
Interns have good human relation skills	3.96	0.75	3.92	0.76	0.24
Interns have good marketing skills	3.81	0.72	3.52	0.81	1.29
Interns have good programming skills	3.96	0.71	4.08	0.81	-0.70
Interns have good supervision skills	3.83	0.81	3.36	0.99	3.39*
Interns have good computer skills	3.96	0.68	4.32	0.80	-2.18
Interns do a good job taking initiative	3.94	0.82	3.92	0.64	0.16
Interns are highly motivated	4.19	0.75	4.00	0.76	1.10
Interns do a good job taking direction	4.16	0.76	4.20	0.64	-0.21
Interns act as professionals	4.22	0.73	4.00	0.76	1.28

Table 3: Practitioner/Student T-Test Comparison – Intern Abilities

Note: Practitioner N=74; Student N=89; *p<0.001

An area of concern is that practitioners indicated that students should 'expect to work more than 40 hours' a week while students did not agree. Students and practitioners were also in disagreement whether 'interns should be willing to do any job task'. Perhaps students do not fully appreciate that if extra work needs to be done to conduct an activity or event then staff, and often interns, need to put in the additional time to see it through. The travel and tourism industry must cater to the needs of its customers and often go well beyond the call of duty to provide good customer service and programmes. If students do not realise this when entering the internship, they certainly will by the end! However, it is important that agencies do not place students in one "insignificant job for the students' entire experience" (Antun, 2001: 65). Furthermore, Kay and DeVeau (2003) suggest that students should gain practical experience by working in several different departments in the agency, thus having the opportunity to have multiple mentors during the internship experience. Regardless, the overall success of the internship experience "ultimately lies with the interns and their willingness to accept and learn from challenges and experiences, open their minds to new

ideas, their ability to learn and adapt to the unexpected, and their contributions to the sponsors' operations" (Kapoor, 2000:71).

Selecting an Internship

Students and practitioners concurred that the most important factors when selecting an internship agency should be 'based on career aspirations' and the 'quality of agency programmes and staff' (Table 4).

<i>Internships should select agencies:</i>	Student		Practitioner		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Based on geographic location	3.51	0.98	2.88	0.99	2.72
Based on benefits (salary, housing)	3.79	0.87	2.84	0.98	4.40*
Based on career aspirations	4.69	0.51	4.56	0.58	1.12
Based on quality of agency programmes & staff	4.56	0.63	4.68	0.47	-0.89
That are likely to offer a full-time position	4.01	0.85	3.28	0.93	3.65*

Table 4: Practitioner/Student T-Test Comparison – Selecting an Internship

Note: Practitioner N=74; Student N=89; *p<0.001

However, students indicated that benefits such as housing and remuneration would be more strongly considered in internship selection than practitioners thought. While practitioners may not see that these issues should be given strong consideration, it is important to consider that many students simply cannot afford to take an internship that does not provide these types of benefits. Many internships in the travel and tourism industry do provide housing, but not all internships provide a stipend or salary. Providing a salary in addition to housing may make an internship more attractive to students, and allow agencies to attract more and possibly better qualified students to their internships.

Future Research

Although the findings from this study are very intriguing, they are limited to practitioners that were members of the Resort and Commercial Recreation Association and a recommendation for future studies would be to expand the sample of practitioners. In addition, the study is limited by the convenience sampling method used to select universities for participation. Although ten universities participated in the study, these universities were all located in the United States and therefore the findings can not be generalised beyond that. Future research in this area should consider different sampling methods and include students from a larger student base.

Conclusion

Internships are a vital part of many academic programmes and play an important role in the transition of students from the college environment to the work environment (Ross *et al.*, 2006). Because of this, all students should be strongly encouraged to engage in an internship experience (Busby, 2003). Internships are also of great importance to the travel and tourism industry as they not only provide academically trained individuals to help supplement the work force, but they are also a breeding ground for the future leaders of the profession. Well trained and supervised interns, whose job performance skills match the needs of the agency are likely to stay employed at that agency (Antun, 2001). In order to better provide quality internship experiences, it is vital that internship agencies and students have comparable perceptions and expectations of the internship experience.

This study has identified some incongruities between practitioners and students related to the purpose of the internship experience; role of the internship agency; intern abilities; and factors in selecting an internship. By having an understanding of practitioners' expectations, students can enter the internship with a better idea of what to anticipate and understanding of the experiences they can expect to have. By understanding students' expectations,

practitioners can be better prepared to provide them with experiences that will enhance their education and meet the needs of students, agencies, and academic programmes. In order to achieve this quality internship experience, it is recommended that universities make agreements between professionals and academic programmes with regards to the internship. This agreement should outline individual responsibilities, objectives, and missions for the internship experience (Williams, 1990; Antun, 2001). If properly selected and supervised, an internship with hands-on experience can truly be “a gateway to the real world” for students (Collins, 2002:93).

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