



2016 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, ART, MATH & EDUCATION JUNE 10 - 12, 2016
HAWAII PRINCE HOTEL WAIKIKI, HONOLULU

HOW A PRE-INTERNSHIP SEMINAR CAN POSITIVELY IMPACT THE INTERNSHIP

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How a Pre-Internship Seminar Can Positively Impact the Internship

Synopsis:

This presentation describes the development and implementation of an internship seminar that occurs prior to the summer internship to engage students in the job search process. The learning objectives, course activities, scheduling rationale, and advantages of the pre-internship seminar will be presented along with seminar topics. A study with students who had completed the seminar and an internship reveal their perceptions of the most and least helpful career planning seminar topics.

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Synopsis:

A workshop seminar prior to the start of a student's internship can assist in better preparing for success in the internship. A one-credit internship seminar will be discussed as well as survey results of the most helpful seminar topics selected by interns.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the development, implementation and student perceptions of a pre-internship seminar within a university interior design program. Often relegated to university services, this presentation will show how career development can be integrated with existing curriculum by disciplinary faculty. The described one-credit internship seminar is designed to address topics of career development, and to engage students in the job search process prior to students' required summer internship. The learning objectives, course activities, scheduling rationale, and advantages of the pre-internship seminar will be presented, along with the seminar topics. The benefits of the internship experience to students, faculty and employers will also be discussed. A survey of students who completed both the pre-internship seminar and an internship reveal the most helpful seminar topics for securing an internship were writing business communications, understanding ethics and creating a professional network. The pre-internship seminar is a practical example of integrating career development into an existing curriculum without displacing any other classes. A typical three credit summer internship was simply separated into a one-credit seminar during the school year, with two credits then earned for the summer workplace experience. The proceeding discussion can be utilized by any higher education programs as an exemplar for creating a workshop-style career development course to supplement a summer internship. In years past, students chose a vocation and began their career development with a clear path to follow. In today's tight job market, employers can afford to be selective. Having career development skills and an internship can give design graduates a great advantage in a highly competitive job market.

INTRODUCTION

Employers are looking for new employees with beneficial skills and experiences. A majority (81%) of participants in a national employer survey expect students to complete an internship or community-based project in order to connect theory with practice (Hart, 2010). Indeed, a fast employment growth of 16.7% is projected for occupations that typically require an internship or residency (USBLS, 2010). Almost two-thirds (63%) of 305 employers in a national survey conducted on behalf of the Association of American Colleges and Universities agree that “too many recent college graduates do not have the skills to be successful in today’s global economy” (Hart, 2007, p. 6). Seventy-three percent of these same employers say a student’s ability to relate learned skills and information to real-world settings through internships is one of the most important learning outcomes of higher education.

An internship can be a significant aspect of a student’s career development and can help define career goals (O’Neill, 2010). Most research on the internship experience is focused on learning outcomes and student satisfaction after the internship has occurred (Ball, Pollard & Stanley, 2010; Sirinterlikci & Kerzmann, 2013). How do students prepare for this experience? One solution is to have students participate in a career development seminar prior to the internship experience. Rather than having this seminar offered through university services, students can benefit from the careful and directed guidance of discipline-specific faculty who know both the profession and the employers. This article describes a pre-internship seminar offered in an established university interior design program.

A PRE-INTERNSHIP SEMINAR

In contrast to the standard three credit summer internship, this program combines a one credit pre-internship seminar completed during the fall semester, with a two credit internship experience completed in a workplace setting the following summer. Together, they equal a standard three credit lecture course. A pre-internship seminar is recommended to improve internship opportunities (Knouse, Tanner & Harris, 1999). However, most schools focus only on the internship itself and some even put the career development seminar at the end of the experience (Sirinterlikci & Kerzmann, 2013).

The pre-internship seminar differed from a traditional course. It was conducted in two, eight-hour workshop-style seminars on separate Saturdays. This schedule was selected in order to have all students present for longer time periods and to avoid conflict with any other university courses.

Teaching the pre-internship seminar on two full days allowed a wide assortment of classroom experiences for the 25 class participants. In-class activities focused on 14 topics seen in Table 1. Activities varied in order to maintain the attention and motivation of students in an eight-hour day. These included lectures, large group discussions, individual work, and small group activities. Two small group activities were reviewing resumes and cover letters. This allowed students in groups of three to conduct a peer assessment of each other's work. Another peer assessment activity was a portfolio review. In architecture, art and design, the portfolio is a collection of design work and is recognized as evidence of the designer's abilities, skills and talents. A final class activity was a three-hour panel discussion with four senior students that represented a variety of internship experiences, such as small versus large firms, and in-state, out-of-state, and international experiences.

Table 1: The 14 Seminar Topics
Awareness of Career Options
The Search for Prospective Employers
Professional Networking
Writing a Resume
Writing a Cover Letter
Creating a Portfolio
Time Management Strategies
Organizational Tactics
The Interview
The Internship Itself
Business & Social Etiquette
Ethical Behavior
Accepting Criticism
The Exit Interview

A study was conducted to determine if the pre-internship seminar was viewed as helpful to students in internship preparation. Two research questions were created for this study:

1. What pre-internship seminar discussion topics help students prepare for the internship experience?

2. Did students feel prepared for an internship after participating in the pre-internship seminar?

METHODOLOGY

A purposeful sampling strategy was chosen to focus on specific population characteristics that are of interest, in order to answer the study research questions (Patton, 2002). Voluntary and confidential participation was requested from 25 interior design undergraduate students who were in the pre-internship seminar prior to completing a summer internship. Three participants were male and 22 were female. All participants were in their fourth year of a four-year undergraduate university degree program. The 14 pre-internship seminar topics were randomly distributed in a survey instrument using a five-point Likert scale. Participants were also asked if the pre-internship seminar prepared them to search, interview and secure an internship. Data was collected five months after the internship experience, after students had time to reflect on their workplace experience. The data was coded by the researcher and entered into a computational spreadsheet for data analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the study data. The scale was 1.00 for very unhelpful to 5.00 for very helpful. All seminar topics were perceived as somewhat helpful. All mean results ranged from 3.12 to 3.92. As shown in Table 2, no topic was perceived as unhelpful.

Rank	N	Mean	SD	Topic
1	25	3.92	0.81	Writing a cover letter
2	25	3.88	0.97	Writing a resume
3	25	3.68	0.80	Ethical behavior
4	24	3.63	1.16	How to search for prospective employers
5	25	3.56	1.19	Awareness of career options
6	25	3.56	0.96	The interview
7	25	3.56	1.00	The exit interview
8	25	3.52	1.08	The internship itself
9	25	3.52	1.00	Business & social etiquette
10	25	3.52	0.96	Accepting criticism

11	25	3.44	0.92	Creating a portfolio
12	25	3.40	1.04	Organizational tactics
13	25	3.16	0.99	How to professionally network
14	25	3.12	1.13	Time management strategies

Results indicate that students viewed writing a cover letter as the most helpful skill in preparing them to seek an internship ($m=3.92$, $sd=0.81$). Other skills viewed as helpful included writing a resume ($m=3.88$, $sd=0.97$), understanding ethical behavior ($m=3.68$, $sd=0.80$), and knowing how to search for prospective employers ($m=3.63$, $sd=1.16$). Least helpful seminar topics included how to professionally network ($m=3.16$, $sd=0.99$) and time management strategies ($m=3.12$, $sd=1.13$). In answer to the binary question of preparedness, one student omitted answering this question. Of the remaining sample, 19 students (71%) agreed that the pre-internship seminar prepared them to search, interview and secure an internship.

DISCUSSION

This study explored two research questions. In response to the first question, the study findings show that the top two topics were writing a cover letter and a resume. This is not surprising, as other research in career development found the creation of a resume to be the most beneficial student activity (Reddan & Rauchle, 2012; Sharp & Rowe, 2013). Yet, there is no requirement for writing business communication in most design programs. Educator Kathryn Anthony (1991) comments, “The lack of emphasis on written and oral communication skills in favor of graphic and visual communications skills reinforces the notion that only design is of supreme importance, and that other skills can be ignored” (p. 78).

The next topic viewed as most helpful was an understanding of ethical behavior. It has been noted that working in industry exposes students to ethical issues atypical of university course work (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008) and helps them prepare for handling these issues in the workplace (Lubbers, Bourland-Davis & Rawlins, 2007/8).

The two topics viewed as least helpful were time management strategies and how to professionally network. This contradicts prior research, which reports these skills are valued (Cord, Sykes & Clements, 2010; Shoenfelt, Kottke & Stone, 2012). Students may have learned to manage their time while in their design major. It is noted that design students

spend an enormous amount of time working in studios, which take the greatest amount of credit hours in the curriculum (AIAS, 2002). These studios resemble a scientific laboratory setting where student do project-based learning.

The helpfulness of learning to professionally network may have been perceived as low by students for two reasons. First, the program has an active student chapter of a national professional design organization that provides many networking opportunities. Second, students routinely engage in discussions with practitioners who visit their studio classes. Desk critiques are a common component of studio education (Goldschmidt, Hochman & Dafni, 2010), which provide casual interactions between student and practitioner.

In response to the second research question, data show 71% of study participants felt participation in the pre-internship seminar prepared them to search, interview and successfully secure a summer internship. One student in the current study commented, “The seminar helped me secure an internship that was paid and helped me learn how to decide between multiple offers”. Another said, “Other programs have a full semester three hour class which I feel is extensive. This seminar was the best use of our time.”

Study results should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The study was conducted with a small cohort of students from one discipline. In addition, standard deviations varied. This illustrates no single topic strongly impacted student perceptions. A student’s prior work experience was outside the scope of this study, yet may have influenced their responses. Future research would benefit from investigating the influence of prior work experience on internship performance and student satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Frequently, practitioners want educators “to produce graduates who can be plugged into the design office like some piece of upgraded hardware” (Thompson, 2002, p. 92). On the other hand, educators are interested in molding a well-rounded individual who can think and reflect on design. According to results from a national study, 305 employers and 510 recent college graduates believed an undergraduate education should be balanced between broad knowledge and detailed skills (Hart, 2007). Why not both? Graduates can possess the necessary skills to begin their professional career after having a workplace experience that benefits them, the employer and even the school.

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