Mapping the Quality of Summer Internships in Washington, D.C.

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Introduction

Student internships, a rarity a generation ago, are now as much a part of the college experience as freshman English. As many as 80 percent of four-year students spend a summer, a semester, or more interning before they graduate, gaining exposure to potential careers and the work world and augmenting their academic studies. Research suggests that internships can help students clarify their goals, deepen their self-understanding, apply classroom knowledge in professional settings, and propel them into successful careers.

At least, that’s the ideal.

A new study of interns in the nation’s capital by The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars (TWC) found that most interns reported overall satisfaction and identified many elements of the internship experience that contributed to their professional growth. Most said that they learned valuable new skills, benefited from a relationship with a mentor, and honed their thinking about future careers, yet also wished that they had more opportunity to work on substantive projects. In addition, the study raised important questions about the type and level of involvement that their colleges and universities have in internships. Interns’ learning was enhanced by significant involvement by, and requirements from, college, but often internships were disconnected from students’ academic lives and pursuits. The study of 531 summer 2011 interns is the first in a series of TWC research projects on the nature, quality, and impact of internships in America and, in particular, one of the largest internship hubs in the world, Washington, D.C.

Despite the rapid growth in internships during the past 20 years, much theorizing about experiential learning, and internships’ potential to help achieve two critical national goals—improving students’ postsecondary education and better preparing tomorrow’s workers—surprisingly little is known about this important dimension of both higher education and workforce development. That is why research is essential.

Standards for good internships exist, but quality is uneven and there is considerable imprecision in even defining what is or is not an internship. Critics contend that some internships are
Internships [...] help prepare students with the “knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities—that will enable them to both thrive and contribute in a fast-changing economy…”

little more than unpaid or under-paid jobs, lacking the combination of intellectual and career-oriented learning that such experiences should possess.

What makes the difference between an internship that is a high-quality, pre-professional learning experience and one that is a lackluster short-term job? Scholars have identified a number of standards of good practice for internships that promote both professional growth and academic learning.

George Kuh in his “High-Impact Educational Practices” report identifies a set of six educational practices that “increase (the) rates of student retention and student engagement.” Internships are one of the most prevalent of such activities as they help prepare students with the “knowledge, capabilities, and personal qualities – that will enable them to both thrive and contribute in a fast-changing economy…”  

For an internship to truly complement a students’ academic learning, the internship experience should also be one that is “academically sound,” engaging students in “planned, educationally related work and learning experiences that integrate knowledge and theory with practical application and skill development in a professional setting,” and be “integrated into the life of a” higher education institution, according to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). The National Society for Experiential Education’s Standards of Practice call for a clear intention related to student learning and development, orientation and training, reflection, monitoring, and assessment. In sum, these standards suggest that a successful internship is an integrated academic and work experience that engages the student’s critical and reflective capacities.

**STUDY OBJECTIVES**

This study was intended to gain better understanding of the range and quality of internship experiences in Washington, D.C.; more clearly define what should be characterized as an “internship”; and identify ways that internships can be improved. In addition to identifying

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which students intern in what settings, the study sought to investigate what variables contribute to high- (or poor-) quality internships. Higher quality internships were characterized by the presence of more elements associated with professional growth and academic learning, based on interns’ own reporting of their experiences.

To ascertain what contributed to a higher-quality internship, questions explored whether interns experienced components of a “high-impact” internship contributing to professional growth and five components of an “academically sound” internship that signal intellectual challenge and alignment with college studies. The high-impact components measured, adapted by The Washington Center from Kuh’s work on such practices, included: performing challenging tasks, developing meaningful relationships, receiving mentoring and professional advice, and having opportunities to lead a project, work in teams, and work in a diverse environment. Academic components, adapted by TWC from the CAS standards, included the match between a student’s skills and his or her internships, and whether the student’s college (or internship-coordinating organization) provided academic preparation, background information, and clarification about learning objectives, outcomes, and evaluation prior to the internship, and supervised and maintained contact with the student during his or her internship.

This research strictly looks at full-time, summer interns in Washington, D.C., and, thus, excludes full- and part-time interns in other parts of the country who participate in internships during the academic year as well as in the summer. The study aims to describe and analyze the impact of internships on this narrow, but important Washington population, and does not make recommendations; these will be addressed in other forums and future studies. It also does not address in depth issues associated with the pros and cons of paid vs. unpaid internships.

**METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE**

In response to a broad-based solicitation to participate in the study, 531 students interning in Washington during the summer of 2011 completed a 30-question survey. Forty-three percent secured their internships and participated through The Washington Center’s internship program; 57 percent of those surveyed secured their internship by other means. Several dozen participated in a half-day discussion at TWC in August 2011; a handful of internship providers also participated. Individual interns were interviewed in September 2011. Interns in the sample roughly corresponded to the demographic profile of America’s overall four-year college population, although they tended to come from higher-than-average-income
Critics contend that some internships are little more than unpaid or underpaid jobs, lacking the combination of intellectual and career-oriented learning that such experiences should possess.

households. Because their internships were in Washington, the overwhelming majority interned in government agencies or nonprofit organizations and majored in political science or related social sciences.

Data were collected and analyzed between June and September 2011 by The Washington Center in conjunction with a team of graduate students from the City College of New York. While most findings reflect data from the entire sample, in a few cases, TWC and non-TWC interns are differentiated because of TWC requirements for interns that are likely to have influenced their responses.

The Washington Center is an independent, nonprofit organization that has served approximately 50,000 students and hundreds of colleges and universities during the past 35 years by providing students with opportunities to work and learn in Washington, D.C.

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Highlights

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

• Internships were quite successful at providing professional growth experiences.
• Interns who said they experienced professional growth were more likely than others to receive skills training, mentoring or professional advice, and feedback from supervisors about the quality of their work.
• Only one-third of interns said they had been given the opportunity to lead a project, despite the importance that hiring managers of recent graduates put on leadership skills.

INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGE

• Internships were uneven in providing academic challenges and direct connections to college studies.
• Only half of survey respondents received academic credit for their internships or were required to report to their colleges about their internships.
• Interns not participating in a program like TWC’s who received credit were much more likely than those not receiving credit to engage in substantive reporting about their internship to faculty or career-services staff at their colleges.
• Interns who received clarification of their learning outcomes, objectives, or evaluation criteria before their internship were more likely to be intellectually challenged.

PAY AND CREDIT

• There was no statistically significant difference in internship quality between paid and unpaid internships.
• There was no statistically significant difference in quality between internships that resulted in college credit and those that yielded no academic credit.
Discussion of Findings

WHO INTERNS IN WASHINGTON?

Tens of thousands of college students spend a semester or summer in Washington each year. The nation’s capital is a magnet for interns, naturally attracting many young people with interests in politics, public policy, and public service.

As a result, 29 percent of those surveyed interned in executive branch agencies of the federal government, with another 10 percent interning on Capitol Hill. Nonprofit organizations were also a strong draw, with 11 percent interning in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), 9 percent in interest groups, 8 percent in think tanks, and 6 percent in member associations. Private-sector interns also had a strong public-policy bent, with 5 percent of the sample interning in consulting firms, 5 percent in lobbying firms, 2 percent in the media, and another 2 percent in financial services. Five percent also interned in local government agencies, with 9 percent in internships classified as “other.”

Academic interests were strong drivers for students choosing to intern in the hub of national government. Nearly half (47 percent) of Washington interns surveyed were political science majors, with another 14 percent majoring in international relations and 11 percent each in economics and history. In addition, 8 percent majored in criminal justice and 8 percent reported majoring in the humanities.

Washington interns surveyed were overwhelmingly of traditional undergraduate ages, although a sizable number were older—either graduate students or post-baccalaureate. Sixty-three percent were 18-to-21 years old, 27 percent were 22 to 25, 8 percent were 26 to 30, and 2 percent were older. Three-fifths of all interns were seniors in college.

Women accounted for 56 percent of Washington interns—approximately their proportion of America’s college students. Fifty-nine percent were non-Hispanic whites, 15 percent were African American, 13 percent were Hispanic, 7 percent were Asian, and 6 percent reported being of other ethnic backgrounds. These percentages closely mirror the general U.S. population, which is about 65 percent non-Hispanic white, 13 percent African American, 16 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian.

Washington interns disproportionately came from relatively well-to-do households, although a surprising number reported being from poor backgrounds. While this, too, may mirror the population of four-year colleges and universities and reflect the higher costs of a Washington...
internship than one in which a student can live at home, it also lends credence to the observation that internship opportunities, at least in Washington, DC, may be less available to middle- and lower middle-class students. Thirty-seven percent were from households with annual incomes of at least $100,000, and 15 percent said they were from households with less than $15,000 in income. Only 11 percent reported being from households with $15,000 to $35,000 in income and 9 percent were from households with $35,000 to $50,000 in income, while 16 percent were in the $50,000–75,000 bracket and 12 percent were in the $75,000–$100,000 bracket.

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF INTERNSHIPS

Students derived many benefits from their internships in Washington, although, in a number of respects, their experiences fell short of meeting the standards for high-quality internships devised by The Washington Center, based on the Kuh and CAS standards described above. Many students reported having “high-impact,” professional growth experiences. Thirty-five percent of respondents strongly agreed, and another 47 percent agreed that their internships “challenged [them] to grow professionally.” Fewer students reported having academically challenging experiences. Nineteen percent strongly agreed, and another 45 percent agreed that their internships “challenged [them] intellectually.” While intern providers, or employers, tended to be very involved with their interns, there was often only minimal involvement by students’ colleges in their internships.

While these findings indicate that most survey respondents had relatively high-quality professional growth experiences, students reported being less academically challenged, having less opportunity to develop their intellectual abilities and build on their college learning. Colleges, by and large, did not demonstrate significant involvement in their students’ internships, as was revealed by the academic components that were tested.

Professional Growth

Interns generally experienced professional growth that included learning about careers and the work world, gaining greater competence and new skills, and making contacts as a result of their internships. Those surveyed overwhelmingly reported the presence of five of the six tested measures of high-impact internship:

- 80 percent reported receiving training from their internship that taught them new skills;
• 72 percent said that someone from their internship served as a mentor, providing them with regular professional and personal guidance, and regular feedback about the quality of their work (73 percent);
• 74 percent participated in a team project as part of their internship;
• 78 percent said that their internship afforded them the opportunity to attend networking events such as receptions, dinners, panels, seminars, or conferences; and
• 93 percent reported that their internship enabled them to interact with people with diverse backgrounds, values, and interests.

The presence of several types of “high impact” elements in internships was statistically associated with greater feelings of professional growth. Receiving feedback from a supervisor was strongly related to perceptions of professional growth; 88 percent of those who did get feedback said they grew professionally, whereas only 44 percent of students who did not get feedback experienced growth. Interns who received skills training were more likely to feel that they grew professionally than interns who did not receive any training (88 percent vs. 69 percent). Interns who had mentors also were more likely to report having experienced professional growth than those who did not have a mentor (90 percent vs. 71 percent).

There was no statistical relationship between receiving leadership opportunities and feelings of professional growth, yet the majority of respondents said that their internships were deficient in providing opportunities to lead a group to complete a project (65 percent). Leadership—the one “high impact” element tested that most interns surveyed said was not present—is one that hiring managers often cite as a skill critical to hiring decisions and job success.

Young men were more likely than young women to report having experienced professional growth in their internship. In particular, the proportion of males who received opportunities for leadership and to make contacts and network was higher than that of females.

**Intellectual Challenge**

Intellectual challenge was not a hallmark of interns’ experience. As noted, there was not significant interaction between most interns and their colleges. This was particularly true of non-TWC interns (but TWC interns had requirements for reporting, credit, and other involvement by their colleges):

• Sixty-three percent of those surveyed received no advance training or briefing from their colleges or internship organizations before their internship. Of the remainder who did, only
5 percent received this pre-internship training, context, and background from their schools. Although there was no statistical relationship between receiving training or preparation and intellectual challenge, preparation presumably enhances a student’s internship.

- 39 percent said that their college had specific requirements to be completed before participating in an internship;
- 36 percent said that their college (or internship organization) helped them clarify their learning outcomes, objectives, and evaluation criteria; and
- 54 percent were required or encouraged to report to their college (or internship organization), although few of these engaged in substantive reporting. Non-TWC interns (49 percent) were significantly less likely to report to their college than TWC interns (63 percent).

Despite the prevalence of internships among four-year college students, and colleges’ encouragement to participate in one, there was strikingly little connection between internships and students’ schools or academic learning. Requirements that colleges have various types of involvement in the internship process, such as those that The Washington Center has, make some difference. Only 52 percent of all interns surveyed received any academic credit from their colleges for their internships.

Forty percent of interns who were not associated with The Washington Center reported securing their internship through their college; somewhat more than half of these did through a faculty member or academic department, while slightly fewer did so through a career-services office. Most (about 62 percent) of non-TWC interns said they secured their internship on their own or through personal connections.

Among all interns surveyed, 48 percent said that they never had to report on their internship to their school. Just 16 percent of interns reported on their internship each week to someone at their college, and another 11 percent reported biweekly or monthly. Twenty-three percent were required to report after their internship ended. A mere 20 percent were required to report on the relationship between their academic studies and their work responsibilities, although 30 percent said they provided a “description” of their duties and tasks. Interns’ most frequent point of contact at their college was a faculty member (50 percent), with only 8 percent reporting to a career-services office. Students who found their internship through their school were no more likely than others to have reporting requirements.
College involvement in internships appears to raise the quality of the experience for students.

One very strong positive measure of academic soundness of internships was that 86 percent of students said that their internship matched their academic and professional skills.

College involvement in internships appears to raise the quality of the experience for students. Although, receiving credit did not have a statistical impact on the 11 aggregated measures of internships quality, interns who received credit were much more likely to have reporting requirements from their school. Seventy-three percent who received credit had such requirements, whereas only 28 percent of those not receiving credit did. In addition, interns who received clarification of their learning outcomes, objectives, or evaluation criteria before their internship were somewhat more likely to report that they were intellectually challenged (71 percent vs. 62 percent), although only 36 percent said that their college or internship organization provided such clarification.

Quality, Pay, Credit, and Internship Setting

Surprisingly, external rewards appeared not to be statistically related to students’ perceptions about the quality of their internships. There was no significant difference in reported internship quality between paid and unpaid internships or between internships that yielded college credit and those that did not. However, interns who spoke to these issues said that getting paid and getting credits were important.

Students participating in internships on Capitol Hill, and in financial services firms, lobbying firms, and academia reported having the highest-quality experiences, although differences among industries were relatively small.
Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that internships can be powerful learning and life-shaping experiences. This study found that Washington-based internships generally provide college students with opportunities for professional growth, career exploration, and learning about the work world. However, in many cases (particularly with non-TWC students), there seemed to be a disconnect between the internship experience and students’ academic learning.

High-impact internships help students grow professionally through mentoring, supervisor feedback, and skills training. Academically-sound, internships provide greater benefits when colleges help students clarify their learning objectives before interning and require reporting during and after the internship, but these and other forms of college involvement in internships are not the norm.

This research not only points to the strengths and weaknesses of the quality of internships, but also to the need for more extensive and refined study of the nature and quality of the internship experience and its connections to students’ academic endeavors. Although the findings suggest some broad principles that define good internships—such as the importance of supervisor feedback and mentoring, skills training, and pre-internship preparation—there is much more we need to learn to be able to make specific recommendations to employers, colleges, students, internship organizations, and the workforce development and higher education policy communities.

The findings only begin to describe the nature and quality of internships in one important and highly desirable location for internships. Because of the significance of internships in millions of young Americans’ lives, we need to ask a number of basic questions: What is the role of colleges in internships? What differentiates an internship from a temporary job? Why do students intern? We also need to probe more deeply into what constitutes a quality experience that contributes meaningfully to career preparation and learning. While the Kuh, CAS, and other standards are helpful, this study also suggests the need to expand and refine these standards, and develop new ones to better describe the characteristics of a high-quality internship. In addition, if we want to better design internships to help students succeed in careers, school, and life, we need to know more about their impact—on student grades, academic choices, professional decisions, and career outcomes.
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