

Career service practitioners need to keep abreast of current and local employment trends to effectively serve both college students and employers. According to Miller's (1997)

their employment requirements and recruitment needs. Timely data collection regarding internship programs also aids career service practitioners in better advising college students.

Employers' Perceptions of the Benefits of College Internship Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore employers' perceptions of the benefits of college internship programs in order to establish an institutional benchmark for program evaluation and development. The findings aided career service practitioners in providing information to students, administrators, and departmental internship coordinators and assisted the university in improving and fine-tuning its internship program. A survey instrument originally developed by Kane (1981) was utilized to seek information about employers' perceptions of the benefits of college internship programs. The instrument was mailed to 468 local employers who had already established internship programs. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the demographic information and questionnaire statement responses. Responses to the two open-ended comment questions were grouped into categories based on the themes that emerged from the data. Over half of the employers either moderately agreed or strongly agreed with all of the statements with the exception of two statements. The open-ended comment question responses indicated areas in which college internship programs could be improved and also included general comments regarding employers' perceptions of the benefits of college internship programs.

review of the standards for higher education, the primary purpose of career service offices was to "assist students in developing, evaluating, and effectively initiating and implementing career plans" (p. 45), which included internship program coordination.

In order to fulfill these responsibilities, Kretovics and McCambridge (1998) advised that career service practitioners consider local employer internship data a primary source of information rather than relying on national data. Because the available research had been conducted on a national scale or in other geographical locations, these research findings could not necessarily be considered accurate at other colleges. Employers in various industries and geographical locations may not always perceive internship programs in a similar way and the prioritization of various aspects of internship programs may be different.

Kretovics and McCambridge (1998) further suggested that career service practitioners value internship programs and have available data regarding these programs. Having supportive information helps to track employer needs, expectations, and employment trends so that career service practitioners are able to effectively and efficiently assist employers with

Purpose & Method

The purpose of this study focused on one broad research question: what were employers' perceptions regarding the benefits of their college internship programs? The objective of this research initiative was to establish an institutional benchmark for internship program evaluation and development.

A survey instrument originally developed by Kane (1981) was utilized to seek information about employers' perceptions of the benefits of college internship programs. The revised instrument contained 22 statements, five demographic questions and two open-ended comment questions. The response choices to the statements on the questionnaire consisted of a five-point Likert scale ranging from strong agreement (5) to strong disagreement (1). The instrument was mailed to 468 local employers from the Greater Boise Employer Directory who had previously stated they had established internship programs. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the demographic information and questionnaire statement responses. Responses to the two open-ended comment questions were grouped into categories based on the themes that emerged from the data.

The organizations included in the Greater Boise Employer Directory were located within commuting distance of Boise, a radius of approximately 40 miles. According to the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce (2000), the population for the local metropolitan area, which included Ada and Canyon

Counties, was 403,817 individuals. The civilian labor force equaled 230,084 individuals and the unemployment rate was 3.7%. The local metropolitan land area covered 1,645 square miles and housed the state capitol.

Some of the major organizations that occupied the local metropolitan area included Micron Technology, State of Idaho, Micronpc.com, J.R. Simplot Company, St. Luke's Regional Medical Center, Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, U.S. Bank, DirectTV Customer Care Center, First Security Bank, Ada County School District, Hewlett-Packard, Inc., Albertson's, Inc., Boise State University, Washington Group International, Inc., and Boise Cascade Corporation. The major industries in the local metropolitan area represented agriculture, corporate headquarters, education, financial services, government, hi-technology, manufacturing, military, healthcare, retail, transportation, tourism, utilities, and wholesale distribution.

Following are student demographics at the researcher's institution from a population of approximately 18,000 students: 82% of the students were white, 5.3% were Hispanic, 2.5% were Asian American, 1.3% were African American, 1.0% were Native American, and 7.9% were unknown. Ten percent of the students were 18 or younger, 44% were 19-24 years, 35% were 25-40 years, 8% were 41-50 years, and 3% were 51 and over. Fifty-six percent of the students were female and 44% were male.

Results

Overall, 329 questionnaires were returned, an initial response rate of 70%. Because the study examined the benefits of established college internship programs, questionnaires were not used if employers designated that they did not have an established internship program and, therefore, were unfamiliar and not currently involved with internship programs; one hundred employers responded that they no longer had an internship program. Two hundred and twenty-nine (229) employers responded that they had internship programs and 149 of these employers were currently utilizing internship students in their organizations. Six questionnaires were incomplete, which brought the total number of usable questionnaires to 223, a final response rate of 48%.

Employers' strongest agreement (97.4%) was with the statement, "students gain marketable skills from participating in internships programs." Employers' lowest agreement (21.2%) was with the statement, "internship programs serve to increase minority representation in participating organizations." A summary table of the 22 questionnaire statements ranked according to response percentages from the

strong and moderate agreement categories can be found in Table 1.

The survey included two open-ended questions that allowed employers to describe any improvements they would like to see regarding internship programs and also to elaborate on any area related to internship programs that they considered significant.

There were 93 responses to the first open-ended question, "in what ways could college internship programs be improved." Following is a summary of grouped categories compiled from the survey answers and sample quotes from the employers. This question generated the most comments in the category of collaboration and teamwork. Employers wanted to experience more collaboration and teamwork with the colleges with whom they worked, "I'd like better communication between teachers/advisors and an organization's supervisor," and, "improve communication between Career Center and businesses to foster better relationship and involvement on campus; work towards better relationship between departments and business community." Employers also wanted to have more efficient and organized program logistics, "occasional information from university on how to best structure internships (reality vs. expectations) and provide opportunity for short-term/project internships for lower credit and encourage students to try a variety of internships of shorter duration," and, "better organization and information from the university on requirements (hours per credit, etc.) and pay/no-pay (how much)." Employers also wanted better internship advertising and promotion, "department needs to make sure students are aware of employers available," and, "marketing programs to increase internships available; if you could provide a listing of participants to the companies that use interns, I would utilize the program more." Employers also wanted colleges to better educate students regarding internship expectations, "ensure that the students are familiar with the position and the organization prior to starting the internship." Employers commented about more advanced planning prior to the internship starting, "have organizations give a presentation to freshmen students about the benefits of intern programs so they can plan for internships in their junior and senior years." Lastly, employers wanted improved quality of the internship experience, "make sure internships are as relevant as possible." A summary table of the categories and response totals can be found in Table 2.

There were 82 responses to the second open-ended question, "please include any other comments you may have regarding your perception of the benefits of college internship programs." Following is a

Table 1. Questionnaire Statements Ranked According to Combined Response Percentages From Strong and Moderate Agreement Categories

Ranked Questionnaire Statements		Combined Response Percentages
1	Students gain marketable skills from participating in internship programs.	97.4
2	Internship experiences assist in students' career development.	96.9
3	Internship experiences provide students with relevant work references.	96.0
4	Internship experiences reinforce students' educational process.	95.6
5	Internship experiences assist students in determining appropriateness of career decisions.	94.7
6	Internship experiences enhance students' chances of post-graduation employment.	92.9
7	Internship programs serve as a mechanism to provide a linking relationship for organizations with colleges.	89.8
8	Internship experiences help make students' educational experiences more rewarding.	84.6
9	Internship programs provide a source of pre-professional staffing.	81.4
10	Internship programs are used as a post-graduate recruitment device.	80.5
11	Employers within your organization strongly support internship programs.	80.0
12	Internship programs enhance communication between industry and academia.	77.4
13	Internship programs serve as excellent community relations' mechanisms.	77.4
14	Internship programs are a cost-effective mechanism for recruitment.	75.7
15	Participation in an internship program is cost effective for an employer.	72.2
16	Internship students positively affect staff quality by providing fresh perspectives.	67.7
17	Hiring internship students is worth some additional expenditure.	67.3
18	Internship experiences motivate students to perform better in college.	64.6
19	Hiring employees who were previous interns within your organization provides for lower long-term employee attrition.	58.8
20	Utilizing internship students is valuable enough that students should be paid fair market value according to their prior experience.	50.9
21	Internship students are more motivated to work than non-internship students.	32.3
22	Internship programs serve to increase minority representation in participating organizations.	21.2

summary of grouped categories compiled from the survey answers and sample quotes from the employers. This question generated the most comments in the category of the benefits of internships to employers, "we feel interns are a great investment in our future hiring procedures," and, "the expenditure isn't very great if we hire an intern that's graduating the following summer and we hire him or her full time after graduation (our typical practice)." Employers also commented on concerns they had regarding the program, "undergraduate interns are good for the interns but create more work for the organization, unless we are able to hire the student afterwards," and, "internship programs are not zero

cost to employers; there is much work and planning that has to be done on the part of the employer." Other comments were related to the benefits of internships to students, "internships are such a great opportunity to experience a work environment of interest," and, "it gives the students a snap shot of what to expect when they enter into the labor market." Employers noted the benefits of internships to both students and employers, "internships provide excellent evaluation ground for both student and company and offers 'glimpse of reality' that is often much needed." Some comments regarding collaboration and teamwork included, "more support from the executive offices of the university on

Table 2. Categories and Response Totals (n=93) From Open-ended Comment Question One: In What Ways Could College Internship Programs be Improved?

Categories	Frequency	Percent
Collaboration and Teamwork	34	36.5
Program Logistics	16	17.2
Internship Advertising and Promotion	14	15.0
Educating Students Regarding Expectations	11	11.9
Miscellaneous Comments		
Advanced Planning	8	8.6
Quality of Internship	5	5.3
Experience	5	5.3

internship value, building closer relationships with businesses in Boise,” and, “I do not believe many departments at local colleges support the idea of intern experiences; we struggle to get support from the school when we post internships.” Lastly, employers commented on the benefits of internships in general, “everyone should be required to do at least one semester’s worth,” and, “long-term I believe internships will be the recruiting tool for employment of full-time college recruits.” A summary table of the categories and response totals can be found in Table 3.

Discussion and Recommendations

Based upon the 22 statement responses and open-ended comment responses, it was evident that employers perceived internship experiences as being beneficial. Employers perceived this particularly in the area of benefit to students’ educational processes. The three statements: “internship experiences reinforce students’ educational process,” “internship experiences assist students in determining appropriateness of career decisions,” and “internship experiences assist in students’ career development,” were among the top five most agreed upon statements

Table 3. Categories and Response Totals (n=82) From Open-ended Comment Question Two: Please Include Any Other Comments You May Have Regarding Your Perceptions of the Benefits of College Internship Programs.

Categories	Frequency	Percent
Benefits of Internships to Employers	16	19.5
Employer Concerns	15	18.2
Benefits of Internships to Students	14	17.0
Miscellaneous	14	17.0
Comments		
Benefits of Internships to Both Students and Employers	9	10.9
Collaboration and Teamwork	8	9.7

by employers. Given this information colleges may consider placing more importance on marketing and promoting internship experiences to students and employers. Internships could also be more effectively promoted within the college community and perhaps should become part of required curriculum. Additionally, the college community needs to be educated about the purpose of internship experiences, which is not simply to obtain a job more easily upon graduation (which seems to be the current perception of internships at the researcher's institution), but rather to use internships as career-decision making opportunities and to incorporate internships into the educational process. The study demonstrated that college education is not solely based around classroom learning; it also justifies the importance of experiential learning and the meaning that is created for the learner outside of the classroom.

Studies conducted by several researchers (Bauer, 1995; Gordon, 1985; Harcourt & Krizan, 1989; Hollenbeck & Smith, 1984; Richards, 1984; Scheetz, 1992; Young & Lee, 1997) suggested that internship experiences were rated as top sources for employment recruiting. The current study found that 80.5% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs were used as a post-graduation recruitment device. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (1998) supported the value that internship experience held to employers. This study found that 80.1% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that employers within their organizations strongly supported internship programs.

Fletcher's (1989) research on career development relating to student benefits from participation in internship experiences indicated that students who had internship experience were better able to solidify and confirm their career choices and better integrate classroom learning with real world, practical experience, which made learning more relevant, more meaningful, and more understandable to the learner. This study indicated that 94.7% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship experiences assisted students in determining appropriateness of career decisions and 96.9% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship experiences assisted in students' career development. Also 84.6% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship participation helped make students' educational experiences more rewarding and 95.6% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship experiences reinforced students' educational process. Finally, 64.6% of employers either moderately or

strongly agreed with the statement that internship experiences motivated students to perform better in college.

Taylor's (1988) research on employment opportunities relating to student benefits from participation in internship experiences found that students who had internship experiences tended to have a greater job network. This study showed that 96% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship experiences provided students with relevant work references and 92.9% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship experiences enhanced students' chances of post-graduation employment.

Brougham and Casella (1996) reported that internship experiences helped students gain skills and confidence. This study found that 97.4% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that students gained marketable skills from participation in internship programs.

Nielsen and Porter (1983) indicated from their overview of three major studies of internship programs that internship students cost less than regular employees. This study found that 72.2% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that participation in an internship program was cost-effective for an employer. Also, 67.3% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that hiring internship students was worth some additional expenditure, and 50.9% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that utilizing internship students was valuable enough that students should be paid fair market value according to their prior experience.

The overview presented by Nielsen and Porter (1983) also indicated that internship programs were a useful source for pre-professional employment and employers experienced less attrition with former internship students than with regular college graduates. This study found that 81.4% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs provided a source of pre-professional staffing and that 58.8% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that hiring employees who were previous interns within their organization provided for lower long-term employee attrition. Finally, 67.7% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship students positively affected staff quality by providing fresh perspectives.

Nielsen and Porter (1983) claimed that job offers were made nine times more frequently to internship students and that recruitment costs for internship

students were lower than costs for regular college graduates. This study found that 75.7% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs were a cost-effective mechanism for recruitment.

Research conducted by Wiseman and Page (1983) on employer benefits from participating in internship programs suggested that both their communication with colleges and their faculty relationships were improved. This study found that 89.8% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs served as a mechanism to provide a linking relationship for organizations with colleges and that 77.4% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs enhanced communication between industry and academia. Wiseman and Page (1983) also indicated that internship programs helped with the organization's public relations efforts. This study found that 77.4% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs served as excellent community relations' mechanisms.

Overall, there were two findings in the study regarding employers' perceptions of the benefits of college internship programs that did not support the literature. According to the overview presented by Nielsen and Porter (1983) more minority students were hired through internship programs and internship students' motivation was higher than non-internship students' motivation. This study found that 21.2% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship programs served to increase minority representation in participating organizations and 32.3% of employers either moderately or strongly agreed with the statement that internship students were more motivated to work than non-internship students.

The open-ended comment responses also supported some of the existing literature. When employers were asked about ways in which college internship programs could be improved the category with the most responses was collaboration and teamwork and the category with the second highest number of responses was program logistics. Ward's (1991) research on internship program concerns referred to the lack of collaboration among the three partners as a major concern. Given this lack of collaboration, developing a successful program would be challenging, a comment mirrored by the responses in this study. Patterson's (1997) and Gibson's (1998) overviews of strategies for successful internship programs included aspects regarding collaboration and teamwork and also program logistics.

When employers were asked for any other comments they had regarding college internship

programs the category with the most responses was benefits of internships to employers. This finding reflected the outcomes of studies conducted by Nielsen and Porter (1983) and Wiseman and Page (1983) regarding employer benefits. The category with the second highest number of responses when employers were asked for any other comments they had regarding college internship programs was employer concerns which coincided with Scott's (1992) research on employer concerns and Deane's et al. (1978) research on program cost concerns.

Further research regarding the other partners' perspectives (college representatives, students, and faculty) would provide additional information, and the results would complement this study's findings. The results could help colleges gain a more comprehensive picture of internship programs and assist in improving the two areas that employers had indicated some concern about, collaboration and teamwork and program logistics. Interviewing employers to explore in-depth perceptions based upon the way in which they responded to the 22 statements and also their open-ended responses would add another valuable piece to the current study.

Given the current economic downturn, a replication of this study would assist in determining whether or not employers' perceptions regarding internships change depending on the conditions of the job market. An overview presented by Nielsen and Porter (1983) regarding three major studies of internship programs indicated that internship students cost less than regular employees; therefore, more internship students may be hired if permanent employees were being laid off. In this study one questionnaire statement read: "participation in an internship program is cost effective for an employer." Employers who strongly or moderately agreed with this statement accounted for 72.2% of the responses. Observing how this particular percentage, along with the other statements' percentages, increased, decreased, or stayed the same given a tight job market would be a valuable comparison.

While some of the open-ended responses were insightful, other responses seemed vague. For example, one comment response was, "develop written plan." Interviewing employers may help in understanding if this comment referred to a student, employer, or college responsibility and would therefore be a more useful response. Many areas for further research also surfaced from the open-ended responses. Fourteen categories emerged from employers' responses, and all of the areas could be researched further to gain an even better understanding of employers' perceptions.

Conducting further research regarding the two areas in which the majority of employers responded with uncertainty or disagreement, could help determine if the trends have changed. Those two statements were that internship programs served to increase minority representation in participating organizations and that internship students were more motivated to work than non-internship students.

The findings did not make clear whether or not employers actually received minority student applicants and, for whatever reason, chose to hire another candidate. Colleges may want to consider strengthening marketing and recruiting efforts for minority students so that employers have the hiring opportunity. The findings also did not indicate if employers do receive and hire minority student applicants, but the quantity was too low to make a difference in the organization's minority representation. Moreover, 138 (61%) employers responded with uncertainty, which could indicate that no actual agreement or disagreement with the statement existed.

As far as internship students' motivation was concerned, the findings did not specify the level of student motivation that employers encountered. It is also important to note that this finding did not suggest that internship students are not motivated but that they are not more motivated than non-internship students. Students are involved in a variety of roles including parents, partners, workers, and caretakers to name only a few. Because of their additional roles and accompanying responsibilities, students may not be able to focus as prudently on their college experience and this finding could reflect this change. Additionally, 106 (47%) employers responded with uncertainty, which could again indicate that no actual agreement or disagreement with the statement existed. Again, conducting follow-up with employers would be necessary to determine what, if anything, could be done in these two areas. Although the findings suggested that college internship programs seemed for the most part beneficial to employers, two areas of particular concern that were indicated from the open-ended responses were the collaboration and teamwork between the colleges and employers and program logistics. College representatives and career services practitioners may want to build stronger relationships with employers and evaluate current internship programs. Colleges could also strengthen the organization of and processes regarding internships in order to improve program logistics. Colleges may want to give particular attention to the areas of collaboration and teamwork and program logistics when evaluating internship programs and developing future programs. Further discussion about these areas with employers could help colleges gain

clearer insight and may strengthen relationships by learning about and listening to employers' experiences, suggestions, and comments.

Conclusion

This study explored employers' perceptions of the benefits of college internship programs and established an institutional benchmark for program evaluation and development. The findings provided credibility for colleges and employers to establish and maintain internships programs, which could positively impact funding and resources allocated to internship programs. The results demonstrated that placing effort into initiating and developing internship programs is a worthwhile investment and provided insight into specific benefits and areas for improvements indicated by employers. This study provided a foundation upon which other research can be conducted and this information may assist college representatives, employers, students, faculty, and internship coordinators with their programs.

More specifically, the results may help colleges make more informed administrative decisions regarding internship programs, assist in planning and implementing new internship programs and/or improving and fine-tuning existing programs, develop meaningful internship program goals for which to strive, advise students more accurately regarding internship programs, provide more accurate information to employers and also to the campus community (students, administrators, and faculty), respond more effectively to employers' needs and concerns regarding internship programs, and evaluate and assess current internship programs.

Employers may learn about the benefits of and improvements needed for their internship programs and they may also be convinced to develop an internship program if they were contemplating the establishment of a program. Employers could also look at how they compare to other local employers regarding their perceptions. Students may learn about benefits to internship participation by understanding employers' perceptions about internship programs. Lastly, faculty and internship coordinators may be assured that employers believe internship programs are beneficial and that the experiences reinforce students' educational processes.

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