

Government internships offer a variety of benefits to a variety of recipients. By affording the opportunity to observe and

Evaluating Successful Political Internships: A View from the Students' Seats

*Robert F. Pecorella, Ph.D., Associate Professor
Department of Government and Politics, St. John's University*

*Jeffrey M. Stonecash, Ph.D., Professor
Department of Political Science, Maxwell School, Syracuse University*

Abstract

If planned and monitored with care, government internships provide students with an opportunity to evaluate popular and academic conceptions about politics while also enhancing their professional experiences. This article is an effort to ascertain the most important elements comprising a successful government internship experience. Analyzing survey data from more than 600 undergraduates who completed legislative branch internships between 1999 and 2005, this research tests several possible predictors of success including, student background characteristics, general attitudes toward work and politics, and perception of treatment by the office against overall levels of intern satisfaction. The findings indicate that interns who feel that they have been entrusted with interesting work, who believe that they have been treated well by office staff, and who have been afforded frequent opportunities to interact with the elected official who heads the office will tend to be highly satisfied with their experiences in the legislature..

interact with government officials, they enable students to evaluate both popular and academic conceptions about government and politics while refining their own career interests. Internships offer public officials the assistance of enthusiastic students who may bring a renewed energy and a fresh perspective to the day-to-day activities of modern governance. And, monitoring internships provides faculty sponsors with a direct nexus to the *real world* of government and politics where they too can assess the conventional wisdom of their chosen disciplines.

The mutual-benefits bargain surrounding government internships is quite clear: *the student intern* agrees to focus on the work of the experiential component of the program as well as on the larger connections between that work and the academic literature; officials in *government offices* assume responsibility for assigning and monitoring *intern-worthy* tasks; and the *faculty sponsor* agrees both to monitor the on-going internship and to provide the academic context necessary for meaningful experiential learning. Although the bargain around internships is clear, it requires constant attention if it is to work over the course of an entire internship opportunity.

If they are planned and monitored with care, internships can be valuable experiential additions to a student's academic learning and personal

resume (Diambra, Cole-Zakrewski, and Booher, 2004; Baker, 2003; Alexander, 1986). Conversely, if they are undertaken in a cursory fashion, internships can prove to be negative experiences for all the parties involved. By analyzing the perspectives of former student interns, this research addresses the question of how to structure government internships to produce the greatest possibility that successful experiential education will take place.

The Internship Setting and the Study Design

In every legislative session since 1972, the New York State Assembly has hosted between 100 and 150 undergraduate college students from universities and colleges around New York state who work full time in legislative offices (a minimum of 30 hours per week) from early January to mid May while completing academic course requirements under the direction of two professors-in-residence (Pecorella, 2003). As full-time employees of the Assembly, the interns see at least a part of the legislative process unfold *up close and personal*; as students, the interns have a distance from the process that affords them a degree of perspective in evaluating what it is they witness.

Each year, the students in the program filled out two questionnaires, one as they arrived to begin their experiences in January, a second as they departed in May. The January pre-internship questionnaire focused on their academic and personal backgrounds, their knowledge of New York State government, and their general attitudes toward work and politics; the post-internship questionnaire, administered in May, sought information on intern reactions to politics in Albany and their

assessments of the internship experiences. The responses on these surveys serve as the basis for the analysis that follows.

This research focuses on the interns' assessments of the value of their experiences in the New York State Assembly Intern Program. For our purposes, the concept of a successful internship is measured by students' self-reported responses to the following question: "How satisfied were you with your overall experience as an intern." The item was measured on a Likert scale where 1 was "very satisfied" to 5 "very dissatisfied." The responses to this item, gathered on the post-internship questionnaire, served as the study's dependent variable. We tested several predictors of success, developed from responses on both questionnaires, against the overall level of intern satisfaction in an effort to identify the most important components of a successful internship.

Approaches to internship success

Based on research on legislative politics and experiential education, as well as years of direct involvement with intern programs, the issue of what affects internship success was approached from three conceptual directions. One, the most distant from the experience itself and therefore the least controllable within any particular internship program, focused on the interns' *academic and political backgrounds*. A second research focus, at least partially amenable to adjustment within an internship program, concerned *general intern attitudes toward work and politics*. Lastly, we tested whether intern assessment of their *treatment and status within the legislative office*, a largely adjustable experiential characteristic, was a useful predictor of internship success.

Academic and political background

To determine whether academic and political background was related to overall level of satisfaction with the internship, we employed three variables to distinguish between and among the students who came to Albany: college majors (political science and other), political party identification, and general political ideology (conservative, moderate or liberal). Several hypotheses focused this phase of the research. First, we expected that political science majors would be more attuned and more comfortable with the highly political nature of state legislative politics than students from other disciplines. Second, alternative expectations guided the analysis of the impact of partisan identification on intern levels of satisfaction. From one perspective, we anticipated that strong Democrats would be most comfortable in the highly partisan and overwhelmingly Democratic Party controlled New York State Assembly (Stonecash and Widestrom, 2006); from another, there was reason to

suspect that strong partisans on either side would be more comfortable in the highly political world in Albany than their less partisan counterparts. Third, we expected that self-identified, philosophical liberals would more readily find a home in a legislature run by a Democratic majority with a strong liberal leadership base in New York City than other more moderate or conservative interns (Pecorella, 2006).

Attitudes toward work and politics

We employed two multi-dimensional measures to test whether student attitudes toward work and politics impacted on internship success. Previous research has noted the importance of intern flexibility in adapting to office work (Koch, 2002). The first set of measures focused on the office work environment and sought to distinguish students with "flexible" attitudes toward work from their more "steadfast" counterparts. Three items were included in this set; working well in unstructured situations, clarity of job responsibilities, and interruptions at work. Ratings were on a 5 point Likert scale where 1 = "always," 2 = "Most of the time," 3 = "some of the time," 4 = "Rarely," and 5 = "Never." We expected that more flexible interns would be more comfortable in the highly episodic world of legislative politics where changes in work assignments, usually driven by events and influences outside of the immediate office environment, are frequent and disruptive of routines.

The second set of measures concern intern attitudes toward politics. It was designed to test the expectation that politically "flexible" interns would be more at home in a legislative environment than their more politically "committed" counterparts who might find the "give and take" of the political process uncomfortable or even distasteful. In our experience, students who understand that politics in general and legislative politics in particular involves negotiation with, adjustment to, and accommodation of a diversity of interests and views would be more comfortable and ultimately more satisfied with that process than students whose view of politics was more dogmatic and assertive. Five items comprised this measurement set; for example, enjoy the give and take of political life, feel responsibility to express my views, and need clear-cut answers to problems. The same Likert scale employed for the first set of variables was again used with these measures.

Intern perception of their treatment and their status

Lastly, based on previous research, we anticipated that how interns felt about how they had been treated by their offices and by the member of the assembly for whom they interned would have some impact on their perception of the experience as a whole (Stonecash,

Pecorella, and Winegar, 1988; Balutis, 1977). In this context, we were interested in a number of interpersonal matters including: whether an intern felt that s/he had been treated reasonably well by office personnel, a sign of respect; whether s/he had been assigned interesting and substantive work by the immediate supervisor, a sign of trust in an intern's capabilities; and whether s/he had been given the opportunity to interact with the member of the Assembly on a reasonably consistent and positive basis, a sign of "status" within the office. The four items were measured on the same Likert scale as used in the previous two variable sets. We expected that interns who perceived that they had been treated with respect and trust while being made to feel a part of the larger office purpose would be more inclined to view the internship experience in a positive light.

Findings

Data utilized in this study were obtained from surveys completed by 624 interns (more than 68% of all interns) who participated in the New York State Assembly Intern Program between 1999 and 2005. The overwhelming majority of students in our study (66 %) reported that they were "very satisfied" with their internship experiences. Indeed, with just over 7 percent of students expressed dissatisfaction with the program, the ensuing analysis will focus as much on the fine-tuning of successful internship experiences as on avoiding the major problems that plague failed efforts.

As Table 1 indicates, the interns in the New York State Assembly Program assumed a variety of diverse responsibilities over the course of a *typical* legislative internship. Overwhelming majorities of the interns since 1999 have engaged in some form of constituent work, involving standing in for their Assembly members in office *meet and greets*; had contact with lobbyists, often at the receptions most of the interns reported attending; and performed legislative bill tracking and other forms of background research for their offices. Conversely, relatively few of the interns were involved in writing press releases or drafting legislation, largely because the Assembly relies on professional staff to perform these tasks.

Table 1. Internship Work Assignments (in percentages)

"Typical" Intern Tasks	Performed task
Performing constituent work	94
Legislative bill tracking	90
Background research	89
Attending receptions	88
Attending floor sessions	88

Meeting with lobbyists	87
Preparing office memos	75
Attending committee meetings	72
Attending public hearings	66
Meeting with agency personnel	49
Drafting Legislation	40
Writing press releases	27

N = (579)

Intern Background and Internship Success

The data in Table 2 indicate that background variables had one or two surprising impacts on the overall levels of intern satisfaction. First, it is clear that political science majors are no more likely to be satisfied with the experiential component of a legislative internship than majors from other programs. Our experience indicates that, depending on the focus of their campus studies, i.e., international politics, sub-national American politics, etc., political science majors tend to be more familiar with the academic concepts and models surrounding government and politics but are often just as surprised by the actual operations of legislative politics in Albany. For example, regardless of undergraduate major, students tend to view the high degree of partisan behavior manifest in Albany negatively.

Table 2. Intern Background Characteristics and Satisfaction with the Internship Experience

INTERN BACKGROUND	Level of Satisfaction (in percentages)			n
	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Less than satisfied	
Academic Major	-----	-----	-----	(613)
Political Science Major	68	24	8	288
Other than political science	68	25	7	325
Political Party ID	-----	-----	-----	(602)
Strong Democrat	68	27	6	191
Weak Democrat	68	24	8	150
Independent	62	28	10	98
Weak Republican	68	25	7	71
Strong Republican	82	17	2	60
Other	63	25	13	32
Political Ideology	-----	-----	-----	(600)
Liberal	61	31	8	232
Moderate	72	21	7	295
Conservative	71	21	8	73

Table 2 indicates that there have been substantially more Democrats interested in pursuing the internship option over the years than Republicans or Independents; indeed, a plurality of interns identified themselves as “strong Democrats.” The preponderance of Democrats in our sample is not reflective of national data which indicate that more than 50 percent of students self identify as “Independents” while less than one-third characterize themselves as Democrats (Institute of Politics, 2004). The partisan imbalance in our sample may well reflect the fact that interns in the program are disproportionately representative of liberal arts programs in general and of political science majors in particular. Such students are more likely than their counterparts in business or professional schools to be Democrats and as such they are more likely to be interested in public-sector career paths than their Republican or less politically focused counterparts.

A surprise emerged in terms of the impact of political party identification on intern levels of satisfaction. While neither Democratic Party identification nor overall intensity of partisan feelings were related to levels of satisfaction, 82 percent of self identified strong Republicans were very satisfied with their internship experiences, a proportion greater than that of any of their counterparts..

Although unexpected, there are explanations for such findings. The program made consistent efforts to place students in offices where they would be comfortable politically and, as a result, students would usually intern with members who more or less reflected their partisan values. During the period of this research, the Democrats maintained a roughly two-thirds majority in the New York State Assembly while the Republicans consistently controlled the State Senate and the Governor’s office. It is conceivable that interns who identified strongly with the Democrats reacted somewhat negatively to the fact that the Democratic majority was forced to accommodate a Republican governor and State Senate and therefore compromise on the party’s initial policy positions; while strongly Republican interns maintained their enthusiasm for the small but focused Republican minority in the Assembly, which given its numerical irrelevance, was able to *stay pure* and stick to its political principles.

In terms of political ideology, the plurality of philosophical moderates reflects the data on national student attitudes but our sample included fewer conservatives and more liberals than national surveys (Institute of Politics, 2004). For reasons similar to those concerning the higher levels of Democratic Party identification in our sample, we attribute greater preponderance of Liberals to the nature of the program and the students it attracts. As to their reactions to the internship, Liberal interns tended to be somewhat less satisfied with their overall experience in Albany than

their moderate and conservative counterparts, which once again might reflect disappointment that the pressures to govern force the notably liberal Democratic Assembly leadership into more ideologically accommodative positions.

Flexibility and Internship Success

Legislative sessions in Albany are characterized by lengthy intervals of quiet, barely perceptible, behind-the-scenes effort punctuated by occasional outbursts of frenetic activity. Moreover, the outbursts of activity are frequently generated by issues and events that emerge outside of the legislative venue, many of which, until the moment that they assume legislative center stage, were not foreseen. Working in such an environment requires the willingness and the ability to change focus; shift priorities; leave assignments incomplete or only *first-draft* complete; and move on to a new topic where the notably disjointed process may well begin all over again.

The relationships between workplace flexibility and internship success are presented in Table 3. We dropped all response categories that had fewer than twenty responses from the table. Although the directions of the relationships reflect our expectations, the data offer only limited support to the notion that intern flexibility concerning work, i.e., the capacity to adapt to the frenetic pace, impacts on levels of satisfaction with the program. The variable “interruptions at work bother me” was the most useful item in the table. Less than a majority of the students who reported being bothered by frequent interruptions were very satisfied with their internships while super majorities of their counterparts who reported being less bothered or not bothered at all by interruptions were very satisfied.

Table 3. Intern Workplace Attitudes and Satisfaction with the Internship Experience

WORKPLACE FLEXIBILITY	Level of Satisfaction (in percentages)			n
	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Less than satisfied	
1. Work well in structured situations (+)	-----	-----	-----	(585)
Always	74	16	10	114
Most of the time	67	27	6	338
Some of the time	67	26	7	133
			Somers’ d:	.036
2. Believe that job clarity is essential (-)	-----	-----	-----	(602)
Always	63	28	9	331
Most of the time	74	21	5	216
Some of the time	78	18	4	55
			Somers’ d:	-.064

3. Bothered by unexpected interruptions (-)	-----	-----	-----	(596)
Most of the time	43	43	14	37
Some of the time	67	27	6	239
Rarely	70	22	7	272
Never	77	19	4	48
			Somers' d:	-.091

Somers' d's – not significant at (.05).

The expected relationships between political flexibility and internship success were largely unrealized. As we did with Table 3, we dropped all response categories from Table 4 that had fewer than twenty responses. As the table indicates, students who professed a consistent enjoyment of the “give and take” of politics in general were only slightly more likely to be very satisfied with their internship experiences than their counterparts who enjoyed such activity only “some of the time.” We had anticipated that interns who “felt a responsibility to express their opinions” might feel stifled in a staff role where only one opinion in the office really mattered but that appeared not to be the case. In part, this might be explained by the general willingness of office staff and even members of the Assembly to discuss legislative issues with interns and solicit their views, thereby allowing them to express opinions without necessarily having any impact on decisions.

Table 4. Intern Political Attitudes and Satisfaction with the Internship Experience

Level of Satisfaction (in percentages)				
Political Flexibility	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Less than satisfied	n
1. Enjoy political give and take (+)	-----	-----	-----	(590)
Always	72	21	7	215
Most of the time	66	27	7	292
Some of the time	63	30	7	83
			Somers' d:	-.012
2. Feel response-ability to express my views (-)	-----	-----	-----	(591)
Always	71	25	4	150
Most of the time	68	24	8	249
Some of the time	65	26	9	192
			Somers' d:	.007
3. Believe that compromise is essential (+)	-----	-----	-----	(608)

Always	70	24	7	378
Most of the time	65	28	8	184
Some of the time	70	24	7	46
			Somers' d:	.021
4. Expect clear-cut answers to problems (-)	-----	-----	-----	(556)
Always	64	28	8	148
Most of the time	69	26	5	262
Some of the time	71	21	8	146
			Somers' d:	-.055
5. Most problems have one best answer (-)	-----	-----	-----	(562)
Always	63	29	8	226
Most of the time	69	25	6	262
Some of the time	74	18	8	74
			Somers' d:	-.036

Somers' d's – not significant at (.05).

Intern Perception of Treatment and Internship Success

Complementing its highly partisan organization, the New York State Legislature is a highly professionalized operation, one measure of which is that it has largest number of full-time staff and the highest proportion of staff per member of any state legislature in the country (Hamm and Moncrief, 2004). As a consequence, most of the interns are assigned to legislators' offices that include several staff people operating under an office manager or legislative director. In that context, we anticipated that the intern's perception of his/her treatment by the office staff as well as the intern's feelings of inclusion within the office framework would impact the final assessment of the internship experience.

Once again, we dropped all response categories from Table 5 that had fewer than twenty responses. The data indicate strong and significant linear relationships between perceptions of treatment and levels of satisfaction. The first two items focus directly on treatment in the office and while it is clear that both were important, being “assigned interesting work” was the primary indicator of a successful internship in the minds of the interns in the sample. Indeed, of the more than two-hundred and thirty interns who indicated that they were “always” assigned interesting tasks, nearly all were “very satisfied” and none were “less than satisfied” with their experiences. Being assigned interesting work can be interpreted as an indication of the office supervisor's respect for and trust in the

intern's abilities and such respect and trust appears to resonate quite loudly with the students in the sample.

Table 5. Intern Perceptions of their Treatment and Satisfaction with the Internship Experience

Intern Perceptions	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Less than satisfied	n
1. Were assigned interesting work	-----	-----	-----	(587)
Always	94	5	0	234
Most of the time	68	29	3	269
Some of the time	11	69	20	84
			Somers' d:	.456*
2. Were treated well in the office	-----	-----	-----	(607)
Always	80	18	2	485
Most of the time	29	57	14	92
Some of the time	3	43	37	30
			Somers' d:	.364*
3. Member treated me well	-----	-----	-----	(595)
Always	74	21	5	505
Most of the time	40	46	14	63
Some of the time	30	44	22	27
			Somers' d:	.294*
4. Had frequent contact w/ member	-----	-----	-----	(604)
Always	82	14	4	266
Most of the time	65	30	5	224
Some of the time	49	40	11	84
Rarely	20	40	40	30
			Somers' d:	.273*

* Significant at the (.00) level.

Several cautions are in order here concerning intern and faculty mentor expectations about work assignments. The concept of *interesting work* is highly subjective. Generally speaking, interns distinguish routine office tasks, such as, filing and opening the mail from those assignments which get them actively involved in the legislative process, such as, preparing bill memos, researching legislative history, and meeting with lobbyists. The benefits of being

“assigned interesting work,” however, are usually secured by an intern's willingness to also help out with the office *grunt work* (Christiansen and Davis, 2002). In the words of one intern in an earlier study: “You go into the internship thinking that it's all going to be glitz and glamour, and you're going into politics, and you're going to be doing all this exciting stuff, but don't be dismayed if you do find yourself doing the menial tasks of copying and stuffing envelopes and filing and that kind of stuff” (Reeher et al, 2002: 214). Given the importance of “interesting work” to the success of the experience, not to mention to the integrity of any internship program, it is a critical aspect for any internship. Nonetheless, it must be balanced with the entire “office experience.”

The focal point of each legislative office is obviously the legislator for whom the staff works. We expected that a legislator's efforts to include the intern in the day-to-day routine of a Member of the Assembly's life would be a positive component of the program and that expectation proved accurate. The great majority of interns reported that they had been treated well by the legislator and while this was not as crucial to a successful experience as being assigned interesting work, it was an important predictor of success. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of the more than two-hundred and sixty interns who had frequent and consistent interactions with their legislators were “very satisfied” with their internship experiences. Alternatively, less than a majority of students whose interactions were less frequent were as satisfied with their internships.

Based on the responses, it is quite clear that interns react very positively to a combination of what they perceive to be interesting work, good treatment by office personnel, and frequent interactions with a legislator who treats them respectfully. Indeed, the findings indicate that these factors are absolutely crucial to a high degree of intern satisfaction with their office assignments and the entire internship experience.

Discussion and Conclusions

Several useful lessons for initiating and monitoring internships emerge from these findings. First, it is clear that the *single most important source of intern satisfaction* involves a serious effort by the office supervisor and staff to integrate the intern into the operations of the particular office to which s/he is assigned. The most directive evidence we have is that interns who feel that they have been entrusted with interesting work, who believe that they have been treated well by office staff, and who have been afforded frequent opportunities to interact with the elected official who heads the office will tend to be

highly satisfied with their experiences in the legislature.

Although the internal organization of a particular government office is not an aspect of experiential education that faculty sponsors directly control, it is certainly one that lends itself to faculty influence at various stages of the internship experience. At the beginning of an internship program, for example, the importance of the factors highlighted by Table 5, i.e., assigning interns interesting work while treating them with respect, should be made clear to legislators, supervisors, and the entire office staff. Office supervisors should be made aware that there are actions under their control that will increase substantially the possibility of a successful internship experience which will benefit both the intern and the office.

As the internship unfolds, faculty sponsors need to monitor the office experience on a regular basis with an eye to encouraging adjustments in office interactions whenever necessary. Such monitoring should include both formal and informal techniques (Pecorella 2003; Marlin-Bennett, 2002)). The use of formal assessment instruments, such as some form of work-learning contract and mid-internship evaluation, reviewed in one-on-one meetings with the intern either by on-site faculty or faculty sponsors from their campuses making periodic site visits, standardizes the process, provides an opportunity to make early and/or mid-course corrections, and helps maintain the mutuality of understanding among the relevant actors. In a complementary fashion, informal communications can alert the faculty sponsor to the problems of students who “slip through the cracks” of formal assessment. The use of both formal and informal communication allows faculty sponsors to assess, on an on-going basis, the direction of the internship experience while affording interns the opportunity to discuss any concerns they might have with the progress of the internship.

It is helpful to keep three cautions in mind while monitoring office situations. One, it is always preferable for the intern to take the lead in seeking adjustments in an office situation. Indeed, a valuable part of experiential education is learning to adapt to the different, not always pleasant, situations one encounters in the “real world.” Faculty sponsors should counsel interns on strategies for “fixing” an office problem but should become directly involved only if all intern-led intervention options are exhausted. Two, sometimes the problems that emerge are not the “fault” of the office; in such instances, faculty sponsors need to address intern expectations and/or behavior. And three, sometimes problems are nobody’s “fault”; they arise from personality conflicts that are best dealt with initially by counseling patience

and, if necessary, by cutting losses and terminating a particular office assignment.

There was some indication that intern attitudes toward work and politics mattered enough to warrant attention by faculty-sponsors. As part of a pre-internship preparation, it would be helpful for students to be informed about and provided with suggestions on how to cope with the often frenetic pace of government work. Faculty sponsors might also encourage interns, particularly those with strongly held views, to recognize that accommodative strategies are often necessary to address the diversity of interests in the political world. Indeed, with such cases, it may well be that in this case “forewarned is forearmed.”

Student interns should be evaluated based upon both traditional academic criteria, such as, briefing papers, internship diaries or logs, and longer research papers, which serve as the capstone academic experience in the program, as well as their work in their legislative offices. While the experiential and academic components of the internship should serve to reinforce each other over the course of the semester, the evaluation process will generally require separate assessments of the two aspects of the internship. It is important to provide office supervisors with evaluation forms and ask them to assess their interns’ work performance concerning matters such as punctuality, completion of work assigned, level of professionalism, etc. Evaluation forms should also be provided to interns so that they might assess their experiences in the particular offices and the internship program. Regular meetings either with on-site faculty or faculty sponsors making regular site visits help standardize the evaluation process as the internship unfolds.

For many students, experiential education through an internship program serves as one of the highlights of their academic careers. Although there is no fool-proof strategy that can guarantee a successful government internship, there are strong indications from this study that there are concrete steps that faculty sponsors and office supervisor can take to encourage such a result.

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