Examining the role of peer messages in the anticipatory socialization process of the internship experience

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on anticipatory socialization literature, this study examined how the content of peer-to-peer conversations shapes college students' expectations of internship experiences. Thirty-six undergraduate students participated in semi-structured interviews. Analysis of the transcripts revealed five different content areas in peer-to-peer internship discussions: work-related issues, site opportunities, logistics, compensation, and the opportunity for career advancement. Themes also emerged that reflected student expectations of internships. Specifically, students expect an internship to provide exposure to a field of study, opportunity to acquire relevant skills, performance of mundane tasks, opportunity for career advancement, and minimal compensation. Findings show the interpersonal communication aspects of internships are not commonly discussed between peers. Additionally, student expectations reveal a tension between the desire to gain valuable skills and an expectation of performing mundane tasks. Implications for site supervisors and university personnel are discussed. (Journal of Cooperative Education & Internships, 2010, 44(1), 6-12).

KEY WORDS: Anticipatory socialization, college interns, communication, internship, peer messages, socialization.

Internships play a central role in the educational experience of today's college students. In 2006, approximately 84 percent of college graduates reported completing internships, compared to 3 percent in 1980 (Peter, 2007). Given the increasing trend in college enrollment, internships are likely to remain a key resource for students seeking to develop relevant job skills (Crosby & Moncarz, 2006). Despite the popularity and prevalence of internship programs among higher education institutions in the United States, scholars have given little attention to the communication processes surrounding internships (see Bartkus, 2007). This is surprising in the light of organizational socialization literature that references the internship as a "distinct socialization mechanism" (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986, p. 217). Internships not only contribute to personal growth, but provide an opportunity to explore careers, "understand the world of work in a more complete way" (Sweitzer & King, 2009, p. 5) and experience a greater crystallization of vocational self-concept (Taylor, 1988).

This study seeks to contribute to the literature by examining how the content of peer-to-peer messages may help shape expectations of the college internship experience as part of the vocational anticipatory socialization process. Specifically, do the messages undergraduates receive from peers who have completed internships affect their own expectations of an internship experience? An examination of this question may contribute to our understanding of how informal social networks impact on sensemaking of pre-professional work experiences. Specifically, we focus on vocational anticipatory socialization as the foundation for our examination.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational socialization refers to the methods and processes of learning the values, attitudes, norms, skills, social knowledge, and behaviors required to participate in organizational life (Jablin, 1985; Morrison, 1993; Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986; Van Maanen, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Vocational anticipatory socialization is a particular aspect of socialization which involves the process of learning about work and work-life as an introduction to a particular vocation (Jablin, 2001; Van Maanen, 1976). Individuals learn about work roles over a lifetime. In particular, part-time employment and internships provide valuable occupational knowledge (Jablin, 2001).

The anticipatory socialization literature shows that prospective employees actively communicate with peers to gain information about future organizational experiences and organizational cultures (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000). Antonio (2004) identifies 30 years of research that "has continually pointed to the peer group as perhaps the dominant change agent during college years" (p. 446). Peers serve as important socialization agents because they provide social support, communicate expectations, offer normative information, and share information with friends in similar situations (Antonio, 2004; Jablin, 2001; Morrison, 1993). In addition, individuals often seek information from their peer groups because they are familiar and often highly accessible (Morrison, 1993). Researchers argue communication serves as the main route for learning roles and shaping expectations about organizational life (Bernstein, 1972; Jablin, 1987; Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986). Thus, it is important to examine the content of peer messages in informal social networks since peers are important sources for pre-entry job information, influence expectations, and impact sensemaking (Jablin, 1985; Levine & Hoffner, 2006; see Settoon & Adkins, 1997).

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While peers, family, and friends can be important informal sources of information, students seeking information on internships typically have access to various formal institutional resources including academic catalogs, university websites, academic advisors, faculty, and university career center staff. Although all information gathered prior to the internship experience has the potential to shape expectations of the internship, this study seeks to understand the content of peer messages. While it is generally recognized that prospective interns talk with their peers about internships (Sweitzer & King, 2009), there is no research that documents the nature of peer-to-peer exchanges. Examination of the content of these interactions is important since the internship literature clearly establishes student expectations as an important variable affecting the quality of an internship experience (Beard & Morton, 1999; Feldman & Weitz, 1990; Raymond & McNabb, 1993; Sweitzer & King, 2009). Based on this review, the following research questions were examined:

     RQ1: What types of messages do students receive from peers regarding internships?
     RQ2: What expectations do students develop about future internships based on peer messages?

METHODS

Participants

Two criteria for inclusion in the study were followed in identifying our subject pool. First, students had to have engaged in at least one conversation with a peer(s) about internships while in college. Second, students had not yet completed an internship. Since we were interested in how peer messages could shape perceptions and expectations, it was important that participants did not have first-hand experience as interns. Participants included 36 undergraduate students (22 females, 14 males) from a small Midwestern liberal arts university. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 24 ($M = 20.13$). The sample included 14 percent freshmen ($n = 5$), 33 percent sophomores ($n = 12$), 3 percent juniors ($n = 11$), and 11 percent seniors ($n = 4$). Four participants did not report their class status. Participants represented 23 different majors in the areas of behavioral sciences, communication, business, languages, education, history, political science, music, and theatre. Finally, participants did not receive any type of compensation for their participation.

Procedures

The study used qualitative methods of analysis to uncover the nature of peer-to-peer messages and the expectancies produced by those messages. To accomplish this, a semi-structured interview process was utilized. This type of interview was selected because it provided consistency across interviews while still allowing interviewers to probe relevant issues that appeared (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; McCracken, 1988). Prior to the interviews, participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and assured confidentiality. In addition, they gave permission to audiotape the interviews. Interviews were conducted in a private setting at a location convenient to the participants.

Participants provided demographic information and guaranteed (1) they had discussed internships with at least one peers and (2) they had never participated in an internship. Twenty-eight of the participants were planning to complete an internship, four were not sure if they would complete an internship, and four did not expect to complete an internship during college. The interview protocol included the following questions: (1) When your peers have discussed internships with you, what is the content of those discussions? and (2) Based on these discussions, what do you expect to happen on an internship? All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed resulting in 44 pages of double-spaced text.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using the grounded approach which is a "method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 24). First, the researchers became familiar with the data by reading the transcripts individually. Next, transcripts were reread together while listening to the audio-taped interviews to ensure accuracy and create more immersion in the data.

In order to gain a holistic understanding of student discourse, a modified version of the constant comparative process was used to identify and code themes throughout the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008), the researchers moved through the data, comparing incidents with each other based on similarities and differences until those that were found to be conceptually similar could form a theme.   After working individually to develop preliminary themes, the authors discussed their initial interpretations. To overcome any discrepancies in data interpretation, researchers discussed incidents and refined themes to reach consensus.

Similarly to past thematic research, the final step involved revisiting "transcripts repeatedly to locate support for themes and to determine how these themes were interwoven in research participants' discourse" (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003, p. 33). This allowed researchers to reevaluate refined themes and understand how each was represented in numerous interviews (Zorn & Gregory, 2005).

FINDINGS

Content of Peer Discussion Regarding Internships

Research question one examined the content of peer-to-peer discussions of internships. The results revealed five distinct content areas: work-related issues, site opportunities, logistics, compensation, and career advancement. Representative student comments are provided to illustrate each content area.

Work-related issues.   Peers most frequently discussed the nature of the work involved in an internship position. Specifically, the researchers identified three themes: (1) general duties and responsibilities; (2) the importance of the work being completed; and (3) the positive and negative aspects of the work. With regard to general duties and responsibilities, participants said they asked their peers about "daily activities during the job" and "what the job would entail." Commenting on the importance of the work to be completed in an internship, Allison (junior, advertising/public relations major) said:

> When my peers have discussed internships with me, I mainly asked what kinds of responsibilities they were given. For my major, a lot of the internships seem to be busy work, and I wanted to make sure that I'll be getting something that I would actually learn from and use in the future and not just getting coffee or delivering food or doing things like that, that weren't very beneficial for my major or for me to learn from.

Finally, students discussed positive and negative aspects of internships. Fiona (junior, secondary education and English major) commented on a discussion in which the positive aspects of internships were highlighted, "We talked about all of the cool things he got to see and experience and all of the business connections he was making." Alternatively, Laura (sophomore, journalism and theatre major) commented on discussions with several peers in which the negative aspects of internships were identified, "We talked about what they did, what kind of stress they were under, how annoying their bosses were, what food they ate, how much they drove around, and how late they had to stay up at night." Collectively, these comments reveal student interest in discussing work-related issues.

Site opportunities. Peers are an important source of information regarding specific internship opportunities in their respective fields of study. Discussions often addressed where peers had completed internships in the past, but there was also an interest in where peers were currently applying for internships. Dustin (sophomore, arts administration/music major) stated:

> Well, most people I've talked to are talking about getting internships. Not a lot of my friends and peers at my age have actually had internships, so they're talkin' about how they're tryin' to get 'em, where they're trying to get 'em, where they're findin' em.

This comment was reflective of other statements that suggest students tell others about internship opportunities.

Logistics. The results revealed that students were often concerned with the planning, implementation, and coordination of internship details. Specifically, three primary logistical items emerged in the interviews: (1) determining whether an internship is a requirement for a particular major; (2) understanding the process involved in enrolling in an internship experience for academic credit; and (3) scheduling the required internship work hours to fit with their academic schedule.

With regards to whether internships are a requirement, Kathryn (freshman, music and arts administration major) made the following observation about her conversations with peers, "They're usually talking about the internships they have had or are applying for at the time. They're always saying whether they need it for either academic credit or doing it to get ahead."

Peers also discussed the process of getting an internship and integrating an internship experience into the semester schedule. Sarah (freshman, international political science major) participated in conversations where both of these themes emerged:

> [We have discussed] what is involved in completing the internships, such as talking with professors – you have to have an advisor from what I understand. The various work you have to do and what it involves in fixing it into your schedule.

As reflected in these comments, peer conversations address the practical matters surrounding enrollment in an internship.

Compensation. The interview data reveals pay was a frequent topic of discussion. Representative of this conversational focus, Anthony (freshman, undecided) commented, "Well, they talk about money, like if it's paid or not. That's a big issue 'cause if you are going to intern full-time, you can't work. So, it would have to be paid." For those individuals who were considering moving to another town to complete an internship, it was acknowledged that a company's assistance in covering lodging costs was an acceptable form of compensation.

Career advancement. Finally, internships were generally believed to be an excellent resumé builder and play an important role in a student's post-graduation success. Scott (junior, speech communication major) reported, "Mostly, people just talk about how some of them would like to have internships because they think it gives them a good foot in the door to get ahead in their field."

In addition to a competitive advantage in the job market, some students were optimistic that the internship could lead to a job offer within the organization where the internship is completed. Darla (sophomore, business major) stated:

> Basically, the discussion of the business internships… led to whether I can get a job with this firm afterwards. I've talked a lot to people, like accounting majors, that want to internship at [name of organization] because they hope they can get a good job, stay in [name of town], that kind of stuff.

The results indicate that peers do share information about the nature of internships and students who have not yet completed internships generally find the information important.

Expectations of Internships
Research question two asked students about the expectations they have of internships based on their conversations with peers. Five major themes emerged concerning student expectations: exposure to a field of study, acquiring relevant skills, performing mundane tasks, career advancement, and minimal compensation.

Exposure to a field of study. The most frequently discussed expectation of internships was exposure to a specific field of study through a professional experience. As Anna (junior, international political science major) stated, "Basically [internships are] for you to like learn more about your field and maybe what you want to do when you graduate from college." Like Anna, many students identified that internships not only provide a learning experience through shadowing and observation but also serve as an evaluative function. While describing a conversation with a peer about his internship experience and her expectations of internships, Fiona (junior, secondary education/English major) stated:

> Well, I imagine that the purpose of an internship is to expose you to as many things as possible before you are actually put into that environment. I know that this was very much just kind of getting your feet wet in the business world and seeing if this actually is for you and if it is for you seeing if you have the capacities that are necessary in order to perform in that position.

Performing mundane tasks. Next, students expected interns spend a lot of time on the job performing office work, busy work, or grunt work. In addition, they believed internships involve doing tasks that paid employees do not want to perform or do not have time to perform. When asked what she expects to occur in a future internship Rachel (sophomore, elementary education/theatre major) stated, "From what I've heard, it just sounds like you're just another body there to do the stuff that the important people don't want to do." Similarly, Daniel (freshman, journalism major) stated, "… I expect to be a staff member, but with some internships you're like, I don't want to say their bitch, but that's kind of what it's like. You're the lackey." Students also seemed to have a definite idea about the types of unimportant duties interns perform including making coffee, answering phones, getting food for paid employees, and photocopying. For example, Patricia (sophomore, theatre major) stated:

> I think there is going to be a hierarchy within whatever system I go into and I don't think that it's always going to be easy. I think sometimes I'll be treated like an intern, treated like I'm the least important person in the office, the person who's just supposed to go fetch coffee or the person who's supposed to do, I don't know, do everybody's basic work.

Acquiring relevant skills. Third, students expected internships to be an extension of the classroom environment by allowing them the opportunity to gain relevant skills through active hands-on learning assignments. Specifically, the two major skills students expected to learn were (1) skills directly related to the internship and (2) career-specific skills. For example, when asked what she expected to happen on internships Carrie (sophomore, music therapy major) stated, "Hands-on learning… yeah, definitely a lot of hands-on learning, especially in my field and interaction with other students who are in the same internship."

Career advancement. Next, students felt internships may provide future opportunities for career advancement in three main ways. First, students described internships as a building block to help them acquire a paid position at the internship organization. Many students agreed with Elizabeth (junior, French/Spanish major) who remarked:

> If you work really hard and kind of stand out from everyone else, you're more likely to be offered an actual paid position or further yourself along in the company or get a good letter of reference to help you get a job in the future.

Second, students expected internships to provide them the opportunity to make connections and assist in developing a professional network. Finally, students expected internships to serve as a resumé builder. When asked how an internship could help her in the future, Amanda (junior, advertising/public relations major) said, "Well, the practical experience, um, and then getting some references on my resumé who aren't just professors and pastors and things like that."

Minimal compensation. Finally, many students expected to receive no pay, little pay, or an amount of pay commensurate with the work they would be performing on the internship. Sam (junior, biology major) pointed out, "Well, just from what I've heard from peers it just seemed like a job where either you don't get paid or you get paid less than what you ought to." Similarly, Patrick (junior, English/theatre major) stated, "I would imagine it would be slightly less pay than a hired position, but, uh, but you'd be paid something, ya know."

DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, analysis of the interview data clearly indicates that internships are a topic of conversation among college students. Nonetheless, this study sought to develop a better understanding of these conversations and identify central themes. To this end, the results provided some interesting insights into the vocational anticipatory socialization process.

The first question investigated the types of messages students receive from peers regarding internships. The findings indicated peers frequently conversed about work-related issues, sites providing internship opportunities, logistical details related to the planning, implementation and coordination of the internship, compensation, and the potential of an internship to positively impact career advancement. Since the respondents in this study had not yet completed an internship, these conversations are likely to have generated valuable pre-entry information about internship positions. Interestingly, topics centered on practical matters related to internships such as acquiring a position and performing assigned duties. Overall, conversations did not address the social or interpersonal components of working in a professional setting (i.e., communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict). It might be expected that students who had completed internships would share their interpersonal experiences (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986), especially those interactions associated with learning their responsibilities as an intern. These types of conversations did not emerge as a theme in this study. This finding is surprising since relationships with supervisors and co-workers are an important element of the internship experience (Sweitzer & King, 2009). However, Rothman (2003) found interns rank job-related factors higher than interpersonal-related factors when describing what they like most about an internship. While the findings of this study reflect this priority, the absence of interpersonal relations in peer-to-peer discussions regarding internships is troublesome. Students may not recognize the complete picture of personal development afforded by internships. Unfortunately, this study cannot distinguish whether the interpersonal aspects of internships were absent from the conversations, or if participants simply failed to recall those elements when asked to recount their conversations with peers about internships.

The second research question identified expectancies students have about internships based on their peer conversations. Consistent with anticipatory socialization literature, messages from peers appear to serve as a means for shaping students' expectations regarding organizational roles, modes of learning, and compensation prior to participating in the internship experience (see Jablin, 1987). Additionally, the results suggest peer-to-peer messages contribute to expectations regarding the types of duties to be performed during the internships. Specifically, students generally expected internships to involve performing mundane tasks. This finding was not surprising since it supports previous research that found one of the least-liked aspects of internships was the low quality of work assigned (Rothman, 2003). However, it was interesting that students reported expectations to learn relevant skills almost as much as they expected to perform mundane duties. Thus, the tension between expecting to learn relevant skills and perform mundane tasks could negatively affect the overall quality of an internship experience, particularly a student's work performance.

IMPLICATIONS

Given these findings, there are some important implications that need to be discussed. First, the absence of interpersonal topics in peer discussions has implications for both campus internship administrators and site supervisors. If peer discussions are centered on the more practical aspects of an internship (i.e., acquiring career-relevant skills, exposure to field, compensation, career advancement), it would be beneficial for campus supervisors to help prospective interns articulate learning objectives that address the inevitable, and sometimes challenging, communication and social components of the experience. Students could be encouraged to reflect on the extent to which the communication exchanges in the workplace fulfilled those objectives. For instance, students could be asked to develop an internship portfolio (Sweitzer & King, 2009) that documents achievement of both task and social skills. Further, there is an opportunity for site supervisors to better utilize performance appraisal processes. The performance review session can be a valuable opportunity to share constructive feedback and invite reflection on a student's learning objectives. Unfortunately, the performance appraisal literature reveals supervisors and subordinates experience discomfort with the appraisal process (Smith, Harrington, & Houghton, 2000) and the full potential of the review process may not be realized. Surprisingly, there is little scholarship in the internship literature regarding the dynamics of the performance reviews of interns. In one study of interns in the hospitality industry, Girard (1999) found not all interns were offered performance appraisals and those who did receive appraisals were confused about the focus of the appraisal (i.e., a focus on improvement, accomplishments, or mistakes). Assessment activities with a clear focus on interpersonal communication behaviors may encourage students to consider how an internship can contribute to their development of a broader base of valuable workplace skills.

Second, the potential for peer-to-peer messages to create unclear expectations about workplace duties has implications for site supervisors. The informal messages exchanged among peers may create expectations for a position that are inconsistent with site supervisors' expectations. Students anticipating mundane task assignments may enact the intern role in a way that does not meet employers' performance expectations (i.e., perform at the same professional level as a paid staff member). Conversely, students who see the internship as a valuable opportunity to develop professional skills will be disappointed with positions that focus on busy work and offer them little opportunity to apply their academic training and knowledge. Thus, site supervisors cannot assume prospective interns will enter the organization with an accurate or realistic view of their role and work responsibilities. Unfortunately, there is little agreement as to who bears the responsibility for articulating performance expectations. Ralph, Walker, and Wimmer (2007) argue many experiential learning programs have the "pervasive problem of inadequate communication and collaboration" among involved parties (p. 132). Rothman (2007) reports interns want site supervisors to clearly articulate their

expectations for the internship position. On the other hand, Metzger (2004) found that employers want colleges "to better educate students regarding internship expectations" and "ensure that the students are familiar with the position and the organization prior to starting the internship" (p. 46). Although internship administrators and site supervisors have the potential to play a primary role in communicating standards and expectations, this study documents how exchanges among college students may challenge the more formal messages produced by academic institutions and internship sites regarding internship roles and responsibilities.

Anticipatory socialization research reveals individuals "use different tactics and sources for information-seeking" (Morrison, 2002, p. 129). Therefore, site supervisors and intern recruiters need to use a diverse set of communication tools to inform prospective interns about internship opportunities and performance expectations. Specifically, organizations should develop detailed postings for internship positions. These detailed descriptions should be available on the organization's website as well as through campus offices providing support for student interns. Additionally, internship sponsors should evaluate the content of the online materials regarding the organization's internship program. Beyond reporting when and what types of internships are available, students seeking internship information should be able to learn about the organization's culture, the institutional view of interns, expectations for conduct and performance, as well as the organization's approach for providing interns with constructive performance reviews. Next, given the importance of peer dialogue in de-mystifying the internship experience, testimonials by successful student interns should be captured and made available to prospective interns through various channels. For instance, video-taped testimonials could be posted on the organization's website and excerpts of testimonials could be included in recruiting materials. Finally, current interns could be encouraged to use a set of social media tools, including blogs, to share their educational experiences in the internship role.

CONCLUSION

Internships are an integral part of the college experience and have benefits that go well beyond campus life. Overall, this study provided additional insights into the role of peer-to-peer communication in the anticipatory socialization processes of prospective interns. Similarly to past organizational research, the results support the proposition that peer-to-peer messages serve as a socializing tool by communicating information about the logistics, norms, values, and requirements of the internship experience (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986).

Despite the insights presented through this study, there are two limitations that should be considered to place the results in the proper context. First, interview participants were asked to share details of peer conversations that could have taken place at any time during their college careers. Thus, the detail and accuracy of those recollections could vary. However, the ease with which participants recalled the memorable messages of peer internship conversations indicates the important role they may play in the socialization process (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). Second, this study was concerned with peer-to-peer messages and did not attempt to account for communication with other sources such as faculty, university staff, and family. Although students clearly identified elements from peer conversations, it is possible student reports could have been influenced by interactions with other individuals or information from other resources (i.e., university materials, media representations of internships).

The limitations notwithstanding, the study makes two contributions to the knowledge base. First, it brings a communication focus to a phenomenon that has traditionally been examined by other disciplines (i.e., business, education, psychology), but less so in the context of internships. Second, the results are based on the experiences of students representing 23 different majors, strengthening the generalisability of the findings.

With this said, there are a number of areas where future research is needed. For example, future research might investigate whether students are actively soliciting information about internships from other sources in addition to peers. This examination could reveal the extent to which students rely on informal and/or formal sources of information prior to the internship experience. Such findings also could illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of communication strategies used by universities and internship sponsors to educate prospective interns about opportunities and performance expectations. In addition to investigating information sources, researchers could examine information content to identify the extent to which topics may shift across sources. For instance, does any information source address the interpersonal dynamics of an internship? Finally, researchers should examine what students do with the pre-entry information they gather from different socialization sources. For example, if students receive conflicting information from different sources regarding internship duties or roles, do they proactively seek clarification from hosting organizations, peers, or university contacts? Exploration of these questions will help clarify the role communication plays in shaping college students' views and decisions to participate in the internship experience.

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