

What Internships? I didn't hear about any Internships: An Exploration of Communicating Internships to Business Students

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ABSTRACT

College students' participation in internships and other real-world learning experiences while in school strongly enhances their learning. One challenge that universities face is communicating internship information to students so that they want to participate and see the value of these opportunities. Research on student perception of internships and the best methods of communicating internship information to students are investigated.

Keywords:

Internships, Real-World Learning, Experiential Learning, Real-World Learning, Communication, Mobile Marketing

INTRODUCTION

In the US, approximately 90 percent of colleges now offer for-credit internships or work-integrated learning experiences that facilitate greater connections between universities, employers and students (Divine, Linrud, Miller & Wilson, 2007; Weible, 2010). Some business schools even require students to have an internship as part of a graduation requirement (McClure and Weible, 2011). Internships help students make connections between their coursework in the classroom and how to relate that to the workplace (Hergert, 2009). There is a general consensus that internships reap numerous rewards for students, including building resumes, modeling professional behaviors, clarifying career-goals and preparing for future employment (Coco, 2000). An expected benefit of many students participating in internships is job opportunities after participating (Addy, Herring, Polledo & Rigsby, 2013).

An important component of recruiting traditional 18-24 year old college students and encouraging them to participate in internships is the actual act of communicating internship information to students. With the number of communication media choices today, some universities, including that of the author(s) may struggle with deciding how to best communicate with students outside of the classroom. The authors' college began an initiative to involve more students in internship programs and actively generated a substantial increase in internship opportunities. However; after the first semester of deployment, many of the internship opportunities had few or no applicants. This left the faculty to consider the question of why.

The authors' university hosts many first-generation college students, so one explanation may be that students do not recognize the value of internships. Though, anecdotally this did not seem to explain the lack of response entirely. Another possible explanation that seemed plausible was that the students weren't aware of the opportunities because they were not communicated via the media preferred and used by the students.

Today's rapidly changing communications environment lead by the proliferation of smartphones and other new devices means that the ways in which people prefer to communicate with others, find out the latest news, and perform their job duties are changing rapidly (Chen, Jones and Xu, 2012.) According to Nielsen's Quarterly Total Audience Report (2015), 18-24 year olds are spending 3 hours and 58 minutes per week on the internet on a PC and 10 hours and 56 minutes per week on App/Web usage on smartphones. When comparing Quarter 2 in 2014 and 2015 among 18-24 year olds, their weekly time spent on a PC went down over the prior year but time spent on Smartphone and Multimedia Devices went up. Nielsen also reports that 76% of households with televisions have smartphones.

Table 1: Weekly Time Spent in Hours: Minutes by 18-24 year olds (Q2 2014 vs. 2015)

Device	Q2 14	Q2 15
Multimedia Device	0:43	1:22
Internet on a PC	4:54	3:58
Video on a PC	1:58	1:47
App/Web on a Smartphone	9:21	10:56
Video on a Smartphone	0:26	0:36

A 2013 Experian Survey reported that during a typical month, smartphone-owners ages 18-24 send 2,022 mobile text messages and receive another 1,831 for a combined total of 3,852 texts sent and received.

One study was conducted to identify the search strategies used by marketing students to locate internships and compare them to the communication approaches that internship providers utilize to promote their internships (Swanson and Tomkovick, 2012). Swanson and Tomkovick found students are most likely to utilize career fairs, an internship coordinator, and career services in that order, in order to learn about internships.

Another study conducted by Chen, Jones, and Xu (2012) focused on the preferred methods of communicating with college students. E-mail was the most frequent method used for communicating with classmates regarding learning, followed by face-to-face meetings and texting. On the topic of communicating with group members for assignments, they chose e-mail first, discussion board (i.e. Blackboard or Moodle) and texting in that order. Respondents did not choose social media sites for the purpose of communicating regarding learning. They were not asked what their preferred method of communication would be with professors.

Faculty members at universities encourage attendance at Career Fairs and networking events to meet potential employers. What faculty members often fail to consider is the most efficient forms of media to connect students with the information they need to pursue available internship opportunities. An exploratory study was conducted in this instance to gather information about students and their communication needs. The following research questions were addressed:

1. Do students perceive internships to be of value?
2. What resources do students use currently for internship information?
3. How often do students use the university-provided resources?
4. What communications media would students prefer to receive internship information on?
5. How frequently would students like to receive internship information?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

A convenience sample of college students at a university in the southern U.S. (n=463) was used to test several hypotheses related to internships. To gather data, a questionnaire was developed and pretested prior to its final use. Questionnaires were distributed in September 2015 via handouts with the online link to students in classes through professors, given in person on campus to students, and through electronic mail through the campus email system.

Four business professors were cooperative in allowing the researchers to enter their classes at the beginning of each session and request that students participate in the study. Students were given details about the topic of study, explained the directions and asked to participate. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey link was posted on the board for students to type in manually through their cellular devices, tablets or laptop computers. The email request for participation was sent to approximately 2,000 business majors which included

a link to the questionnaire.

Respondents

Four hundred and sixty-five usable questionnaires were obtained. The majors included 25% Accounting (n=120), 19% Business Administration (n=91), 8% Finance (n=39), 25% Management (n=121), 16% Marketing (n=78), 3% Supply Chain Management (n=15), 1% MBA (n=3), and 2% Other (n=9.) As to be expected, the majority of respondents were between 18-23 years of age. A breakdown of the student classification included 25% Freshmen (n=116), 13% Sophomore (n=60), 30% Junior (n=141), 30% Senior (n=145) and 1% Master (n=3.) Of the respondents, 35% were male (n=163) and 65% were female.

Methodology

A copy of the questions from the survey instrument are provided in Appendix 1. In addition to the questions listed, students were also asked to provide demographic information including gender, class status and major. Frequencies and cross-tabulations were conducted to assess each of the aforementioned research questions.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1. The first research objective was to determine student perceptions of internships. When asked whether or not they believed that internships look good on a resume⁷, the majority of students said they strongly agreed (53%) while (20%) agreed internships look good on resumes.

Research Question 2. The second research objective was to determine how students were currently receiving information about internships. As shown in Table 2, when asked what resources students used within the current year to locate information about internships, it was revealed that 45% attributed Personal Networking, 36% to Department Emails and 24% to Professors and 24% to the University Career Fair.

Table 2

Answer	Response	Percentage
Personal Networking	243	45%
Department Emails	195	36%
Professors	131	24%
University Career Fair	130	24%
Non-university job services such as Monster.com, newspaper	118	22%
None	121	22%
Faculty Advisors	100	18%
University Career Services Website	96	18%
College of Business Networking/		
On-Campus Interview Events	49	9%

Research Question 3. The third research objective was to determine how often students were using the university's career services online software to find internship opportunities. As shown in Table 3, the majority of students responded that they never use the online service (51%) or rarely use it (22%).

Table 3

Answer	Response	Percentage
Never	275	51%
Rarely	122	22%
Sometimes	91	17%
Frequently	44	8%
Always	11	2%

Research Question 4. The fourth research objective was to determine the type of media that students would prefer as a vehicle to receive information about internships. Students were asked to choose their top three media choices. As shown in Table 4, an overwhelming majority responded with E-mail as one of their top choices (96%). The other top choices were a Moodle (the university's online course delivery software) link for internship information (50%) and text messaging (40%).

Table 4

Answer	Response	Percentage
E-mail	443	96%
Moodle Site for Internships	231	50%
Text Message/SMS Message	182	40%
College of Business Website	123	27%
Bulletin Boards in the College of Business Hallway	93	20%
Career Services Website	68	15%
College of Business or Degree Department Facebook Page	60	13%
Instagram	52	11%
LinkedIn	31	7%
Newsletter	26	6%
Twitter	19	4%
Other/Comments	3	1%
Blog	2	0%

Research Question 5. The fourth research objective was to determine how often students would like to hear about internship opportunities. As shown in Table 5, almost half of the respondents answered with once per week (48%) followed by bi-weekly (21%).

Table 5

Answer	Response	Percentage
Once per Week	254	48%
Bi-Weekly	111	21%
Monthly	74	14%
Bi-Monthly	38	7%
Never	34	6%
Once per semester	13	2%
Never	9	2%

CONCLUSION

With such a large majority of colleges offering internships for real-world learning experiences, we must place an emphasis on how to best connect students with employers. Internships are seen as valuable opportunities by faculty and students on college campuses. Even though some universities do not mandate internships, the benefits shown by the placements should encourage promotion.

In order to better communicate these types of real-world experiences, business departments need to focus on sending weekly information to students that can be accessed by their smart phones including e-mails, Moodle/Blackboard sites, and even through text messaging platforms because the level of engagement on their mobile

devices is increasing.

While media communications is vital, it is also important to reinforce the information being sent by giving details about the internships in the classroom and encouraging networking events such as Career Fairs to meet potential employers in person. Students will continue to look to these venues for further connections.

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