

Assessment of Student Learning Through Journalism and Mass Communication Internships

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Under accreditation standards, journalism and mass communication programs are required to regularly assess student learning and utilize results to improve curriculum and instruction. This case study examined how an accredited journalism program utilized internships in outcomes assessment. The study revealed that the program used internships as an indirect assessment measure among its multiple assessment tools. Significantly, the study found that assessment data from internships proved to be instrumental in taking steps to improve student learning. A key challenge, however, was the complexity of measuring discipline-specific values versus competencies through the program's worksite evaluation forms.

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) requires journalism and mass communication programs to regularly assess student learning and to use the results to improve curricula and instruction (ACEJMC, 2010a). To assess learning outcomes, the council suggests that programs use a combination of direct and indirect measurement tools (ACEJMC, 2001). Among the indirect measures that the council suggests are internships and placement data (ACEJMC, 2001).

During the academic year 2009-2010, 113 journalism and mass communication programs in the United States, and one in Chile, were accredited by the ACEJMC (2010a). Most journalism and mass communication programs highly value student participation in internships and encourage students to take them (Grady, 2006). An internship is a structured and supervised professional experience within an approved agency for which a student earns academic credit (Inkster & Ross, 1995). Nearly all journalism programs assist students in obtaining

internships because they realize that employers view internships as good markers of career readiness (Basow & Bryne, 1993). The ACEJMC (2004) also strongly encourages internships and allows programs to grant academic credit when programs supervise and evaluate these work experiences.

Getz (2001) found that not only do students hold positive perceptions about the value of internships, but students believe internships help to validate career choices. Basow and Byrne (1993) reported that students participate in internships for a variety of reasons, including “to practice what they have learned, to acquire new skills, to sample potential careers, to assess their employability, to seek mentoring, and to make contacts, as well as to earn academic credit or payment” (p. 52). Likewise, Grady (2006) reported that the benefits of internships include résumé building, enhanced practical knowledge, improvement in writing and production skills, and access to professional-level equipment.

Inkster and Ross’s (1995) work, *The Internship as Partnership: A Handbook for Campus-Based Coordinators and Advisors*, asserts that the academic internship coordinator, the worksite supervisor, and the intern represent a “three-person partnership” (p. 12). The agreement should address learning goals, resources, activities, responsibilities of the intern, and criteria for assessing and monitoring the intern’s work (Inkster & Ross, 1995, p. 12).

In journalism and mass communication programs, Basow and Byrne (1993) reported academic internship advisers play a key role in the success of internships. These internship advisers often develop contacts with professionals willing to work with student interns, act as coordinators between internship applicants and worksite supervisors, oversee the completion of requirements, and counsel students about career issues (Basow & Byrne, 1993). Grady (2006) suggested that a number of internship work requirements could be utilized for evaluative purposes, including the following:

- Daily or weekly diary, journal, or calendar of events
- Description or discussion of formal and informal tasks completed
- Reports on books or readings pertinent to employer or type of work

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- Portfolio of work completed during internship
- Papers based on interviews with significant personnel in the company or organization
- Final report or reflection paper
- Debriefing session with academic supervisor
- Worksite supervisor evaluation
- Student evaluation of the worksite and internship experience (p. 356)

During the 2005-2006 academic year, the ACEJMC (2005) began to apply the assessment requirement to its accreditation reviews. *Assessment of student learning*, as defined by Walvoord (2004), is “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning” (p. 2). Astin (1991) further framed it as follows:

The role of assessment is to enhance the feedback available to faculty and staff in order to assist them in becoming more effective practitioners. Assessment, in other words, is a technology that educational practitioners can use to enhance the feedback concerning the impact of their educational practices and policies. (p. 130)

As noted, the ACEJMC (2001) recommends that programs apply multiple assessment measures, including indirect and direct measures of student learning. Internship supervisor surveys are among the indirect measures that a journalism and mass communication program could utilize to measure student learning (ACEJMC, 2001). In regard to internships as an indirect measure, the council encourages programs to perform “regular compilation, comparison and analysis over time” (ACEJMC, 2001, p. 4) of the numbers and proportions of students who seek and find internships. The council also recommends that programs systematically analyze evaluations by worksite supervisors and utilize results to improve curriculum and instruction (ACEJMC, 2001, p. 4). Other indirect assessment measures for program assessment include grade distribution; student retention and graduation rates; probation and dismissal data; student performance in local, regional, and national contests; alumni and student surveys, and student exit interviews (ACEJMC, 2001). By comparison, direct measures of student learning include student performance in capstone courses; pretest/posttest evaluations; sectional and department exams; and portfolio evaluations, including student work from professional internships (ACEJMC, 2001). Highlighting how internships also could be utilized as a direct measure

of assessment, Foote (2006) pointed out that employers “are in a position to rate directly the competence of the student and their prospect in the marketplace” (p. 486), and thus “the rating of individual students’ professional performance in a systematic way provides a valuable, direct measure of assessment” (p. 486).

Even prior to the creation of the ACEJMC’s assessment standard, however, some journalism and mass communication programs had utilized internships as a tool for assessment (Graham, Bourland-Davis, & Fulmer, 1997; Vicker, 2002). In a study utilizing narrative accounts by interns, Graham et al. (1997) found, for example, that internships were useful in identifying strengths and weaknesses of a public relations program, and that internship feedback provided empirically driven justification for program changes (p. 203). Vicker (2002) found that worksite supervisor evaluations assisted in identifying strengths and weaknesses of a program.

In the present study, the four research questions were: (a) What specific learning outcomes are measured through the internship experience in journalism and mass communication? (b) In what ways does the program collect data from internship experiences for learning outcomes assessment? (c) In what ways does the program use results from internship assessments to improve the academic experience? and (d) What are the challenges to successful implementation of assessment when internships are utilized to measure student learning?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative, case study design and was conducted at a comprehensive institution that offers more than 40 undergraduate fields of study, including a journalism and mass communication program that is accredited by the ACEJMC. Data were collected through institutional documents (e.g., internship evaluation forms, assessment reports) and 16 face-to-face participant interviews, including interviews with three administrators, three faculty, six students, two worksite supervisors, and two staff members—the program’s internship director and the university career center experiential education director. Administrator and faculty study participants had worked on assessment issues in the course of their departmental activities; student participants had completed internship experiences; worksite supervisors had supervised interns from the program; the internship director had responsibility for implementing the internship program; and the experiential education director’s office had conducted an attitudinal survey of student interns.

In data collection and analysis, the study utilized an interview strategy that allowed for open-ended questioning and a conversational

style, but centered on a core group of four specific interview questions. Those interview questions were: a) Identify and describe specific learning outcomes assessed in internships; b) Identify and describe methods for assessing student learning outcomes during internships; c) Identify and describe ways internship data are used to improve curriculum, instruction, and student learning; and d) Identify and describe challenges to implementation of assessment using internship data. The interviews were conducted on the campus. Participants were requested to sign an informed consent statement that indicated that they understood the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to terminate participation at any time during the study, and assurance of confidentiality related to their participation. Interviews were the primary source of data, but supplemental sources of data included a course handbook, assessment report, program self-study report, and internship evaluation and registration forms. In data analysis, the study employed the constant comparative method, an analytical method frequently used in case study educational research (Merriam, 1998). Unites of data were sorted and coded into groupings. Patterns that surfaced became categories, or themes of the study, which were compared for relationships and differences.

RESULTS

SPECIFIC LEARNING OUTCOMES MEASURED THROUGH INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES

Two dominant findings emerged in regard to the specific learning outcomes measured through internship data. First, the program adopted nine of 11 values and competencies cited in accrediting standards as the specific learning outcomes measured through internships. Following this study, in the Fall of 2009, the ACEJMC (2009) amended its standards, and added to the list of professional values and competencies that students should learn and programs should measure. In addition to the values and competencies recommended by the accrediting body, the program also measured general workplace behavioral skills, such as punctuality and reliability. All learning outcomes were measured through worksite supervisor surveys.

This study finding—highlighting the impact of accreditation standards on assessment—was corroborated in other research that demonstrates the growing influence of disciplinary accrediting organizations over assessment of student learning (Whittlesey, 2005). In the case under study, faculty held discussions in which they decided that the ACEJMC recommended learning outcomes aligned with key values and competencies advocated by the faculty.

The specific learning outcomes measured during assessment were: (a) applying ethical ways of thinking, (b) knowing history and roles of media, (c) communicating to diverse audiences, (d) writing clearly and accurately, (e) using technology, (f) applying concepts in presenting information, (g) conducting research and evaluating information, (h) interpreting data and statistics, (i) being creative, and (j) thinking analytically.

Faculty and staff participants particularly stressed that general workplace skills, such as reliability and punctuality, contribute to success and failure in the workplace and should be assessed, in addition to the discipline-specific values and competencies recommended by the ACEJMC. This finding is in alignment with literature recommending the measurement of general workplace behavior skills, in addition to the discipline-specific competencies (Hurd & Schlatter, 2007). The nine general workplace competencies assessed through internships in this program were (a) works independently, (b) evaluates work of self and others, (c) understands law and issues in the workplace, (d) clear presentation skills, (e) good interpersonal skills, (f) reliability and punctuality, (g) appropriate appearance, (h) takes constructive criticism, and (i) completes work on time.

DATA FROM INTERNSHIPS

The second research question examined the ways in which the program collects data from internship experiences for learning outcomes assessment. The study revealed that data were collected through five means: worksite supervisor evaluations of interns, university visits to work sites, direct student feedback, descriptive records, and a survey of interns. The following discussion offers more detail concerning this finding.

Worksite supervisor evaluations. Administrators, faculty, and staff agreed that worksite supervisor evaluations were the most crucial means of gathering data for assessment through internship experiences. Worksite supervisor evaluations offer a reality check by an important, external stakeholder group. As one administrator put it, “We have some internal ways of doing assessment, but this is a nice external way. It involves someone who is not on our payroll.” The importance of feedback from worksite supervisors is reflected in assessment literature suggesting that such measurements by employer supervisors offer an opportunity “for feedback and curricular change with a cycle time that can address rapidly changing employer needs and expectations” (Brumm, Hanneman, & Mickelson, 2006, p.127).

Direct student feedback. Though all study participants acknowledged the importance of employer feedback, faculty study participants

repeatedly underscored the value of another type of feedback—the direct feedback to faculty from students returning from their internships. This finding is in alignment with assessment literature (Beard, 2007), which suggests that post-internship discussions with students with regard to outcomes can impact both curricular, and teaching and learning strategies. In the present study, faculty felt that direct conversations with students allowed them to pose follow-up questions about internship experiences and to confirm or disaffirm classroom teaching/learning tactics. Faculty also found that this direct student feedback opened the gateway for worksite supervisors to interact even further with students and faculty, in the form of speaking engagements and other activities. A faculty participant illustrated this finding:

I will debrief all of my students about their internships because I want to know what's going on in the business. What are news directors saying? What reinforces what I'm saying in the classroom? What counters what I'm saying in the classroom? What's new in the business? You thought your news director was brilliant. Do you think she'll come and talk to our class?

Worksite visits. Inkster and Ross (1995) reported that visits to internship work sites offer an excellent opportunity to see interns in action and to observe their interactions with others. At the program under study, visits to internship work sites were another way that the program collected data for assessment purposes. Although site visits by the program were sporadic during the assessment cycle under study, participants reported that these visits allowed the program to observe internship performance and reactions to performance at the work site. Study participants reported that these observations helped the program to affirm firsthand how skills and competencies are demonstrated at the work sites.

Intern survey. Students reported that a confidential online survey administered by the college offered them yet another way to give feedback about their internship experiences. The survey queried students about career and learning-related issues, including connections they perceive between knowledge gained in the classroom and worksite expectations. One student described the benefits of such a survey: "Doing an internship, you're not in the classroom. So, the survey was helpful, as far as getting that information about our internships out to everyone. It was a good idea."

The literature reveals that student surveys are appropriate to utilize as indirect sources of information about factors that may "contribute to or detract from student learning" (Lopez, 2002, p. 361) but should not be substituted for direct measurements of student learning. As Lopez

(2002) explained, student surveys “provide only participants’ opinions on how much they have learned” (p. 361), though such information could be useful when triangulated with data from other measures of learning.

Descriptive records. In the program under study, descriptive records, such as the types and numbers of internships, were systematically analyzed and maintained in assessment records (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Internships/Work Experiences/Credit Hours for School of Communications, 2004-2005

	Summer 2004	Fall 2004	Winter 2005	Spring 2005	Year totals
Internships	63	11	26	33	133
Noncredit work experiences	7	0	1	1	9
Credit hour experiences					
0	7	0	1	1	9
1	17	4	15	10	46
2	25	5	11	15	56
3	1	1	0	0	2
4	20	1	0	8	29

Source: 2005 Program Assessment Report

Table 2. Internship/Work Experiences by Site Category for Winter/Spring 2005

Internship/work experience	Percentage
Television station or network	28%
Nonprofit organization (PR/advertising, media relations/marketing)	15%
For-profit company (PR/advertising, media relations/marketing)	13%
Newspaper	11%
Sports team or conference (PR/advertising, media relations/marketing)	11%
Video/TV production/distribution	7%
Radio station or network	4%
Magazine	4%
Book publishing company	4%
Audio/music production/distribution	4%

Source: 2005 Program Assessment Report

Administrators described descriptive records as another method by which the program collects data for assessment purposes. According to administrators, these data provide an opportunity to observe trend lines reflecting student access to internship opportunities and changes in the journalism and mass communications employment fields.

The assessment literature acknowledges that academic programs gather such descriptive data, but the literature (Lopez, 1997) also describes these data as "non-measures" (p. 15) that do not offer evidence of student learning. Administrators of this program also recognize that descriptive data do not offer evidence of student learning, but they believe these descriptive data are useful for spotting trend lines in internship opportunities and employment.

WAYS THE PROGRAM USES ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The third research question examined the ways that the program utilized results from internship assessments to improve the academic experience. Assessment research (Nichols, 1995) has argued that to "close the loop" (p. 50), or to use the results of the assessment to take action to improve the program, is the bottom line of assessment. This research showed that the program under study utilized internship assessment data to make changes designed to improve the academic experience. In summary, the program utilized internship assessment results in the following specific ways: to strengthen ties with worksite supervisors, to contribute to discussions leading to a new course, to update weekly journal assignments, to stimulate conversations about student learning, and to validate teaching and learning strategies. The following discussion offers more detail concerning this finding.

Strengthen ties with internship worksite supervisors. The study found that programs made a decision to strengthen ties with internship worksite supervisors, rather than restrict access to internships, after examining survey data from internships. A survey, administered by the college, found that only 60% of interns said they felt prepared for their internships. Administrators speculated that students might naturally feel intimidated in a new work setting. Or, as an alternate explanation, sophomore-level interns who responded to the survey might feel inadequate because they had not yet taken upper-level courses. Because the program encourages students to do multiple internships, program administrators decided to continue the practice of access to internships for sophomore-level students too, but to work more closely with worksite supervisors to match students to appropriate internships.

Contribute to discussions about a new writing course. In another action stemming from assessment, a new writing course was created for corporate communications students. The research reveals that this

action came after two events: First, a faculty member heard from interns that some students felt unprepared for writing assignments at their internship worksites; and second, during a series of meetings about assessment, the faculty uncovered a gap in writing instruction. As a result, the faculty decided to create a new writing course for one of its concentrations.

Update weekly journal writing assignments. The study showed that another action resulting from assessment was the decision to key questions on internship journal-writing assignments to the professional values and competencies cited in the assessment plan. During discussions about assessment data, administrators noticed that discipline-specific values and competencies were being measured through worksite supervisor evaluations, but they were not being examined through questions in the journal-writing assignments for interns. As a result of assessment, the program began to include questions about discipline-specific values and competencies in the internship writing assignments.

Stimulate conversations about student learning. The program utilized assessment results to stimulate conversations about student learning. Administrators and faculty believed that an important outgrowth of assessment through internships, as well as through other assessment measures, is the conversation it stimulates about student learning. Study participants believe that assessment has spurred important discussions about student learning. Offering an example, the internship director recalled conversations at one work site in which an employer suggested additional learning outcomes that the program should address. Upon returning to the institution, the internship director passed along this feedback to an individual faculty member. The internship coordinator also decided to address this and other internship feedback with faculty at an appointed time each year, either at the annual faculty retreat or another appropriate venue.

Validate classroom instructional approaches. Finally, this study revealed that faculty participants utilized assessment results to validate classroom instructional approaches. In other words, faculty participants reported that assessment results helped them to reflect on teaching/learning strategies. The assessment literature (Beard, 2007) also argues that faculty and students benefit from the integration of internship feedback into classroom activities. In the present study, faculty participants reported that they compared feedback about intern experiences with their teaching/learning goals. As one faculty member put it, "I look at what I am doing in my classes, my organizational communication, my television production, or whatever it is I am doing, and how it is in line with what they were expected to do."

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED WITH ASSESSMENT

The fourth research question in this study investigated the challenges to successful implementation of assessment when internships are utilized to measure student learning. Three key challenges surfaced: (a) complexity involved in measuring values versus competencies through worksite supervisor evaluation forms; (b) wide variance of internships in location, nature, and type; and (c) absence of timely feedback during internships. The following discussion offers more detail concerning these findings.

Complexity of Measuring Values. A key challenge encountered in assessment was the complexity of measuring professional values versus competencies through worksite supervisor evaluation forms. The program defined *professional values* as ways of thinking about issues such as truth, accuracy and fairness, and ethical habits of thinking. Professional competencies included such issues as the ability to write clearly and accurately and the use of technology. Perplexingly, nearly one-third of the worksite supervisors in the assessment cycle under study responded that two of three values questions on the internship evaluation form were not applicable to their interns. Even prior to the assessment cycle under study, the academic program had already experienced similar difficulties with responses to the internship evaluation form and, as a result, had deleted two other values questions from the evaluation form for interns. Said one administrator, "It seemed reasonable to conclude that many supervisors did not feel comfortable evaluating or thought questions about these values were not applicable to their work environment."

A worksite supervisor and another administrator study participant pondered yet another explanation: Perhaps the questions on the evaluation form needed to be clarified. As the administrator put it,

We hope that the instrument is clear in the way that it's formulated. I don't know that we know that completely, but I think the questions on the evaluation instrument are fairly straightforward and clear. It could be that we could do a better job of describing for each employer what those questions really mean.

The complexity of measuring values is cited in psychology literature, which argues that values cannot be measured directly, but rather can only be inferred from what a person says or does (Domino & Domino, 2006, p. 141). One worksite supervisor in the present study explained the difficulty in measuring values, saying, "Obviously it's easier for me to see that this person can write or spell," but harder to

evaluate that person's values. That sentiment was echoed by an administrator participant as well. "So, it's not a perfect match," the administrator study participant concluded, adding,

It seemed to actually work better with competencies because supervisors know if that intern was a good writer or not, or if the intern understands technology or not, or seems to show that they can think critically or creatively. So, we found that our instrument feedback on internships fit the competencies better than the values.

Wide Variety of Internships. Program administrators considered yet another challenge of utilizing internships in assessment: the difficulty of collectively analyzing assessment results from such a wide variety of journalism and mass communications internships. In the program under study, all students were required to participate in either an internship for credit, or a non-credit professional work experience. Internship experiences in the program under study varied extensively in location, nature, and type. The type of work sites ranged, for example, from newspapers and television stations to book publishing and music production. As one administrator put it,

[Internships are] difficult to compare. Therefore, the kinds of questions, and the kinds of assignments that we create in an attempt to get at [student learning], must be very general in nature. The best we can do is generalize about the experiences overall, and that's what we're trying to do.

Administrator participants in this study, however, concluded that they gleaned valuable information for assessment purposes from internships. They decided that information from these diverse work settings—collected and analyzed over time—could help to detect trend lines in internship opportunities and the employment field.

Lack of Timely Feedback. A third challenge the study revealed was the lack of real-time feedback from interns at their work sites. This study showed that results of internship experiences are reported mainly through a variety of written reports, surveys, and debriefings, following an internship. Real-time feedback from students during their internships, however, occurred much less frequently. An administrator study participant believed that the program could better help interns if the program had a way to easily communicate with students during their internships. The administrator believed that a valuable opportunity to hear about student internship experiences, as well as to encourage a connection between classroom learning and work experiences, was be-

ing missed, saying, "I think I could keep bridging them back [to] things like, yeah, diversity is a real problem in the newsroom. Why don't you talk to someone from a different race and ask them about their career path?" Similarly, this administrator also believed that a mechanism to facilitate peer-to-peer conversations among students during the course of their internships would be beneficial.

DISCUSSION

Although a single case study alone cannot provide the basis for practice and policy, this study provides insights that could be valuable across disciplines as well as in applied learning pedagogies such as service-learning, study abroad, and undergraduate research. As argued by Ash and Clayton (2009), students in experiential learning environments need structure and guidance during the critical reflection process in order to maximize the learning experience. Otherwise, reflection becomes "little more than descriptive accounts of experiences or venting of personal feelings" (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 28). In the program under study, data collected from internship experiences for assessment purposes led to steps taken to strengthen the reflection process. While analyzing assessment data from internships, administrators realized that the reflective writing assignments for interns could be strengthened to focus on key journalistic values and competencies rather than on general workplace issues. As a result, interns now write reflections about targeted journalistic outcomes such as applying ethical ways of thinking, communicating to diverse audiences, utilizing technology, and applying concepts to present information. This insight, however, has implications across disciplines, as most experiential learning programs have—or should have—a critical reflection component. That reflection could focus on values and competencies deemed most important by the program, and help to document student learning.

Second, most applied learning programs seek feedback from the experiential learning sites about the quality of student work. One way to collect that information is through employer surveys, such as internship evaluation forms. In the program under study, administrators reported a concern that internship worksite supervisors were checking "not applicable" for survey questions concerning journalistic values. As suggested by one administrator, perhaps the wording of those questions was unclear. Subtle differences in question wording are known to yield different responses (Suskie, 1992). Rewriting those questions could make them more transparent and lead to a higher rate of response. In addition, a program could include brief definitions of key values and competencies on internship evaluation forms. Also, a program might consider performing a simple pilot test of questionnaires or convening

a small group of worksite supervisors to offer their perspectives on issues of clarity concerning evaluation forms.

In another finding of this study, the program found that interns need more real-time feedback from the college while at the worksite. That feedback would allow college liaisons to discuss workplace issues in a timelier manner, and also could provide an opportunity for peer-to-peer intern conversations. As one administrator suggested, and I concur, the program should take advantage of today's communication technologies to stay in touch with interns at their work places. Since the study, the program has established such virtual conversation spaces. The internship director, for example, now communicates with students on a regular basis via Blackboard, Skype, and e-mail. Assignments are submitted electronically in increments rather than waiting until students have completed their internships.

DESCRIPTIVE DATA IN ASSESSMENT PORTFOLIO

Lastly, the program under study systematically collects and regularly analyzes internship descriptive data, including the location, nature, and types of internships in which students participate. All applied learning programs similarly should compile and analyze worksite descriptive data. Such descriptive data does not represent student learning. However, as an administrator in this study strongly argued, descriptive data point to trends in experiential learning opportunities and the employment industry. The systematic collection and analysis of descriptive data also could be utilized to provide information to prospective interns and other stakeholders, including grantors and accreditors.

CONCLUSION

Despite some challenges, assessment data collected through internships proved to be a useful tool for improving curriculum and instruction in this case. The program under study utilized internship assessment results to strengthen ties to worksite supervisors, contribute to discussions leading to a new course, update internship journal-writing assignments, stimulate conversations about student learning, and validate teaching and learning strategies. Of note, the program employed internships as merely one of multiple assessment tools, an approach recommended in the literature (Peterson, Augustine, Einarson, & Vaughan, 1999). As the demand for assessment in higher education continues to grow, internships can be a valuable ally in the assessment of student learning.