

**Supervisor Influence and Reflections on a Student's
Congressional Internship Experience**

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Introduction & Conceptual Framework

Congressional internship experience and programs on Capitol Hill have grown in number and popularity with many colleges, universities, and foundations (Gryski, Johnson, & O'Toole, 1987). Originally, congressional internships focused on students who were seeking a degree in the political science field (Gryski, Johnson, & O'Toole, 1987), but have since spread to all disciplines (Fleishman, 2004). Despite the popularity and resources dedicated to congressional internships and the participants, Hedlund (1973) stated the literature has largely ignored questions regarding the scope, structure, and strategies of congressional internship programs. Hedlund (1973) also found that the work a congressional office assigns an intern might affect a student's experience along with the size and specialization of the office. To create meaning, engaged learning in congressional internships (Research Priority 4; Roberts et al., 2016), research is needed to guide this effort.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify the impact an intern supervisor has on an interns' experience and the changes in their student the supervisor witnesses during their time in Washington, DC. Research objectives used were: (1) Describe how a supervisor might affect a student's congressional internship experience; and (2) Identify the areas in which the supervisors felt the students' experienced personal growth or change because of the congressional internship experience. The design of this study was a qualitative grounded theory approach to investigate the research objectives with constructivism as its philosophical approach. The researcher utilized direct observations, emails between the researcher and intern supervisors, and end-of-semester evaluation forms. In addition, supervisors' phone calls, emails, face-to-face interaction with the researcher, the end-of-term evaluation form, and journal entries of student interns related to their supervisor allowed the researcher to chronicle supervisors' evolving thoughts and feelings throughout an intern's time in Washington, DC. A comparative method of open, axial, and selective coding was utilized as broad categories were identified through the prevalence of phrases, terms, and concepts (Creswell, 2013). From the open coding, axial coding was then utilized to further organize the concepts, codes, and phrases. Final themes were created through continuous comparison and refining of the open and axial codes allowing the researcher to create relational categories (Glesne, 2011). The researcher addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure trustworthiness in the qualitative procedure.

Participants were limited to those who provide the direct congressional office supervision for a students participating in the program in Washington, DC during the spring, summer, or fall 2015 semesters with individual data beginning with the office placement process until all requirements for the internship were completed. The population included 31 intern supervisors. Of the supervisors, 29 (93.5%) held the title of staff assistants and two (6.5%) were schedulers. Within the 31 supervisors, 25 (80.6%) were former interns through either [University] or another institution or program. The other six (19.4%) supervisors had either interned in federal or state government or simply managed to earn their job as a staff assistant without a congressional internship. For all of the staff assistants ($n = 29$; 93.5%), this position was there first paying job out of college. The schedulers ($n = 2$; 6.5%) had both been staff assistants prior to moving up into a scheduler position. While not every age of all 31 supervisors was assessed, the youngest known supervisor was 21 while the oldest, a scheduler, was 30. The secondary population of this study included students who interned on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC during the 2015 spring, summer, or fall 2015 semesters (January 2015 - December 2015). The secondary population's data was gathered to provide an additional reference point to better understand the

supervisors' perspective of the intern's time in Washington, DC and the context of their role in the intern's experience (Erlandson et. al, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The population included 58 students. Of these participants, there were 38 females (65.5%) and 20 males (34.5%). The youngest student was 19 years old at the start of the internship, and the oldest was 27 with an average age of 21.7 years. There were 11 graduate students (19.0%) and 47 undergraduates (81.0%).

Findings

Research Objective One: For the students who interned during 2015 ($N = 58$), 54 (93.1%) journaled that they met the congressional member they were working for, but not one described creating a strong working relationship with that member. However, all 58 (100.0%) mentioned daily and frequent interaction with their supervisors. Four themes emerged: (a) intern's time in the office; (b) supervisor maturity, length of tenure, and mentorship; (c) office expectations, and (d) expectations created by past interns.

Research Objective Two: At the end of an intern's time in Washington, DC, the intern supervisors are asked to complete an evaluation form to review a student's progress and overall development throughout the semester. Overall, the students faired best in the "quality" category with an average of 4.57, and the lowest category was "initiative" with a 3.32. There were 11 (18.9%) students who received fives in all categories. Three themes emerged: (a) professionalism, initiative, maturity, and confidence; (b) skill development; and (c) office needs and preferences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Congressional internships are unique experiences giving students from a variety of backgrounds and academic interests an opportunity to learn more about the way the federal government functions. An intern supervisor plays an important role during an intern's time in Washington, DC. In the workplace, the supervisor has the most direct contact with the intern and sees firsthand how the intern progresses and changes in the role. As themes began to emerge throughout this grounded theory study, the researcher was able to focus on how an intern supervisor can affect a students' time in a congressional office and what a student learns and develops during the internship. The resulting themes indicate the presence of pre-internship factors and how the intern changes subsequently influence future intern needs & expectations (Figure 1). Although all students' personalities and backgrounds are different and supervisors have different management styles and abilities, the results increase our understanding of how students' could be better recruited to the program, matched with appropriate offices, and supported throughout their time in the internship as well as what impact (positive and negative) an internship supervisor can have on the learning environment.

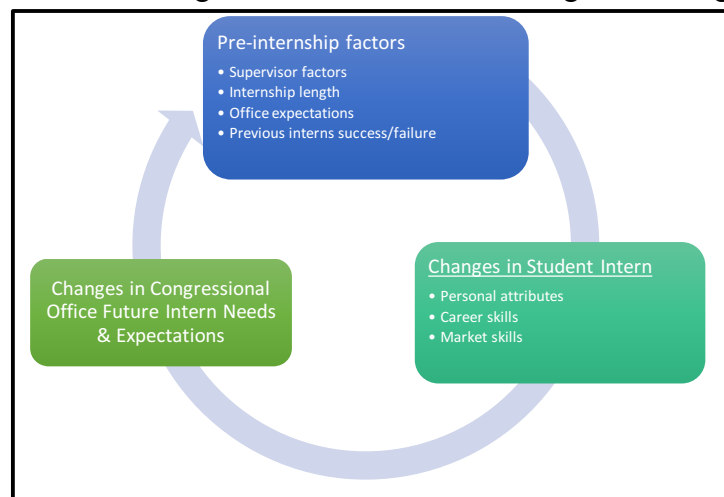


Figure 1: Factors that Influence Student and Internship Program Growth and Long-term Success.

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