

Interns' & Supervisors' Perception of Professional Growth Through Internship Programs

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Introduction

Students are concerned about finding job opportunities after four years of academic preparation. According to Andrews and Higson (2008), college curriculum improves students' performance in their job experience and allows them to use the skills acquired inside the classroom and apply them to real-life situations. For that reason, internships are considered experiential learning tools that help students' professional development in their career life (Leary & Sherlock, 2020). Companies and organizations look for an efficient workforce with technical knowledge and professional skills that demonstrate their ability to solve problems at work. According to a survey of employers, half the participants established internship programs are resources universities must develop in the curriculum (Hart Research Associates, 2008). However, research about internship perceptions in the agricultural communications industry is minimal, as is information about professional skills developed through these programs. The objectives for this study were to (1) describe students' perceptions of their professional growth through their internship; (2) explore which communication skills need improvement; and (3) identify differences between supervisors' and students' perceptions of professional skills.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical base selected for this investigation was Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) which seeks students' behavior related to their career development (Friesenborg, 2002). This theory strongly influences students' development when they are beginning their professional careers. However, SCCT identifies three dimensions: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals, which together can impact students' behavior and perception of their professional growth (Burga et al., 2020). Therefore, internships are cooperative efforts between students and organizations where students can learn and work toward skills essential for their career success (Blenner et al., 2021).

Methodology

A descriptive, comparative, quantitative analysis was used to study interns' and their supervisors to measure their perceptions of professional growth through an online survey questionnaire using Qualtrics. The questionnaire was distributed at the end of their internship program in the Summer 2022 and Fall 2022 semesters. A series of 5-point Likert-type scale questions were used to measure two broad categories: professional and communications skills. The questionnaire has been distributed to supervisors of the Texas Tech University agricultural communications interns for several years. Summer 2022 was the first semester the same questions were distributed to students to measure their perceived growth. The questionnaire consisted of basic demographic information and five-point Likert-type scale questions about professional growth (16-item) and communication skills (15-items).

A Qualtrics survey link was distributed via email to students and supervisors at the end of their internship program. Then, the information collected was exported on an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistics. The five point-scale was rated from 1 (No Growth at All) to 4 (Exponential Growth), ordering them according to the mean to accomplish objectives one and two. To achieve objective three, a Mann-Whitney test was used to identify

differences between supervisors' and interns' perceptions of professional skills. An alpha level of $p < .05$ was established to determine which skills were statistically different.

Results

The findings showed a total of 37 students and 54 supervisors participated in the evaluation questionnaires. Objective one results showed that students perceived most professional skill levels in meeting deadlines ($M = 3.76$, $SD = .41$), the ability to follow directions ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .37$), and the willingness to assume responsibility ($M = 3.68$, $SD = .76$). While the least professional skills perceived were leadership ability ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.22$), ability to work in harmony with others ($M = 3.11$, $SD = .87$), and integrity ($M = 3.30$, $SD = .46$). On the other hand, findings for objective two demonstrated the most perceived growth in communications skills were editing ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.58$), graphic design ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.19$), and social media management ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.67$). However, the least perceived skills growth was magazine production ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 1.69$), trade show management ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.80$), and web design ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.66$). Finally, objective three results showed there is a statistical difference ($p < .05$) in the following perceived professional skills: tactfulness, acceptance of constructive criticism, dependability, maturity, receptive to supervision, integrity, work in harmony with others, and leadership ability where the supervisors perceived more development than students themselves.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Findings about professional growth (soft skills) demonstrated that students perceived more abilities related to organization and accomplishment of the tasks assigned during their internship program. According to Karunaratne and Perera (2019), most students agreed that internships allowed them to learn about industry culture and prioritize tasks. On the other hand, the skills least perceived were related to teamwork. According to Teng et al. (2022), internships after COVID-19 developed a gap in interpersonal skills because of distance work activities.

The skills with more improvement, as perceived by students were related to what today's agricultural communications industry needs, especially in editing. According to Patacsil and Tablatin (2017), the order of perceived hard skills depends on what most companies are focused on when hiring professionals, and the Texas Tech curriculum matrix has been reinforced with by research with the industry so students are prepared for current job opportunities.

More than half of professional skills were statistically different, where supervisors perceived the interns to have greater professional skills than students themselves. According to Urquía-Grande and Perez Estebanez (2020), supervisors evaluate their interns well because they find that interns fulfilled the company's expectations, and students also undervalue their professional skills applied in companies.

Further research should be done in other agricultural communications programs, and it could be assessed cross-sectional professional growth through evaluations before and after internship experience. The researchers should plan to collect similar data for a longitudinal study each semester. Also, these results can be replied by other colleges to determine what skills should be improved in their curriculum to develop a better career work experience for students.

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