

# Investigating the Internship Experiences of Human Service Students

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## ***Abstract***

*This qualitative study explored the internship experiences of 15 undergraduate human service students. Students completed a paper at the end of the semester, reflecting on their overall internship experiences. Data analysis revealed four primary themes; professional, knowledge, personal, and challenges. Findings indicated that the internship was a powerful experience for students, both personally and professionally. Implications for education are provided and recommendations for future research are included.*

## **Introduction**

The human services internship is the capstone experience for all undergraduate human service majors at the authors' institution. The internship requires 400 hours of work at an approved site within one semester. In addition to direct service, the students are also required to attend a weekly internship seminar. This seminar provides supervision for human services interns in a classroom setting. Activities within the seminar include group discussions, role-plays or simulations, journaling on assigned readings, peer discussions of internship experiences, self-assessment activities, process recordings, and reports on professional meetings and topics. For the majority of students, this internship is the first experience they have working with clients in a community setting. Thus, the course provides a challenging and supportive environment in which to examine internship-related issues, address problems and concerns relevant to internship, further enhance helping skills, and receive necessary information and instruction pertinent to the internship experience (Old Dominion University, 2009).

The purpose of this research study was to examine human service students' perceptions of their internship experiences. The overarching research question addressed was: How do human service students experience their internship? More specifically, we asked: To what extent did their perceptions of their internship experiences change from the beginning to the end of the semester? How did the internship experience influence the development of their professional identities?

## **Literature Review**

For a number of decades, colleges and universities have considerably expanded the teaching and learning environment beyond the classroom. One example is the inception of experiential education as a recognized pedagogy. One of the major proponents of experiential education was John Dewey. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dewey advocated for learning experiences where students could employ the knowledge and skills they acquired in the classroom well beyond the confines of its four-walls (Dewey, 1916/1944). In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, David A. Kolb

stressed, along with Dewey, the need for experience to be organized and processed as a means to support learning. Kolb's view of learning led to the development of an experiential learning model consisting of four components: Concrete experience, observation and reflection, the development of abstract concepts, and testing in new situations. Today, countless numbers of students participate in structured field placements where Kolb's model is often used as a standard to support the use of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Steffes, 2004; Sweitzer & King, 2009).

One of the key components of internships is reflection and perception. Reflection and perception connects and integrates work in the field, to the learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Giles, 2002; Sweitzer & King, 2009). Several studies have focused on students' perceptions of their internship experiences primarily in regards to preparedness and lessons learned (Diambra, Cole-Zakrzewski & Zakrzewski, 2004; Wilson, Walsh, Kirby, 2008). This research differs in its focus. Specifically, it studied the extent to which students' perception of their internship experiences changed from the beginning to the end of the semester and how their experiences influenced the development of their professional identities.

## **Conceptual Framework**

In order to explore the internship experiences of undergraduate human service trainees, a qualitative research design was employed in the study. Essentially, qualitative research aims at developing an understanding of how informants construct their world (Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative investigation of human service trainees serves as a venue to investigate how students make sense of their own internship experiences. Thus, the present study was designed to use phenomenological methods to reveal the constructed meanings of the professional identity development of human service trainees. A phenomenological research method framework focuses on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform their experiences into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning (Patton, 2002). Through the process of data analysis, the researcher reduces the experiences to a central meaning, or "essence" (Moustakas, 1994). Such a strategy requires methodologically capturing and describing their experiences as they are constructing, remembering, perceiving, and making meaning of their internship experiences (Patton, 2002).

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

A total of 15 participants participated in the research study. Of this sample, 12 of the participants were female and 3 of the participants were male. In terms of ethnicity, 9 of the students identified themselves as White while 6 of the students identified themselves as African-American. All of the participants had completed all of their required undergraduate coursework and were exclusively enrolled in the human services internship. As a requirement for their internship, students attended a weekly seminar class and worked at their internship for a total of 400 hours during the semester.

### ***Instrumentation***

For this study, the instructor had students complete a reflection paper that focused on their internship experiences. The assignment, taken from the course syllabus, is as follows:

Students will submit a 3-5-page paper on their internship experience. Students must include the following information: Discuss your overall internship experience. What have you learned about yourself personally and professionally? (You may also respond to the following questions: Discuss a high and low point of the semester. You may also want to include a memorable case or experience. Finally, discuss your future plans).

### ***Procedure***

Prior to conducting the study, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained through the university IRB committee. The next step was to select participants. The primary researcher selected students in her 12-credit semester long human services internship course, using purposeful sampling methods. Purposeful sampling methods, consistent with phenomenological methodology, aims to select individuals based on their knowledge or experience (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999).

Although all students completed the reflection paper as an assignment, they were not mandated to participate in the research study. Thus, in order to gain permission for use of their reflection papers, the students signed an informed consent form. Students did not receive a penalty nor did they receive extra credit for giving the researcher permission to use their papers. Further, the papers were carefully stored in a secure file cabinet and no one had access to the data other than the researcher. While participation was voluntary, 100% of the class did elect to participate.

### ***Data Analysis***

The reflection papers were analyzed using qualitative data analyses methods, relying on a phenomenological strategy. The phenomenological strategy represents the best fit for eliciting the data that will help to address this research focus due to the benefit of a phenomenological approach—capturing the experiences of students to better understand the internship experience (Patton, 2002). After the data were bracketed, all elements of the data are treated with equal value, or “horizontalized” (Moustakeas, 1994). Adhering to the principles of a phenomenological strategy, a search for themes in the participant’s experiences, was conducted. Broad categories were sought, with sub-themes to elaborate the topography of meaning expressed by the participants. While identifying these themes and patterns, the lead author specifically looked for convergence and divergence across participants. Within the study, a variety of different methods were used to generate particular themes, such as creating concept maps and looking for recurring words. The following results section represents the findings from these meetings and the overall data analysis.

## **Results**

Four primary themes relevant to the research questions emerged from the data analysis: (a) Professional, (b) Knowledge, (c) Personal Changes, and (d) Challenges. The following section will present each theme separately and will include segments from the participants’ reflection papers.

### ***Professional***

The first theme, Professional, includes responses related to the participants’ professional identity and professional experiences. All participants wrote about how their internship experiences affected them on a professional level. Many students wrote about how their identities’ shifted from that of a student to one of a professional. For example, one student shared,

*I began this semester as a student and I ended up a professional. This semester has taught me so much and I appreciate the experience. No matter what the outcome of this class happens to be, the important thing is that I am much better prepared for the professional world now, than I was prior to this semester.*

Another student shared,

*At the beginning of the semester, I truly thought there was not much more growth I could possibly do as a professional. However, I was wrong. I had the feeling that I had taken all the necessary steps to be a professional, until I was tested at it. I was tested by clients, colleagues, and myself.*

Overall, the students felt that their internship experiences challenged them to view themselves differently. By the end of the semester, the majority of students viewed themselves to be human service professionals. For many, this was a powerful recognition and shift in their thinking.

### **Knowledge**

Many of the students reflected upon the knowledge they learned in their internship. The majority of students believed that the experiences they gained provided them with a great deal of knowledge, perhaps more knowledge than they would have learned in a classroom experience. For example, one student shared,

*My knowledge has changed and that is due to my experience...reflective listening, paraphrasing, empathy, and open-ended questions are skills I use everyday now. The more you use these skills, the better you become at using them.*

Another participant wrote,

*My internship site has provided a great opportunity to apply what has been learned in the classroom to the field. I have developed stronger personal ethical standards, which validate the value of all individuals. I have enhanced my development of varying diverse populations and cultures in order to respect others' points of view."*

Other students talked at length about some of the specific skills they learned about their agency and the human services field, in general. For example, one participant shared,

*There are some skills that I've been learning to use in this internship and that I will continue to use over the years to come. One of the main skills that I'm learning to use is rapport building with the clients that I'm assigned to. I've found that it is much harder to work with clients if I have not worked on building a relationship with that client first.*

When writing about knowledge, all of the students reflected upon this theme in a positive manner.

### **Personal Changes**

Many of the students wrote about the personal experiences gained throughout their internship experience. The majority of participants reflected that their internship forced them to examine themselves in a different manner. One participant reflected upon her internship in a spiritual manner. For example, she shared, *"I have grown personally. I truly feel that this profession is a*

*calling—It's not meant to be pursued by all people. However, once you are called, it is your duty to do all you can do to help everyone you can.*” Other participants wrote about the personal things they learned about themselves throughout the internship. For example, one participant shared, *“Personally, I've learned that I have to be less critical of myself and to be more confident in myself.”* Another participant wrote, *“My internship has been a wonderful, eye-opening experience. Being placed at my site has helped me to learn more about myself.”* Additionally, one student wrote about how her role in personal relationships changed. She stated, *“I have learned a lot about personal relationships—how to foster relationships, how to end relationships, and how to maintain relationships. These relationships included my clients, co-workers, community agencies, and personal friendships.”* Finally, several of the participants wrote about how the internship taught them how to strike a balance in their personal lives. For example, one participant wrote,

*I have learned how to distribute my time amongst the many facets of my life. This transition in my life has been accompanied by really intense emotions that I have never felt before. I have never been so stressed, happy, tired, peaceful, loved, or focused in my entire life. All said and done, I would not trade this experience for anything. I have gained tremendous strength from the successful and trying times during this internship.*

### **Challenges**

Several of the participants wrote about both the personal and professional challenges they experienced during their semester-long internship. For example, one participant shared, *“I had to learn how to separate work and my personal life out of necessity. It was one of the most stressful experiences I have ever had in my entire life.”* Other students spoke about the challenges of what their new role brought to them. For example, one student wrote,

*The actual internship itself brought many challenges for me. First, I have never been put in a counseling setting before, and it has taken some getting used to for me. It is the one thing to talk about it in class, and study it in a book, but it is a whole lot different what you have someone actually sitting across from you.”*

The participants also shared about how big of a commitment the internship was and how this affected them personally. For example, one participant wrote, *“The challenge of the semester has to be the fatigue that I had all the time. I felt like I was always extremely tired, and never had a moment to rest.”* Finally, many students talked about the challenges of getting all of their hours completed.

Additionally, others faced challenges at their particular internship sites. This student wrote, *“To be honest I was a little confused and frustrated because when I came to the site, they were transitioning...these occurrences aren't anyone's fault. It's almost like I was in the 'right' place, just at the wrong time.”* Finally, others talked about challenges they faced with their supervisors. For some, they experienced a personality conflict or felt that their internship supervisor treated them like an “intern” and didn't give them enough “responsibility”.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the internship experiences of human service students. Specifically, the study sought to investigate the extent to which students' perception of their

internship experiences changed from the beginning to the end of the semester and how these experiences influenced their professional identity development.

Findings from this study are not intended to be representative of the experience of all human service students in an internship course. As with any qualitative study, the reader needs to decide on the applicability of the study's findings to his/her own setting.

All of the students reflected on their views about themselves as a professional. For many of the students, it was the first time they started seeing themselves as a professional rather than a student and this proved to be a powerful experience. For many of the students, their professional development occurred over time through their many experiences and challenges in their internships.

The students' responses indicated that the internship was a powerful professional experience. Many of the students appreciated the skills they gained from applying the knowledge they learned in the classroom to "real world" experiences. Their regular practice of skills also led to increased levels of confidence in their roles. For many students, their internship experiences also taught them a great deal about the diverse needs of individuals receiving human services.

Throughout the internship experience, personal growth was just as significant as the professional growth. The experiences they gained taught the students a great deal about themselves. The students talked about the importance of balance in their personal lives, how their roles took on more of a spiritual dimension, and the skills and knowledge they gained about personal relationships.

While the internship was mostly positive for the students, many faced significant challenges. The long hours led to fatigue for many students. Additionally, many students talked about the difficulty they experienced trying to balance their responsibilities at their internship with their responsibilities at home. For the majority of the students, these challenges were perceived in a positive manner and the challenges did not appear to have a negative effect on their experiences.

## **Implications**

This study speaks to how valuable the internship experience is for students and how it prepares them for the field of human services. The reflection papers appeared to provide both the student and the faculty member with valuable information about the internship experience. Thus, professors should consider adding the element of reflection papers within the internship course (Griffin & Frieden, 2000).

This research study also speaks to the importance of focusing on professional development and professional identity development in pre-service training (Auxier, Hughes & Kline, 2003; Brott & Meyers, 1999). For the majority of students, this was very first time they started to view themselves as professionals and further it was the first time that others began viewing them as professionals. There is definitely a place for this topic to be integrated into the internship as well as in classes taken prior to the internship course.

Additionally, with a new role-taking experience-like the internship often comes a great deal of discomfort and anxiety (Foster & McAdams, 1998). Thus, human service internship instructors must be ready and willing to offer a great deal of support to students. This may occur during

large class discussions, small reflection teams or “support groups” where students could meet weekly to discuss the ups and downs of their experiences, and in one-on-one meetings (Griffin & Frieden, 2000).

## **Future Research and Program Development**

The unique and diverse work of human service professionals requires an expanded or reconstructed view of what human service education should look like. The internship is full of rich and unique opportunities for students to experience. It would behoove human service educators to examine and research different elements of the internship. For example, a study that examined the perceptions of the site supervisor’s experience of the intern would be valuable (Peterson & Deusche, 2006). In addition, it would be beneficial to assess skill development or multicultural development in interns at the pre-and post-test level. Finally, it would be advantageous for human service educators to dedicate sufficient time to examining their current program’s internship. Educators should ask, “Do the students have ample opportunities to reflect upon their experiences? Is feedback given to students upon reflection? Is there a component to professional development included within the internship experience? Spending time asking these questions will undoubtedly strengthen the internship experience for both students and educators.

## **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to examine the internship experiences of human service students. While the findings have direct implications for teaching, learning, and research, there are notable limitations to the study. First, the study was conducted within one university’s human service program. A future study should address these limitations by expanding the study across different universities using a larger sample. Additionally, the responses given by participants are subject to potential biases due to their relationships with the author. The primary author was also the instructor of the internship course. Thus, it is possible that answers were subject to response bias, a phenomenon that occurs when participants answer questions in the manner they think their questioner wants them to answer rather than according to their true beliefs. A future study may consider having an external researcher or faculty member not associated with the internship collect the reflection papers.

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