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AUTHOR Buell, Cindy
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ABSTRACT

A case study examined the internship program in the communication major at Wesleyan College (Georgia), employing informal methods of student evaluation. Faculty sponsor/student discussions, journal entries, and phone calls to supervisors achieved an objective measurement of interns' progress and added an important dimension to the formal methods which basically only provided the needed paperwork. These informal methods provided the student intern, faculty sponsor, and supervisor an opportunity to get to know the student on a more personal basis. The discussions afforded an opportunity to see the internship from the eyes of the student. The journal entries motivated the individual student to examine her effectiveness with the internship task and her relationships with the people at the intern site. The phone calls gave the faculty sponsor and the intern supervisor a chance to know each other on an informal and spontaneous basis and to support the student through acknowledging her strengths and weaknesses. (KEH)

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Beyond Instrumentation
Informal Methods of Evaluating College Internships

Cindy Buell, Ph.D.
Wesleyan College
Macon, Georgia 31297

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Beyond Instrumentation Informal Methods of Evaluating College Internships

This paper serves as a case study of Wesleyan College and its internship program in the communication major. My role in this program is faculty sponsor. A regional liberal arts women's college, Wesleyan is located in the heart of Georgia in Macon, 80 miles south of Atlanta. The College prides itself on its internship program. Being a women's college, our students women find internships advantageous to selecting a major as well as securing a career. The purpose of this paper will be to share the informal methods of internship evaluation found prospering at Wesleyan. By "informal methods" I refer to a more subjective measurement of the intern's progress as opposed to the objective, formal measurement found in the standardized midsemester report and the final evaluation form, The Ward Evaluation Instrument. Also included as a formal measurement is the faculty sponsor visit to the internship site. Whereas, informal methods include periodic student and faculty sponsor discussions, a student journal and faculty sponsor/field supervisor telephone calls.

First, let's turn our attention to the student and faculty sponsor discussions. I find it easier to have joint meetings will all my interns than individual internship meetings. I have found that they readily learn from brainstorming in groups. The ideal situation is for students to be participatory and for them to interact with their faculty sponsor who for students who have declared their major is their advisor. From student evaluations, I have found that they appreciate and want certain things from me. For example, students do not like to spend time idly talking about the same things every few weeks. They like to feel their meetings with their peers and faculty sponsor are profitable and moving them forward. I have found it helpful to set up the first meeting where each intern describes her internship - the people involved, the environment, the customs, her initial position in the internship (for instance, how she sees herself participating within the organization: her role). I ask interns initially to create a two page paper submitted within the first two weeks of the semester outlining their goals and objectives in taking the internship. Their paper should also spell out as clearly as possible what skills they bring to the experience, which skills they hope to develop, and how they plan to meet their goals and objectives. Here is an excerpt from a young woman interested in the broadcasting industry:

"My goals going into the internship were extremely broad because I was not quite sure what to expect from an internship. My first goal was to learn all that I could about broadcasting. Having little or no experience in the field, I wanted to come away from this internship with a broad background in TV news. I

was anxious to see all aspects of a news production. My second goal was to learn the specifics that make a good reporter or a good broadcast. I wanted to find out what makes some anchors and reporters more successful than others and what things could be done to make the reporter better. My final goal was to discover how strong my personal interest in the field was and to decide whether or not I felt I would enjoy and succeed in this field."

The rewards of holding an internship should be stressed in student/faculty sponsor discussions. Dunn (1982) in Make the Most of Your Internship addresses the importance of student networking. He urged students not only to build networks but also to maintain these networks especially throughout the early stages of their careers. Dunn recommends that a student first compile a record of the people they have met during their internships and list their titles, backgrounds or interests, special skills/and a telephone number where they can be reached. Second, Dunn advises students to think of reasons to contact these persons from time to time. During visits with these persons over lunch, tea or dinner, the intern needs to ask them about others with whom they are both familiar. The key to the success of this networking is to keep an open file until you meet others who match your criteria or interest (41). As a faculty advisor I believe these concepts need to be introduced early on in discussions to help the student facilitate contacts needed to be successful. Also, it is important to monitor student progress in these areas and to generate discussion among several student as to their contact so contacts can be shared in the appropriate situations.

In group discussions, one of the big topics of conversation includes "hands on experience." About 75% of my students interns are interested in Public Relations. Because we are a small college and offer only one course in Public Relations (an introductory theory course in Public Relations), students are concerned whether they have the practical background to be competent with "hands on" tasks. It has been my experience more often than not that students surprise themselves with their own skills and ability to readily adapt to their environment. Several student interns have worked at the two largest Public Relations firms in Macon. Additionally, they have interned in the Departments of Public Relations or Human Resources at various hospitals and corporations in our city. Discussions often center around specific public relations tasks, such as press releases, creation of a speaker's bureau, and talking to media personnel. Students see their backgrounds differently in terms of how effectively prepared they feel to tackle their particular internships. Most students feel success in one internship breeds success and self confidence in the next. Also, it should be emphasized that two objectives of a liberal arts curriculum

should stress transferability of knowledge and flexibility. The importance of internships cannot be underestimated by administration, faculty, or students. Vonne Meussling (1986), author of the article "Practical Professional Experience in Public Relations Taking Theory into the Community" addresses the vital need in a practical field to get practical experience. Meussling refers to the philosophy of Edward De Bono when she says that much of the thinking done in the schools today is about the past and involves defining, describing and analyzing. DeBono emphasizes that today's society dictates a need for "skills for doing." Meussling refers to the positions of Kalupa & Harrell (1982) when they mention that research focusing on educational needs suggest significant curriculum changes to prepare students for the interests of the work environment. In my discussions with students they are very much aware of the gap between the classroom theory and the application of their knowledge to the workforce. The brighter students seem to be able to take their knowledge of the workforce and apply it more easily than the average students. Those students who are slower academically find transfer of knowledge more threatening than challenging.

The second informal method of internship evaluation is a student's journal. Students write an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to that specific internship. This allows students to get in touch with their feelings and decide in a very personal way how they feel about their own talents and how competitive they see themselves. Lynne Gross (1981) points out the importance of self-evaluation for the student. She feels self-evaluation should be introspective and help the student with overall career development. Gross says, "If you must write frequent reports, you may have difficulty thinking of new points to make because your responsibilities may become routine. Here is where your reflections and reactions to what is happening will be most important. If you observe what is going on around you and keep vigil on your feelings toward your work, you should find that you have a great deal to report, even on a daily basis"(11).

Also, the journal assignment enhances value clarification. William A. Laramee in his article, "Values Clarification and Self Understanding through Student Work Related Experiences (1989) directs his concerns to a student's self understanding. Laramee says, "One approach to facilitating values education and self understanding which has not received sufficient attention is the student work experience (e.g. internships). A large number of students are involved in some form of work while they pursue higher education. Consequently they face some of the most difficult value conflicts and choices that they are likely to experience during their higher education" (40). It is interesting to note the same student who wrote about her short term goals in broadcasting responds to her strengths and weaknesses as she sees them at that particular time:

"I learned my strong points are my intelligence and insight. I have the ability to see below the surface of the facts and discover what is underneath. I was able to see different sides to the story and to be objective. My weak points are my hesitance in asking to do work. I felt intimidated by some of the reporters and I did not want to get in the way, so I stayed in the background sometimes when I should have stepped forward. I will try to get this fear under control. I got better as the internship progressed, but I still was not assertive enough."

Not often, but occasionally, a student will have a negative experience in her internship. This, too, is value clarification. Then the faculty sponsor finds herself acting in several capacities - advisor, friend, confidante and any other role that seems appropriate. In my five years of supervising internships, I have been involved in three negative experiences. The young lady of whom I speak was a senior communication major and also Homecoming Queen her senior year. She interned in what she thought would be the most exciting program on campus, Wesleyan's new Computer Program. Her career objective was to mature in the Public Relations field. Her course work had consisted of business courses (e.g. marketing, advertising, economics) as well as communication courses (e.g. public speaking, interpersonal, persuasion, mass media) in addition to general education courses. The student intern writes in her journal:

"The Computer Program has definitely been an experience for me. I began the internship in the fall of 1988 by writing a public relations proposal for the program. After writing the proposal, I was asked to present it to the Apple representative. The representatives were pleased with my suggestions and asked the program director to have me as an intern. The program was very exciting for me and I was really enthusiastic about the potential for the program."

Later in her journal she writes:

"I quit the internship early because I felt it was becoming more of a burden than an experience. Looking back, I realize the experience I gained by learning to work with computers, communicate with a technical minded person and assisting students with the computers. But I have never felt so frustrated with something in my entire life. I guess I walked into the program with the aspirations of making it a true public relations campaign. But I quickly put that to a halt because of lack of funds and most importantly, lack of communication."

I should mention that all the student interns I have worked with during my six year tenure at Wesleyan College have wanted their internships to be successful. They want to feel they know and can do far more after their internships than before the experience. In the case of the student who worked with the college Computer Program, other student interns and myself worked hard to avoid a disappointing ending to a potentially positive situation. We suggested to the intern various types of behaviors to use with her intern supervisor, such as alternative behaviors. Some of these behaviors included greater listening, the paraphrasing style of feedback where the student attempts to put in her own language what the supervisor was trying to communicate to her. We also suggested constructive confrontation where the student told the supervisor of her real feelings of frustration and confusion in as tactful a way as possible, also eliciting feedback from him at the same time. These methods were just a few ways suggested for stronger communication between the intern and supervisor. The student would return periodically to the internship meeting having tried these various methods, but still complained of her supervisor's lack of sensitivity.

At the conclusion of their journals, students are invited to comment on whether or not they would recommend their particular internship to another student. The student who I previously quoted writes, "No, I would not suggest this internship for anyone else unless she is under a different supervisor. Since it was the program director's first year, I believe he was uncomfortable. However, he should have been more willing to accept help in making the Computer Program more of a success."

Sometimes a journal can be a valuable asset to a student both in the writing of the formal paper and in serving as a reflection, for the student to see the extent of her progress. Journals assist a student in coming to hard decisions about the direction of her life. A junior transfer student who interned in broadcasting during the summer at WBRC-TV, an ABC affiliate in Birmingham, Alabama writes:

"This summer internship was an excellent opportunity for me, yet painstaking just the same. As far as getting the experience I needed to pursue a career in broadcasting, I received it. The painstaking portion involved the decision of whether or not I would be doing the right thing if I pursued a career in another aspect of communication. I felt like I was going through my adolescent years all over again, except this time it involved my career. I believe the hardest part was admitting to myself that this wasn't the career I was suited for. I am glad that I kept an open mind during my internship which allowed me to seek all possible opportunities. After three and a half months

of "soul searching", I at least know what I don't want to be and that is a reporter."

To conclude the story, this young lady decided to invest her interest in the area of Public Relations using her journalism experience as support. She now has graduated from Wesleyan and is a stewardess with Delta Airlines and is on track for an opening in the Public Relations Division. She should do well due to her many attributes, just some of which include her sincerity, motivation and interpersonal skills.

The third and final informal method of internship evaluation is phone calls from the faculty sponsor to the field supervisor. These calls occur midsemester and at the end of the semester. If interns seem to be uncertain as to the progress of their internship or of their interpersonal relationships, it seems helpful for the faculty sponsor to pick up the phone, introduce herself and check on the student and her progress. It's always helpful, to get feedback from the intern field supervisor, to ask unexpected questions, to try to get to the root of the work situation rather than at the stereotypical questions. Like a good interviewer, the good faculty sponsor must be able to ask the right questions. It's also interesting to note that sometimes the intern's perception of the internship and the field supervisor's do not always coincide. For example, in the case of the young lady who worked for our college computer program. The gentleman who conducted this program was glad to hear from me as I was from him. He, was concerned about the quality of communication between himself and his intern. His version of the student's progress was that she was a talented young lady who "was leery of asking questions and whose writing needed to be more precise." Also, he felt she needed a lot more self-confidence. His positive comments about her included that she was "good in planning, organizing and research as well as possessed a good sense of presentational writing. Also, she was clever at coming up with novel ideas for the Computer Focus Program." There is a spontaneity in talking on the phone with these supervisors that cannot be replaced in in-person or on-site visits. There is a freedom there to state the truth that cannot be easily replaced. Listening is the guide to getting good information, helpful information.

In summary, the three methods addressed - faculty sponsor/student discussions, journal entries and phone calls to supervisors, indicate the importance of informal methods as well as formal methods. Perhaps it can be stated that the formal methods provide the needed paperwork, but the informal methods provide the student intern, faculty sponsor and supervisor an opportunity to get to know the student on a more personal basis. The discussions provide an opportunity to see the internship from the eyes of a student. The journal entries should motivate a student to examine her effectiveness with the internship task and

her relationships with the people at the intern site. The phone calls give the faculty sponsor and the intern supervisor a chance to know one another on an informal and spontaneous basis and to support the student through acknowledging her strengths and weaknesses. Andrews states, "Supervised field experience benefits both the student and the employer. For the student, field experience allows exploration of career options and serves as a testing ground for classroom theory. It provides job experience in the student's occupational field without a long-term commitment." (161) It is this broad experience that is so helpful to the student and often times saves her from making a poor career choice.

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