

Establishing Cooperative Competency-based Internships for Parks and Recreation Students

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Using a competency-based assessment can improve the internship experience for recreational-management majors.

An undergraduate education in parks and recreation goes beyond completion of required general education courses and major courses that focus on such things as programming, facility management, or budgeting. It is assumed that students are not fully prepared for a full-time job until they go through a culminating internship. The classroom generally serves as an artificial lab for honing skills such as problem solving, decision making, customer service, or professionalism. The pinnacle of the degree, then, is the senior internship, in which students apply classroom-acquired skills in real-world settings, as required by accreditation standards (National Recreation and Park Association [NRPA], 2004).

Internships serve several purposes, including (1) networking with professionals; (2) developing professionalism; (3) demonstrating, refining, and acquiring competencies; (4) working toward securing an entry-level position; and (5) bridging the gap between theory and practice (Stier, 2002). Nowhere in this list is “free labor,” that is, having interns doing work that staff does not want to do. Internships take considerable time and effort on the part of all parties: students, university supervisors, and agency supervisors. Internships require a tailor-made experience that is beneficial to everyone involved, but most importantly to the student.

Since internships are generally the culminating undergraduate experience, it is often assumed that students will be fully prepared to enter the workforce on completion of the internship. In supervising senior internships, one senses that senior interns are often unclear about their own professional strengths and weaknesses. They are similarly unclear about the expectations of agency professionals in terms of entry-level employee competencies. Students frequently express concerns about not being ready for their first job or not knowing what skills they need to develop to give themselves a competitive advantage over other job applicants. Likewise, agency supervisors have asked how internship experiences can be improved to help interns develop in terms of specific job-related competencies. The purpose of this article is to present a cooperative competency-based internship as a way to improve internship experiences for everyone.

A Cooperative Approach

Stier (2002) asserts that academic preparation, student motivation, and competency level for the upcoming internship experience, and the internship sites themselves, all play key roles in the overall potential for a quality internship experience. Internships require a three-way partnership or cooperative approach between the student, the university supervisor, and the agency supervisor (Williams, 2004). Still, misconceptions regularly exist among these three parties with respect to internships. For example, university supervisors typically expect agency supervisors to know how to provide a quality experience. Similarly, agency supervisors sometimes expect students to be able to do all things that entry-level employees can do. Finally, students sometimes assume that merely showing up to work at the internship site will result in a quality experience. The establishment of a cooperative relationship among university supervisors, agency supervisors, and students can not only ameliorate such



Would an intern at a zoo, or at any other site, know what competencies are required for the job?

misconceptions, but can help foster an environment where the three can work together to provide a quality internship experience that will essentially prepare the student for the future. Many university and agency supervisors may already embrace strategies for fostering cooperative relationships in internships, which include the following:

- Agency supervisors should meet regularly (at least once a week) with interns to touch base on projects, programs, and any other issues raised by the student.
- Agency supervisors and university supervisors should stay in close contact via telephone, email, or on-site visits to ensure that interns are getting the type of experience they need.
- Agency supervisors should view themselves as an extension of the university faculty and be prepared to spend time teaching and mentoring student interns (Steinbach, 2004).
- University supervisors and student interns should communicate on a regular basis via weekly or biweekly reports, telephone, email, and/or on-site visits.

Open communication among the parties is desirable, and the ideal situation is when all three work together during the internship to confront conflict, problems, and concerns. Williams (2004) indicated that although the relationship between the agency supervisor and the university supervisor can vary considerably, this relationship is often crucial to the success of the internship experience. Furthermore, she argues that a fully cooperative relationship among all three people will help enhance the internship experience through such aspects as meeting established internship goals and outcomes, adhering to academic requirements, ensuring the academic integrity of the internship, and providing oppor-

tunities for mentoring and professional development. It is imperative in cooperative relationships that all three stakeholders share a common goal: to provide the best learning experience possible to fully prepare the student intern for an entry-level position. After all, the “primary purpose of the internship is often job placement or career advancement” (Kelley, 2004, p. 28).

A Competency-based Approach

Once a cooperative attitude exists among students and agency and university supervisors, the notion of competencies can be introduced as a way to further enhance internship experiences. Competencies are defined as the skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics needed to do a job effectively (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999). Once competencies have been assessed, training and development can be used to enhance these skills to meet the needs of the organization and the employee. Competency standards are widespread in the market sector and are increasingly being used in nonprofit and public sectors such as the field of parks and recreation.

The cooperative competency-based internship experience presented in this article uses the Entry Level Competency Framework (ELCF; Hurd, 2005) as its foundation. The ELCF is the result of research done with practitioners who identified the competencies needed for entry-level positions in public parks and recreation. University curricula, accreditation standards, and professional certification standards all contain lists of needed skills and knowledge for entry-level positions. Two missing components, however, are measures of interpersonal characteristics and comprehensive competency measures, both of which are included in the ELCF. Lucia and Lepsinger (1999) advocate including interpersonal characteristics—rather than simply looking at skills, knowledge and abilities—because of their value in making employees more successful. They argued that bringing together all aspects of the employee results in a more effective employee. Although there are currently several employee and internship evaluation tools on the market, and there are other tools that have been created by universities to evaluate interns, research-based competencies offer valid indicators of intern strengths and weaknesses. Understanding these strengths and weaknesses will be of considerable value to interns in search of their first job upon graduation.

Using the ELCF as a basis, the Recreation Management Competency Assessment (RMCA) was developed to assess intern competencies in five general areas deemed necessary for entry-level positions: (1) communication, (2) community relations, (3) interpersonal skills, (4) leadership and management, and (5) professional practice. A five-point Likert scale is used to measure students’ competence on the listed items. The scale ranges from excellent (consistently exceeds expectations, exceptional performance) to poor (needs improvement in meeting expectations, below average performance) with the last measure being “unable to rate.” The 54-item instrument combines competencies and several additional items that measure student preparedness for success in entry-level

positions (some sample items appear in table 1). Additional items address professionalism and issues requiring monitoring and development in students that are simply taken for granted by professionals. For example, when the ELCF was created using entry-level professionals, the group did not see professional work habits such as timeliness, attendance, and punctuality as competencies worth including in the framework. They felt these were things that are expected of employees and not things that are considered competencies per se. However, since the RMCA is used to evaluate student performance, it was decided that such items were necessary so students will understand their importance in the makeup of a professional.

There are several steps in this competency-based assessment process. Students are first asked to go to the web site (http://www.cast.ilstu.edu/hurd/KNR398/competency_assessment.htm) to take the RMCA just before the start of their internship. Their ratings on the competencies are sent electronically to the university internship supervisor and are kept for future comparison. Students are then asked to reflect on their scores by answering the following questions: (1) what areas are your strengths, (2) where do you see the need to further develop as a professional, (3) which three to five competencies do you want to target for improvement to make yourself a better professional, and (4) specifically what can you do in your internship that will assist in further developing your skills in these areas?

Once these questions are answered, students discuss the results with their university internship supervisor and outline plans for skill development throughout the internship. Having an open discussion regarding student self-ratings may help deter over-inflation or under-estimation of ratings. In addition, this should not be a “graded assignment” for the same reasons. After the discussion between the student and the university supervisor, either person may feel there is a need for the student to adjust some ratings on the RMCA.

The pre-test is designed to provide students with a complete picture of what will be expected of them in an entry-level job. The test further emphasizes that the internship is not just another course, but a springboard to employment that makes it desirable to develop one’s competencies as fully as possible.

In this model, students must discuss the results of their RMCA as well as the reflection questions with the agency supervisor at the start of the internship. Supervisors and students then outline how skill-building can occur through assignment of tasks, programs, and projects during the internship. Not only will this build competencies, but most students want to be challenged with projects in order to aid in their professional development (Stratta, 2004). In essence, they create a development plan that is monitored by the student, the agency supervisor, and the faculty internship supervisor throughout the internship. Young and Baker (2004) suggested using an internship journal that outlines work-related situations and how they benefit the student’s professional development. This assignment would require students to

Table 1. Sample Competencies from the RMCA

- Able to deal with the public
- Able to take initiative
- Able to make ethical decisions
- Able to prioritize tasks
- Possesses an understanding of financial processes (e.g., purchasing, budgets)
- Is a self-starter
- Is flexible
- Has patience

monitor their progress in developing competencies.

Progress on developing competencies is a topic of discussion in weekly meetings between the intern and agency supervisor, in intern reports to the university supervisor, and in discussions during on-site visits. In addition, students are evaluated using the RMCA midway through the semester. Young and Baker (2004) advocated that students do self-evaluations during the internship, in which they will be required to analyze their personal and professional growth. With this information, adjustments can be made to the development plan.

Once the internship is completed, the student once again takes the RMCA. These post-internship results are compared to their pre-internship results to determine where growth is still needed and to identify skills that were developed through the internship experience. Agency internship supervisors also rate students at the end of the internship using the RMCA. Supervisors are asked to discuss the ratings with students so they will better understand their strengths and weaknesses from the professional’s perspective. It should be noted that in most cases recorded to date the agency supervisor rated the student much higher overall than the students rated themselves. One way to curb this rater inflation may be to ask the agency supervisors to rate the student as if he or she were an entry-level employee being paid by the agency to do a job.

Although the process of the cooperative competency-based internship experience has been described using entry-level competencies for public parks and recreation, competencies have been developed for CEOs in public parks and recreation (Hurd & McLean, 2004), commercial recreation entry-level employees (Hammersley & Tynon, 1998), therapeutic recreation professionals working with at-risk youths (Sprouse & Klitzing, in review), and employees in recreational sports (Barcelona & Ross, 2004). All of these competency sets have been developed using practitioners in the field in these types of positions. These competency sets can be adapted to fit several different professional settings.

Outcomes of the Cooperative Competency-based Internship

Since this cooperative competency-based approach to supervising interns is time consuming, it is important to outline



University supervisors and interns should communicate regularly.

the outcomes of its use for the three stakeholders. Six outcomes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Clarify Entry-Level Job Expectations. The assessment illuminates students' understanding of entry-level employee expectations in terms of skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics. Students can see that there is a strong need for competence in such areas as hiring and motivating staff, community relations, and having fiscal responsibility. Experience in using the RMCA has shown that students actually appreciate seeing what practitioners felt were important competencies for entry-level positions. It helps them make a connection between their academic preparation and their future as a professional.

Create an Internship Project Plan. While internships provide opportunities for students to build a multitude of skills in order to be marketable in the profession, many agency supervisors accept interns to complete a specific project. If agency supervisors know a student's strengths and weaknesses before the start of the internship, it will be possible to tailor assignments to help the student address areas of weakness. Concomitantly, students should be challenged and asked to use competencies that they rated high on the RMCA. Just because interns feel they have certain skills does not mean that these skills should not be given proper attention. The interns are at a point in their career where they need to build skills in weak areas and hone their skills in areas of strength.

Benchmarking Skills. The RMCA serves as a benchmark for competency development. Students understand where they are in terms of their own competencies, and from this benchmark a plan can be developed to gain skills and knowledge in appropriate areas rather than blindly trying to build skills that may or may not be beneficial to them. Initially some concern may be raised that the students are just that—students and not entry-level employees. The RMCA is not meant to be the evaluation tool from which students receive course grades during their internships. More appropriately it is the benchmark for assessing where they

are and where they need to be in terms of competencies for entry-level positions.

Plan for Career Development. If shared with the agency supervisor, the results can help the student become better prepared for a full-time position in the field at the conclusion of the internship. For entry-level employees, career development is largely a function of the organization rather than the individual (Sturges, Guest, & McKenzie-Davey, 2000). This means that the supervisor plays a predominant role in helping develop an entry-level employee until the employee gets several years of experience and can better set their own course for career development. It is even more important for the supervisor to guide an intern, as the intern has little experience in this area and would greatly benefit from the guidance of a seasoned professional. The RMCA can serve as the foundation for establishing a career development plan with the intern. It can further expedite this development if the intern arrives at the agency with a clear assessment of their own skills. In that way, the agency supervisor will not have to wait several weeks to determine the intern's strengths and weaknesses. Working together, the two can start the plan for career development at the outset of the internship. However, it is expected that internship requirements and assignments may uncover strengths and weaknesses that were misjudged by the student when completing the RMCA. If so, adjustments to internship assignments can be made to enhance the internship experience and build necessary skills.

Program Curriculum Review. The university can use the data generated from the RMCA to track where there may be weaknesses in the curriculum. For example, if students repeatedly rate their budgeting skill and knowledge as fair or poor, there may be a need to review that area of the curriculum in order to strengthen the base of knowledge for students before they go out to do their internships.

Program Assessment Data. Many universities are requiring assessment plans for programs. The RMCA provides data that can be used as one piece of the assessment plan. Resulting data can be analyzed for outcomes and trends. Since each student is rated by himself or herself and by the supervisor, there are two different perspectives on competencies developed during the degree program. Furthermore, the data from the RMCA can link student outcomes to the NRPA Accreditation Standards. There are several similarities between the competencies and the standards. For example, both have listed communication, knowledge of the community, and fiscal management as necessary knowledge areas. Data from the RMCA can assess how well accreditation standards are being met.

Summary

The success of the cooperative competency-based internship approach relies on strong relationships between the student intern, university supervisor, and agency supervisor and on their willingness to use determined competencies to map out the internship. This approach serves as a guide

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messages throughout the program. Use of CDR is especially beneficial in meeting programmatic, university, state, and national standards and expectations for beginning teachers.

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whereby student skills are measured before, during, and after the internship and a plan is subsequently created to build competencies during and after the internship. The impetus for this approach was to create an internship that, upon completion, would give students a clear picture of the competencies that professionals deem important for entry-level employees. Moreover, students would gain a personal assessment of their strengths and weaknesses on these competen-

cies. Lastly, students would receive a supervisor's perspective on their performance of the competencies. Equipped with this knowledge on three levels, it is assumed that students will have a clear understanding of their preparedness for the entry-level job market and a plan for how to improve their skills to make them viable candidates for entry-level positions in the field.

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