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Improving Broadcast Internships

A Look at University and Industry Obligations in the Training of a New Generation of Professionals

By Michael L. Hilt

Broadcasting internships have come under attack during the last two years since the release of the Roper Study on Electronic Media Career Preparation. Universities should not be surprised by the results, which indicate a need to strengthen basic broadcasting courses. Internships should be viewed as an extension of these courses, and as an important part of the broadcast curriculum. This article offers some suggestions to help both the university and the broadcast industry upgrade the internship programs.

Broadcasting internships are essential for the student who plans a career in the profession. The programs offer the student an opportunity to grow in the professional environment, while supple-

menting what has been learned in the classroom.

If this is so obviously the case, why do a majority of broadcast journalists question the quality of interns at their television or radio stations? Results of the Roper Study on Electronic Media Career Preparation spell out this fact: News directors believe most broadcast students lack certain key skills such as how to write for radio and television, and how to operate broadcasting equipment. Executives claim these skills should be taught in school, and not in their newsrooms.

A recent study of Nebraska broadcasters supports the results of the Roper Study. The survey was conducted with the help of the Nebraska Broadcasters Association. Thirty-four of 62 surveys

were returned, for a response rate of 55%. In the survey, Nebraska broadcasters said they would like colleges and universities to stress newswriting and hands-on experience, while at the same time giving the students a broad liberal arts education.

One broadcaster said a reason for the problems found in the Roper Study is the lack of professional experience by broadcasting instructors. "Most broadcast instructors couldn't put a packaged story together if they had to. I believe until universities adopt policies of hiring broadcasting news professionals with years of experience, the situation will not improve."

The Nebraska survey results also indicate a need for internships to help train and educate students about broadcasting

in broadcasting continuing to be more favored than average non-supervisory wage earners in all non-agricultural industries. The rising experience and education in the work force at large, combined with a declining number of entrants to the workforce, promised relief from the long decline in inflation-discounted wages that was related to birthrates and immigration as well as education and experience. Average real wages might well rise for all by 1994, with those in broadcasting continuing to enjoy the double advantage of both comparatively higher levels of pay and a gain against inflation.

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while they are still in school. "If there has been no real-world experience, they cannot understand the frustrations, the delays, the work involved with a day-to-day deadline."

"Internships are the best solution. Internships should be (a) mandatory part of (the) program."

So how can internships programs be upgraded? The answers must come from the two principles involved: The university, and the broadcast industry.

The University

Many people involved in academics seem to believe they need only provide their students with a liberal arts education. In a study of professional education by Stark, Lowther and Hagerty (1986) some educators claim journalism skills are best acquired through on-the-job training following a liberal education. At one time this may have been true. But now, with the industry tightening its belt, and fewer jobs available to the graduating students, only the best trained will succeed. A study by Renz (1988) shows more than 89% of the broadcasters polled say some journalistic training is a requirement for entry-level positions. Granted, every student should receive a broad liberal arts education, but broadcasting students also need to know how to function in a newsroom. There is no reason why both goals cannot be achieved.

Since the executives have neither the time, the facilities, nor the money to teach the students about the industry, it is the university's responsibility to teach them the basic broadcasting skills. More emphasis should be placed on the so-called technical courses: Basic Reporting, Radio and Television Newswriting, Editing and Broadcast Production. News directors expect students to know the basics before they enter the newsroom. What students learn during an internship comes from observing, and from hands-on, "in the trenches" experience. Interns, internships and the universities receive a bad name when the students perform in this situation. The students have chosen how they want to spend the rest of their professional lives. It is now time the university helps them reach that goal.

One way the university can help is by applying the standards of the newsroom in the classroom. Stricter enforcement of professional guidelines would dispel the truths of student inade-

quacy in writing and equipment operation.

Once students have completed the basic required coursework for the broadcasting major, they should be able to apply for any and all internships, but internships should not be a requirement. This will help those students who cannot afford to give up a paying job.

Internship credit hours should be kept to one hour, enabling those students who can take internships to get a variety of experience. Giving more than one hour would decrease the number of total internships a student could take, while not giving any credit would eliminate a student's incentive. As we enter the 1990s we have passed that point where we could encourage or push students to apply for internships at radio and television stations, but refuse to give credit for the professional experience.

Internships, at the very least, must be for credit, and when possible, should be paid. This also is reflected in the Roper Study. Roper says, "Internships, as they are currently organized, are not providing students with the types of experience which executives feel they need [and] . . . it may be that students cannot realistically afford to take advantage of unpaid internship programs." The cost of living, and the cost of higher education itself, has reached the point that many unpaid internships go unfilled.

It is true that, as stated by some respondents in the Meeske survey (1988), internships are a learning experience. But can most college students work for free and still pursue their degree? For many, the answer is no. So colleges and universities must be willing to face the economic future, and give students some credit for paid work done in their major

The Industry

The broadcast industry is not blameless in the intern problem. Many times interns waste away in the newsroom, performing such routine tasks as ripping the news wire, logging a news feed, or making seemingly endless numbers of phone calls to police and fire departments. News directors rationalize this by saying, "Someone has to do it," and "It's time the students learn what a newsroom is really like." A true statement, but the news director fails to say that someone else is paid to do those jobs, while many students intern for little or no money. Students should be given the opportunity to write

stories, shoot and edit video tape and gain the hands on experience they will need.

News directors must understand they are in competition for the best interns and there must be some reward for the student. Besides money, that reward should come in the form of performing worthwhile duties that they can take with them when they return to school

Discussion

I worked for eight years in radio and television newsrooms before moving into the teaching profession. I have seen how unprepared some broadcast journalism students are for internships. Many of the interns had problems grasping some of the basics of broadcast journalism: Style, tense, attribution and so on. These interns were not limited to one school, but instead came from some of the largest and most respected universities in the country. Without knowing the tools of the trade, I found the students both bored and angry with their internships, the news director assigning them "busy work" to keep them occupied, and the university awarding credit hours for knowledge the students did not learn or earn.

The quality of interns runs in cycles. So too will the upgrading of internship programs. When students learn and understand the basics, they will perform better as interns. When they perform better, the station will look favorably on the system and on the university from which the intern came. But when students fail to grasp those basics, the entire internship program suffers, and soon not just the quality of interns will be questioned. Eventually the quality of the graduates and the school itself will come under fire.

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