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Feedback

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Comparing Views of Broadcasters and Student Interns about Career Preparation

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Broadcast news professionals appear to understand the value of internships as one way to train students for a career in the industry (Davie, Fleisher, & Rodriguez-Gillman, 1999). Internships have become an integral part of many journalism and broadcasting curricula. More than 95 percent of journalism and broadcasting programs report that they offer internships (Becker, 1990; Meeske, 1988b). The industry's mandate that even entry-level employees should have experience in the field (Basow & Byrne, 1993; Parcells, 1985) has led colleges and universities to help place students in internships. The programs provide students an opportunity to grow in a professional environment, while supplementing what has been learned in the classroom.

The present study focused on broadcast career preparation, and compared four groups of respondents: general managers, news directors, producers and students. Respondents were asked their views about college training and education for a career in broadcasting.

CONCERNS ABOUT JOURNALISM AND BROADCASTING EDUCATION

There is a considerable body of literature addressing the issue of student preparation for careers in broadcasting news. In general, while broadcast newsrooms continue to hire college graduates, the managers also express disappointment in the work quality of the employees (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1996; McCall, 1990; Stone, 1989; Renz, 1988). Typical of news director concerns was a 1996 report from the Society of Professional Journalists. The report found that a majority of job applicants fall short on knowledge about liberal arts areas such as geography, government, history, economics, statistics, and computers (p. 10). The concerns identified by the Jane Pauley Task Force on Mass Communication Education parallel those of the Roper Study on Electronic Media Career Preparation (1988). In that study news executives highlighted the problems college graduates had with professional skills such as broadcast writing and equipment operation.

The common concerns of broadcast managers, as well as managers in all types of organizations, are that college graduates do not meet employers' expectations (Funkhouser & Savage, 1987). The fundamental issue at the college-level is what balance should be struck between professional skills and the liberal arts (Porter & Szolka, 1991; Stark, Lowther, & Hagerty, 1986; Dugas, 1984). It is common in the literature to separate professional skills (Hochheimer, 1991; Fisher, 1978), previous broadcast experience, and what is generally considered to be a liberal arts college education (Becker, Kosicki, Engleman, & Viswanath, 1991).

Internships have been seen as a popular way for broadcasting students to obtain professional experience in order to qualify for entry-level positions (Donald, 1998; Newton & Thien, 1993; Hilt, 1991; Meeske, 1988a; Hyre & Owens, 1984). One strategy for producing a successful internship is to spend time preparing the student for working in the field.

Broadcast general managers and news directors say they consider a combination of professional skills and a liberal arts education when hiring an employee. One curriculum alternative to the internship is development of a "five-day-a-week broadcast news laboratory experience" (Duhe & Zukowski, 1997, p.14). While such a proposal offers interesting possibilities for students to learn both skills and liberal arts knowledge, most programs continue to rely on the internship as a less-costly way to help the student gain experience.

Students in the present study were asked to evaluate their college education and internship, and these data were compared with responses from broadcast managers and producers.

METHODOLOGY

Upper-level undergraduate communication students at an urban Midwestern university were surveyed during the last week of their internships from 1995 to 1998. Students at this university receive a degree in communication. They select an area of emphasis -- broadcasting, news editorial, public relations, or organizational communication. All communication students are required to complete a foundation of liberal arts coursework. The interns were treated as a single group for this study because of common background and training. It is not unusual for students to cross traditional print/broadcast boundaries for their internship in this communication program. Students enrolled for credit after being placed in an internship with the guidance of a faculty advisor. The interns attended weekly meetings with the faculty advisor where broadcast and journalism professionals articulated expectations for entry-level employees. The students discussed their own internship experiences during the weekly meetings, and shared this information with the group. The survey was administered during the last required class session. The students responded to six statements concerning career preparation. They also provided basic demographic information.

The broadcasters in this study were selected from each of the 211 markets identified in the *Broadcasting & Cable Market Place* (1992), and the 210 markets in the *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook* (1997). One station in each market was randomly selected through a rotation of network affiliations. The general managers and news directors were listed in the description of the chosen stations. A previous study found that GMs and NDs were nearly identical in their responses concerning career preparation variables (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1994). Producers were not listed, and were identified through telephone calls to each selected station.

RESULTS

The typical broadcast manager respondent was a college-educated 43-year-old white male. Respondents were split between the occupations of general manager (45.7%) and news director (54.3%). They worked at both television (52.3%) and radio (47.7%) stations. The typical local television news producer was a 29-year-old white female (59.3%). The intern responses were compared to news producer responses to the same questions from a 1997 mail survey, and broadcast general manager and news director responses from a 1992 mail survey. The intern data were compared to the responses offered by producers (N=87, response rate=41.2%), broadcast general managers (N=67) and news directors (N=81). For the general managers and news directors the overall response rate was 36.3 percent.

TABLE 1
Broadcast Career Preparation

ITEM	GROUP	N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.
Colleges should teach students hands-on skills. (4.41)	General Managers	67	4.07 ^{cd}	.89	6.41	.00
	News Directors	80	4.40	.70		
	Producers	87	4.54 ^a	.77		
	Interns	75	4.56 ^a	.60		
Internships prepare future broadcasters/journalists. (4.09)	General Managers	67	3.85 ^d	.74	9.94	.00
	News Directors	81	3.85 ^d	.90		
	Producers	85	4.16	.91		
	Interns	75	4.48 ^{ab}	.70		
A broad liberal arts education is valuable. (3.84)	General Managers	67	3.88	.73	1.02	ns
	News Directors	81	3.95	.88		
	Producers	87	3.75	.88		
A college degree is essential for a career. (3.32)	General Managers	67	3.06 ^d	1.14	6.13	.00
	News Directors	81	3.01 ^{cd}	1.30		
	Producers	87	3.56 ^b	1.10		
	Interns	75	3.61 ^{ab}	.98		
Students learn Adequate hands-on Skills in college. (2.82)	General Managers	67	2.63 ^d	.97	14.99	.00
	News Directors	81	2.42 ^d	1.01		
	Producers	86	2.76 ^d	1.24		
	Interns	75	3.49 ^{abc}	.94		
Colleges adequately prepare students. (2.75)	General Managers	66	2.35 ^d	.87	31.42	.00
	News Directors	80	2.45 ^d	.95		
	Producers	85	2.59 ^d	1.02		
	Interns	75	3.63 ^{abc}	.75		

^a General Managers
^b News Directors
^c Producers
^d Interns

The six items were measured utilizing a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). The general managers and news directors were surveyed in 1992-1993. The producers were surveyed in 1997. The students were surveyed at the end of their internships from 1995 to 1998. The statistical significance for between-group differences was analyzed using ANOVA. A post-hoc Scheffe test identified significant differences through multiple comparisons. Statistical significance between groups ($p < .05$) is noted above as a, b, c, and d for general managers, news directors, producers, and interns respectively.

On four of six statements there was overall agreement. The strongest overall agreement was for the statement, "Colleges should teach students hands-on skills." This was followed by the statements: "Internships prepare future broadcasters/journalists"; "A broad liberal arts education is valuable"; and "A college degree is essential for a career."

On two of the statements there was overall disagreement. The strongest overall disagreement was with the statement, "Colleges adequately prepare students." This was followed by overall disagreement with the statement, "Students learn adequate hands-on skills in college."

On five of six statements, post hoc statistical tests revealed group differences. On the statement, "Colleges should teach students hands-on skills," interns and producers had significantly higher agreement than general managers. On the statement, "Internships prepare future broadcasters/journalists," interns had significantly higher agreement than general managers and news directors. On the statement, "A college degree is essential for a career," interns and producers leaned toward agreement while GMs and NDs were neutral. On the statements, "Students learn adequate hands-on skills in college" and "Colleges adequately prepare students," interns were in agreement while all three professional groups disagreed.

On only one statement, "A broad liberal arts education is valuable," all four groups were in agreement, and there were no statistically significant group differences.

DISCUSSION

An analysis of the six broadcast career preparation statements produced an interesting pattern. Student interns had a more positive view of the quality of their college education. In particular, interns were the only group to agree that colleges were preparing students and that students were learning skills they need for careers in broadcasting. At the same time, however, all four groups saw the value of a broad liberal arts education, hands-on skills, and internships. Only producers and interns saw the college degree as an essential prerequisite for a career.

It might not be surprising that college students near the end of their academic careers would be optimistic about the quality of their training. However, it is somewhat surprising that there was a fairly wide variation of opinion by GMs and NDs about the value of a college degree. They rate liberal arts knowledge as more important than the completion of a degree. It is a contradiction that broadcast managers value liberal arts education—presumably more useful in long term career preparation—because entry-level employees are judged more on their professional skills.

Everybody seems to agree that colleges should be teaching hands-on skills, but professionals do not appear to be convinced that students are learning those skills. Maybe we should assume that professionals will tend to believe that few students ever receive adequate hands-on training until they enter the "real world." After all, for the broadcast manager who has spent ten or twenty years toiling in the field, they may expect that their efforts naturally make them more knowledgeable than a graduate right out of college. Therein lies the traditional chasm between the academic community and professionals. It is not known whether there are any curriculum reforms that could be instituted to satisfy the broadcast profession on this point. However, the results of this survey suggest that everybody is satisfied with how internships move students toward a career in broadcasting. Therefore, these data make a strong case for maintaining existing internship programs and developing new ones.

There are ways to bridge the differences in opinion. One, general managers and news directors should become more aware of the wide range of courses broadcasting students take in college. At the same time, the managers could do more to keep up with what their employees and student interns are doing in newsrooms. Second, producers should improve communication with student interns who sometimes are left to sink or swim. Third, interns should learn to be more realistic about what is expected of them by the professional community. And fourth, university faculty should be open to involving professionals in the teaching and planning process. Better communication between the academic and professional worlds might lead to students being more prepared for what to expect in broadcast newsrooms before going out to do an internship.

Future research should replicate this survey by collecting data from all groups at one time. A case may also be made for studying the process of student development during their

college career. Future studies may also wish to be more specific about the types of hands-on skills and liberal arts experiences that are most valuable to a broadcaster.

The present study confirmed industry support for broadcast internships as a way to prepare students. Of course, the internship happens at broadcaster facilities where they are in control. Likewise, the efforts in the classroom seem to be most appreciated by students and faculty. A long-term issue is how we might better blend the two environments. More fluid movement of faculty and broadcast professionals between newsrooms and classrooms is one step toward improving communication and ultimately improving career preparation of students.

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