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Broadcast Newsroom Hiring and Career Preparation

By Michael L. Hilt and Jeremy H. Lipschultz

Internships have become an integral part of many journalism and broadcasting curricula. More than 95 percent of journalism and broadcasting programs report that internships are a part of their curricula (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 offer students an opportunity to grow in the professional environment, while supplementing what has been learned in the classroom.

While past studies have extensively examined how broadcasters and journalists view internships, and what those professionals think of the training entry-level employees receive while in school, little is known about how views of the internship experience relate to newsroom hiring practices and career preparation of students. College students may find it difficult to predict what journalists and broadcasters want in the hiring of newsroom employees. This problem also affects journalism and broadcasting faculty who teach and advise students.

The present study focused on views of newsroom hiring variables and career preparation considerations. Students completing a required internship were surveyed, and those responses were compared to previous results from broadcast general managers and news directors.

Broadcasting Education

There is a considerable body of literature, some of it conflicting, on journalism and broadcasting education. "Despite continuing suspicion about the value of higher education for employment in the broadcast industry, most employers feel a college degree is a minimum requirement" (Renz, 1988, p, 10). "Professional broadcasters surveyed by the Roper organization continued to be critical of university education programs that are perceived to have too little 'hands-on' training" (McCall, 1990, p. 9). "Two-thirds of the nation's news directors say broadcast journalism training at universities generally gives students a head start, with solid grounding in basics" (Stone, 1989, p, 58). Broadcasting education came under attack with the release of the Roper Study on Electronic Media Career Preparation in 1988; news directors believed most broadcast students lacked certain key skills such as how to write for radio and television, and how to operate broadcasting equipment. Executives claimed these skills should be taught in school, and not in their newsrooms. It appears that broadcast managers, as well as managers in all types of organizations, commonly believe college graduates do not meet the employers' expectations (Fimkhouser & Savage, 1987).

Skills vs. Liberal Arts

While most undergraduates receive a liberal arts education, many journalism and broadcasting programs also teach students how to function in a newsroom. However, in a study of professional education by Stark, Lowther and Hagerty (1986), some educators claimed journalism skills are best acquired through on-the-job training after a liberal education. Dugas (1984) suggested that, from a liberal arts perspective, employers should give preference to those students who are articulate:

The better we communicate, the better they will communicate with others. Then I would look for people who are knowledgeable. The less I have to teach them, the sooner they become productive staff members. Finally, I would want students who have experience either from a part-time job or an internship. In the fiercely competitive broadcasting marketplace, students need both a comprehensive liberal arts education and thorough technical training to succeed (p. 23).

It is common in the research 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). An analysis by Hochheimer (1991) outlined four broad criticisms: too little emphasis on writing; too much emphasis on machinery; lack of liberal arts substance; and favoring the needs of industry over the needs of students. In previous surveys of broadcast journalists, writing skills ranked above performance and production techniques (Fisher, 1978). Fisher concluded that future professionals need more than skills training—they need the "mature understanding" that comes from a liberal arts education (p. 144). However, Porter and Szolka's survey of University of Missouri-Columbia undergraduates (1991) placed a liberal arts education at the bottom of a list of nine attributes. The attributes included such items as: enthusiasm and initiative, oral and written communication skills, professional experience and appearance, and technical training.

Broadcasting internships

Internships are an extension of journalism and broadcasting courses and an important part of the curriculum (Hilt, 1991). For some educators, internships have been the normal way for their students to receive initial professional training (Newton & Thien, 1993; Meeske, 1988a). While most professionals and educators agree that the practice could be improved (Hilt, 1991; Roper Study, 1988; Hyre & Owens, 1984), it remains the most common way for students to break into the field. College "experiences"—including media internships—do seem to help predict a graduate's success in the field: "... the specialized training of the universities and the provision of opportunities for role playing in the job through college media outlets and internships generally do seem to have a payoff for the student" (Becker, Kosicki, Engleman, & Viswanath, 1991, p. 19).

In one study of potential employers, college-related factors such as grade point average, university and program variables, and college media experience were considered along with the internship (Becker, Kosicki, Engleman, & Viswanath, 1991). In the end, the authors admitted, success of college graduates depends mostly upon factors that have not or cannot be measured. If one treats the graduate as a product of university training to be marketed to the profession (Elmore, 1981), then there are a variety of other possible reasons a candidate would appear suitable for employment. For example, physical appearance and personality should not be ignored, nor should job application skills (Elmore, 1981).

Broadcast general managers and news directors say they consider a combination of professional skills and a liberal arts education when hiring an employee. A two-state survey found that "higher percentages of broadcast general managers saw dedication of newsroom employees as very important, while higher percentages of news directors responded that writing skills and news judgment were very important" (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1993, p. 18). A national survey found general managers and news directors in agreement on the variables used in hiring a newsroom employee (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1994). From a list of 12 items, the two groups responded that communication skills, self-motivation, dedication, and news judgment were most important. Next, in order of importance, were on-air presence, personality, voice quality, physical appearance, broadcast news experience, and audition tape quality. The least important items were college degree and college major.

Previous research on these issues has focused either on what media employers want from a new employee, or on what professors and their students feel they need. The present study attempted to compare the views of employers with those of potential employees.

The research questions for this study were:

1. Were interns' views on newsroom hiring different from those of broadcast managers?
2. Were interns' views on career preparation different from those of broadcast managers?

Method

Undergraduate communication students at an urban midwestern university were surveyed during the last week of their internships from 1993 to 1995. Nearly all (97%) of the students were juniors or seniors enrolled in a required internship course. 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. 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. Of the 66 students, 48 (72.7%) completed a broadcast internship and 18 (27.3%) completed a journalism internship. 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 12 newsroom hiring items, and six statements concerning career preparation. Beyond the hiring and career preparation questions, students were also asked about whether internships should be required. They also provided basic demographic information.

The intern responses were compared to broadcast manager and news director responses from a 1992 mail survey. These two sets of responses were compared because a majority of the students in this study were majoring in broadcasting with an intent to work in that field. Beyond this, some print journalism majors expressed an interest in broadcasting. The nature of this university's program was that similarities between print and broadcast journalism were emphasized, and students were prepared for entering either work environment.

The intern data were compared to the responses offered by broadcast general managers and news directors (N=151, response rate = 36.3%) in the national mail survey conducted in 1992, a study that found the two groups nearly identical in their responses concerning newsroom hiring and career preparation variables (Hilt & Lipschultz, 1994).

The broadcast managers were randomly selected from those listed in Broadcasting G- Cable Market Place. 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.

Results

The interns in this study were predominantly white and in their 20s. The intern respondents were split on gender— 54.5 percent were male, 45.5 percent were female. Sixty-one percent of the respondents were paid for their internship, while 39 percent worked at an unpaid internship. Fifty-nine percent of the

respondents spent 12 hours or less a week at their internship, and 41 percent spent more than 12 hours at the internship. Additionally, most of the respondents (83%) had a full or part-time job. In general, the intern respondents were younger and less likely to be males than the previously-surveyed broadcast managers.

All intern respondents (N=66) supported requiring internships in their degree program. Internships were seen as one way to acquire employment experience. More than 59 percent of the interns agreed that previous broadcast news experience was important when a company hires a newsroom employee. Further, nearly 97 percent of all intern respondents agreed that internships prepare future broadcasters and journalists.

In order to answer the first research question concerning the students' views toward newsroom hiring variables, the interns responded to 12 statements. The pattern of their responses was similar to the views of broadcast managers found in previous surveys. Both groups considered writing, listening, oral communication skills, self-motivation, and dedication very important.

Both groups considered news judgment, on-air presence, and personality as important hiring variables. There was less agreement among both groups that voice quality, physical appearance, broadcast news experience, audition tape quality, college degree, and college major were critical in newsroom hiring decisions.

On three of the 12 items, there were statistically significant differences between broadcasters and interns. Broadcast managers were more likely than interns to place greater emphasis on news judgment. On the other hand, the interns placed greater emphasis on college degree and college major than broadcast managers. To answer the second research question, the interns also responded to six statements concerning career preparation.

Both groups strongly agreed that colleges should teach students hands-on skills. On five of the six items, the interns were more favorable toward higher education than the broadcast managers. However, broadcast managers were more likely to support the idea that a broad liberal arts education is valuable.

On two items, "Colleges adequately prepare students." and "Students learn adequate hands-on skills in college," broadcast managers were more likely than the interns to disagree. In general, the interns were more favorable about their college education than the broadcast managers.

Discussion

It is noteworthy to reiterate that every intern in this study responded that colleges should require internships for journalism and broadcasting majors. One senior intern said, "I feel it is highly important (that) everyone interested in the field does one or two.' Another senior intern said, "My internship has given me new hope in actually finding a job in my field of study." The experience was best summarized by a 23-year-old senior as she completed an unpaid internship:

They are very valuable. I've improved greatly in writing, shooting, and editing news stories. College classes are a good start, but you need that extra experience of a "real-world" situation and environment. You can only receive this through an internship.

Clearly, undergraduates completing an internship tended to support the experience. They suggested that there are elements of the newsroom experience that cannot be learned in the classroom. By the end of an internship, most students have learned that industry experience is necessary to land an entry-level job.

This study attempted to survey student interns and place their responses within the context of what professionals have said about the college experience. The results of this study indicated that neither broadcast managers nor interns placed as much importance on the college major as they did on other variables. Still, interns agree that the college major was an important newsroom hiring variable, while broadcasters, as a group, fell on the disagrees side of neutral. Both broadcasters and interns considered a college degree less important than other variables, but still important.

In general, this group of interns was more favorable in their perceptions of the value of college, while broadcast managers favored broad liberal arts education coupled with news judgment. If it is true that a college degree is now a "minimum requirement" for entry into journalism or broadcasting, then a mixture of theory and practice probably best serves the student. While liberal arts education is valued by professionals, an internship is the bridge to a career. A program that requires its students to take at least one internship for credit might better prepare them for an employer's expectations.

When the internship comes toward the end of a college student's degree program, the intern may be able to benefit from the "mature understanding" liberal arts internship experience, as many of the students responded, should help a college graduate find work.

The results should be read cautiously because of the limitations in this study. The study did not address what the students thought of internships prior to their experiences. We also have not studied or observed what takes place during an internship. The responses of the interns and the managers were self-reported perceptions. It should be emphasized that the intern data from one midwestern urban university are exploratory. This particular program emphasizes both print and broadcast journalism training under the broad umbrella of a department of communication. This is not always the case. It could be argued that future research should isolate print and broadcast journalism students, and compare them to their professional counterparts. The present data, however, do not suggest the likelihood of large differences in response to hiring and career variables.

Regardless, it is clear that educators need to better understand internships within the larger evaluation of academic programs. As the assessment movement forges ahead in American higher education (Haley & Jackson, 1995), internships may surface as a key component in establishing the effectiveness of teaching, and establishing the link between a college communication program and its employer constituents. By requiring journalism or broadcasting students to complete a relevant internship, educators may enhance the quality of the student's learning experience. By listening to past industry criticisms of journalism and broadcasting higher education, and by implementing changes that will enhance hands-on experiences without diluting the liberal arts curriculum, we are being more responsive to our students' needs. In the past, the debate between journalists and college faculty has focused on differences. The main question on the table seems to have been: Should students be taught journalism or broadcasting skills as part of their college degree? Perhaps the question ought to be: What is the proper mix of liberal arts, theory, and skills for would-be broadcasters or journalists? It is fair to say that a student who comes out of college with a broad liberal arts education, strong communication skills, a desire to succeed, and some hands-on industry internship training has an advantage in landing a job in a highly competitive field.

TABLE 1
A COMPARISON OF BROADCASTERS' AND INTERNS'
VIEWS ON NEWSROOM HIRING VARIABLES

<i>Item</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Prob</i>
Writing, listening & oral communication skills	Broadcasters	148	4.75	.54	-0.50	n.s.
	Interns	66	4.76	.47		
Self-motivation	Broadcasters	148	4.61	.58	-1.90	n.s.
	Interns	66	4.77	.42		
Dedication	Broadcasters	147	4.50	.65	0.27	n.s.
	Interns	66	4.47	.56		
News judgment	Broadcasters	147	4.46	.69	2.37	.019
	Interns	66	4.24	.66		
On-air presence	Broadcasters	148	4.24	.64	1.51	n.s.
	Interns	66	4.06	.68		
Personality	Broadcasters	148	4.09	.67	0.35	n.s.
	Interns	66	4.11	.66		
Voice quality	Broadcasters	148	3.94	.70	0.29	n.s.
	Interns	66	3.89	.83		
Physical appearance	Broadcasters	147	3.68	.75	0.70	n.s.
	Interns	66	3.58	.91		
Broadcast news experience	Broadcasters	148	3.68	.89	0.51	n.s.
	Interns	66	3.67	.85		
Audition tape quality	Broadcasters	148	3.66	.85	-0.45	n.s.
	Interns	66	3.76	.84		
College degree	Broadcasters	148	3.51	1.01	-2.90	.004
	Interns	66	3.94	.98		
College major	Broadcasters	148	2.83	.89	-5.66	.000
	Interns	66	3.65	.89		

The twelve items were measured utilizing a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The broadcast managers were surveyed in October 1992. The students were surveyed at the end of their internships from 1993 to 1995. The t values are pooled variance estimates. Statistical significance was determined utilizing a two-tailed probability test at the .05 level.

TABLE 2
A COMPARISON OF BROADCASTERS' AND INTERNS'
VIEWS ON CAREER PREPARATION

<i>Item</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Prob</i>
Colleges should teach	Broadcasters	151	4.25	.81	-3.22	.001
students hands-on skills	Interns	66	4.67	.48		
Internships prepare future	Broadcasters	151	3.85	.83	-5.46	.000
broadcasters/journalists	Interns	66	4.52	.56		
A broad liberal arts	Broadcasters	151	3.92	.81	2.00	.047
education is valuable	Interns	66	3.58	.93		
A college degree is	Broadcasters	151	3.03	1.23	-3.85	.000
essential for a career	Interns	66	3.64	.99		
Colleges adequately	Broadcasters	151	2.40	.91	-8.35	.000
prepare students	Interns	66	3.58	.70		
Students learn adequate	Broadcasters	151	2.51	.99	-4.80	.000
hands-on skills in college	Interns	66	3.29	.96		

The six items were measured utilizing a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The broadcast managers were surveyed in October 1992. The students were surveyed at the end of their internships from 1993 to 1995. The t values are pooled variance estimates. Statistical significance was determined utilizing a two-tailed probability test at the .05 level.

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