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Corporations: An Untapped Resource for Higher Education Administrators Who Seek to Enhance Student Learning

Jonathon H. Jankowski¹

Higher education currently has a strict focus on the personal, intellectual, and social development of students. However, little attention is given to student development after college, particularly, to students who enter the "real world" and choose to work for a corporation. Colleges and corporations need to work together to assist students during the transition out of college and into the corporate workplace. Internships provide one means of cooperation between the two parties. This paper will explore how colleges and corporations can enhance student development and better prepare students for a post-collegiate corporate career.

Introduction

For many students interested in pursuing employment at a corporation, attending college serves as a precursor to a professional career. Modern American culture has proven that a college education is a useful tool for a person who seeks to enter the professional job market (Oedel & Zemsky, 1994). This fact is further exemplified by the number of corporate employment opportunities that require candidates to hold a college degree and by the number of corporations that recruit employees from college campuses.

The transition from college to the "real world" can be as difficult as the period when students enter college. Many students experience fear, anxiety, and apprehension when entering college. A few years later, these emotions often return as students prepare to graduate from college and begin a corporate career. An open dialogue between colleges and corporations can create a smooth transition into the "real world."

This article will look at how internship programs can unite colleges and corporations in a partnership focused on enhancing student learning. It will address how both parties mutually benefit from the partnership. It will speak to the author's personal experience of corporate involvement in student development. Finally, the article will conclude by showcasing the Walt Disney World College Program, an internship opportunity that exemplifies the synergy between colleges and corporations.

A Rude Awakening

Fear, anxiety, and the numerous college staff members present, serve as my first memories of college. The staff members were directing traffic, assisting with residence hall check-in, and planning various events. As higher education administrators, we have all had the first-year student experience as both a student and an administrator. Many agree that being involved with a first-year student's personal growth is one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences a higher education administrator can experience. A satisfying first-year experience leads to greater student retention and greater campus involvement making the first year of college, arguably, one of the most critical times during a student's collegiate career (Astin, 1985).

It has been my experience that a lot of college administrator's attention is given to first-year students during the transition to college, while little attention is given to students as they prepare to graduate from college. Why is there this discrepancy? Why are college seniors not nurtured to the same degree as first-year students?

Many corporate professionals with whom I work tell me they were more nervous during their post-collegiate job search than they were when they began college. College administrators work to provide students with a sense of comfort and support during their time at college. This helps the college reduce attrition rates and provide for happy customers (the students). On the other hand, life after college is full of self-reliance and autonomy. After college there is no dining hall

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to cook meals, creditors expect student loan payments to be sent on time, and if one makes an error at work it can cost a person his or her job.

The Real World Transition

How can we as higher education administrators assist students during their transition from college to the "real world?" One way is to provide programs for seniors about how to manage finances, how to find a job, and how to find an apartment. I believe the best means for higher education administrators to expose students to a professional, corporate environment (among other professional settings) is to encourage students to infiltrate career environments during their collegiate years. An internship is one method for students to gain exposure into the corporate arena.

I believe it is the role of all higher education administrators who work with students to seek out internship opportunities and create opportunities based upon the mission of the college and the mission of the company. Career counseling is the responsibility of all administrators who work with students, not solely those who work in the career development office. As a student, I wanted to see my college taking a proactive position in seeking out and creating unique internship opportunities. I expected my college to provide alternative learning opportunities to enhance the college experience and better train me for a job after college. If these efforts are implemented, they will not only magnify student learning but also equip students with the tools needed for the professional environment. Moreover, unique learning opportunities will allow a college to be more competitive relative to other colleges of the same size and similar mission.

Student Development Through Internships

Colleges provide corporations with a steady flow of young, energetic, and educated employees. While colleges train students in business theory and analysis, many students lack the professional experience that is helpful when starting a career at a company. This often forces corporations to provide extensive, often costly, training about company philosophies and practices. Internships provide this type of training. Corporations realize that students who have a positive experience during their internship may return to work for the company after college (Oedel & Zemsky, 1994). Therefore, corporations view an investment in college internships as an investment in the company's future.

Problem Solving. Internship opportunities help to teach students how to think "outside the box" in a professional environment. The internship exposes students to a variety of problem-solving techniques, as the problems are being analyzed and resolved in a practical environment. Eric Erikson (1968) theorized that the more challenges a student is forced to overcome, the more the student will learn. Therefore, a student will learn more if they are given internships that provide unique challenges.

Many students are at a developmental stage where they observe problems in a dualistic frame of mind; they see problems as having only two possible resolutions (Perry, 1998). An important step to viewing problems is to move from a dualistic paradigm to a relative frame of reference where students are able to recognize areas of uncertainty and explore alternative solutions beyond those found within a dualistic framework. Rather than solving a problem for a personal goal of a grade, in the corporate environment, the student is solving a problem which will benefit other employees while impacting the company's operations. Some decisions made by students can directly affect the company's "bottom-line."

Ethical Dilemmas. Managers are often required to solve problems with ethical components. Managers need to balance the ethical standards of the company with their personal ethical values. Lawrence Kohlberg (1972) theorized that students approach a moral decision from three possible perspectives: a self-centered perspective, relative to the moral beliefs of others, or from a sociological point of view. The more moral dilemmas students encounter, the more chances they have to learn and develop their analytical skills. Students are exposed to moral dilemmas in the corporate environment that they often do not experience in a classroom setting. A student enrolled in a corporate internship can observe how managers analyze problems; and he/she can rely on the ideas of other team members when making critical ethical decisions.

Theory to Practice. Utilizing "theory to practice" is essential to enhancing students' learning experiences (Strange, 1987). Internships allow students to apply what they are learning in the classroom to practices in a corporation. It is this theory to practice component that makes the college-corporate experience significant to student development. Students learn the skills and tools in college while the corporation helps the student put those tools to use. Students will be better equipped for a post-collegiate career if given more tools and training during college.

Self-esteem. The internship also provides an opportunity for students to enhance their self-esteem. Many students struggle with self-esteem issues as they try to succeed in college and also determine a career path. Some students may not be as successful in college as they would like to be (Crook, 1984). The student, unable to achieve his or her goals in the classroom relative to his or her peers, may excel in the corporate environment. A successful internship can heighten students self-esteem, making them more confident as they search for a job after college. In addition, the success a student experiences through a corporate internship can motivate him or her to return to the company that provided the positive experience during the internship.

Social Development. Social development is also enhanced by an internship experience. The social interactions in a corporation provide students with the opportunity to network and make connections with a number of professionals throughout the company. They learn how communication is dictated and how employees from different departments collaborate on cross-functional teams. This type of communication cannot be learned in the classroom. Students also gain insight into company politics and the role social interactions play in corporate practices (Moore, 1983).

It is my position that one of the primary benefits of an internship is the opportunity students have to determine the career path they would like to pursue after college. For instance, Jade Blackford (2001) writes about her internship experience as an electrical engineer at the Boeing Company. Blackford's positive experience led her to return to college to complete her electrical engineering degree and to obtain a full-time position at Boeing after college. During her internship, she was introduced to various employees from across the company. These networking opportunities led to the development of many professional relationships. These relationships were a source of support and inspiration during her pursuit of a corporate career. As Blackford states, "there were many places in Wichita where I could have worked, but after having a positive experience as an Intern at Boeing, I knew that I wanted to work [there] permanently" (<http://www.campuscareercenter.com/students>).

A Uniquely "Magical" Experience

Many companies offer experiences for college students during their collegiate tenure. Some schools require internships as part of the curriculum. Northeastern University, for example, mandates that a student reserve one semester per year for an internship in his or her respective major (Undergraduate Admissions - Northeastern University, <http://www.admissions.neu.edu/Coop.html>, 2001).

Corporations provide varying degrees of internships. Some internships allow students to work in departments as office assistants, while others allow students to complete company-critical tasks such as creating and analyzing reports or providing feedback on decisions that need to be made. Other internships incorporate the educational and social theories and philosophies practiced by colleges. The Walt Disney World College Program exemplifies an internship that provides a professional working experience while also utilizing the educational and social theories utilized on many college campuses.

The Walt Disney World College Program

The Walt Disney World College Program (2000) began in 1981 with approximately 200 students from 30 colleges and universities around the country. Today, the College Program enrolls approximately 6,000 students from over 350 colleges and universities. This growth exemplifies the success of the College Program and the positive response from students and college administrators (The Walt Disney World College Program, 2000).

The College Program recognizes the success of college theory and incorporates the components of the college experience that seek to maximize students' education. Colleges are designed around a bifurcation of student learning: a valuable learning experience in the classroom and a quality living experience in the campus community. Similarly, the College Program provides a living and learning component while also giving students the opportunity to work at Walt Disney World. Administrators of the College Program view the students as customers by consistently treating students with "Disney Magic" as if they were guests of Walt Disney World.

Students enrolled in the College Program and corporate executives in Walt Disney World's human resources office both agree that the goals of the College Program are clear: (1) learn as much on the job as possible; (2) make many professional contacts; (3) apply the information learned in the classroom to the job; (4) have fun (Michael Almeida, personal communication, December 5, 2001). The College Program strives to provide the following core competencies:

- Build transferable skills including interpersonal, problem solving, writing and verbal communication;
- Explore network opportunities;
- Experience educational resources that couple academic theory with the Walt Disney World Resort management expertise;
- Experience business practices in a variety of fields all within one Fortune 100 company (Watson, 2001);
- Develop relationships with peers from across the globe.

Living. It may sound unorthodox for a residential life program rooted in student development to be found within a corporation, but Walt Disney World has pioneered the ability to make the College Program's apartment complexes truly feel like a college campus. Walt Disney World recognizes what student affairs administrators have known for decades, that a positive living experience will enhance personal growth (Residential College Task Force, 1998). The apartment complexes are dedicated to participants of both the College Program and the international student program. The housing complex staff places an emphasis on providing programs to enhance social, personal, and cultural growth. Like college residential life and student activities offices, the College Program utilizes a vast number of social development theories to create a community of learners. Educational, social, professional, and volunteer programs are provided to enhance social interactions and community development. Walt Disney World has even created a resident assistant-type program to assist students with their transition from college to the internship. The resident assistants, known as Residential Community Advisors, are alumni/ae of the College Program, trained to counsel students about roommate conflicts, homesickness, and career planning (The Walt Disney World College Program, 2000).

Learning. The College Program provides optional classes to enhance students' intellectual development. The classes provide students with an opportunity to learn about the skills needed to succeed in the business environment. Examples of classes are: "Disney Communications Course," "Disney ExpEARiential Learning Course," and the "Disney Organizational Leadership Course." The classes offered are accredited by the American Council on Education (The Walt Disney World College Program, 2000), which allows students the opportunity to receive credit from their primary institutions. The College Program does not provide direct credit.

Similar to the living component, Walt Disney World infuses critical pedagogy into the classes they offer. Classes are conducted as business meetings with emphasis placed on strict attendance and proper business attire. Instructors are full-time faculty members who undergo intensive training. The learning objectives, required reading, homework, and group projects for each class are outlined in the class' syllabus. Grades are given as pass/fail (70% and higher is passing) for the successful completion of quality assignments, attendance, and participation (The Walt Disney World College Program, 2000). Classroom discussions must follow Walt Disney World's R.A.V.E. guideline-Respect, Appreciate, and Value Everyone.

Earning. The work component is at the core of the College Program experience. The Walt Disney World College Program philosophy is to allow students to experience direct theory to practice. Students perform hands-on activities with guests to understand how management theory impacts customer satisfaction (The Walt Disney World College Program, 2000). Students are able to recognize and implement the theory learned in college and the theory learned in the College Program, as they observe managers live the theories each day. The job further provides funding for rent and other personal expenses. This teaches students how to manage a budget in the "real world."

Students also have the opportunity to observe how other departments in the company implement the Walt Disney World philosophy. College Program participants are encouraged to network and explore various career opportunities within the company, such as Advanced Internship opportunities. A student may be working in merchandising but realize a desire to learn more about international marketing. The student is encouraged to connect with people in the international marketing department and arrange a networking opportunity.

Networking opportunities not only expose students to a variety of professional roles; they help the company train potential future employees. Prior working experience in the company may allow the student to re-enter the company after graduation in a role observed during the internship. Returning to a known working environment reduces student anxiety about finding a job and entering an unknown workplace. The company benefits because the student requires little additional training and can adapt to the new role more quickly than a person who is unfamiliar with the company.

Conclusion

Student development does not end once students graduate from college. During the transition into the "real world," higher education administrators, in partnership with corporations, need to work together to guide students who intend to work for a corporation. The ideal internship should be an extension of the college experience by providing a platform where students can apply what they have learned in the classroom to practical situations in a company.

For a student interested in pursuing a corporate career, a corporate internship accomplishes a number of goals. Corporations benefit by exposing students to the skills needed in the corporate environment. Corporations also benefit by having the opportunity to recruit students who have previously worked at the company and are already familiar with the company's business practices. This saves the company money in recruiting and training costs. Colleges benefit by learning the skills that corporations require. Colleges also gain more theory-to-practice learning opportunities for future students. Most of all, students benefit by having more learning experiences during college and an opportunity to return to the company upon graduation, thus creating a smooth transition for the student as he or she graduates from college.

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