

EXPECTATIONS OF FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES UNDERGRADUATE INTERNS

**Kyla Olson, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Bette Montgomery, University of Nebraska - Lincoln**

Internships are one educational method by which Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) professionals are prepared. A phenomenological approach was used to examine the experiences of FCS undergraduate students' internship experiences. Three major themes are identified regarding students' professional expectations: the internship experience matched, exceeded, or mismatched their expectations. Case studies are used to illustrate each of these themes.

Individuals are often prepared for professional work through experiential learning opportunities, such as internships. Frequently Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) teacher educators also serve in the role of internship coordinator and are responsible for facilitating students' learning through internship experiences. Within professional preparation the purpose of an internship should be the professional development and growth of the student. In actual practice, however, the emphasis of the internship may be the completion of work tasks or projects with little emphasis placed on students' development (Montgomery, 1999). Therefore, there is a need to better understand internships as a method for preparing individuals for professional work in FCS. The purpose of this paper is to highlight literature related to the internship as a form of experiential learning and to report the findings of a study conducted on the nature of the internship as experienced by FCS undergraduate students.

The Internship as a Learning Experience

Experiential learning is the means by which an individual builds linkages among education, work, and personal dimensions (Kolb, 1984). It also "empowers individuals to gain control over their learning and hence their lives, and to take responsibility for themselves" (Griffin, 1992, p. 32). Although experiential learning is viewed as important, and there is interest in providing students opportunities for internships as part of their educational program, there has been very little research devoted to the study of internships broadly or within the profession of FCS. Meaningful experientially-based internships are important to professional development. Internships are generally perceived as successful, however, if the experience engages students in work and if it is perceived as having a positive outcome by the participants (Bell, & Haley, 1995; Eyler, 1995). There are many variables which may contribute to the positive outcomes, or success, of an experience. Bead and Morton (1999) identified six predictors of success in internships. These include the student's academic preparation, proactiveness, positive attitude, and compensation received for the experience, such as academic credit or payment. Predictors of success also included quality of work site supervision and organizational practices and policies that structure the internship.

Martin (2000) suggested that students' expectations about the FCS profession are not always clear, however, they are a factor in the success of an internship. Academic preparation should include a dialogue about the expectations related to professional work in FCS. If students have realistic expectations they are more likely to have positive experiences; however, a discrepancy between expectations and the actual experience leads to negative outcomes (Cole &

Knowles, 1993; Feldman and Weitz, 1990; Walter & Marks, 1981). An internship is experienced through developmental stages beginning with the expectations or anticipation of what will happen and potential disillusionment regarding what really does happen in the internship (Swietzer and King, 1999).

Undergraduate students may or may not have prior experiences which help to clarify their expectations regarding professional work. If students are preparing to be teachers, they “. . . bring with them beliefs, attitudes, ideals, influences and expectations developed over years of life experience and exposure to a wide variety of teaching-learning situations and contexts” (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 458-459). Students’ career expectations are also influenced by work or volunteer experiences (Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Luzzo, McWhirter & Hutcheson, 1997). However, students may not have had experiences which prepare them to be human services workers, community educators, or consumer advisors.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of FCS undergraduate learners in an internship program. This study examined the broad question: What is the nature of the internship experience for undergraduate interns in FCS? Specific questions included: How do interns describe their expectations about their internship experiences? What is the nature of these expectations? What is the role of expectations in the experiences of undergraduate interns?

Methodology and Sample

This study was concerned with understanding the lived experience of undergraduate interns. A phenomenological approach was used to direct the study. “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). One premise of a phenomenological approach is that “experience is a valid and fruitful source of knowledge (Becker, 1992, p. 10).

The sample for this study included seven students enrolled in a three-credit semester internship course. Each student completed approximately 150 hours in the internship experience. Students also attended class meetings every other week and completed written assignments. Students were purposefully selected for this study in order to represent the diversity of all students enrolled in the course, including both males and females, traditional and non-traditional age students, and various majors. Majors included one student in Family Financial Management, four students in Family Science, and two students in FCS Education.

Data was collected in various forms including: an internship application (which was completed prior to the beginning of the semester), reflective journal entries (written by students each week throughout the semester), a final reflective paper completed at the conclusion of the semester, and an exit interview conducted after the internship was complete. Data was analyzed from the beginning of the study and continuously. Significant events were identified for each student and cross-case analysis was used to identify common themes.

Findings: Expectations and the Reality of the Experience

Students’ expectations and the reality of their actual internship experience were identified through the qualitative data. Three primary themes emerged:

1. The reality of the experience matched the student’s expectations,
2. The reality of the experience exceeded the expectations held by the student, and
3. The reality of the experience mismatched the expectations held by the student.

Based on data analysis, each student in the study fit into one of these three categories. These themes are illustrated by the following case studies.

Matched Expectations: Dave and Phyllis.

Students who matched expectations experienced a ‘fit’ between what they thought would happen and what they perceived actually happened in the internship regarding their professional roles. Dave was a student majoring in Family Financial Management. From the beginning he seemed very confident about his choice of an internship site. He had been working as a part-time teller at a local bank prior to his internship. He sought out and secured an internship placement in the auditing department at the same bank. He selected a site supervisor he thought would be supportive of his work.

Dave’s major expectation was to ‘build his resume’ by gaining professional experiences through the internship. This idea of building his resume recurred throughout the semester. In a journal entry he wrote “I started to type up my resume and I think this experience will look good for future employers.” In his final paper reflecting upon his semester goals he indicated “My goal really stayed constant; I just wanted to learn as much as I could in order to gain knowledge for the future and my resume.” Building his knowledge base was an important expectation in order to give him future job advantage.

[My internship has] allowed me to learn more about banking, the financial side, and put it on my resume . . . Hopefully, it gives me a better advantage than other people who have applied for the same job, that I have had more experience and at least have a grasp about what is going on. So hopefully that will look a little better than just the average Joe that just went through college and didn’t do anything but study . . . That would give me an edge. (Dave, Exit Interview)

While Dave’s expectations were matched by the actual experience, it is interesting to note that it was more difficult than he expected.

I just expected to go there and learn and everything would fall into place. . . As I started . . . I thought ‘This is going to be a piece of cake.’ . . . I was a bit gullible going in, but everything went into place, my work hours, and my school schedule, so I could go in a couple of hours here, an hour there.

Overall, Dave had a very satisfactory experience and matched his expectation of building his resume by adding new experiences and knowledge to his already existing knowledge of his professional role.

Phyllis also experienced a match in her expectations. Phyllis appeared to be very satisfied with her internship experience. She had become interested in helping with the grief support group at her church. Initially, Phyllis thought that she would be a part of a three-person team leading the support group. However, when the experience began, she discovered that the other two volunteers were unable to participate. At this point she altered her expectations and developed a plan to conduct the support group as an individual facilitator. She seemed to adjust to this change and to be very satisfied with her experience. Phyllis summarized the experience during her exit interview by saying:

I'd like to say that the experience was very [good]. It was a tough semester but all in all it was a very good experience knowing that I helped some people and it was fun to watch their progress, to see them grow. You could tell as time went by, fewer and fewer Kleenexes were used at the group so you know people were getting stronger. . . . Personally it has been a good place for me to be this semester, helping me to work through some personal loss in my life. . . . I'm very glad that I have had this experience and it's been very rewarding. (Phyllis, Exit Interview)

Phyllis appeared to grow both professionally and personally through her internship experience. The internship matched her expectations to have an experience that allowed her to facilitate a grief support group and to observe growth in the lives of the attendees.

Exceeded Expectations: Jean and Margo.

The second theme emerged when students' expectations were exceeded in the internship experience. Jean was a non-traditional student majoring in Family Science. She completed her internship at an outpatient counseling facility for individuals' with chemical dependency and mental health problems. Her site supervisor had never supervised an intern before.

Jean's previous volunteer and practicum experiences in counseling were considered valuable by the site and she was given more responsibility than undergraduates usually were given in a similar setting. Jean expressed dissatisfaction, however, with a previous practicum experience.

I can honestly say that I did not take away anything meaningful or useful from [my prior practicum] experience -- which is in contrast to the present experience. Essentially all I did was make phone calls, that's all I did. Make phone calls and file some things and those were not the types of experiences I was after. I think that it was a situation where the person that I was working with really didn't know what to do with me . . . (Jean, Exit Interview)

This unsatisfactory experience motivated Jean to seek out a position which would fully meet her needs. She had particular criteria in mind for the types of practice in which she would be engaged:

. . . Something specific with regard to counseling, therapy, and direct contact with clients. Those were the types of things that I viewed as meaningful and the types of things that would help me to develop. (Jean, Exit Interview)

She also described learning both professionally and personally from her internship position. It was in regard to personal development that Jean exceeded the expectations for her experience.

I didn't expect to take away so much on a personal level from this [experience]. I expected to gain professional skills, to see and learn and understand, process some of what was going on. It would help my professional development . . . But what I didn't expect . . . [was] the degree of personal development that has gone along with that. . . . It was every good thing I expected in terms of professional

development but the personal growth and development from it was the ‘and more.’ It was over and above. It was that extra part that allows me to say that this was an incredible experience for me. (Jean, Exit Interview)

Jean’s outstanding experience exceeded her expectations. From the beginning she was determined to experience a professional role in a counseling setting. Jean set out to find an internship placement which would provide the experience that she wanted and ultimately she found an internship that met her expectations for professional development and went beyond her expectations for personal development.

Margo seemed to have a very satisfying internship experience. When she set out to find a placement, Margo knew that she wanted to work for the corporate office which owned the restaurant where she had been an employee for three years. She approached the director of operations with her ideas and together they developed Margo’s internship. Margo had an experience that exceeded her expectations. She described the following event as her professional turning point:

Looking back at my internship experience I can remember many daily affirmations of my professionalism. I feel like I was continually receiving feedback on my progress and development as a professional in the office. My personal turning point as a professional occurred late in my internship experience. This particular turning point for me was when I was offered the opportunity to continue working in the office as an administrative assistant and training coordinator following the end of my internship and graduation. It was a tremendous feeling knowing that I had made a professional impression during my internship experience, which lead [my site supervisor] to ask me to stay as a part of the management report team for [the organization]. (Margo, Final Paper)

Margo’s foresight to seek out the specific internship placement that she wanted paid off in the end. Throughout the semester, she described a rewarding experience that was beyond her expectations. It is evident that receiving and accepting an offer for permanent employment made this an excellent experience for Margo.

Mismatched Expectations: Nicole, Sara and Keesha.

The third theme which emerged represents a mismatch of students’ expectations. These are illustrated by three students’ experiences that each resulted in different outcomes. While Nicole’s expectations were not an initial match, she was able to overcome these differences and have a satisfactory experience. Sara and Keesha, however, also experienced a mismatch of expectations but were not able to overcome this discrepancy.

Nicole was majoring in FCS education and also pursuing teacher certification. She chose to complete an internship to increase her opportunities for future employment after graduation. Her internship was completed in a nonprofit foundation which supported youth programming. The site supervisor had experience in working with interns previously.

Nicole agreed to work at the site before she had an in-depth discussion with the site supervisor regarding the focus of her work. Early on, Nicole formulated her own concept of what her internship would be like and she believed she would be working directly with youth. Her expectations were based on her own experiences as a participant in the program as an

adolescent. Her discussions with the site supervisor clarified the position and altered her expectations.

When I got there, I found out that I was going to be raising money for the foundation. Right away I was really hesitant because [I thought] maybe I've gotten into something that I really don't want to do. . . . This was more . . . in the business world or sense than what I thought it was going to be. (Nicole, Exit Interview)

However, although there was an initial mismatch, Nicole seemed to alter her expectations as she wrote in her journal at the beginning of the semester:

I am looking forward to the rest of the semester and working with the talented staff here at [the site]. I think leadership breeds leadership and there are many talented people whom I can learn from . . . I think this will be a great learning experience as well as a possible future job. (Nicole, Journal Entry).

When asked if she would make any changes in her experience, Nicole indicated she would do it all again. It appears that once Nicole had the opportunity to clarify her expectations at the beginning of her internship, she was able to experience a match between her expectations and reality.

Sara also experienced a mismatch of her expectations, but in contrast to Nicole, was unable to overcome these differences. Sara was majoring in Family Science. She sought an internship placement within the area of social services because she was contemplating an entry-level job in this field upon graduation. For her internship position, she agreed to work with a program which provided assistance to low-income new mothers.

Sara actually started her internship before the site supervisor began her position within the agency, and before a clear position description had been developed. While her site supervisor had no experience in working with interns, other persons in the agency had worked with interns previously. By the time she first interacted with her site supervisor, Sara had already determined her expectations and what she would and would not do in the experience.

[The site supervisor] asked me what I would like to accomplish through this experience, I responded by telling her that I wanted to be active in coordinating and improving the utilization of the agency. . . [The site supervisor stated one responsibility] . . . would be to assess the needs of these moms-to-be or new mothers. However, I will only do this assessment in the office. In the past they have sent the intern out for home visits to assess the living conditions . . . Alarms went off in my head. First of all, I would never put myself at risk by going into a home I didn't know. Secondly, I am not trained to do so, and those that are, [such as caseworkers] go with a chaperone. This made me feel very uncomfortable that they would ask me to do this. It isn't my job position to do home visits. My job is the organization of outreach educational programming to enhance parenting skills and to locate resources of less fortunate or uneducated women. (Sara, Journal Entry)

The intention of the site supervisor was to provide a full experience for Sara regarding the roles and responsibilities of the agency by doing client assessments. Although Sara did eventually accompany another caseworker, she refused to take on this responsibility independently. She stated in a journal entry “I feel as though they are pushing me into something I’ve stated I don’t and won’t do.” During the exit interview, she continued to discuss the discrepancy between the expectations of the agency and her own comfort level.

. . . I really did not feel comfortable independently going into someone’s house. That’s just not for me. That was kind of a point of conflict because the whole agency is like ‘This is what we do.’ And I said, ‘This is not what I’m going to do.’ . . . I just didn’t think it was safe and then I started going on these visits with another person. I didn’t care. I just wanted another warm body with me. I started going in and I’m glad that someone was with me because I saw the environments in which most of our clients came from and I would not feel comfortable going in there by myself . . . I was just thrown in and didn’t feel comfortable with that. But then I started matching them up and doing the follow-ups and seeing how the program really worked and that was pretty beneficial. (Sara, Exit Interview)

Sara described this experience as changing her immediate career plans.

The more I became involved . . . I no longer thought this what I wanted to do, even for a year. Initially I did know that I did not want to make a career out of human services, but I felt as though the foundation in understanding family structure would allow me to administer better care to my future patients [as a nurse]. All I can say is that I was disillusioned. I don’t know what it was exactly, or whether it was a combination of different things. (Sara, Final Paper)

Overall, Sara seemed displeased with her experience. Based on her actual internship experience, Sara decided this was not the type of work she really wanted to do. Sara did express through her journal and interview that her internship experience helped her to clarify her future educational and career plans. Therefore, her internship was not entirely negative. The internship did fail, however, to meet Sara’s expectations. She seemed to be generally dissatisfied with the internship and appeared to be glad it was over.

Keesha seemed to struggle in her internship to do the type of work that she thought was of a professional nature. Through her first few reflective journal entries and discussions during the internship seminar, she expressed that she was doing mostly clerical work like copying, filing, answering phones, making phone calls, and drafting letters. Keesha became frustrated with her work because she expected her internship to be a professional experience. Keesha primarily shadowed her site supervisor and had little opportunity to assume an independent role in her internship. She summed up the lack of direction in her internship in her final paper:

Perhaps all of this confusion . . . was felt by both [my site supervisor] and myself . . . because of a lack of knowledge about each other and what we expected of each other. I think this happens to everyone once they enter a new position in the professional world. It is definitely a learning experience for both the employer

and the employee -- however, the employee must work 100 times harder to achieve the wanted results. (Keesha, Final Paper)

Overall, Keesha did not get the experience from her internship that she initially expected. She expected to assume a professional role during her internship; instead, she provided clerical support and shadowed the work of her site supervisor. Keesha did express that she liked the organization where she worked and that she was still interested in pursuing professional work in the field of family science.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of FCS internships as experienced by undergraduate students. An important finding of this study is the role that students' expectations played in their actual internship experience. Ideally, it would seem by this time in their career preparation students would know what to expect in their professional role. A match between expectations and the actual experience would seem to be the most desirable in order to achieve positive outcomes for the student. Students in this study who matched or exceeded their expectations appeared to be more proactive with well-developed plans regarding their internship experience. Bead and Morton (1999) identified both academic preparation and proactiveness as factors which contribute to success in internships. This preparation may include academic preparation, as defined by Bead and Morton, but may also include personal preparation related to one's career goals.

The findings of this study also suggest that a mismatch of expectations does not always result in negative outcomes. However, when changes do not occur that help alter expectations for the student, learning is likely to be more limited. While this may seem to be "common sense," students' expectations and the developmental process of internships have not been addressed within FCS research-based literature. Through academic preparation we can better assist students in recognizing and developing realistic expectations regarding an internship and professional work within FCS. Pre-internship experiences might include, for example, students mentored by FCS professionals, job shadowing experiences, structured interviews with professionals or additional practicum experiences in FCS related organizations. These activities may be part of existing course work and may better assist students if they occur over time rather than as one semester events.

We cannot assume that all undergraduate students approach and enter their internships with the same level of preparation and experiences. Students enter the experience with varied levels of understanding of professional knowledge and skills. Internships need to be approached individually in order to help students' clarify and examine their expectations. Both students and site supervisors need to have a clear understanding of their expectations before the internship begins. Helping students to more fully examine their expectations and focused discussions among the student, site supervisor and internship coordinator may further assist in helping students be successful in their internship.

Through multiple experiences to increase understanding of the profession, students may be able to more fully match their expectations with the reality of their actual internship experience. Continued examination, discussion, and development of the internship experience are essential to prepare new professionals. Further research might be conducted on identification of FCS professional competencies and unique skills, an examination of the role of the site supervisor in facilitating professional skills and knowledge, or an examination of traditional and

non-traditional students in FCS internship experiences. Internships are important to the preparation of FCS undergraduate students and require our ongoing attention as the profession continues to evolve.

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About the Authors

Kyla Olson, M.S., is a Graduate Research Assistant and Bette Montgomery, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences in the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.