

The Internship Experience:
Experiential Learning, Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Learning

by

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from theories of experiential learning and critical pedagogy this thesis uses a qualitative research design to assess student and faculty experiences and perceptions of student internships. Five focus groups with undergraduate and graduate college students and six semi-structured interviews with faculty were conducted. The data were analyzed to address major themes related to satisfaction, skills gained, barriers to internships, and transformative learning in applied settings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
Student Experiences	3
Experiential Education and Employers	4
Barriers	5
Faculty Experiences and Perceptions	6
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY	8
Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model	9
CRITICAL PEDAGOGY	10
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	13
METHODOLOGY	14
Focus Groups	14
Interviews	14
Participants	15
<i>Table 1: Demographics of participants (N=24)</i>	16
Data Collection and Transcription	17
Data Analysis	17
FINDINGS	18
The Internship Experience	18
Career Preparation and Real-world Experience	19
Skills	21
Professionalism and Work Ethic	22
Communication	23
Workplace Planning	23
Networking	24
Employment	25
Social Media	25

Barriers	26
Awareness	27
<i>Balancing Internships and Other Responsibilities</i>	28
<i>Empathy</i>	29
<i>Classroom Learning and Community Involvement</i>	30
Recommendations to Minimize Barriers	37
<i>Increasing awareness</i>	38
<i>Expanding internship databases</i>	40
DISCUSSION	41
CONCLUSION	46
Appendix A: IRB Approval	52
IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE	52
Student Focus Group Interview Guide	55
Appendix C	56
Faculty Interview Guide	56
Appendix D	57
Demographic/Learning Styles Survey	57

INTRODUCTION

Experiential learning practices are fast becoming a key instrument in career development and opportunities in the workforce. In today's competitive job market many college graduates are competing with people who already have work experience and most students will require up to a year to secure employment after graduation. Practical experiences through internships, applied practicums, and cooperative learning provide students with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience and improve their knowledge, skills, and professionalism in the workplace. Practical experiences beyond the classroom often give students a needed edge as well as an opportunity to create social networks that can provide them with employment opportunities (Chronicle of Higher Education 2015, NACE 2017; Swanson and Tomkovick 2012).

Internships are one of the most widely used forms of experiential learning and have been used successfully to allow students to assess satisfaction with prospective jobs (Yiu and Law 2012; O'Neill 2010; NACE 2017; NACE 2018). There are a number of existing studies on internships, including those on barriers to taking internships (Jackson 2014; Wilmore and Bratlien 2005; DiRenzo 2016) and the impact of positive faculty support on student satisfaction and completion of internships (Wu 2001; Nicholas 2016; Rodriguez-Mendendez et al. 2017). Most of the extant literature is based on student feedback whereas only a few studies have been conducted on faculty perceptions of internships and experiential learning practices (Wurdinger and Allison 2017). While most teachers will agree that education is an essential part of promoting active citizenship, there has been considerable debate about how students should be taught and how different teaching methodologies impact the way students learn and how knowledge is

gained (Marlow and Mclain 2016; Caufield and Woods 2013; Chavez 2007). This research seeks to add to the literature on the benefits of internships, barriers to pursuing internships, and how these barriers can be minimized to improve opportunities for students. Further, this study aims to add information to the ‘best practices’ on what makes a successful internship. Drawing from the literature on critical and engaged pedagogy I explore how a critical education in college provides students with the opportunity to bridge the gap between what they learn in the classroom and the real world through transformative hands-on experiences in the community. The research employs a two-part qualitative design using student focus groups and semi-structured faculty interview data. The triangulation of data can be used to explore how students and faculty describe their internship experiences, some of the common barriers to students for finding or participating in internship/practicum opportunities, and finally, the perceived impact of these experiences on skills gained, employment, and on transformative learning in local communities.

Questions addressed by the research include, how do students perceive their internship or practicum experiences and how do these prepare them for a career in the workforce or further professional or graduate training? What are the barriers to taking or completing internships? How have student intern experiences encouraged transformative learning and active citizenship? How do faculty who sponsor internships perceive satisfactory internship experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Experiences

Cox (2017) contends that the key to internships is to “help students put their experience into proper context through some sort of guided reflection and application process (p. 13).” He argues that internships “work best when they are a part of a systematic learning experience with well-designed learning objectives and due attention paid to helping students make connections between their in, and out of classroom experiences” (p. 13). The benefits of student internships and practica are well documented. As two of the most popular forms of experiential learning practices for students and teachers (Eyler 2009; Harrison 2017). The Association of Experiential Education defines experiential learning as a “philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposely engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people’s capacity to contribute to their communities” (www.aee.org/what-is-ee). Although it has been an under-utilized teaching method in the past, more professors and college curriculum programs are incorporating internships and practicum requirements.

A few studies suggest that motivating students throughout their internship experience improves their experience with companies and faculty and increases their satisfaction with their overall internship experiences (Coker and Porter 2015; Raman and Pashpati 2012; Sibthorp et al. 2011). Experiential learning provides students with critical thinking, communication, time management, cultural competence and collaboration skills that help them bridge the gap between theories learned in the classroom and community engagements outside of the classroom. Internships can also help students gain future employment and enhance learning. A qualitative study from Northwestern University

found that co-op experiences for students “helped them integrate the knowledge they gained in the classroom to their work responsibilities and motivated them to complete their tasks” (Simon et al. 2010:14). The study found that 97% of students reported applying skills they learned in the classroom to their co-op placement. In addition to providing students with the skills needed to become productive members of society and enter the workforce, internships reportedly provided students with the confidence to do their jobs successfully or to pursue a graduate degree (Simon et al. 2010; Cedercreutz and Cates 2010). While internships provide students with a wide array of benefits and opportunities many students cannot participate in internships and take advantage of these opportunities.

Experiential Education and Employers

The Chronicle for Higher education surveyed 500 nationwide employers to determine how well colleges are preparing students for a career in the workforce after graduation (2012). Results from the study indicated that internship experience was “the single most important credential for recent college graduates to have on their resume” when looking for employment. Other studies found that employers are more likely to hire students who have internship experience than those who do not (Benzing 2004; NACE 2010; Knouse, Tanner and Harris 1999; Eyler 2009). A similar nationwide study conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) indicated that 42.3% of college seniors with internship experience before graduation received at least one job offer. Moreover, the Knouse et al. study (1999) found that students who participate in internship programs are more likely to acquire gainful employment before graduation. Research from a similar survey conducted at Georgetown University’s Center

for Education and the Workforce indicates that most students (65%) who participated in an internship received a job offer after graduation (Carnevale et al. 2015). A survey conducted on recent graduates in May of 2015 found that 57% of them reported being satisfied with their current position (Saltikoff 2017). A similar study found that students completing internships at the University of Georgia (Atlanta), found that only 12% were unhappy with their place of employment after graduation.

Barriers

Several studies have addressed barriers to taking internships among college students. Lack of compensation for work completed during the internship and time allotted to complete the internship in conjunction with other personal responsibilities are two of the most significant barriers to internship participation. Moreover, minority and low-income students are placed at a considerable disadvantage to internship participation and economic advancement (Penn and Tanner 2009; Shirley 2006). Although internships are used as an advantage to high-paying positions in the job market, they also require a specific amount of time and/or money for students to participate. Students from low-income backgrounds may not have access to the means needed to participate in them, thereby indirectly perpetuating inequality among students. Lack of pay for internships is one of the most common barriers reported to student internship participation (DeRuy 2015; The Intern Bridge 2015; Metiza and Johnson 2016; NACE 2016). It is not clear how many students participate in internships every year or how many of them are unpaid. However, a study from the NACE (2016) shows that traditional advanced students, particularly students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely than underserved students (transfer, low-income, and minority) to participate in for-profit paid

internships. Furthermore, when compared by major, the Intern Bridge study also found that students pursuing academic majors in fields such as biological sciences, physical sciences, engineering, and computer science, were more likely to participate in paid internships than students who were pursuing degrees in the arts or communication. The disparity between paid and unpaid internships creates a wide inequity in employment opportunities and job satisfaction among students. For-profit paid internships are often the ones looking to hire interns for more permanent employment, placing a large number of underserved students at a disadvantage.

Moreover, lack of information, time, and prior commitments were also barriers to many students' participation in internships (Knouse, Tanner, and Harris 1999; Curry 1999; Finley and Nair 2013). Students who cannot take unpaid internships often have to work to pay for their tuition and do not have the additional time needed to participate in an internship while working full-time. Others cannot participate in internships because they also participate in other school activities (Curry, Degreenia, and Warner 2009). Unless university faculty and staff are making students aware of internship/practicum opportunities, many students are often unaware that these positions are available.

Faculty Experiences and Perceptions

Combining experiential learning opportunities with higher education curricula can provide many benefits for faculty and students. Internships/practica can assist the student in applying what they learn in the classroom to real-world situations and provide students with the needed resources and environment to obtain skills related to course content. Faculty are a very intricate part of successful internship experiences and helping students cultivate the skills they learn in the classroom and applying them to hands-on experience

in the community. But how do faculty members who participate in facilitating student internships describe their experience? Several studies have been conducted on student perceptions of their overall internship experience. However, limited studies have been conducted on faculty perceptions of internships and the impact of faculty curriculum on experiential learning (McIntyre et al. 2005; Rosenstein, Sweeney and Gupta 2012; Wilder 2015; Hesser 1995; Hou and Wilder 2015). Nonetheless, existing studies have found that the majority of faculty are supportive of experiential learning practices. Wurdinger and Allison (2017) found that nearly all faculty surveyed (97%) believe the skills gained from experiential activities, and internships specifically, provide students with important opportunities to work on projects beyond the classroom. The research also showed that the majority of faculty members (68%) believed that life skills developed because internships and the like give students the opportunity to work on projects in the real world. Further the involvement of faculty was noted as an essential part of students having a successful learning experience. They argue that students may only learn something from the hands-on experience if faculty members mentor students and "inform the students about the importance of the job" (p. 36).

In a recent study by Wu (2001) conducted at the University of Iowa's Agricultural Department, the researchers found that agricultural faculty had a "positive" perception of internship experience for students because "it provides hands-on opportunities to a career-related experience" (p.412). Many faculty in the study believed that internships should be incorporated as a mandatory part of the curriculum. However, the study also found that although many faculty and students were in favor of providing a mandatory internship program, there were several reasons why implementing them as a mandatory

part of the curriculum will not work well for students. Furthermore, the study found that the positive perception of internship experiences was influenced by the number of years students had been participating in internships. Despite barriers and limitations to requiring internships, the potential benefits of experiential learning have encouraged universities across the nation to incorporate experiential learning and practicums as a curriculum requirement.

Further research is needed on the number of unpaid internships students partake in every year, student experiences, and career outcomes. Updated research is needed on the demographic information between paid/unpaid internships and job satisfaction as well. Although they are often seen as separate from the curriculum, internship effectiveness studies show that students recall having a “more effective” experience when internships are incorporated into the curriculum as a required course toward graduation (Honan and Day 1984; Garrison 1992; Colby et al. 2007; Alex-Assensoh and Ryan 2008).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

Experiential learning theory provides a framework for understanding the importance of experiential learning for students providing a method for instructors to focus “key questions to be asked when designing or planning learning experiences in the course or classroom” (Fry and Kolb 1979: 80). John Dewey’s *Experience and Education* (1938) and David Kolb’s theory of experiential learning (1979) are frequently cited in the literature. Dewey is often cited as the first advocate for a more progressive education. He believed that “[t]o ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out

what it is like” (1916:164). Moreover, he contends that the best educational experiences come from our human interactions and our engagements with the world. These experiences and interactions help us acquire knowledge and skills while still encouraging individuals to apply new forms of knowledge and concepts to other aspects of their every day lives. Taking advantage of the experiences and applying them to their daily lives, he argues can help create learners and shape future life experiences. Whereas Dewey was focused on what students learn, Kolb was focused on how students learn and process new knowledge. Through this idea he developed a four-stage experiential cycle and a learning style inventory.

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model

Kolb (1979) developed a four-stage learning cycle that explains how people learn using direct hands on experience. The learning cycle demonstrates the learning process from acquiring information to transferring newly acquired information to a new experience. The four components of the learning cycle are: Concrete Experience (CE), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), Reflective Observation (RO), and Active Experimentation (AE). The first two stages of the four-stage learning process are centered on the way individuals learn information about the world around them. Concrete experience is described as the process of directly experiencing something. Kolb argues that during this stage, learning happens with the direct involvement from the experience. Abstract conceptualization on the other hand is described as using different concepts to understand how something works. The last two stages of the learning cycle are centered on taking the information gained from the direct experience and abstract concepts and using them to transform that into a new experience. Reflective Observation involves

understanding the meaning of new experiences after observing them and describing the actions taking place. It is more concerned with how things will happen. While Kolb does believe that you can start at any point in the learning cycle to benefit from a new experience, he contends that the only way for the learning to be effective is to complete all four of the stages in the learning cycle.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Critical Pedagogy “embodies notions of how one teaches, what is being taught and the transforming of relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge and institutional structures of the school and the social and material relation of the wider community” (Giroux 1997:#). It also analyzes the power struggles between those who are distributing the knowledge and those who are receiving the knowledge. Over the years, there has been much debate about the purpose of the education system. Those adopting a critical pedagogy assume that the purpose of schooling should be to educate students and promote social transformation to a more socially just society (McLaren 2003; hooks 1997; Hill-Collins 2009; Freire 1970). Others believe that the primary purpose of schooling is not to create social change but simply to prepare students for careers in the workforce and to motivate them to become active, productive members in society (Pinar et al. 2002; Breunig 2014). A proponent of critical transformation, Hill-Collins (2009) argues that the traditional curricula and how schools are organized to suppress or promote democracy is central to democratic possibilities.

The underlying assumption of critical pedagogical practice is that teachers and students must be given equal opportunity to create knowledge and find solutions to social issues and problems. They introduce alternative methods to traditional education. The

earliest developments of critical pedagogy can be traced to Paulo Freire (1970). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire argued that traditional education methods merely “deposit” knowledge into learners without giving them the opportunity to change the world around them. This type of “banking method” inhibits the freedom of marginalized and oppressed groups. He argues that learners who desire to change the world can come from what he called *praxis*-a cycle of deep reflection and action and dialogue. He argued that education is a process of freedom that allows learners from marginalized groups to free themselves from oppression. He introduced the concept of problem posing education. Problem-posing education gives students the opportunity to create new knowledge and solutions when problems and social issues are raised in the classroom.

As the concept of critical pedagogy developed its focus has shifted from social class to include religion, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age. Freire believed that transformative freedom is gained through knowledge that encourages oppressed groups to resist oppression. hooks (1994) contends that the freedom that education provides is achieved when students learn to transgress against various racial, sexual, and class boundaries. However, she builds on Freire’s idea that the dialogue created in the learning process can provide marginalized groups resources to challenge inequality. This is accomplished best by encouraging students and teachers to share their experiences thus empowering them to “transcend” across boundaries created by racism, classism, and sexism. She argues that the dialogue between students and teachers is important for fostering empowerment and awareness.

Many proponents of critical pedagogy believe that it is important for students to learn from their lived experiences. Proponents of critical pedagogy argue that examining

students' experiences from a critical perspective and capturing the narrative of their experiences gives insight into how students are using their classroom and internship experiences to transform and make positive change in their communities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students describe their internship experience?
 - a. What are some of the benefits of participating in an internship?
 - b. What are some of the perceived barriers from placement and internship assignment?
 - c. What skills do students acquire from internships?
2. How have students' internship experiences prepared them for a career in the workforce or professional training?
3. How do faculty describe their experience sponsoring internships?
 - a. How do faculty describe their role as internship sponsors?
 - b. How do they describe a satisfactory internship experience?
4. What are some of the best practices proposed by participants?
5. What can be done to encourage more student involvement in internships?
6. How does knowledge of intersectionality or race/ethnicity, class, and gender shape students' understandings of their learning and experience?
7. How do students bridge the gap between knowledge they learn in the classroom and internship/ practicum experiences in a process of transformative learning for themselves and their communities?

METHODOLOGY

To complete my study, I employed a two-method qualitative analysis using focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research protocol on April 5, 2018 (see Appendix A).

Focus Groups

Focus groups were used to understand the collective nature of what students learned, the skills they gained, and how the overall internship experience influenced their preparedness for the workforce. I conducted five focus groups of 5-8 students each, all of whom completed an internship or practicum within the past year. From the larger pool of 300 students who registered in an internship/practicum course and /or who took the “internship benchmark survey,” 24 students volunteered to participate. The focus group interview guide can be reviewed in Appendix B. Focus groups are an appropriate method for this study because they provide students with a “conversational space” to engage with others and share different perspectives about their experiences. Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2005:5) argued that conversational spaces allow students to “openly reflect on and create meaning from their experiences and encourage group-based and individual learning.”

Interviews

Five faculty from diverse disciplines who have sponsored internships/practicums over the past three years were recruited to participate in a one-hour interview. Interviews focus on how to improve the internship program and how to encourage more faculty to sponsor internships. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand faculty perceptions of experiential learning practices, more specifically their experiences sponsoring internships, perceptions of the role of students and faculty, and what makes a successful internship (see Appendix C, Faculty Interview Guide).

Participants

A purposive sample of 18 undergraduate students and 6 graduate students including 16 females and 8 males who were enrolled in any internship or practicum course at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) over the past three years were recruited by email. Volunteers completed a survey as part of a larger project and then responded to emails seeking participants to take part in a focus group on internship experiences, employment, and career preparation. Incentives used to recruit participants included a \$15 gift card to either a restaurant, coffee shop, or movie theatre as well as the provision of a light lunch or dinner.

Table 1 below provides a demographic breakdown of students that participated in the study. Most participant volunteers were either seniors (14), or graduate students (6), with the remaining 4 participants sophomores or juniors. This pattern of advanced class ranking suggests that students typically take internships as a form of preparation for entering the workforce when they draw closer to matriculation. The majority of students (16/24) were also traditional ages for college students, between the ages of 18 to 24. Regarding race/ethnicity, 15 were white, 4 were black, 3 Hispanic/Latino, and 2 self-identified as “other” race/ethnicity.

Table 1: Demographics of participants (N=24)

Category	Number
Race	
Black/African American	4
White	15
Hispanic/Latino	3
Other	2
Age	
18-24	16
25-34	5
35-44	3
45+	0
Class Rank	
Freshmen	0
Sophomore	2
Junior	2
Senior	14
Graduate	6
Class Background	
Upper Class	0
Upper Middle Class	4
Middle Class	13
Lower Middle Class	6
Lower Class	1
Gender	
Female	15
Male	9

*Class is by self-identification

Data Collection and Transcription

Audio recordings and detailed field notes were collected during the focus groups and interviews. Recordings were transcribed using transcription software Express Scribe.

Data Analysis

Data were systematically analyzed by identifying major themes and narrative quotes using qualitative analysis software, NVivo, 12.

First, “parent nodes” were created by coding segments of text from the interviews and focus groups to reflect students’ perceptions of their internship experiences Research Question 1, (RQ1), faculty perceptions of sponsoring internships Research Question 3, (RQ3), best practices for increased student involvement, best practices for faculty sponsorship, Research Question 4, (RQ4), and how students use the skills they gain in the classroom and through hands-on experience to transform their communities Research Question 7 (RQ 7). Next, “child nodes” were created to identify students’ perceived benefits and barriers to participating in internships (RQ1a, RQ2a) and the skills students gained during their internships (RQ1c). Faculty data were analyzed to identify how faculty describe their role as internship sponsors and what they perceived determines a successful internship experience (RQ3a and RQ3b). A set of themes that summarize the findings for the research questions and sub-questions was then developed.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of their internship opportunities and how these opportunities helped them prepare for careers. I also explore how faculty report incorporating experiential learning into the curriculum, perceptions of student experiences, and their role in helping students through the internship process. Findings presented below include data from focus groups with students and interviews with faculty. Students in each of the focus groups were actively engaged with one another and in critical discussion when describing their experiences. Similar themes emerged from the focus groups during discussions of barriers to internship placement and participation, recommendations to minimize these barriers. For faculty, similar themes emerged when asked about skills students should gain their internship experience, challenges to incorporating experiential learning practices into the curriculum, recommendations that can be made to improve these challenges and encourage them to sponsor more internships.

The Internship Experience

Students were asked to describe some of the positives and negatives of their internship experiences and their satisfaction with their placements. Students explained how they enjoyed being challenged to do things out of their "comfort zones." A graduate student who majored in ISO Psychology stated,

the best part about my internship is that it got me to do things that I would not normally do. So, I don't like public speaking or talking in front of groups of people, but one of the things that I did was I created and then did activities and everything for a day workshop for people in the state of Tennessee in the finance department.... So, like I had to create the whole thing, do the needs analysis, evaluate it; and then the consultant that we had was very hands off and pretty much this is yours, you do it and so my friend and I went in there and we did a full day-long workshop, so. It was awful, but it was a great experience.

Another participant, a social work graduate student from the fifth focus group stated that her most recent internship was “invaluable” because “I’ve been exposed to the things I didn’t even sign up for.” She also explained how the experience has forced her to challenge herself outside of the internship, stating, “I’m constantly challenging myself in a way I haven’t throughout my entire education because I am practicing, and reflecting, and still learning so it’s been really good and challenging.”

Students used the discussion about internship satisfaction and overall experience to discuss how their internship experience could have improved. Challenging assignments and increased responsibility and application, and skill development were some of the things students suggested could have been done to improve their internship experience and overall satisfaction.

Career Preparation and Real-world Experience

In addition to providing students with a set of skills that can help them transition from the classroom to the workforce, internships provide students with the experience necessary to determine a preferred career path. Students and faculty both agreed that the “real world experience” that comes from internship opportunities has helped students define their career paths.

Faculty also perceived internships as having real world benefits. In the interviews, some participants described how internships help students develop professionally. An internship coordinator from English said, “It’s a really important step in the professionalization process and the movement from the school into the real world. It helps students learn what they like and what they don’t like.”

Similarly, internships also provide students with the opportunity to bridge the gap between theories and concepts learned in the classroom and applying them to the community. A College of Liberal Arts faculty coordinator stated, “It gives students the opportunity to take the knowledge and theories they are learning here at school and put them to work in a professional setting.” A faculty internship coordinator for the College of Basic and Applied Sciences stated, “it is useful in general because it gives you that real-world component; you get to see what to expect but also...[helps answer] why am I going to school in the first place, what am I doing and learning about this in the end?” Students responses to describing their internship experiences reinforced these findings. In all the focus groups, at least one person discussed how their internship helped them gain real world experience. Some of the participants directly stated that it provided them with real world experience. A Religious Studies and Leadership senior described how her internship helped expand her worldview, commenting: “Having these outside experiences have made my education more than just classroom learning. It was real world learning. It was taking what you’ve learned and looking at the world in a new lens.” One participant, an Accounting major indicated that he “really enjoyed” the real-world application of his internship because it gave him a different side of the business.

Similarly, while not describing an internship, a Forensic Science senior recalled how her employment history has shaped her passion for forensic science: “I know what I like to do and what I don’t like to do. I know how I can learn, and I know [when] I learn the least. I like to research whatever I can to understand myself. That’s how my internships helped me; they all had an aspect of forensic science.”

In addition to providing students with the opportunity to gain real-world experience, students who participate in internship opportunities are more likely to get into graduate programs. A social work junior described how her internship experience helped her decide to further her education, stating, “I definitely want to go back to grad school. I don’t know for what yet but, especially in the field of social work, it’s kind of like if you just have a bachelor’s degree a lot of the time you can only do case management and things like that so, being at that internship showed me that [given] what I want to do with that field, I need to go back to graduate school.” Internships also provide students with a set of skills that can be used beyond the internship.

Skills

Faculty take pride in shaping students to become active and successful members of society. Each faculty member interviewed at random times throughout their interview passionately expressed how they use their classroom to actively prepare students for a successful career in the workforce. They believe that the best way to do that is to help them develop professional readiness, work ethic and communication skills. They stated that they believe that interpersonal and communication skills are skills that students should gain from their internships because they play a large part in a shaping students’ professionalism and work ethic. A Media and Entertainment faculty internship coordinator stated that networking and other “soft skills” are important for students’ professionalism because “they need to learn how to integrate into that professional environment and conduct themselves appropriately.” Another participant, a Basic and Applied Sciences professor stated, “Being professional also involves working with people ... [people who you] may not always like to work with.” A faculty internship

coordinator for the English Department stated that she believed good written communication and adaptation skills are important in an internship because “Interns can learn how to do that and learn a lot about themselves and it’s been a very positive experience.” When asked to describe the skills they learned from their internship experience, students listed: digital technology, professionalism and work ethic, problem solving, critical thinking, decision making, intercultural competence and teamwork; ranking professionalism and work ethic, communication, and workflow planning as the top three most important.

Professionalism and Work Ethic

Students listed professionalism and work ethic as the most common skill they gained from their internship experience. One participant stated, “I think professionalism is always needed whether it’s in a casual setting or in a very professional setting. There was a consensus in all the focus groups that professionalism and work ethic is instrumental to personal development. Another participant from the same focus group equated professionalism with punctuality, attendance, and style of dress. She expressed the importance of going to class on time and dressing appropriately and stated that these “really helped me [and] had one of the biggest impacts on my academic career.” Students also mentioned gaining communication skills during their internship.

Communication

Communication was the second most common skill listed by students. Verbal and written communication skills are a critical part of any job. A speech language pathologist stated, “if you aren’t able to communicate with anyone then, your whole ideas are all gone, and [in order] to progress you need some kind of communication in order to do that. An Exercise Science senior explained how verbal communication was instrumental during her internship, noting “when something was to happen, we needed to be very verbal and tell each other what we were planning on doing to make sure it was the right decision.” As described by students, communication skills play a critical role in any job in the workforce.

Workplace Planning

Workplace Planning was the third most common skill students gained from their internship or practicum experience. During the focus group session students described how students Workplace planning helps student, who listed workplace planning as the number one skill he gained during his internship, described how workplace planning and teamwork were critical in recruiting student athletes, he stated, “There were some things that were just going to just be more pressing, maybe it was something about compliance where we had to get a guy’s transcripts right, and that was pressing because we needed to get those done before he got on campus next week for training.” Another student described how workplace planning was particularly important during her internship for the Tennessee republican Party, she stated, “The second full day that I was there, I was just left in the office. I had to open and I had to close. I had to know what I was doing. I had to like plan out my day, how I wanted to address things.” Another student described how workplace planning helped her maintain time management, commenting “....we

have many projects going on at once, so with clients we have to have like charts and all kinds of organizational project planning tools going on for each of those projects. Then, prioritizing your time for each one, and then leadership because there was a couple times where I was the lead project associate and I had to coordinate all of our meetings, meeting agendas and stuff like that. Then just also kind of lead a team of other graduate students.” Workplace planning skills helped students manage multiple projects and maintain increased responsibility.

Networking

Though it was not mentioned among the top three skills, there was discussion in all of the focus groups surrounding the importance of networking and maintaining connections to companies in the community. Students indicated that strong ties to the community can be important to expanding internship opportunities. An accounting senior, who had an easy time finding internship opportunities, used networking with sororities and honor societies. One participant who majored in accounting noted, “I was involved in the honor society, but it really pushes your personal development and has a lot of connections with the firm in the Nashville area. I actually had five different offers from firms for different internships, so I had no trouble finding internships.” Another student participant explained how the College of Business hosts guest speakers to come in and talk about their careers. The skills students gained from their internship can help them gain higher employment opportunities.

Employment

Internships and practicums are often a stepping stone to future employment opportunities for students. Students were asked how their internship opportunity has helped them find employment. At the time that the focus groups were conducted, most students indicated that they had not yet found employment. Some students said they had not found employment because they are still in school and have not reached the stage of looking for employment. Two participants discussed how they were offered employment opportunities while they were at their internship. One student explained that she was unexpectedly offered a job during her second internship and has been working there for “an hour and a half now.” A social work student, who stated she was graduating in May, said that she received a job offer from the internship organization “but had not accepted or declined it yet” at the time of the focus group.

Social Media

Social media was another one of the few unexpected themes that emerged from the data. Faculty contended that social media is an under-utilized tool that can be used to help students find employment and internship opportunities. Interviews revealed that faculty utilize social media to inform students of experiential learning and employment opportunities. One internship coordinator described how she uses the professional social media site LinkedIn to inform students of new internship opportunities that become available to students, she stated, “Yes. I make all of my students subscribe to LinkedIn and LinkedIn sends me notifications on job openings and internship opportunities and what’s required and that sort of thing. I send those companies to the College of Liberal Arts internship coordinator and she researches them for me so that’s really helpful.”

Another internship coordinator explained how she uses Facebook to communicate with alumni and inform students of employment opportunities that are available, she commented, “We utilize Facebook. So, we have basically three Facebook pages, one is for current students, one is for alumni, and one is for MSWs.... Agencies always call [and talk about] their current openings, so that’s where we post it.” She went on to explain how other students within the groups post and discuss about job openings. “It’s a good time for students to network with each other and search for job openings [and] we have alumni [across the country] who post about their agencies that are hiring.... that has unintentionally become helpful for the job market.” The rate at which students participate in experiential learning practices is contingent on the barriers imposed upon students. The next section discusses barriers students faced while completing their internships and practicums.

Barriers

A wealth of research has been conducted on the barriers to internship participation. This study supports earlier research, which found that lack of time and quality mentorship were prominent barriers. In addition to these, in my research a major theme emerged around the lack of support provided to students to find and participate in internships. Additionally, related barriers included: compensation, transportation, location, interest, and flexibility. Despite the significant increase in students that participate in internships over the years. Teachers have made experiential learning opportunities a requirement in the curriculum to provide students the opportunities to gain real-world experience.

Compensation

Unpaid internships were cited as the number one barrier to internships. There was also discussion about how unpaid internships limit the availability of opportunities. A Psychology senior expressed the many reasons he was unable to participate in internships. “Due to my major in the school, there haven’t really been any available, and the ones that have didn’t really offer course credit or offer any pay at all.” A Music major described how finding an internship in “music city” was more challenging than she expected. “Well, through the school of music ... it’s really hard to find an internship that works for you because Nashville is like, it’s the music city, so essentially not all of them are going to be there and it’s really hard when you live in Murfreesboro and you can’t afford to go to Nashville on a daily basis, especially when it’s unpaid.” It was also apparent while doing my research that majority of students participating in internships, whether required for a class or just to gain additional experience, are doing them for the first time. They are unaware of how to go about finding appropriate internship opportunities, the number of opportunities available or the resources available to help them find these opportunities.

Awareness

Students expressed feelings of frustration with the lack of guidance provided when looking for internship opportunities. One participant from the second focus group stated, “The [Media and Entertainment Department] says go find it and come back when you are ready. There was no like list of places you can go to. It was very much like go do this on your own... there wasn’t much help at all.”

Students were also unaware of the resources available to help them. During the interviews, faculty explained that while it is the student's responsibility to find their own internship opportunities, faculty also expressed that students have databases that are available to help them find the right internship opportunity. Although departments have databases that can help students find internships, students are unaware that the databases are available for their use. They recalled how once they obtained an internship opportunity, they struggled to balance the number of hours required for the internship, their coursework, and other responsibilities.

Balancing Internships and Other Responsibilities

Balancing internship expectations with coursework and other personal responsibilities such as work proved challenging for students as well. Participants who did not have trouble finding internships frequently described how they had trouble balancing their internship hours with their personal responsibilities⁵. A senior social work student recalled, "I had to get 200 hours in my internship, plus I had to go to class three times a week, and [go to] work; so sometimes it's a lot." Another participant from an earlier focus group described how the struggle to balance the hours has affected her daily activities: "I'm a commuter. I have rent, I have a car note, I have to feed myself. I literally haven't eaten food in the past three weeks because I can't afford it because I don't have time to work at my job that much... 300 hours is a lot in a semester, along with other classes." A non-traditional social work senior similarly stated, "I'm 43 years old and I am the breadwinner of the family; so, I supply the car insurance, health insurance and whatnot...200 hours for internship on top of my full-time employment and

studies was rather challenging.” Inability to balance the work and internship hours further makes internships inaccessible to students, leaving some students unable to participate in any type of internship. A Business graduate student expressed great regret for the inability to participate in an internship but doesn’t have time to do so because she has to work full-time. “I’ve been at [this university] for the last 3 years and for the past two I have been a full-time worker.” Several students suggested that the lack of flexibility for people who are required to complete an internship for graduation and who have to work a full-time job to provide for the household, is another barrier to internship participation.

Empathy

During discussions about ways to minimize the barriers, students expressed empathy for students who are faced with a multitude of barriers that limit or complicate their ability to participate in internship or practicum opportunities on campus. During the discussion of minimizing the barriers, one participant expressed empathy for students who struggled every day to maintain coursework on top of internship hours for little or no pay.

The biggest thing I have a problem with is the fact that the vast majority of internships are unpaid and then in order to get credit, you do have to pay for the class; which I think is pretty ridiculous and makes internships inaccessible to students who have to work. I was fortunate enough to only have to work for food and stuff like that, like my tuition is covered.... I think the biggest thing is to make it more easily accessible to students that don’t really have the financial resources.

Other participants similarly expressed frustration and empathy for students from majors that are required to complete internships. One participant expressed how empathy

for non-traditional students who must work to provide for a family and complete an internship despite its inflexible hours is needed, she said:

They can give you [for an internship] ... a parting gift of like you know, I don't know like a gift card or something at the end of the semester. But like, they can't give you ... a \$100 check or something like that for ... your intern cause that's considered payment; and so that really irks me; especially since for non-traditional students who might necessarily need to be able to work and a lot of times with political science internships, they have to be done during the day because [of] office hours. Especially with ... law offices 8:00-4:30, 8:00-5:00 and that's it. And so, like that's taking time out of [a student's] day where they need to be you know, paying for bills for their family or working or things of that nature.

Shifting to a focus on themes that revealed the importance of transformative learning the importance of experiential learning [EXL] opportunities became prominent

Classroom Learning and Community Involvement

Together, classroom learning, and community involvement can enrich student learning experiences and transform the way they live their daily lives. Students were asked how their classroom learning was influenced by internships. One participant stated that they saw their community involvement as a developmental pathway of interest, stating:

They completely complement one another. Both in when I look at my EXL coursework and leadership studies, specifically, some of our segments were to go out into the community and interview community members, etcetera and then write about that and bring that directly back into the classroom. So that was just very basic, but when we talk about my uh, thesis work, I study modern feminists, and that work began with my freshmen English course and shaped all four years of my undergraduate [education] in different ways.

Another student described how her involvement in the community helped her determine what she wanted to focus her studies on when pursuing her graduate degree. She stated,

I worked with a student organization and I think that the experience from that -- even though it wasn't directly coursework-- like I didn't get credit for it. But it still had a lot to do [with learning]...like I was in the organization before going to graduate school and that really impacted where I ended up going from that coursework...just because I started out doing--well I did a lot of different things with it--but the biggest turning point was when I did research for Transgender Day of Remembrance. It had a huge project looking at names and things like that. She continued to describe how this work helped her hone her interest. She went on to say, "Yeah, it really drove ... my passion for the topic because I was learning in the classroom about different things and what different people were seeing. Then I was able to see it... I guess it just puts everything into perspective being in the undergrad; teaching the undergrad class, being in the graduate class, and in the community [how they] all influenced each other." An informed, democratic education empowers students to become more active members of society. Students were also asked how their classroom experiences motivated and empowered them to become active citizens.

Community involvement helps students bridge the gap between theory and practice, influenced their work as graduate students, and was used as a resource to their classroom experiences. Community involvement in combination with classroom learning provided students with the self-confidence needed to become an agent of social change and motivated them to interact with people from diverse communities and backgrounds. Actively working in communities that value their services and the wealth of knowledge they bring into the internship empowers them to become agents of social change and work diligently to transform their respective communities. Participants described how using an intersectional lens of race, class and gender gave them a critical perspective on both their classroom and internship/practicum experience. One participant, a Religious and Leadership studies student said,

I just can't separate how gender touches everything. It's my go to um, race, gender, class, like it's all of it.... It's very interesting that the discussion I led last week, that I moderated was a critical discussion of the pitfalls of the modern feminist movement over the last five years. [I]t was a really great discussion and ... the panel had one white woman, one black woman, one biracial woman, and two Muslim women....so we had a real range of intersectionality on race.

A Sociology graduate student similarly commented,

I think as far as race, class, and gender in the classroom and um, at least in the teaching classroom that I'm in now, we're trying to bring in race, class, and gender to a lot of these things, and some of the students are super into it, but those are usually the students that already have multiple marginalized identities so they live it. They can sort of bring that in and sometimes it works out with the other students and sometimes it facilitates arguments that you [laughter] address but, um, uh, I'm trying to think, I don't think you can really talk about anything related or tangential to sociology without talking about race, class, and gender.

One participant described how her classroom and experiential learning empowered her to become a more active citizen, stating,

I have so much power now to speak about the things that you see that are wrong and to critically analyze what's happening and to inform others and hopefully help, you know, influence--be an effect on your circle of influence [and] to lessen the hardships on the marginalized that are in our circle of influence. I mean, in this political environment that's the best that I'm hoping for right now; and I hate that that's the reality but then it's the reality, but it's like 'hey if I can make your day or your week a little bit better.'

Overall student participants listed relatively positive words to describe experiential learning. Critical, helpful, a partnership, were some of the positive descriptors used to describe them when asked how beneficial they were to student learning. For instance, a faculty internship coordinator from the English Department stated, "I think it's just massively important. I think its good exposure to what things are like in the professional world." A faculty mentor from the College of Basic and Applied Sciences commented, "They find internships to be so beneficial that the majority of the courses provided qualify for the MTEngage program on campus. Their departments are

active in connecting theory and practice.” In a few departments, experiential learning courses are used as a method to bring students to the program. Faculty discussed that they make experiential learning opportunities a part of the curriculum because they help students get out in the community and become more active citizens. One internship coordinator stated,

The experiential learning helps students get out into the community and actually think about what they are learning rather than just reading in the textbook... when you're actually having to experience something ... you're going to learn it more, you're going to experience it at a deeper depth and grab a hold of those notions that helps us learn.

Internship placement is a critical component of internship satisfaction and sets the stage for the entire internship and/or practicum experience. Faculty participants were also asked what criteria they used to determine internship placement for students. Some internship coordinators look for internship placements that give students the opportunity to learn things about the industry of their internship. An internship coordinator from the Media and Entertainment Department commented, “Well if the learning is not beneficial to the student, I do not want the student going back into those environments, so we try to make them all a good situation for the student to learn.” Other internship coordinators are more flexible on the qualifications when determining internship placement. One participant from the Communications Department stated, “we're pretty open, we're a very broad major and discipline so we're pretty open to hearing an argument from a student about how [the internship] applies to the major.”

Faculty look for placements that give students the opportunity to apply what they are learning in the classroom to the outside community. One internship coordinator stated, “there has to be a chance to continue learning. It has to be more than just getting

coffee and clerical work.” Another internship coordinator similarly stated, “To make sure that they are going to have a chance to learn something and are not going to be in a situation where they can be abused.” One internship coordinator looks for a positive environment: “I look for an environment that is conducive to social work and provides guidance and supervision for social work experience.”

When students complete the internship application, they typically agree that they are required to produce weekly written assignments. Faculty listed reflective journals, evaluation forms, activity logs, completion reports, as assignments students are required to complete by the end of the term. The “pass” or “fail” grade in the course is contingent upon the internship evaluation form and the written assignments.

Internship coordinators were also asked to describe an experience where they perceived the learning to be beneficial to the student. One participant had a hard time describing just one experience, she stated, “It’s hard to narrow that experience down to one because one of the things that I hear from the students over and over is how much they learn about what goes on in the cooperative world or what goes on in the writing professions or doing social media.”

Faculty with experiences to share described internships that led to employment opportunities for students. One participant described,

One student worked in a government organization, and at the end of it said what a great experience it was for their organization and that they offered that person a job. She also was thrilled by the end of it saying that she got offered a job and that she really loved doing the work... and she didn’t know about this organization, she was unclear going into it but then she ended up really loving it and she fit in well there.

Faculty also described experiences with students that were not as beneficial to them. These experiences centered around negative environments. An internship coordinator for the Communications Department commented,

Yes, a recent example is a student [who] went to work in the hospitality industry for an internship and was-I don't know much about the student because I don't get to see them face to face, I don't know them, but she went to the internship. The supervisor at the end evaluated her and said that she was not very proactive, she didn't fit in well, she showed up late, she just had a terrible work ethic. But the student also said she didn't like the work, she didn't like being there, it was very cliquish, she saw how different employees were treated, there were in-groups and out-groups, some employees were not being treated well and she didn't like that at all.

As described by participants and prior literature, internships and practicums provide a wealth of benefits for students and faculty; however, implementing internships and other experiences into the curriculum can pose a few challenges to faculty. Faculty listed time, variance, and money as some of the challenges to incorporating experiential learning into the curriculum. A faculty member from Basic and Applied Sciences described how the wide array of internship opportunities can make incorporating them into the curriculum challenging for faculty. He stated,

I think maybe the biggest challenge is that an internship can be a very different thing depending on where it is. I did an internship in undergrad at county assessor's office and I did a lot of math work and stuff and I also sat at a desk and answered the phone. That's one internship experience, but there are other experiences where you're literally just getting coffee for people but that is not helping the intern in any way at all. I think that the challenge for us with the MSPS program is because there is so much variance in what internships actually are, that some of them are very useful and some of them are not useful at all.

An internship coordinator from the faculty department similarly stated, "In our department particularly, it takes a bit of extending yourself outside of your subject matter...I think it's hard for some professors to understand how those internships are

going to plug it in to their concept of what English is about because it's not always about literature, there are other types of writing that's not creative writing.”

Limited research has been conducted on the impact, breadth, and depth of internships. Some studies found that students have more than one internship experience. Similarly, the study also found that students that have more than 30 internship hours, were more likely to gain a meaningful experience. A field coordinator indicated that “one of the challenges to incorporating an internship into the curriculum is “[having] enough internship hours to make the experience worth it. We require 500 hours total. A lot of places only require 100 hours or something like that. I don't even know if that's worth it sometimes.”

All of the faculty participants interviewed indicated that they would be more willing to supervise internships if they had more financial support and time to vet organizations that need student interns. This ensures that students are getting the best experience as possible. For example, an internship coordinator for the Media and Entertainment Department commented, “I just wish I had more time and more money to go to town and go meet with my providers more than I already have.” In another part of her interview, an internship coordinator from the Communications Department similarly stated, “if we had more resources, we would be able to better vet internship opportunities.” When asked to elaborate on what some of these resources might be she stated, “It would be great to have time to go out, leave campus, go to the internship sites, meet potential internship supervisors, make sure they are very clear on their responsibilities, [and] what's expected of them to do.” She indicated this would be

important because: “I prefer internship experiences [that] are not just students getting coffee and running errands and making coffee.”

Some participants revealed that they would be more willing to help students find internships if they had more support from faculty. Faculty carry a heavy workload involving instruction with several course loads and research. A field coordinator from the Social Work Department described how the course load and expectations take a toll on faculty, stating, “I struggle with the fact that we only have one field coordinator for bachelors and masters. I think we need two [field coordinators] just in our department. It’s too much to expect that other faculty along with their workload can do a job like this as well.

Recommendations to Minimize Barriers

Barriers to internship participation prove challenging to students and interfere with their ability to do the best during their internships. Three primary recommendations emerged in the interviews to help remove barriers to placing students in internship environments that promote developmental and transformative learning: hiring internship coordinators, increasing awareness about internship opportunities, and refining data bases of information students can readily access in seeking out internships.

Hiring internship coordinators

Internship coordinators and site supervisors are instrumental in helping students find internship opportunities and maintaining meaningful relationships with interns and organizations. They evaluate their performances to ensure that the internship experience runs smoothly for those involved. Several students recommended that the university hire internship coordinators for all departments across campus to help students find

internships and educate them on the internship process, expectations, and relevance. Students from departments that already have internship coordinators agreed that hiring internship coordinators for all departments would be beneficial. A female Social Work senior stated, “I know for Social Work they have like internship coordinators, like someone that finds internships for you, so maybe the university can find out about getting those for other programs.” Internship coordinators will also help faculty. Throughout their interviews, faculty revealed that they are overwhelmed by their work. Some indicated that they would be more willing to sponsor internships if they had additional support to help them assist students during the internship process; but they would still like to remain involved. Hiring an internship coordinator will enable them to maintain their role as site supervisors.

Increasing awareness

Focus group data revealed that one of the biggest barriers to student internship participation was awareness. Most of the students that are completing an internship for the first time; some of them do not even know what an internship is. Another suggestion to minimize the barriers mentioned by students and increase internship participation on campus is to help student become aware of the importance of internship, where to find them, how to determine the best internship placement and opportunities. Several students

A Psychology senior commented, “My first internship I found it myself and I think that a lot of students they don’t know where to go to, what do I even want to do? Maybe having like fairs that students can go to? Like I know that we have career fairs and stuff but like internship fairs, just like where you know, people who are looking for interns, whether paid or not, and students can go to them if that’s what they want to do or

not. I think that's great." Similarly, another participant from the fourth focus group stated, "having internship coordinators would be a start."

MTSU offers several career fairs throughout the semester for a wide array of colleges and majors. These fairs inform students about the different organizations in the area that are hiring students to complete internships, allow students to network with employers within their field, allow students to get involved in on-campus activities. Despite the campus' efforts to inform students of these opportunities, some students feel that the internship fairs that are offered will not help them find an internship opportunity that appeals to their interest. Students who were aware of the internship opportunities and had attended information sessions on campus indicated that a variety of "internship fairs" were needed to attract students from different majors. A Forensic Science senior commented, "They do have internship fairs, but they're Business, they're this, they're that. I'm a science major. I can't put my science on the business.... I feel like diversity should be in these types of internship fairs of different background and diversity of different... majors."

One student also suggested using the students' campus emails to bring awareness to internship opportunities on campus, stating,

MTSU has a huge basis of commuter students and so because of that I think like a lot of commuter students miss out on things that are going on around MTSU. I know I check my email frequently, but I think our email could be utilized a lot more. It was only through a professor that told me about the career catalog where you can find jobs and apply for jobs, but we have one for MTSU and I didn't know that until one professor told me. So having mass emails that direct students toward these programs would be efficient I think, especially for commuter students.

Expanding internship databases

Internship databases Students also recommended expanding the internship databases on campus to search for internship opportunities, more specifically, opportunities of interest to students. One student from the fifth focus group stated, “if we had a [job search engine] but for internships, [that] would be useful.” Another participant from the same focus group added “you can filter by internships but there’s not a lot... I didn’t see a lot of [the available internships] as a good fit.” Expanding the databases to create more opportunities for students and employers. Informing students that these databases are available as a resource to internship opportunities alleviates some of the anxiety and frustration students say they experienced during the process of finding internship placement.

DISCUSSION

This study adds to the growing literature on experiential learning. Specifically, it speaks to the benefits and barriers to internship participation. It also adds to the limited research on faculty perceptions of experiential learning practices and the influence faculty have on students' experiential learning opportunities. The first objective of this study was to explore student perceptions of their internship/practicum experience and how these experiences helped prepare them for a career in the workforce or to pursue an advanced graduate degree. I also explored student satisfaction with internship experiences. In addition, I identified the benefits and barriers to student internship participation. Students and faculty agree that internships and practicums provide and enhance communication, critical thinking, teamwork, problem solving, professionalism, and networking. This finding supports Dean and Clements' (2010) study which found that students who participated in internships were more prepared to enter the workforce, establish a career, improve their networking and communication skills, and were able to bridge the gap between theoretical learning in the classroom and practice applied in a professional setting. Students who were challenged to step out of their comfort zone and gain enough confidence to apply these skills to the classroom and future workforce opportunities reported overall satisfaction with the internship. The quality of the internship influenced students' overall satisfaction with their internship.

Literature indicates that internships expose students to a professional environment that helps them determine their interest and career paths. This study supported this idea with job skills and employment opportunities. All students who participated in the focus groups stated that their internship and/or practicum experience helped them prepare for

careers in the workforce by helping them determine a desirable career path. Some students reported identifying the populations they want to work with while others recognized the populations they did not want to work with. For a few students, it helped them determine that they want to continue on to pursue a graduate degree. These findings are consistent with prior research (Simons et al., 2010; Cedercruz and Cates 2010).

Time, location, accessibility, compensation, and lack of direction were the most common barriers to internship participation according to students. It is evident in this study that most participants were fulfilling a course requirement for graduation. Study findings imply that most undergraduate interns are participating in internships for the first time and lack awareness on the importance of internships in employment and career advancement opportunities. Findings also imply first time interns lacked direction on finding appropriate placement and as a result struggled to balance their internship requirements and personal responsibilities. They advocated for internship coordinators that will help them find placement opportunities that appeal to their interest and on-campus informational sessions and career fairs that will inform them of the internship opportunities available to them. This is consistent with other literature on internship barriers.

Student and faculty recommendations for improving the internship program centered around adding an office that oversees internship opportunities to majors across campus. For example, students suggested that hiring an internship coordinator that will help students find an internship that works with their schedule, appeals to their interest, and helps them begin the internship process. The internship coordinators hired to help with the internship department can devote time to educating students on how the

internship process works and finding an appropriate placement that will be beneficial to the student. Not only will adding an internship department solve student issues of accessibility, it will also provide support for faculty. The internship coordinators will have the time needed to vet organizations that are looking for student interns, checking in on the progress of the internship throughout different times in the semester.

The second objective of this study was to explore how students' internships or practicum experiences motivate and influence them to become active citizens. This will add to the literature on engaged pedagogy. Students believe their classroom learning empowered them to become active citizens in the community. These findings support the arguments made by proponents of critical pedagogy. Proponents of engaged and critical pedagogy Freire (1970), hooks (1994), and Hill-Collins (2010) contend that education empowers students to be free from oppression. Students posit that active discussions are essential to student learning. This supports Hill-Collins and hooks. They argue that active discussions about the role race, class, and gender play in lived experiences influences the empathy people have for one another. Empathy emerged as an unexpected theme in the focus groups. Students expressed empathy for students that were burdened by the barriers to internship participation. Through in-depth discussion about barriers to student participation to internships, students expressed empathy toward other students who described how they struggled to balance their personal responsibilities with their internships.

Students used their internship and practicum experience to create a non-traditional democratic classroom that encourages discussion from student's diverse life experiences. These findings support Finley and McNair which found that students whose professors

related their classroom learning to lived experiences reportedly had a more engaged learning experience. This is a direct reflection of Hill-Collins' work as well. She contends that applying classroom learning to diverse lived experiences of students is essential to creating a more democratic classroom. She further argues that the connection between these can create a much needed "heated" dialogue. Consistent with a critical pedagogy it is noted that learning need not always be 'tidy,' and that critical reflection and transformative learning, often requires pressing the boundaries and limitations of students' abilities and of their accepted wisdom.

Finally, I explored faculty perceptions on experiential learning. Findings from the study show that faculty believe hands-on learning opportunities to be essential to student learning; so much so that much of their curriculum centers around going out into the community and putting what they learn in the classroom into practice in both a professional and community setting. This finding is consistent with the limited literature that has been conducted on faculty perceptions of experiential learning practices (Carlson and Wurdinger 2018; Carlson and 2010).

Consistent with student discussions, all the faculty internship coordinators suggest that experiential learning provides students with the real-world experiences that will help them in the professional world. This study found that faculty had an overall positive perception of experiential learning. All of the faculty interviewed incorporated experiential learning assignments into the curriculum despite challenges for students in accessing practicum and internship opportunities. This is consistent with Rosenstein, Sweeney, and Gupta (2012) which found that 91% of faculty who participated in their online survey used experiential learning in their junior and senior high school courses.

Internship supervisors revealed that they would be more willing to supervise internship opportunities if they had more time and money to do supervisory visits throughout the course of the internship. These visits provide faculty the opportunity to maintain a personal connection to different organizations. Almost all of the students who participated in the study indicated that they completed internships as a requirement for course credit; meaning that throughout the internship they were required to submit several assignments that contributed to their grade. For some students, these required reflection and journal entries which helped them become active citizens and understand the meaning of their internship or practicum experience. Furthermore, almost all the faculty interviewed relied on pass/fail courses in combination with written assignments as grades for internships. This is more than reported by faculty from a prior study that found only 30% of faculty relying on these assignments used a “pass” or “fail” grading system. All of these findings are consistent with previous research and add to the body of literature on the importance of internships for transforming learning (Wiltmore and Bratlien 2007).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to determine how students describe their internship, their satisfaction with their overall experience, barriers to internship participation and internship placement, and how a critical education encouraged students to become active citizens. Lastly, I wanted to determine how faculty could who have supervised student internships describe their experience. This study has shown that faculty and students have positive perceptions of critical education and experiential learning practices despite their challenges and barriers to participation.

Focus groups proved to be an appropriate method for students to share and create meaning of their experiences (Jensen, Kolb, and Baker 2005). Students were able to describe relatable experiences and provide feedback and support for one another. Students are more likely to be satisfied with an internship if they are challenged to complete with more difficult tasks and they were entrusted to with increased responsibility to be self-sufficient, enthusiastic and dependable. They understand the value of skills that you learn in the classroom and how they can transition to successful career in the workforce.

Students also expressed feelings of frustration and empathy during the discussion of barriers to internship participation

Developmental models suggest that pedagogy and learning styles are significant to student learning. However, these developmental models failed to address the importance of critical education on student involvement. The findings from this study illuminates the impact that experiential learning has on students' community involvement. Students' community involvement influenced their classroom learning.

They used their internship and practicum experiences to generate critical discussions about their lived experiences in the classroom. This study has also shown how the intersectional lens of race, class, and gender influence the classroom and experiential learning.

This study has also shown that faculty are supportive of experiential learning. They incorporate experiential learning practices into the curriculum because they want to prepare students for a career in the workforce and serve their community. It was clear during their interviews that they value professional readiness in students before they have students complete an internship. They assess student's professional readiness based on the quality of their assignments, their, and how often they attend class. Like students, faculty value the relationship they have with organizations that have provided students with internship opportunities. It is important for them to maintain these relationships through supervised visits to assess how well the internship is going and if any changes need to be made. Faculty stated that they would like more time and money to go on these supervised visits to maintain these important connections.

Students and faculty both reported feeling overwhelmed. Students were overwhelmed with the task of finding an appropriate internship that appeals to their interest and works with their busy schedules. Faculty reported being overwhelmed with their workloads and the responsibilities required for supervising student internships. Both students and faculty recommended incorporating an internship department on campus that will oversee all internships. The internship coordinators hired for the internship department will help students find an appropriate internship and help them understand the

expectations and responsibilities of their internship, leaving faculty with time needed to make supervised visits and help ensure students have a good experience.

As part of the completing their internship, students were required to complete written activities that helped students reflect on what they learned. These assignments are used to assess how well the values and expectations of the internship fit with the expectations of the university. Some faculty also had students' complete evaluations about the organizations they interned with. These evaluations help them determine if the organization is a good fit for future students.

Students and faculty have positive perceptions of internships and practicums. Despite challenges, students said they would encourage other students to take advantage of the invaluable experience at some point in their college career. Faculty believe that these experiences are an essential part of personal development and professional readiness.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

IRB

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Thursday, April 05, 2018

Principal Investigator	Ella Weaver & Vicky MacLean (Faculty)
Faculty Advisor	NONE
Co-Investigators	Tierra Brooks, Brandon Creso, Huey Davis and Chasity Fraizier
Investigator Email(s)	<i>ella.weaver@mtsu.edu; vicky.macleam@mtsu.edu</i>
Department	Department of Sociology and College of Liberal Arts
Protocol Title	<i>Co-curricular activities and internship experiences: Barriers, skills and employment preparation</i>
Protocol ID	18-2197

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

IRB Action	APPROVED for one year from the date of this notification
Date of expiration	4/30/2019
Participant Size	5,000 (FIVE THOUSAND)

Participant Pool	General Adults (18 years and older) - Current and former MTSU students who are still on the MTSU email network
Exceptions	Signature requirement waived for informed consent (refer below)
Restrictions	1. Mandatory active informed consent through the click of mouse and age verification done online prior to data collection. 2. Identifiable data and audio recordings must be deleted once data processing is over.
Comments	NONE

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**4/30/2021**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **4/30/2019**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that you may not receive a separate reminder to complete your continuing reviews. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study **MUST** be notified to the Office of Compliance by filing a final report in order to close-out the protocol.

IRBN001 Version 1.3
Office of Compliance

Revision Date 03.06.2016 Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Continuing Review Schedule:

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	3/31/2019	NOT COMPLETED
Second year report	3/31/2020	NOT COMPLETED
Final report	3/31/2021	NOT COMPLETED

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Only two procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year in addition to changes allowed during continuing review. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel.

Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions imposed with this approval. [Refer to the post-approval guidelines posted in the MTSU IRB's website.](#) Any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. Amendments to this protocol must be approved by the IRB. Inclusion of new researchers must also be approved by the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.

All of the research-related records, which include signed consent forms, investigator information and other documents related to the study, must be retained by the PI or the

faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data storage must be maintained for at least three (3) years after study completion. Subsequently, the researcher may destroy the data in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity. IRB reserves the right to modify, change or cancel the terms of this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

[Click here](#) for a detailed list of the post-approval responsibilities.
More information on expedited procedures can be found [here](#).

Appendix B

Student Focus Group Interview Guide

Description of Internship/practicum

1. Please describe your internship? Where did you work and what were your responsibilities? Did you get course credit for it? Was it paid?

Skills Gained

2. What skills did you gain from your internship/practicum? (Which of the skills you ranked on the survey do you think are most important? Why did you rank them high?)

3. Has the internship/practicum helped you further your career goals? Find employment or planned your job goals?

Satisfaction

4. Overall were you satisfied with your internship/practicum experience? What were the positives and negatives?

Barriers and Improving Internships

5. What would you recommend to make internships/practicum more beneficial?

6. What are some of the barriers to participating in internships for students at MTSU?

7. What are some things MTSU can do to help eliminate barriers and ^[]_{SEP} motivate more students to complete an internship?

Learning Styles and Race/Class/Gender (Graduate Student Focus Group)

8. Do you think that there are specific learning styles that work better for students from non-traditional social statuses or backgrounds such as race/ethnicity, social class or gender?

9. How your own social status (e.g., race/ethnicity, class and gender) shaped the way you learn? If yes, how so? In what ways?

Appendix C

Faculty Interview Guide

1. How would you describe your experience sponsoring internships?
2. In your experience supervising an internship or practicum can you describe a good experience where you perceived the learning to be beneficial? Can you similarly describe an experience you have had where you were not satisfied with the internship or practicum?
3. What are some of the challenges to incorporating internship programs in the curriculum?
4. Are there other ways that you attempt to incorporate experiential learning into your curriculum/pedagogy/teaching? How important to you think experiential learning is to students?
5. What criteria do you use to determine internship placement? What do you look for to determine that the internship/practicum will be beneficial to student learning?
6. In what ways do you think internships or practicums are important for students?
7. Whose responsibility is it to find an internship or practicum opportunity for students?
8. Would you be more willing to sponsor an internship/practicum if you had someone to find placement opportunities for students (i.e. an internship coordinator)?
9. There is some suggestion in the literature that students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., class, race/ethnicity, and gender) may respond differently to practical learning experiences, than simply academic ones. Have you observed any patterns based on student background and learning styles? Please explain.
10. What are some of the most important skills students should gain from their internship experiences?
11. How have you helped students whose internships you have you sponsored help find employment?

Appendix D
Demographic/Learning Styles Survey

INSTRUCTIONS: Before completing this brief survey, please sign the informed consent form for our research. (Please ask one of our researchers if you do not have the form).

1. What is your class rank
 - Freshman
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior

2. What is your race? (Check all that apply):
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Black or African American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
 - White
 - Asian/Asian American
 - Other (please specify):

3. What is your age?:
 - 18-24 years old
 - 25-34 years old
 - 35-44 years old
 - 45 or older

4. How would you describe your class background?
 - Upper Class

___ Upper Middle Class

___ Middle Class

___ Lower Middle Class

___ Lower Class

5. In your own words, please briefly describe your preferred learning style (e.g., what activities help you learn more effectively?) There are not expected answers here! I learn best when....
6. What company/agency was your internship/practicum, what was your job title (if any) and basic duties:
 Company/Agency name:
 Job Title:
 Duties:
7. Please rank the following 12 skills from most to least important (1 being most important and 12 being least important). How has your internship/practicum influenced each.

___ Intercultural competence (the ability to value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. The individual demonstrates openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences)

___ Career management (the ability to value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. The individual demonstrates openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences)

___ Teamwork (the ability to identify key issues or problems of concern and evaluates potential solutions. The individual presents ideal solutions that demonstrate sound reasoning and an understanding of contextual nuance)

___ Problem solving and decision making (the ability to identify key issues or problems of concern and evaluates potential solutions. The individual presents ideal solutions that demonstrate sound reasoning and an understanding of contextual nuance)

___ Workflow planning (the ability to Identify and prioritize tasks to achieve a desired outcome, and to create a plan with sequential steps and associated actions)

___ Verbal communication (the ability to verbally deliver purposeful presentations designed to increase knowledge, to foster understanding, or to promote change in the listeners' attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors)

___ Critical thinking the ability to conduct a comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion)

___ Digital technology (the ability to Leverage existing digital technologies and adopting new technologies to ethically and efficiently to solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals)

___ Written communication (the ability to Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in a variety of written formats. The individual can develop and express complex ideas effectively with strong voice, sentence variety, paragraph flow, and grammatical awareness)

___ Influencing (the ability to motivate individuals and groups to do something, or convincing or persuading others)

___ Leadership (the ability to leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others)

___ Professionalism and work ethic (the ability to demonstrate personal accountability and effective work habits, (e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image).