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## Unresolved issues: Students' perception of internships in arts and cultural management

Antonio Cuyler and Anne Hodges





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Alessandro Monastero  
A.R.Va – Archeologia Ricerca e Valorizzazione s.r.l., Lecce, Italy

Laura Schina  
University of Salento, Lecce, Italy

# Unresolved issues: students' perceptions of internships in arts and cultural management

Antonio Cuyler  
Florida State University, Tallahassee, United States  
acuyler@fsu.edu

Anne Hodges  
Florida State University, Tallahassee, United States  
ahodges@fsu.edu

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## ABSTRACT

Based on 76 open-ended survey comments from arts and cultural management students, this study used content analysis to identify and describe unresolved issues with internships. The data revealed issues of concern including financial challenges, cultural organizations' commitment, intern satisfaction, and distinguishing between graduate and undergraduate internship criteria and expectations. Identifying and describing students' perceptions of these issues alert the field that improvement in these areas could lead to enhanced internship satisfaction and professional development for arts and cultural management students.

## Keywords:

Arts management

Cultural management

Content analysis

Internships

## Introduction

To better understand students' perspectives of the internship experience in arts and cultural management, the authors developed a cross-sectional descriptive research survey and distributed it to currently enrolled graduate and undergraduate majors in academic programs from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, the UK, and the US. From April 10 to June 21, 2013, students from 131 arts management programs were invited to participate in the survey. Students from 35 programs responded. Not all programs require students to complete an internship to graduate, possibly affecting the overall program response rate, which was 27%. While this response rate was lower than anticipated, a total of 206 students participated in the survey, yielding 104 undergraduate and 102 graduate responses (Cuyler & Hodges, 2015). At the end of the survey, an open-ended comment section prompted students to "provide any additional comments you would like to share about your expectations of internships in arts and cultural management". Fifty-nine respondents provided a variety of comments. Because these comments revealed rich qualitative data, we believe it warranted further examination. Based on an analysis of this feedback, what points of concern can we identify for improving arts and cultural management internships in the future?

This study has practical significance because of its useful suggestions for arts and cultural management educators and cultural organizations. The unresolved issues revealed in this analysis provide opportunities for educators and cultural organizations to improve the internship experience in ways that may lead to increased student learning and satisfaction. In addition, this study has invited the perspectives of students, which previous scholarship on internships in arts and cultural management (Cuyler & Hodges, 2015; Cuyler, 2015; Cuyler, Hodges & Hauptman, 2013; Kuo, 2011; Brindle, 2011; Channell & Anderson, 2010; Stein & Bathurst, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Rolston & Herrera, 2000; Murphy, 1977) has not included in this way.

## Methodology

We used the methodological framework followed by Rothman (2007) which asked interns to provide specific suggestions on how employers could improve the experience for future interns enrolled in a for-credit business school internship. The frequency of specific comments made by students illuminated patterns and themes that Rothman found useful in deciphering areas of concern. These eight key areas of concern included: clarity of tasks, communication, completing challenging tasks in a reasonable time frame, ongoing feedback, mentoring, exposure to other parts

of the business, and respectful treatment. Employers' attention to these issues could improve the effectiveness of internships in business. Given that this framework yielded insightful findings for Rothman, along with content analysis, it has proved ideal for use in this study.

According to Frankel, Wallen & Hyun (2012), content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way by analyzing communications. Underlying meanings and ideas are revealed through analyzing patterns in elements of text, such as words or phrases (Yang & Miller, 2008). Researchers use content analysis to obtain descriptive information, to analyze interview and observational data, to test hypotheses, to check research findings, and/or to obtain information useful in dealing with problems. The latter supports our rationale for using content analysis as the methodology in this study. From the literature, as well as from previous phases of this project, students have often evaluated their internships as poor or even negative experiences. We invited open-ended comments from arts and cultural management students to potentially identify unresolved issues within the internship experience.

We received approximately 59 individual comments. Four students commented "None/nil", and one student commented on aspects of the survey itself, resulting in 54 analyzable comments. Approximately 68% of the original sample population studied in the US, and 85% identified as female. This explains the higher levels of commenters based on country of origin illustrated in table 1. Undergraduate students made up a little more than 50% of the sample population. However, there were 16 more comments from graduate students as shown in table 2.

Country	Nr. of comments
US	36
Singapore	6
Australia	5
UK	4
Canada	2
New Zealand	1

**TABLE 1. COMMENTS PER COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**

Source: Informed by data from the study.

Enrollment status	Nr. of comments
Graduate	35
Undergraduate	19

**TABLE 2. GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE COMMENTS**

Source: Informed by data from the study.

Several comments were complex enough to reveal multiple themes. We counted approximately 22 such comments. An example of a comment with multiple themes is this one:

*If a graduate student is completing an internship, I believe it would be respectful to the student that they are compensated. If they already have a degree and have obtained that internship, they are mostly likely qualified to work there and should be compensated since they are most likely spending time that they could be earning money, at a meaningful internship.*

This comment represents two of our themes: compensation and the need to distinguish between graduate and undergraduate internship criteria. These types of multi-layered comments brought the final total of analyzable comments up from 54 to 76. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we conducted content analyses individually. We then conducted content analyses jointly to agree upon themes and the frequency of themes to reach a consensus.

As academic supervisors of graduate internships and the primary instruments of this qualitative study, we acknowledge the risk for bias. To control for bias, we adhered to two of Tracy's (2010) criteria – rich rigor and credibility – for conducting excellent qualitative research. In terms of rich rigor, this study used appropriate and sufficient data, sample, and context. Regarding credibility, thick description with key illuminating data that shows rather than tells marks this study, which is replicable. Students' expressions of concerns varied, but provided enough similar content to reveal several distinct, but related themes; one of which contains two separate elements. In the subsequent section, we present the five critical issues based on the frequency of themes with textual data as support.

## Findings

Table 3 summarizes the issues, thematic frequency, and percentage occurrence of the total responses.

### Financial challenges

Not surprisingly, the financial challenge associated with accepting an internship was mentioned most often, with the highest number of comments, 38%. Students indicated that they experience this financial issue in two separate categories: 29% of respondents commented specifically about the typical lack of compensation; and an additional 9% expressed (separately) considerable resentment at having to pay tuition for academic credit.

### Compensation

As expected, students have varied and passionate concerns about compensation. They seem to agree on an expectation of financial sustainability as a minimum level of compensation: they want and expect to receive enough financial resources to keep them afloat for the duration of their internship. They also want to know they can prevent incurring debt before accepting the internship. Students suggested that regular or hourly pay, scholarship stipend, travel, transportation, and/or parking reimbursement, housing, and food allowance are useful ways for organizations to consider compensation for interns. However, there are some distinctions between graduate and undergraduate student expectations of compensation. In the comments below, for example, one graduate student strongly desired compensation, while an undergraduate expressed a negative experience of going into debt:

Unresolved issues	Thematic frequency	Percentages
Financial challenges	29/76	38%
<i>Compensation</i>	22/76	29%
<i>Resentment of paying tuition for academic credit</i>	7/76	9%
Cultural organizations' commitment	23/76	30%
Satisfaction with the internship	18/76	24%
Distinguishing between graduate and undergraduate criteria	6/76	8%

**TABLE 3. FINDINGS**

Source: Informed by data from the study.



## “STUDENTS AGREE ON AN EXPECTATION OF FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AS A MINIMUM LEVEL OF COMPENSATION: THEY WANT AND EXPECT TO RECEIVE ENOUGH FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO KEEP THEM AFLOAT DURING THEIR INTERNSHIP”

*Really, arts organizations have devised a smart system where they can get skilled workers and pay them nothing. I feel disheartened.*

*I would not necessarily need a salary in order to complete an internship. However, I have done an unpaid internship in which I paid for my own travel and parking expenses. This resulted in me essentially losing money to do the internship.*

### **Resentment for having to pay for academic credit**

More than a few comments expressed resentment for academic institutions requiring students to pay tuition when there is little or nothing provided in compensation to offset this cost. Students often perceive little to no value provided by their college or university, such as expressed below:

*It is so NOT FAIR when I work for someone for free, AND pay 3 credits for my school who neither set up the internship program nor helped me find my internship. I'm willing to work for free for the experience, and I also value the real world experience very much. However, paying tuition when I'm a free laborer is RIDICULOUS!*

### **Cultural organizations' commitment**

While students see considerable academic investment from their university (course credit, syllabi, assignments, and faculty supervision), they do not believe there is equal commitment on the part of the cultural organizations where they intern. This is all the more important because they often view internships as potential professional opportunities for the future. Several points made by students in the comments below express this concern:

*An intern is someone who enters an organization with the explicit motivation to gain more practical real-world experience in the career field they wish to enter and grow in. This means opportunities to assist on multiple projects, and come into contact with multiple people. Having an intern means an organization should commit the time and energy to outline the intern's responsibilities and learning.*

*An internship should be about getting the experience we need for our future work. I think that there should be people monitoring what is happening in the company, because there are some companies that just make use of interns as coffee persons.*

*Companies seeking to hire interns from a college should have to speak with a representative (preferably a career counsellor) from the school prior to hiring a student for an internship to ensure that the student is right for the position and the employer is right for the student.*

*I think an intense full-time internship is more beneficial than a staggered part-time internship over an extended period. This is particularly the case with regard to working on a specific project.*

### **Satisfaction**

Some students commented that they were, indeed, satisfied with their internships. These comments focused on gaining valuable experience and making good professional connections. Typical among these types of comment are the two below:

*I recently completed a 10-week part-time internship with the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and had a meaningful experience because: it enhanced my networking opportunities, I got an insider's view of the Education and Marketing departments, I worked on two meaningful projects, my hours were flexible, and I had an opportunity to learn new skills.*

*Internships are obscenely helpful; they were one of the most useful pieces of my college education. I am all for a program adding more internship aspects to their programs.*

### **Distinguishing between graduate and undergraduate criteria**

Lastly, a few students commented about how little distinction exists between graduate-level and under-

graduate-level internship criteria. One graduate student commented:

*After four years of professional arts marketing experience, to complete my master's I am required to fulfil the same internship responsibilities as a student with no professional work experience. There is no flexibility within the program. That is an unfortunate waste of time and resources.*

## Discussion

As shown in table 3, a total of 38% of students related concerns about the financial challenge of accepting an internship; 30% commented on cultural organizations' commitment; 24% voiced concerns over satisfaction, and lastly, 8% conveyed a desire for distinguishing between graduate and undergraduate student internship criteria.

This study found that arts and cultural management students cite financial challenges most frequently as an unresolved issue for them relating to an internship. Too many cultural organizations do not compensate interns leaving them feeling undervalued by the field. How students view whether the cultural sector appreciates and values them is a key component of their socialization and pending entry into the field (Dailey, 2014). In addition, research has shown that unpaid internships in fields such as Accounting, Business Administration, Communications, Engineering, English, Political Science, and Psychology do not increase students' employability and salaries beyond graduation (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2013). Because of this, academic supervisors and practitioners should develop creative solutions to the issue of intern compensation, particularly because many cultural organizations cannot afford to compensate interns. Academic supervisors could consider, for instance, collaborating with their development officers to raise funds for internship scholarships. Internship scholarships would hold tremendous value for students of low socio-economic status who cannot afford to complete an unpaid internship. Similarly, cultural organizations could pursue funding through their fundraising and development strategies to regularly provide compensation for interns – see, for instance, the strategy followed with regard to this by the

DeVos Institute of Arts Management at the University of Maryland (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, 2014).

Requiring students to pay tuition to their academic institutions in order to work for a cultural organization, mostly likely for little or no pay, has created considerable resentment among students. Lack of compensation for required internships seems to exacerbate resentment for having to pay tuition. This begs the question, should students receive academic credit only for paid internships in arts and cultural management. Academic institutions could consider an internship policy that encourages payment and explains why tuition is required. In addition, program directors and/or internship coordinators may need to improve communication with students about the college's or university's infrastructure and the advantages for enrolled students. Cultural organizations appreciate and often depend on competency from interns who have acquired academic knowledge about arts and cultural management. Engaging qualified interns is typically more efficient and effective than screening interns

from the general population. Academic supervisors can stress to students that cultural organizations are eager to engage interns with pertinent academic credentials. In addition, once academic advisors and cultural organizations develop relationships, the process of engaging interns and evaluating the experience becomes smoother for both parties. In our opinion, students need to also understand the benefits they receive from their academic institutions before, during, and after their internship. They should know that tuition ensures they will have an academic supervisor to provide feedback, guid-

ance, and support. Feedback from supervisors can become a part of their academic file, thus lending credibility to his/her resume; and the supervisor can allude to this experience in conversations with potential employers. Students' tuition also allows academic institutions to insure them in advance of problems that may arise, such as a sudden cancellation of the internship, or on-site injury.

This study reveals that cultural organizations' commitment to internships is of similar importance to students. Thirty percent of respondents perceive a lack of commitment from the organizations that host them. Evidence of such organizational commitment might include a publicly stated emphasis on nurturing the next generation of arts leaders; a published internship job description; periodic review of goals and objectives; a letter of agreement; time devoted to

## “ACADEMIC SUPERVISORS AND PRACTITIONERS SHOULD DEVELOP CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO THE ISSUE OF COMPENSATION, PARTICULARLY BECAUSE MANY CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS CANNOT AFFORD TO COMPENSATE INTERNS”

## “ORGANIZATIONS CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPROVE THEIR INTERNSHIPS SO THEY TRULY BECOME A MECHANISM OF ANTICIPATORY SOCIALIZATION THAT PREPARES ASPIRING MANAGERS FOR EMPLOYMENT IN CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS”

assessment at midpoint and conclusion of the internship; and a designated, on-site staff mentor to nurture the intern toward understanding the organization's operations. By way of example, the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts – which supports an internship program that is regularly ranked favorably by the Princeton Review and Bloomberg Businessweek – makes clear a commitment to preparing the next generation of arts and cultural managers (Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, 2014). We believe evidence of organizational commitment would also go a long way toward improving intern satisfaction.

Students also voiced concerns about the apparent lack of distinguishing criteria between graduate and undergraduate internships. Their comments were pointed toward both academic institutions and cultural organizations needing to distinguish such criteria. Cultural organizations would do well to acknowledge the potential variance of skill level between graduate and undergraduate students. A graduate student may not require the same amount of supervision as an undergraduate student. Everyone might benefit from coming together to design individual internships to more effectively increase student skills, while benefiting the organization.

Finally, from general observation, negative experiences motivate comments at the end of a survey; therefore, we were surprised that commenters chose to share some of their positive internship experiences. The total rate of internship satisfaction may exceed expectations. Nevertheless, clearly the student who interned with the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston had a satisfactory experience because the internship enhanced networking opportunities, gave an insider's view of the education and marketing departments, provided two meaningful projects, permitted flexible work hours, and afforded opportunities to learn new skills.

### Conclusion

As part of a 2013 research study to better understand student perspectives of arts and cultural management internships, this qualitative analysis of their open ended survey comments sought to answer the following question: What issues can be identified

that might lead to improving their internship experiences? Using content analysis, we analyzed 76 survey comments from arts and cultural management students about their perceptions of internships. Several distinct unresolved issues emerged from the data: financial challenges (compensation and resentment of paying tuition), cultural organizations' commitment, interns' satisfaction, and the recommendation to distinguish between graduate and undergraduate internship criteria. Future studies on internships in arts and cultural management should investigate the correlation between paid or unpaid internships on future job placement and salary. We also encourage further investigation of contextual factors, and the attributes of assignments, projects, and work environments that lead to intern satisfaction (D'Abate, Youndt & Wenzel, 2009) in arts and cultural management.

As educators, we value internships as an important aspect of the curriculum in arts and cultural management. Internships can have tremendous effects on students' career goals, professional development, and their lives. We have witnessed the professional confidence and maturity students gain through their internships. With thoughtful attention to the unresolved issues revealed in this study, arts and cultural management organizations can significantly improve their internships so they truly become a mechanism of anticipatory socialization that prepares aspiring managers for full-time employment in cultural organizations (Dailey, 2014). In the same way that actors, dancers, and musicians rehearse in preparation for performances, internships in arts and cultural management will allow students to rehearse their future roles in the complex management settings of cultural organizations.

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Avenue Maurice 1  
1050 Brussels,  
Belgium

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T +32 (0)2 201 29 12  
[info@encatc.org](mailto:info@encatc.org)  
[www.encatc.org](http://www.encatc.org)



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