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Criminal Justice Internships: An Assessment of the Benefits and Risks

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Criminal Justice Internships:
An Assessment of the Benefits and Risks

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Abstract

Many Criminal Justice programs actively encourage and facilitate student participation in internships and other types of field learning activities. Internships are often highly individualized arrangements between the student and a criminal justice (or related) agency, creating the potential for a wide range of outcomes. While evidence indicates that *successful* internships offer students a host of potential benefits, relatively little is known about the nature of the “average” or “typical” internship as characterized by students and their host agency supervisors. Through an analysis of data collected via self-administered surveys completed by participants in WOU’s CJ practicum program, this study aims to change that. Findings indicate that most students accomplish their academic goals and assess their experiences in highly favorable terms. Agency supervisors generally evaluate students as prepared, professional and committed. Large portions of both groups view the

completion of an internship as an important (if not essential) component of an undergraduate education in Criminal Justice. Aspects of internships that warrant caution and continued study are discussed.

Introduction

Many Criminal Justice (CJ) baccalaureate degree programs facilitate student participation in experiential (or field) learning activities, such as the completion of an internship or practicum¹. Internships provide students with the opportunity to spend time in a professional field setting (e.g., at a police department, probation office, correctional institution or social service agency) where they are permitted to observe criminal justice practitioners and, under certain circumstances, participate directly in select pre-professional-level activities. Criminal Justice interns typically complete internships at public or not-for-profit agencies and work on volunteer (unpaid) bases.

Potential Benefits Associated with Internships

Internships have the potential to benefit students, faculty and agencies alike. The benefits for students include knowledge acquisition, knowledge application, skills development, personal development and professional development (Gordon and McBride, 2008). By introducing students to new situations and settings, internships also have the potential to foster attitudinal change. In sum, internships have the potential to enhance students' learning experiences, help them decide what to do (or not to do) after they graduate and improve their career-readiness. CJ faculty can use internship programs as a way to expand or deepen their understanding of the field, establish and maintain relationships with the professional community, cultivate collaborative research partnerships and as a method of evaluating the quality, relevance and applicability of CJ

¹ Given their similarities, the terms “internship” and “practicum” are used interchangeably here.

curriculum. The agencies that host interns stand to benefit in many ways as well. Internships, of course, can be an effective recruitment tool, but the benefits don't end there. Interns have the potential to introduce new ideas and/or apply their unique skills and abilities in ways that improve the agency's efficiency and/or effectiveness.

Potential Benefits for Students

Knowledge Acquisition

Internships have the potential to enhance students' academic experiences by allowing them to apply and expand upon the knowledge they have acquired in the classroom (Green, 1979; Bell, 1981; Fabianic, 1987; Ward, 1991; Parilla and Smith-Cunnien, 1997; Gordon and McBride, 2008). Evidence suggests that students recognize these benefits and see internships as valuable components of their educational experiences (Pockrass 1974, Palmiotto 1984, Ross and Elechi, 2002).

Personal and Professional Development

Internships have the potential to increase students' career preparedness and actual employability. A number of studies have found that students who complete internships feel more prepared for their careers (Pietz, DeMier, Dienst, Green and Scully, 1998; Ross and Elechi, 2002). Internships may lead to long-term career benefits as well. For example, Farmer (1977) found that students involved in law enforcement internships developed a more accurate understanding of the police role and more realistic expectations about the realities of police work.

Another advantage offered by internships includes providing students with networking opportunities. Internships often place students with positions to interact and develop professional relationships with experienced professionals who can serve as mentors, role-models, teachers and references.

Internships also allow students to learn about the career field in which they wish to work (Farmer, 1978). “Job shadowing” and participant observation activities give students the chance to learn more about the duties, expectations and challenges associated with a particular career, improving their ability to assess whether the profession is right for them. Internships may also help students make smooth transitions from academia to a professional working environment (Farkas and Stichman, 2005).

Attitudinal Change

While it may not be inherently beneficial, internships also have the potential to impact student attitudes toward criminals and the criminal justice system in general. Few studies have been published in this area, but all examples indicate that attitudinal change is a likely outcome associated with internships. For instance, Pietz, DeMier, Dienst, Green and Scully (1998) found that the completion of an internship in correctional facilities increased levels of interest in the field. Fichter (1987) found that criminal justice internships altered student attitudes toward prisoners. However, some types of attitudinal change associated with internships may be problematic. According to a study conducted by Farmer (1977), for example, students who participated in law enforcement internships adopted more dogmatic and authoritarian attitudes, which indicate that they acquired

attitudes similar to those of in-service officers.

Potential Benefits for CJ Faculty

In addition to the potential benefits for students, criminal justice faculty also stand to benefit from being involved in the coordination, management and supervision of internships. One such potential benefit includes providing faculty with an opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, thereby enhancing the relevance of what they teach in the classroom. Ross and Elechi (2002), for example, found that many criminal justice interns see a disjunction between what they learn in the classroom and the knowledge they need to be successful criminal justice practitioners. While the divide between theory and practice can make it difficult for students to make a seamless transition from the classroom to the field, much can be learned from their experiences. Observant CJ faculty can use the experiences of student interns to gauge the relevance and applicability of their program's curriculum (Grosskopf and Schrink 1978). Involvement in an internship program also provides faculty with valuable networking opportunities, which can then be used to forge collaborative research partnerships with agencies and practitioners. In sum, internships can be valuable program (or individual course) assessment and faculty development tools that can, in turn, be used to improve student learning outcomes (for a discussion about the "quality control" benefits of internship programs, see Greene, 1979).

Benefits for Agencies that Host Interns

In addition to benefitting students and CJ faculty, participating in internships offers potential advantages for host agencies. Students offer agencies the ability to do a variety of things ranging from research and report writing to simply introducing new ideas and perspectives on traditional practices (Palmiotto, 1984; Ward, 1991). Students can give insight on current trends and recent developments in the field (e.g., recent Supreme Court decisions) and can help practitioners use (or maximize the usefulness) of new technologies (Fabianic 1987, p. 25). In addition, internships provide agencies with a fundamentally practical opportunity to evaluate students' preparedness and suitability for future employment.

Potential Risks and Drawbacks Associated With Internships

While there is agreement that internships can be valuable to the student's overall educational experience, there are several potential problems associated with field learning activities. Any endeavor that involves placing students in the field alongside CJ practitioners and offenders involves a certain degree of risk. Specific risks include but are not limited to the possibility of being exploited, harassed, or hazed.² Each example creates challenges for the student and his/her field and agency supervisors. To date, however, very few researchers have attempted to examine and assess these risks.

² Other risks include accidents or injuries. For example, students could be injured by arrestees or offenders, or in a crash while on a ride along with a criminal justice professional. In our experience, these types of incidents are extremely rare and, because of their seriousness, are also reported to faculty, whereas instances of harassment, hazing, or exploitation are less likely to be reported. Therefore, questions regarding these types of risks were not included in the survey or in this analysis.

Exploitation of Student Interns

According to Greenhouse (2010), approximately 50% of graduating university students complete internships today, up from just 17% in 1992. One fourth to one half of these internships were completed on an unpaid basis. Greenhouse speculated that the trends he observed could be associated with the post-2008 economic recession and, therefore, may be temporary rather than inherent problems.

With job openings scarce for young people, the number of unpaid internships has climbed in recent years, leading federal and state regulators to worry that more employers are illegally using such internships for free labor (Greenhouse, 2010).

While this problem is typically associated with for-profit institutions, budget woes stemming from the post-2008 recession left many public and non-profit agencies scrambling for resources, including personnel. Under the circumstances, some agency supervisors may have found it tempting to use student interns as a source of free labor to relieve pressure created by personnel shortages. Although students often lack the necessary skills and experience to perform duties reserved for skilled/trained officials, some agency supervisors may have been (and may continue to be) tempted to assign interns to menial (but necessary) tasks. Such arrangements are likely to leave a negative impression on students (Palmiotto, 1984). Clearly, such scenarios threaten to result in the student's educational goals being neglected for the benefit of the agency; however, the extent to which students actually experience problems of this nature is, thus far, primarily a matter of speculation.

Harassment, Hazing and Unprofessional Conduct

Published research on internships offers very few insights into how students are treated during their internship experiences. Thus far, empirical evidence about the extent to which student interns experience problems such as harassment and hazing has been virtually nonexistent. Considering that most student interns are young, relatively inexperienced unpaid volunteers in hierarchical organizations (many of which are male-dominated workplaces) who may perceive themselves to be powerless, further investigation into these risks is warranted. At the very least, it is important to acknowledge that some interns may be vulnerable and subject to mistreatment. Mistreatment of student interns can take a variety of forms, including exploitation (discussed above), harassment and hazing. It is essential for faculty supervisors to be conscious of these risks and to take steps designed to identify, understand and prevent them.

METHOD

With the broad goal of identifying ways to help future students maximize their odds of having fruitful and rewarding internship experiences, this study was designed to evaluate the WOU CJ Practicum Program from the perspectives of two of the program's principal stakeholders: students and their host agency supervisors. Special emphasis was placed on:

- 1) Analyzing individual-level student assessments of their overall experiences, the extent to which they achieve their academic goals, and the factors they view as contributing to (or impeding) their success, and
- 2) Evaluating agency supervisor perspectives related to individual student preparedness, professionalism and commitment levels, and

- 3) Evaluating student and agency supervisor perspectives related to the importance of internships as a component of a CJ education, and
- 4) Exploring the extent to which students experience problems related to exploitation, harassment and unprofessional conduct.

Surveys were administered to all undergraduate students who completed Criminal Justice internships at Western Oregon University between spring term, 2011 and spring term, 2015. A second survey was administered to these students' agency supervisors. Invitations to complete the online surveys were sent via email upon the students' completion of all internship requirements, including volunteer work hours and written requirements. Participation was strictly voluntary and respondents were permitted to complete the survey at their convenience. A total of 296 student surveys and 303 agency supervisor surveys were administered³, of which 236 student surveys and 228 agency supervisor's surveys were completed (n=464), resulting in response rates of 79% and 75% respectively.

Student surveys were comprised of 40 questions. Thirty questions related to the nature of the student's internship experience and the extent to which the student achieved his/her original objectives. Six questions focused on the student's demographic characteristics, background and career aspirations, and three questions related to the students' general attitudes about internships as a component of a college-level education in Criminal Justice. A final open-ended item was an invitation to students to provide

³ This disparity stems from the fact that some students volunteered under more than one agency supervisor

specific recommendations for improving the Department's internship program.

Agency supervisors were asked 20 questions on several specific topics, including the students' performance and preparedness for a career in the field. Additional questions addressed the supervisors' academic and professional backgrounds, general attitudes about higher education and the benefits of field learning activities specifically.

Internship Program Requirements

The student interns who participated in this study were required to complete 400 hours of volunteer service with a public or non-profit agency of their choosing. Interns were permitted to complete their volunteer hours on a full-time (40 hour or more/week) or part-time basis, according to their preferences and availability. A large majority (80.2%) reported working 30 or more hours per week (on average).

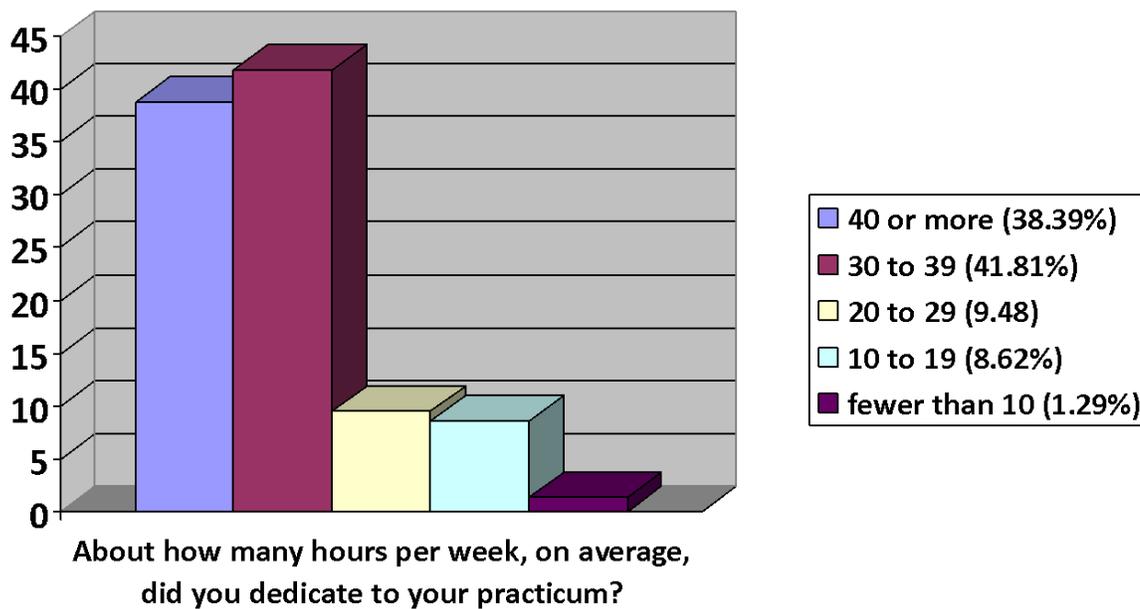
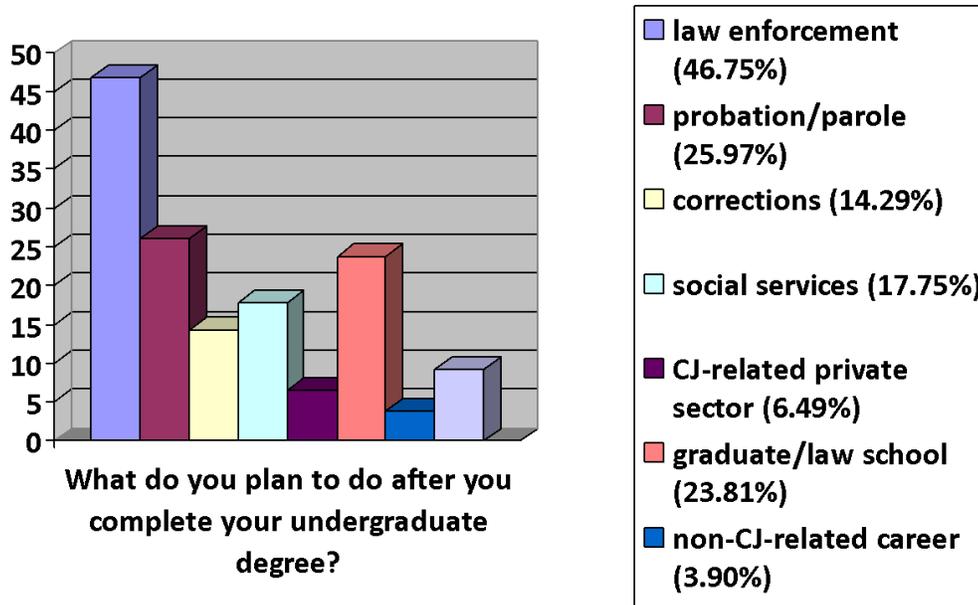
For purposes of maintaining academically rigorous standards, each participant was also required to complete and submit a statement outlining his/her academic goals, a daily journal, weekly progress reports, two agency-specific writing samples, a resume and a term paper. Additionally, each student was responsible for coordinating and scheduling a meeting/site visit involving themselves, their host agency supervisor and their faculty supervisor. The required term paper included a summary of his/her experience, an analysis of how the experience helped him/her gain a better understanding of the issues he/she learned about in their prior CJ coursework, and a review and discussion of his/her progress toward his/her original academic goals.

Sample Characteristics

The Students

The sample of student interns was comprised of undergraduate Criminal Justice majors at Western Oregon University. All respondents (123 males and 109 females) were in their junior or senior year of study and all but seven (7) were at least 21 years of age.

The students involved in this study had diverse career aspirations with a large portion (46.75%) planning to pursue careers in law enforcement. Over forty percent of the participants anticipated seeking careers in community-based (25.97%) or institutional corrections (14.29%) while nearly 18% planned to seek employment with a social service agency. A relatively small percentage of students (6.47%) planned to pursue CJ-related careers in the private sector (described as including loss prevention, private security, etc.). Nearly one quarter of students surveyed (23.81%) intended to continue their education before pursuing careers.



The Host Agency Supervisors

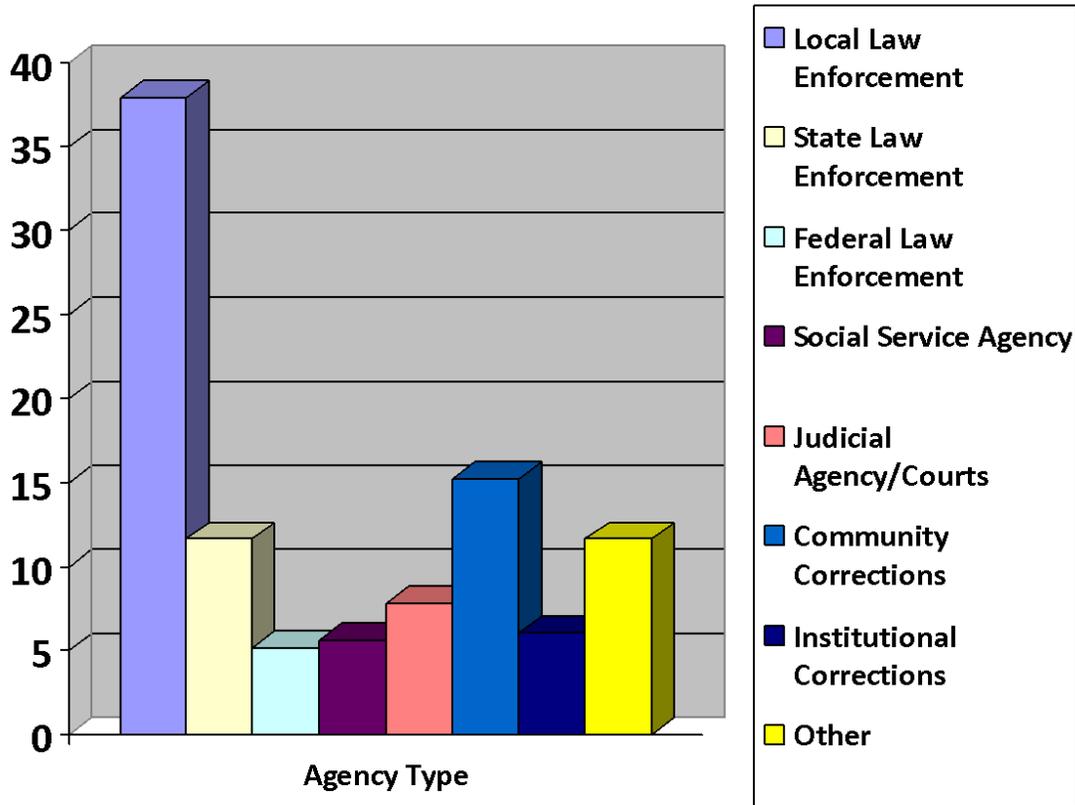
Of the agency supervisors who completed the survey, 54% were male and 46% were female. Most were experienced: 94% had more than five years of experience in their current field. Thirty-five percent (35%) had worked for their agency for 20 years or more. Two percent (2%) of the agency supervisors involved in this study lacked college experience while the rest completed at least some college coursework. Two thirds (67%) possessed baccalaureate or graduate degrees.

In addition to being relatively experienced and educated, the agency supervisors involved in this study appeared to be committed to the idea that internships have value. Literally all of those who completed the survey shared the opinion that an internship experience is an important part of a baccalaureate education in Criminal Justice (more on this below). Additionally, nearly 70% had prior experience supervising interns.

The Host Agencies and Organizations

The students and agency supervisors who participated in this study were affiliated with many different types of agencies and organizations. Nearly half of the students volunteered with a law enforcement agency of one variety or another, 24.9% with municipal police agencies, 11.6% with state police agencies and 13.3% with county sheriff's offices. Twelve percent of respondents were affiliated with county probation and parole offices. Other students completed their internships with state or county courts (7.7%), correctional institutions (6%), social service agencies (5.6%), federal law enforcement organizations (5.2%), and state or federal community corrections agencies

(2%). Nearly twelve percent of students completed internships with other public or nonprofit organizations (mostly providers of various social services) and/or split their internships between multiple agencies.



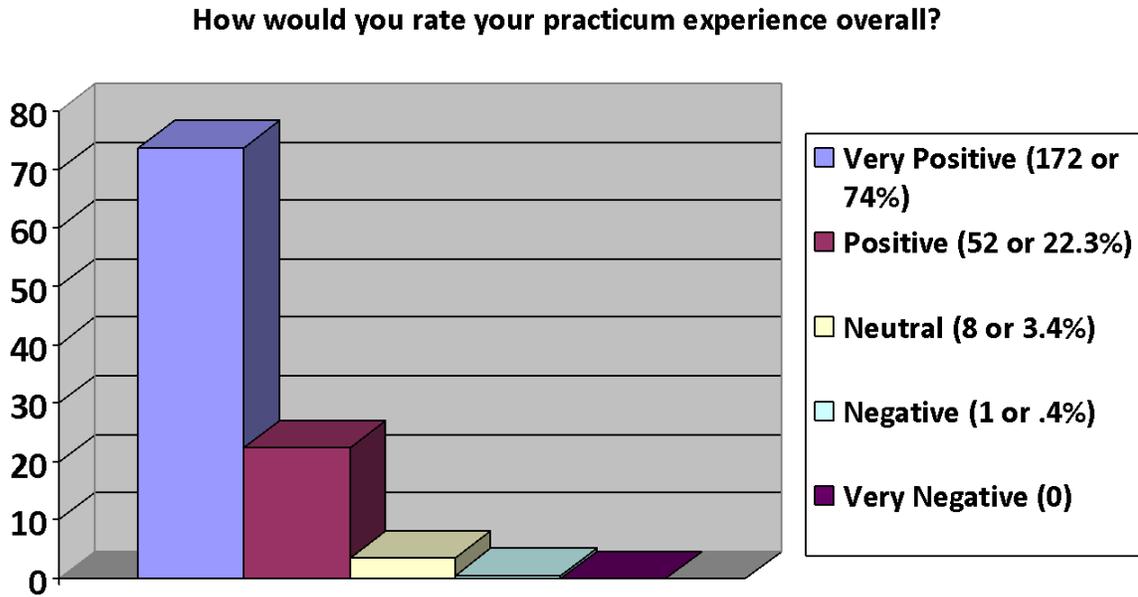
FINDINGS

Individual-Level Outcomes as Evaluated by Students

Rating the Overall Experience

With very few exceptions, the students who participated in this study rated their practicum experiences positively. A large majority (96.3%) rated their internship experiences as either “very positive” or “positive” overall. Eight students rated their experiences in neutral terms, one rated his/her internship as “negative,” and zero students

rated their experiences as “very negative.”



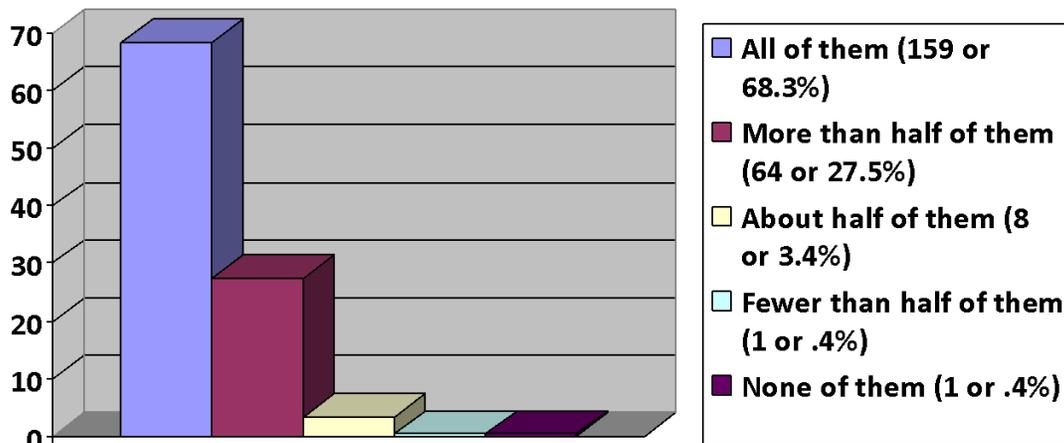
Achievement of Goals

Evaluating the impact of a field learning experience on a student’s overall academic experience can be challenging. This is due, in part, to the fact that many field learning experiences are highly individualized arrangements. Moreover, each student seeks to accomplish a unique set of goals that typically corresponds with his/her specific academic interests and career aspirations. As a result, no two field learning experiences are exactly alike. In recognition of this, all WOU CJ students who participated in this study were required to compose a list of their *academic* goals prior to beginning their internship experiences. These goal statements summarized what each student hoped to learn during/through the internship experience.

Given the fact that each student’s goals were different, it makes little sense to

evaluate student achievements according to standard criteria. This study was designed to permit students to evaluate their own experiences with their own personal, unique academic goals in mind. The vast majority of students (96%) evaluated their achievements in positive terms. Specifically, nearly 70% reported that they accomplished *all* of their goals, while over 25% accomplished more than half of their goals. Two students (2.7%) evaluated their achievements in neutral terms, reporting that they had accomplished about half of their goals. One student claimed to have accomplished fewer than half of their goals and one reported accomplishing none.

Reflecting back on your original practicum goals, about how many did you accomplish?

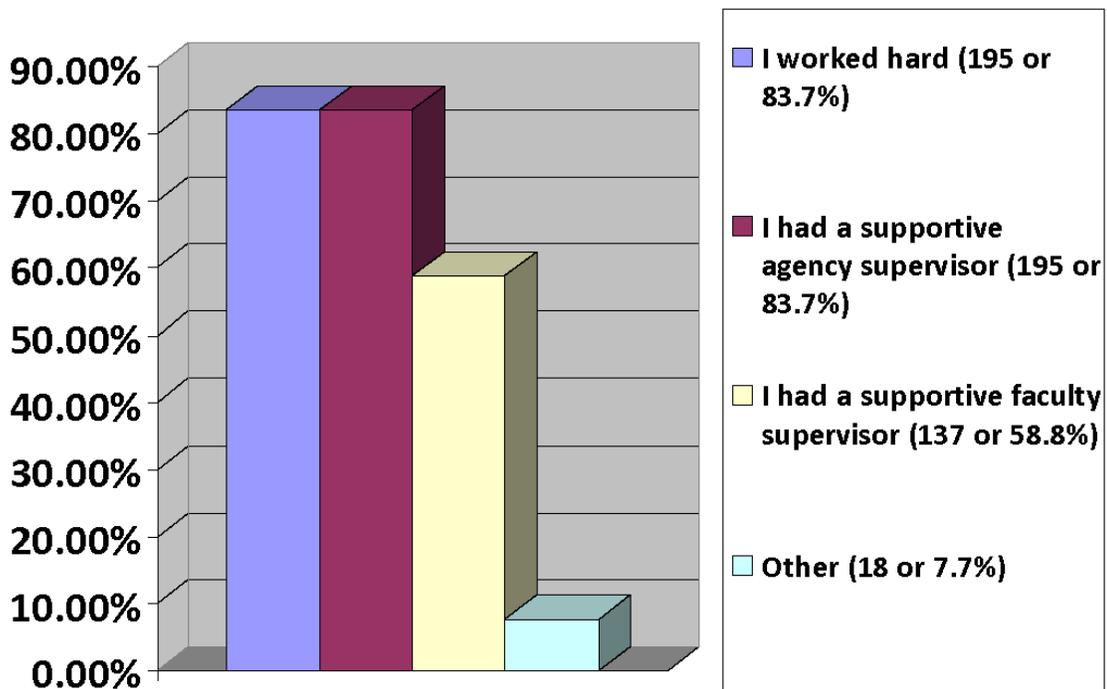


Factors Associated with Achievement of Goals

Students were also asked to identify some of the factors they associated with their successes. When given several options and asked to select any and all of those that applied, a majority (83.7%) linked their successful outcomes to hard work; that is, they

assigned credit to themselves. An equally large percentage attributed their success to having a supportive agency supervisor. Over half of respondents (58.8%) reported that having a supportive faculty supervisor contributed to their successes.

Referring to the goals you accomplished, to what do you attribute your success? (please select all that apply)



Nearly eight percent (7.7%) of respondents selected the option of “other” (above). These students were invited to supplement that response with additional details. Here’s what they wrote:

I completed goals and answered questions that I have had since beginning of my studies as a Criminal Justice Student. These were not things that I had put on my list but feel overjoyed that I found answers in what I thought was an unlikely place for me.

The crime analyst I worked with presented a lot of opportunities for me to learn.

I find that I worked hard, but am also very thankful for the support of my agency and faculty supervisors.

The staff were amazing in helping me succeed.

I was persistent in accomplishing my goals

A specific deputy that took the time to help and mentor me. Also allowing me to be included in many different activities including k-9 training.

Members of the agency such as detectives and patrol command staff were very helpful and trusted me to complete reports and other important tasks.

My goals were internal in a way and just by being at the agency I completed those goals.

Being a student at western helped as well.

I was treated as someone who had skills to offer the agency, and a role was made for me to be an asset to the Ranger and the agency.

Overall, all employees at Umatilla County Community Corrections played a role in my learning experience.

This division had many different opportunities and my supervisor had many connections with places like Records and the Dispatch Center- she hooked me up with some great sit-alongs and chances to further knowledge and understanding

All staff members were very supportive and very helpful.

Support and assistance from other employees, not my agency supervisor

I spoke up and asked to participate or be let to lead with supervision to gain experience.

Positive and adaptable co-workers

I wanted to see and work with anyone, I wanted to see it all.

All of the employees at the agency I was at made sure that I was engaged in experiences that would enhance my ability to find employment after finishing my practicum.

Impediments to Goal Achievement

Although the vast majority (over 96%) of students described their internships as either “positive” or “very positive” and over two-thirds (68.3%) achieved *all* of their original goals, the findings showed room for improvement. It is, therefore, important to pay special attention to the factors that students viewed as impediments to their progress. The results of this line of inquiry, however, produced findings of limited value. On one hand, very few students assigned individual-level blame for falling short of their goals; less than two percent of respondents blamed themselves. Very small portions of the sample assigned responsibility (in all or in part) to unsupportive agency supervisors (1.7%) or unsupportive faculty supervisors (0.87%).

Students who selected the option of “other” (above) were invited to provide additional details. Their responses identified a wide range of contributing factors:

Just need more time out on patrol and dealing with individuals that I come in contact with.

Some of my goals are future ones.

There were not opportunities to complete.

It got busy at the agency and my "free time" became limited.

I did not achieve some of my goals because I ran out of time.

There was not a specific person that practiced the career that I wanted to learn about.

One of my goals was incredibly lofty. While I'm disappointed I didn't reach it, it does not and will not bother me.

It was a lofty goal to earn a full time officer's position. I was the number two candidate in a hiring process though.

Poor program on agency end. Departments within agency were not consistent or helpful.

Some were unattainable due to security reasons.

The work never went in that direction. I was hoping to learn more about legal writing, but never got to do any.

A couple of my goals were difficult to arrange and changed as a result of my assigned projects being altered, which was perfectly acceptable to me.

There was a lot of miscommunication. Some was my fault, some was not.

Circumstances did not allow me to work directly with those I wanted to.

I was more focused on learning about the aspects of patrol which led to me neglecting to pursue looking into the Fish and Wildlife Division.

My work schedule got in the way. I needed to be employed also to survive.

Agency supervisors was supportive, however, the agency work group was not.

I had many ambitious goals and with the allotted time may not have been enough to complete all goals to the best of my ability

Some of the goals I set are on going.

One of my goals was to use GIS in a professional setting and there was no need for any GIS analysis during the time of my practicum.

The focus area of my practicum shifted as to where I was needed most and because of that two goals had to be eliminated.

It seems that the particular office I worked with was having it's own internal conflicts. Many of the staff were unhappy and wanted to transfer out. The Group Supervisor took another position elsewhere during my practicum, and I suppose the overall atmosphere of unhappiness had a large impact on the amount of time it took to get things done, and the manner in which they were completed.

My supervising officer was hurt and therefore put on light duty making it impossible to perform all of the required tasks.

I set a goal that really was not realistic or achievable.

Ran out of time.

I believe and feel that I am not ready to move onto the next step of my reserve program.

I accomplished goals that I hadn't even considered prior to the beginning of my practicum and focused on those aspects in place of the one goal that I didn't accomplish.

Goals did not apply to agency.

Agency policies did not allow for me to complete my goals

Just hasn't been enough time. My supervisor kept me very busy:)

I had goals that were time consuming and difficult to get answers to because they required input from lots of references so, time was the factor.

Some of my long term goals required more time to complete than the practicum allowed for but, I was able to make great effort towards completing those goals.

Some of the goals I created at the beginning of the practicum didn't apply to the work that I was doing at the Agency.

One goal was to attend/finish a reserve academy. It does not start until

October 2010, which is well after my finished practicum hours.

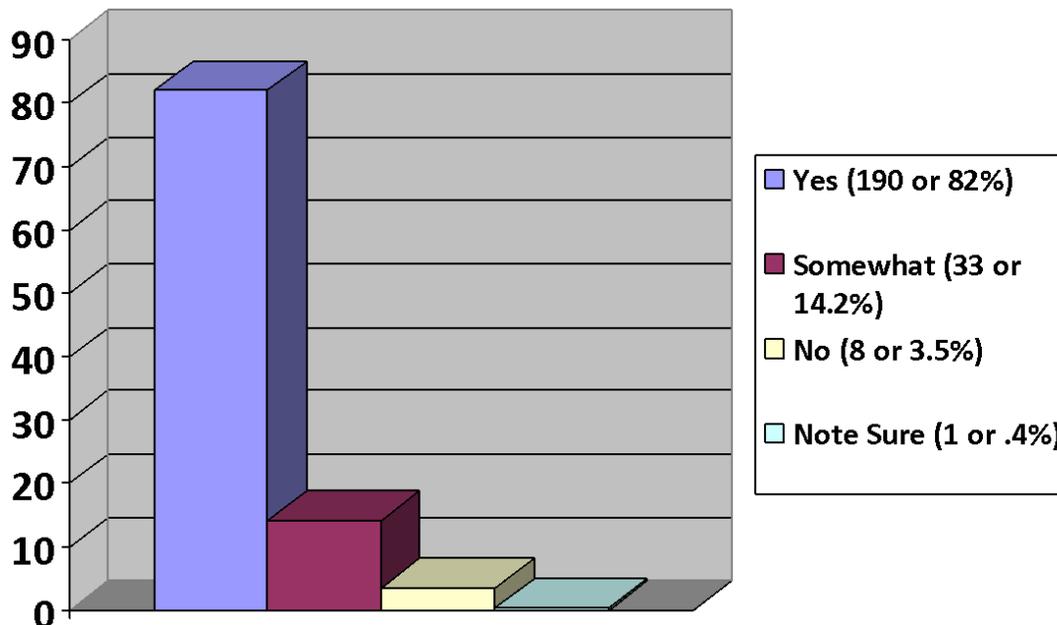
I wasn't certified.

The goal was how to present myself in a courtroom and I never had the opportunity to go into a court room.

Expanding Knowledge: Impact of Internship on Overall Education

Students tended to see their internship experiences as valuable components of their undergraduate experiences. Most (82%) agreed that their internship experience enhanced their education overall. Just 3.5% of the sample categorically disagreed.

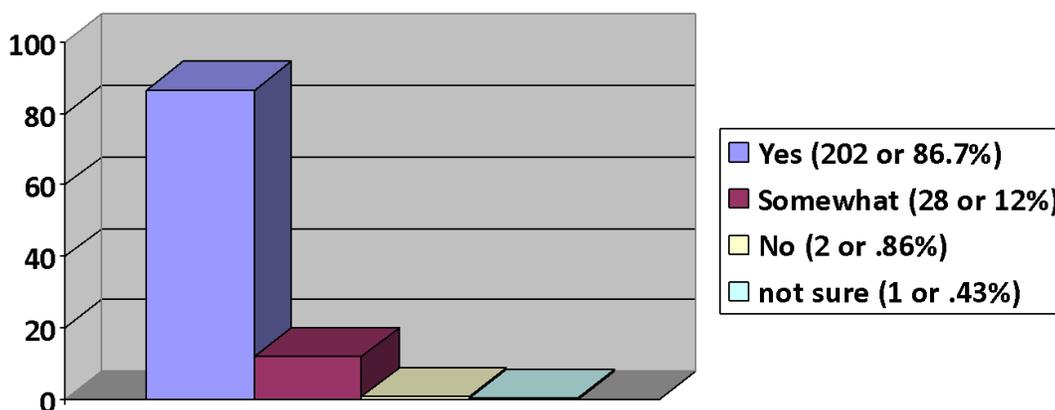
In your opinion, did your practicum experience enhance your overall educational experience at WOU?



Personal and Professional Development

Although many students expressed hope that their internship experiences would eventually enhance their professional prospects, assessing the long-term professional benefits of internships went beyond the scope of this study. This study did, however, address the impact of an internship on student perceptions of their own career-readiness. Specifically, students were asked “In your opinion, did your internship experience help you prepare for a Criminal Justice-related career?” The vast majority of students (86.7%) agreed that their internship contributed to career preparedness. Only two students in the sample (0.86%) reported that their internship did not enhance their readiness for a CJ career.

In your opinion, did your practicum experience help prepare you for a Criminal Justice-related career?



Attitudinal Change

This study did not include an in-depth investigation into the impact of internships on student attitudes. The one measure of attitudinal change included in the survey focused on the impact of internships on individual-level student perceptions of their host agency. Specifically, students were asked “What impact did your practicum experience have on your opinions about your practicum agency/department?” Responses suggest that most students (82%) developed more favorable opinions of their host agencies as a result of their internship experiences. A very small number of respondents (6 or 2.6%) reported that their opinions of their host agencies became more negative/unfavorable as a result of their internships. The balance (15%) reported that their attitudes regarding their host agency remained about the same.

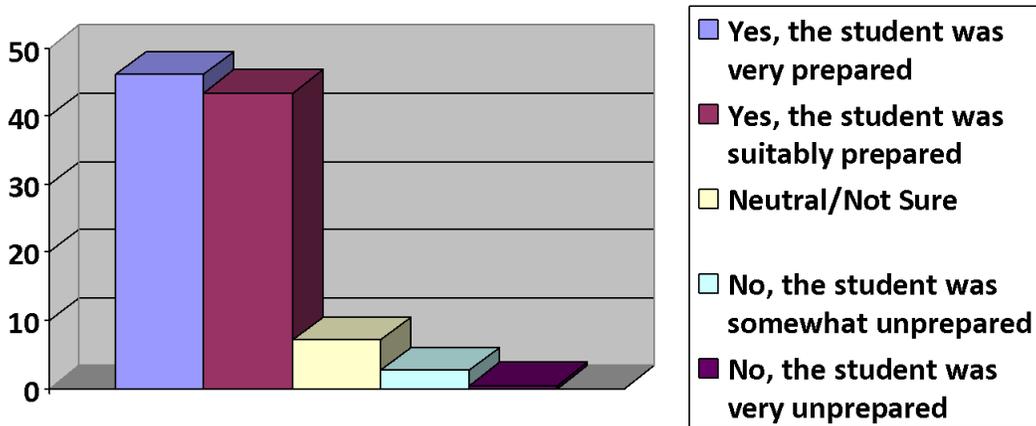
Individual-Level Outcomes as Evaluated by Agency Supervisors

The agency supervisors who participated in this study were in a unique position to evaluate student interns (and internships in general) on a number of criteria. In addition to being valuable to CJ faculty for purposes of monitoring the individual- and group-level progress of interns, these evaluations can be used to assess internship eligibility requirements, the relevance of existing coursework and the overall effectiveness of faculty efforts (e.g., mentoring and advising, etc.) to prepare students for their futures. With these goals in mind, internship agency supervisors were asked to evaluate interns’ levels of academic preparedness, professionalism and commitment.

Academic Preparedness of Students

By and large, agency supervisors reported that WOU CJ students were academically prepared for their internship experiences. Ninety percent (90%) of respondents described the students they supervised as either “very prepared” or “suitably prepared.” Fewer than three percent (2.69%) of respondents described the students they supervised as “somewhat unprepared.” One supervisor (0.45%) described the student he/she supervised as “very unprepared.”

Do you feel that the student was academically prepared for his/her practicum?



Student Professionalism

Agency supervisors were asked to rate the students they supervised on a variety of measures related to professionalism. The rating options included “Excellent,” “Satisfactory,” “Fair,” “Poor” and “N/A.” On average, agency supervisors rated WOU

CJ internship students quite favorably. The overwhelming majority (93.72%) of supervisors rated students' levels of professionalism as either excellent (71.75%) or satisfactory (21.97%). Similarly positive evaluations were given on specific measures of professionalism such as punctuality and the "ability to handle sensitive/confidential information in an appropriate manner."

Just fewer than fifteen percent (14.72%) of agency supervisors reported having to discuss matters related to poor performance with students. Four percent of respondents reported the need to have such a conversation more than once.

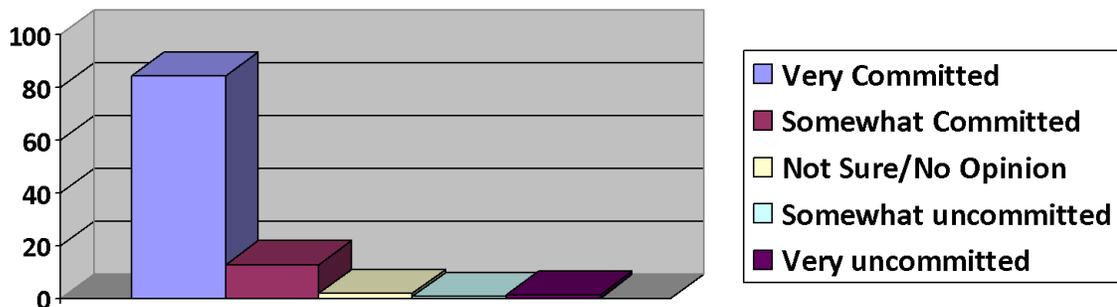
Although they were rated highly overall, the survey results identified a few areas where students could improve. For example, only 55% of agency supervisors rated students' communication skills as "excellent." Similar evaluations were given in the areas of critical thinking skills and problem solving skills; only 52% and 51% of agency supervisors, respectively, rated student performances as "excellent" in these areas. It was, however, very rare for students to be given "poor" ratings on any performance measures. On just three measures did more than two students receive such ratings; "critical thinking skills," "problem solving skills," and "the ability to learn from mistakes/accept constructive criticism."

Student Commitment Levels

The agency supervisors who participated in this study evaluated the commitment levels of WOU CJ practicum students very favorably. The vast majority (84%) evaluated the student they supervised as "very committed" to making the most of his/her internship

experience. Another 12.6% of supervisors evaluated the student in question as “somewhat committed.” Only three students’ commitment levels were evaluated unfavorably, one (0.47%) was described as “somewhat uncommitted” while two were described as “very uncommitted” (0.93%).

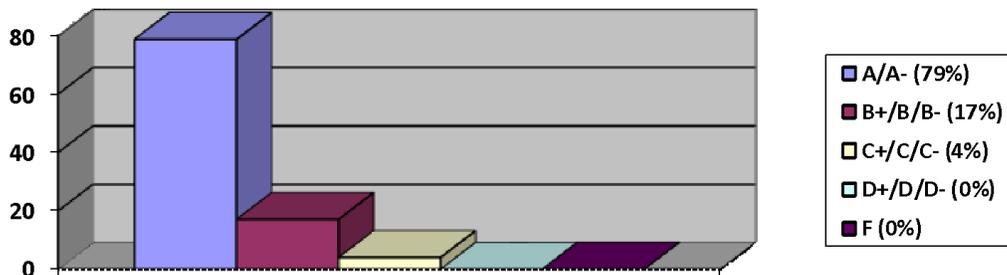
In your estimation, how committed was the student to making the most of his/her practicum experience?



Overall Host Agency Supervisor Evaluations of Students

Perhaps the best indication of how host agency supervisors evaluated student interns was reflected in the letter grade they think the student earned. When asked “If you could give the student a grade for his/her overall practicum performance, what would it be?,” nearly four out of five (79%) of respondents selected grades of A or A-. The vast majority of the remaining respondents (17% of the total) selected grades of B+, B or B-. Four percent reported that they would assign grades of C+, C or C-. None of the 229 respondents selected grades of D+, D, D- or F.

If you could give the student a grade for his/her overall practicum performance, what would it be?

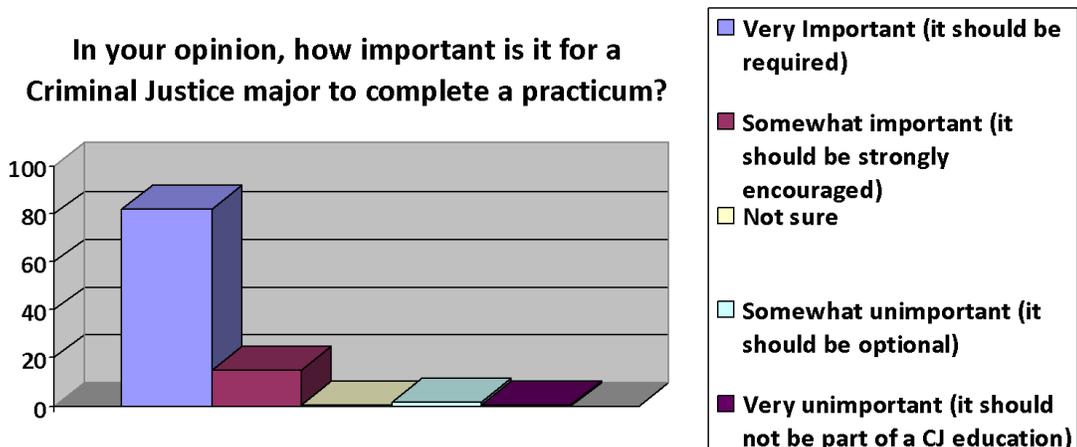


EVALUATING INTERNSHIPS AS A COMPONENT OF A CJ EDUCATION

Overall Value of Internships

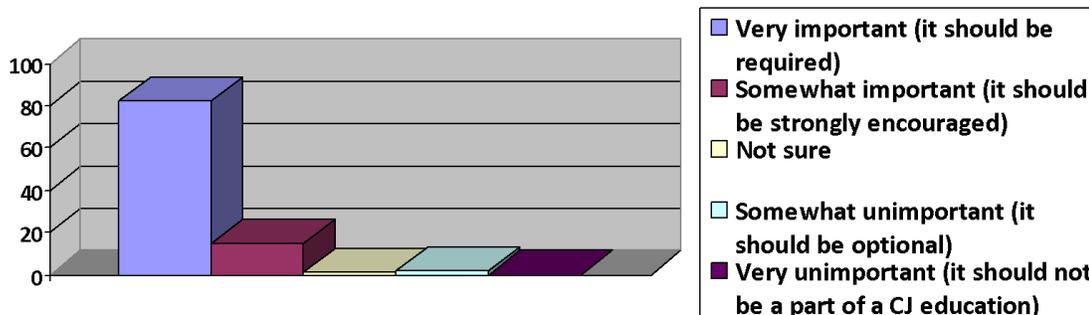
Nearly all (save one) of the students and agency supervisors who participated in this study agreed that an internship experience is an important part of a baccalaureate education in Criminal Justice. The same percentage (82%) of students and supervisors expressed the opinion that an internship is a “very important” experience that “should be required for all CJ majors.” Most of the other respondents (15% of students and agency supervisors alike), shared the opinion that an internship is a “somewhat important” experience that “students should be strongly encouraged to complete.” Fewer than two percent of students (1.72%) and agency supervisors (1.78%) viewed internships as “somewhat unimportant” experiences that “should be optional.” One student and none of the agency supervisors described CJ internships as “very unimportant” endeavors that “should not be part of a CJ education.”

The Students' Perspectives



The Agency Supervisors' Perspectives

In your opinion, how important is it for a Criminal Justice major to complete a practicum?

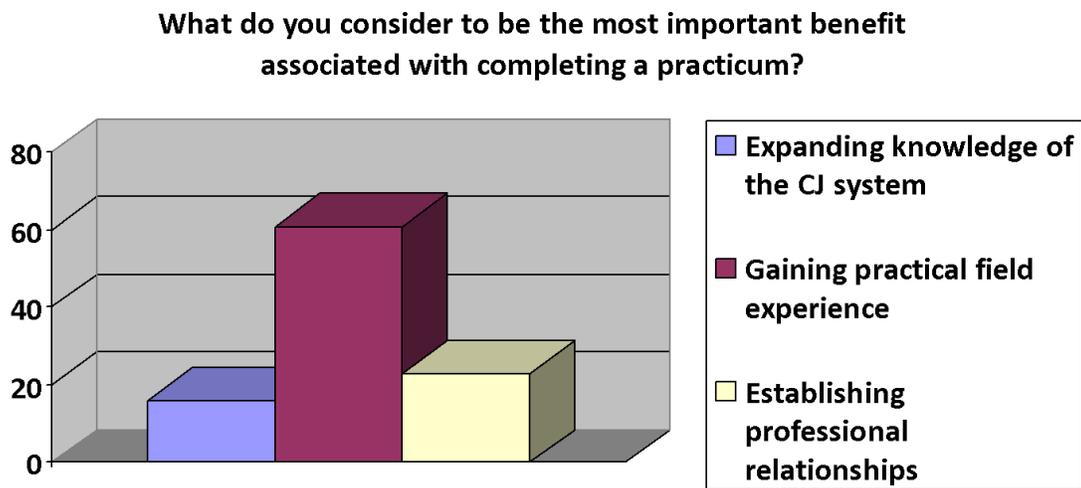


The Most Important Benefits of Internships

Students and agency supervisors expressed fairly similar views about the most important benefits associated with completing an internship. Overall, students and agency

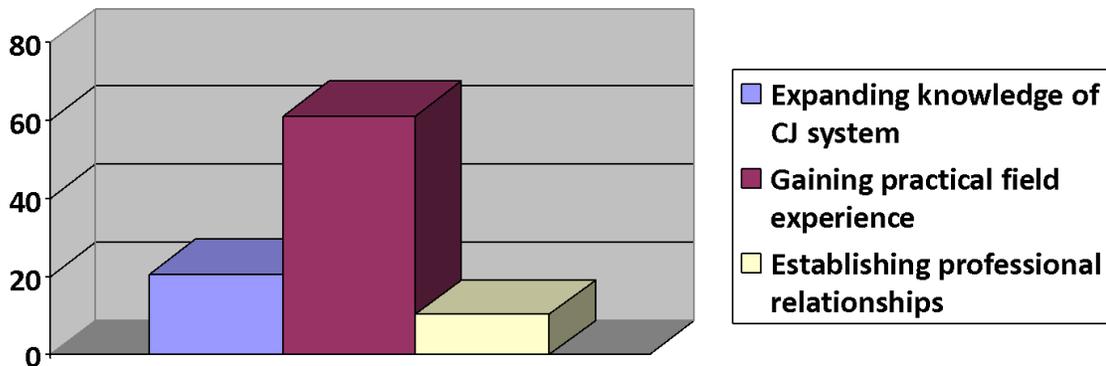
supervisors alike tended to prioritize benefits related to professional development over those related to academic development. Most students (60.8%) and most supervisors (61%) identified “gaining practical field experience” as the most important benefit. Approximately a sixth (16%) of students identified “expanding knowledge of the CJ system” as most important. This option was selected by about a fifth (20.7%) of agency supervisors. Compared to their agency supervisors, students had a tendency to put more emphasis on the networking benefits associated with an internship; over a fifth (22.8%) of students saw “establishing professional contacts” as the most important benefit, while only 7.7% of supervisors agreed.

The Students’ Perspectives



The Agency Supervisors’ Perspectives

What do you consider to be the most important benefit associated with completing a practicum?

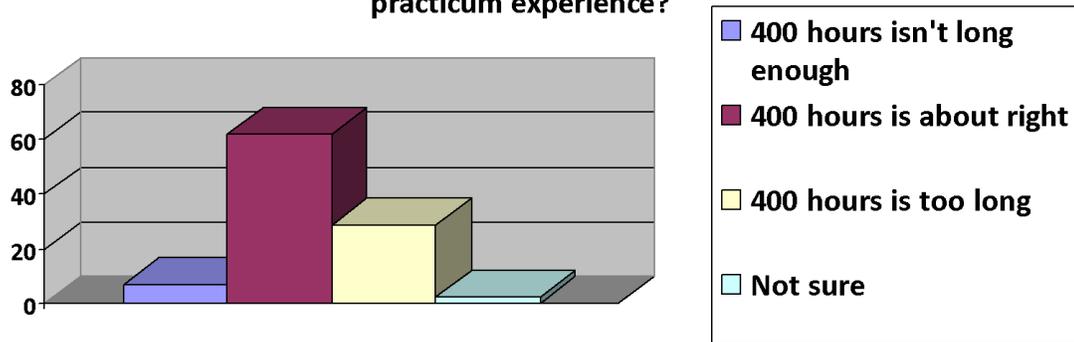


Ideal Duration of Internships

In general, students and agency supervisors expressed support for the time requirement of 400 volunteer hours to which the students who participated in this study were held. Perhaps not surprisingly, students were more likely to hold the opinion that the time requirement was excessive while agency supervisors were more likely to view this requirement as insufficient. Specifically, 75.2% of agency supervisors and 61.6% of students agreed that “400 hours is about right.” Approximately 11.3% of supervisors and 28.2% of students expressed the opinion that “400 hours is too long” while 9.5% of supervisors and 6.9% of students felt that “400 hours isn’t long enough.”

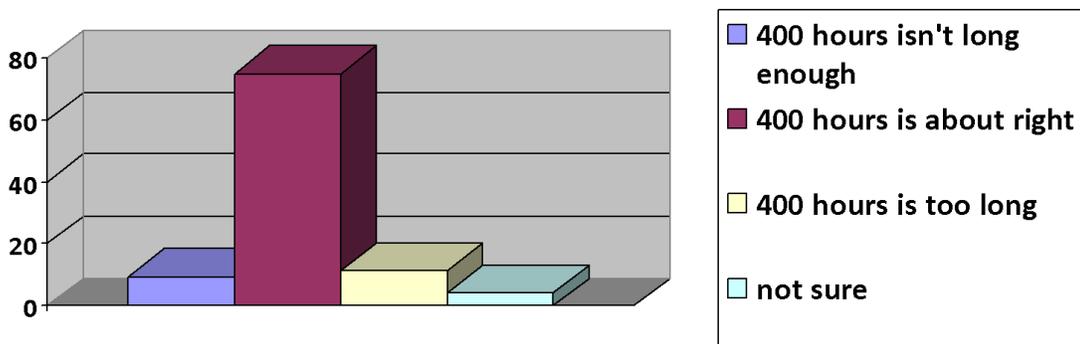
The Students’ Perspectives

What do you consider to be the ideal length/duration of a practicum experience?



The Agency Supervisors' Perspectives

What do you consider to be the ideal length/duration of a practicum experience?



EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL RISKS AND DRAWBACKS

This study was inspired, in part, by a desire to help students maximize their odds of having positive internship experiences. Coming to terms with the risks student interns face is a prerequisite to the achievement of this objective. With that in mind, this study included an assessment of the extent to which interns have various types of unpleasant or potentially counterproductive experiences (i.e., experiences that limit, interfere with or undermine their ability to achieve their academic goals). Students were asked questions

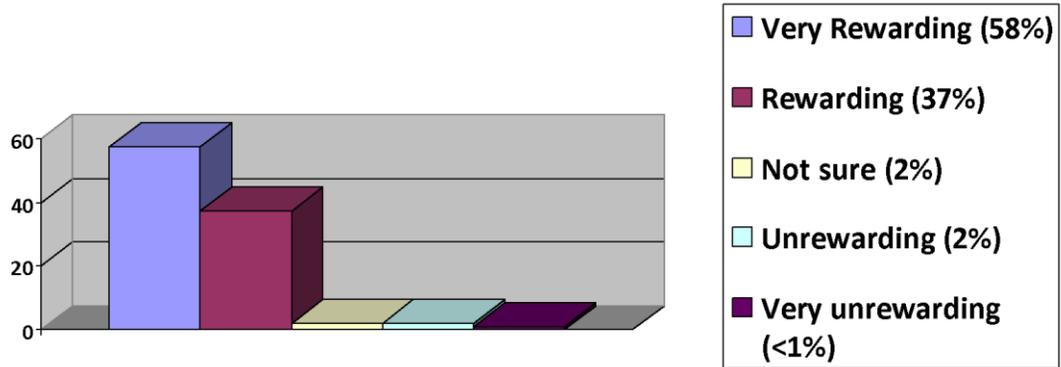
about the nature of their practicum activities along with questions about how they were treated by their agency supervisors and other agency personnel. Findings indicate that negative experiences are not typical (much less inherent) components of internships. Nevertheless, the fact that some students do occasionally encounter these problems highlights, among other things, the importance of pre-internship preparation and the provision of proactive faculty supervision and support services.

Exploitation

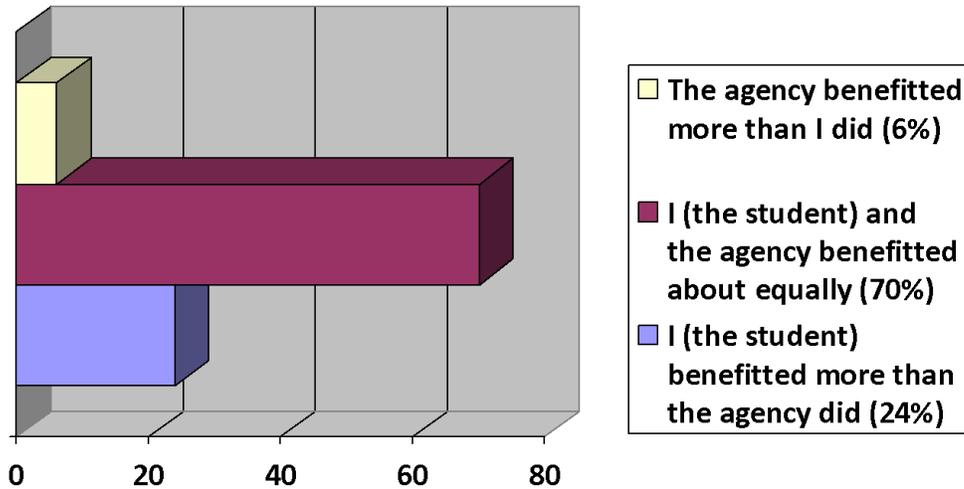
One of the lines of inquiry pursued in this study focused on determining if the student interns were sometimes “used” by agencies as “free” solutions to personnel shortages. Of specific concern was the possibility that some students were assigned to tasks/duties/activities that were insufficiently linked (if at all) to their academic goals. This problem did not appear to be common among this sample.

Contrary to popular notions that student interns are commonly assigned to perform mundane and/or menial tasks, the majority of students who participated in this study indicated that their internship activities were meaningful and gratifying. Nearly 95% described the activities they engaged in to be either “rewarding” or “very rewarding.” Moreover, as an indication that their activities aligned with their interests and goals, most students reported that they personally benefitted from the activities to which they were assigned. When asked “who benefitted most from the work you completed during your [internship]?” nearly 94% of students responded with “I benefitted more than the agency did” or “I and the agency benefitted about equally.”

How rewarding did you find your practicum work/duties to be?



In your opinion, who benefitted most from the work you completed during your practicum?



Harassment, Hazing and Unprofessional Conduct

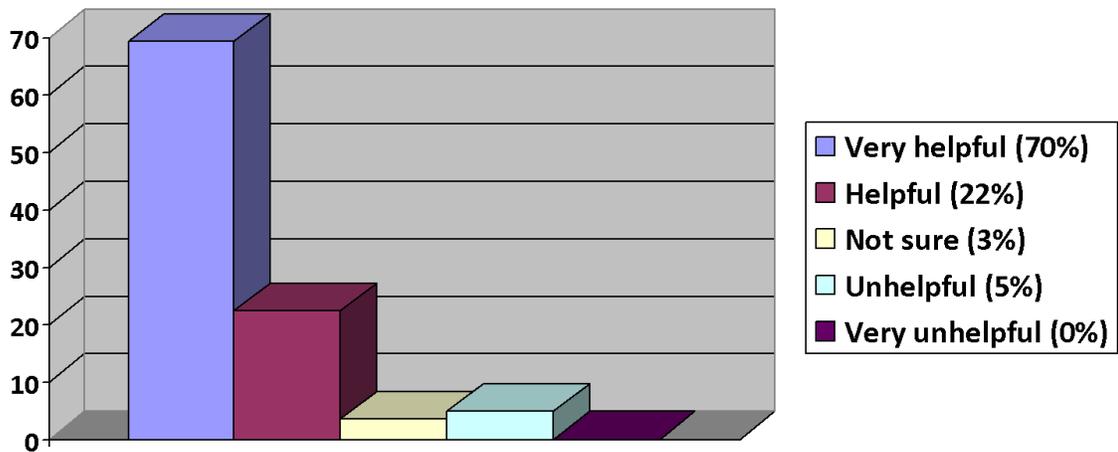
The student interns who participated in this confidential study were also asked to describe the extent to which they experienced discourteous, unprofessional or otherwise problematic behavior on the part of agency personnel. The survey produced two confidential reports of unwanted physical contact, two reports of unwanted nonphysical contact (e.g., looks, notes, phone calls), and one report of pressure to socialize after hours⁴. Additionally, the survey generated twenty-three reports of inappropriate comments of a nonsexual nature (e.g., teasing, joking) and nine reports of inappropriate comments of a sexual nature.

Students who reported negative encounters like those mentioned constitute a

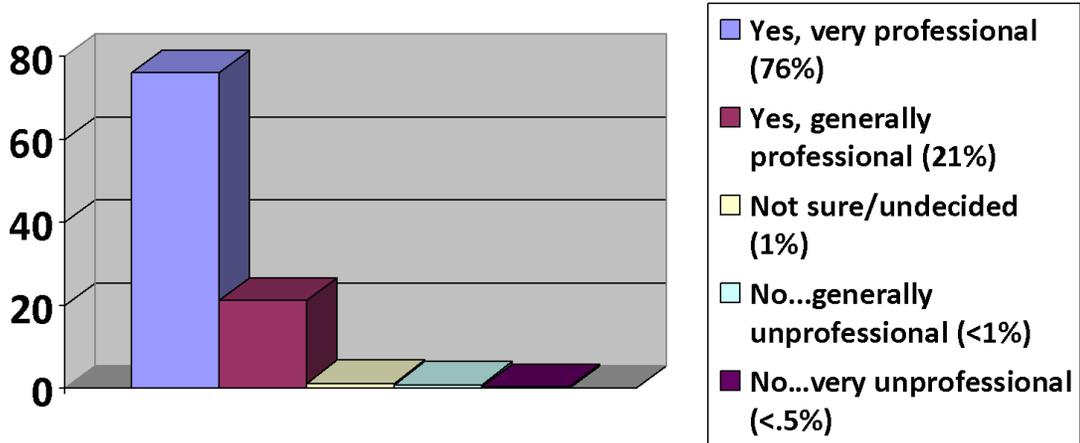
⁴ Although confidential reports of off-campus incidents like those collected via this study are not subject to Title IX mandatory reporting guidelines, internship coordinators should note that student reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment are subject to such guidelines under many circumstances.

small minority of those who participated in this study; the vast majority viewed the personnel who worked at their host agency in highly positive terms. Nearly 92% reported that agency personnel were “helpful” or “very helpful” and 97.4% concluded that the people they worked with were “generally professional” or “very professional.”

How helpful were the personnel in your agency (including your agency supervisor) when it came to assisting you with the academic requirements (e.g., writing assignments) of your practicum?



During the course of your practicum experience, did the people you worked with (i.e., agency personnel, including your agency supervisor) conduct themselves (and treat you) in a professional manner?



Discussion and Conclusions

This study was designed to evaluate the experiences and performances of undergraduate students involved in criminal justice internships. Data were collected via self-administered surveys completed by the student interns and their field/agency supervisors.

The primary goal of this study was to provide a broad evaluation of CJ internships as experienced by the main participating parties: WOU students and their host agency supervisors. The majority of students rated their experience positively, accomplished their immediate goals and encountered few (if any) major problems. The majority of host

agency supervisors provided favorable evaluations of the students they supervised. Large portions of both groups reported high levels of support for requiring internships as a component of an undergraduate education in Criminal Justice.

A few trends in the data highlight areas where outcomes could be improved. For example, students tended to receive their least favorable evaluations in the areas of interpersonal communication, critical thinking and problem solving skills. These findings may indicate the need to enhance opportunities for students to cultivate these skills in the classroom setting. However, the number of students who reported having negative internship experiences was insufficient for purposes of identifying statistically significant differences between students who had “successful” and “unsuccessful” experiences.

Of special concern are the findings related to some of the potential risks that student interns face. Although these findings are preliminary in nature and should therefore be interpreted with a degree of caution, they provide a rough outline of the potential risks student interns face. The number of such cases revealed by this study was small, yet they demonstrate that at least some interns experience harassment and other forms of unprofessional, unethical and illegal conduct. Any evidence of inappropriate treatment of student interns, particularly those that involve unwanted physical contact and or harassment of a sexual nature, must be taken very seriously and interpreted as a reminder of the importance of providing students with pre-internship instruction and coaching (e.g., in the form of classroom-based preparation, pre-internship orientations, etc.), active supervision (i.e., ongoing, structured monitoring of student progress), efforts

to vet host agencies (e.g., via site visits, etc.), support, and guidance. Internship programs that are designed and managed to minimize these risks provide students with a host of opportunities, advantages and rewards that can be difficult if not impossible to replicate in a classroom setting.

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