Internship Characteristics and Critical Events: A Structural Model of Vocational Turnover Intention as a Result of the Internship Experience

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The internship experience is a critical period of transition for undergraduate students preparing to graduate and begin their career or graduate school. Some have lauded the internship as an effective way for students to benefit from hands-on work experience and networking opportunities that can lead to increased marketability and starting salary (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). On the other hand, many have begun to question the educational value of internships where students are assigned routinized tasks and treated as low-cost labor (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent & Turner; King, 2009; Schneider & Stier, 2006). Given that the internship is a major educational component for sport management, recreation and tourism programs, and that undergraduate students represent the future of the industry, the quality of internship experiences are of extreme importance to educators and practitioners alike.

Although some attention has been given to factors that influence interns’ behaviors during the internship (i.e., Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner & Kent, 2004; Odio & Walker, 2012), and evidence exists linking the internship experience to decreases in students’ anticipated career satisfaction and intent to enter the profession (Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Cunningham et al, 2005), the complete picture is not yet known. The present study provides a more holistic account of factors that influence students’ intent to enter the profession through a comprehensive structural model grounded in turnover and decision-making theory and including factors external to the internship absent from previous studies.

The unfolding model of voluntary turnover (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) has been used to account for individuals’ decision to leave an organization due to accumulating job dissatisfaction, and critical events, known as shocks, that occur within an individual’s personal or professional life. Shocks are coded as continuation, discontinuation, or neutral depending on whether the individual perceives the shock to make them more likely to stay, less likely or have no effect. By accounting for shocks in addition to job-related factors, researchers have significantly increased the understanding of how and why individuals choose to exit an organization (Harmon, Lee, Mitchell, Felps, & Owens, 2007). Applied to the vocational context, accounting for external events, in addition to internship-related factors, in the lives of students preparing to complete their undergraduate education and enter the workforce while immersed in a full-time internship may enhance the understanding of the influence the internship has on students’ decision to continue pursuing a career in the industry or not.

Surveys were distributed to undergraduate sport management, recreation and tourism students at two large research universities in the South who were completing their required, final-semester internship. A pre-internship survey included Likert-type measures of students’ affective vocational commitment (i.e., emotional attachment to the profession; AVC), and intent to enter the profession upon graduation, adopted from Cunningham et al. (2005). A post-internship survey included measures of AVC, intent to enter the profession, as well as measures from previous studies on internship experiences including job challenge, supervisor support, role conflict, and role ambiguity (Dixon et al. (2005), learning opportunities and internship satisfaction (D’Abate, Yount, & Wenzel, 2009). The post-internship survey also asked participants to describe any important events that occurred during the time of the internship and what effect the event(s) had on their decision to continue pursuing a career in the sport, recreation and tourism industry.

A final usable sample of 173 students across both schools was used for analysis, including 119 of the 189 students solicited for participation at school 1, and 54 of the 79 from school 2. The hypothesized model was estimated using MPlus version 7. Fit indices for the model showed adequate fit (CFI = .90, RMSEA = .068). Results showed job challenge (β=.52, p=.00), supervisor support (β=.26, p=.00), and role conflict (β=-.15, p=.01), were significant.
predictors of internship satisfaction while learning experiences ($\beta=.13, p=.43$), and role ambiguity ($\beta=-.01, p=.93$), were not. Internship satisfaction was found to be a significant predictor of post-internship AVC ($\beta=.51, p=.00$) controlling for pre-internship AVC. Post-internship AVC was found to be a significant predictor of intent to remain in the profession ($\beta=.76, p=.00$) controlling for pre-internship intent and enrollment in graduate school. Finally, continuation shocks were not found to be a significant predictor of intent ($\beta=.05, p=.37$), but discontinuation shocks were ($\beta=-.18, p=.01$). Satisfaction and AVC were found to fully mediate hypothesized relationships in the model.

The present study reinforces Dixon et al.’s (2005) findings that challenge is an important factor in the internship experience, and provides a sizeable increase in variance explained of interns’ intent to enter the profession after the internship ($R^2=.68$) over previous studies (i.e., Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Cunningham et al., 2005). Further, the role of discontinuation shocks, which included events outside the internship, provides support for the application of the unfolding model at the vocational level.

While some attrition is expected as some students realize through the internship that this career path is not for them, the link established in this study between specific characteristics of the internship and intent to enter the profession is troubling. Practitioners supervising interns must become aware that their treatment of students can be critical to their development and career trajectory, all of which may lead to long-term ramifications on the pool of talent feeding into the industry. Furthermore, educators must take steps to ensure their students are being challenged and supported during the internship, not being given routinized tasks with little educational value.

Future research should dig deeper into the design of internships, the relationships between interns and their supervisors, and the value of internships as recruitment tools for sport, recreation and tourism organizations.