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# Establishing and Supervising Internships

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# Payment for Undergraduate Interns: Benefits and Problems

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*A survey of technical communication programs revealed that a large majority of faculty favor payment for undergraduate interns and that at least some interns are paid at most schools. A significant number of faculty, however, believe that payment can cause problems. This study presents and discusses the survey findings and considers the problems that can arise from paid internships.*

This study deals with the educational and practical implications of paid undergraduate internships in the field of technical communication. It is based on the results of a survey I conducted recently of the academic institutions in the United States offering programs for the training of technical communicators. This study, however, is more than a report of the survey findings; I interpret and discuss the survey findings, drawing upon both the published literature and my own experiences arranging and supervising over 100 internships at two universities.

The large majority of survey respondents support the idea of payment for interns and arrange payment for at least some of their interns. Furthermore, many saw no difficulties in payment. Some, however, while supporting payment for interns do see problems or potential problems, and these problems and some solutions to them are discussed. Another issue raised by the survey and discussed in this study is whether payment for interns is always necessary or beneficial.

## Survey Methodology and Quantitative Findings

The survey forms were mailed out during the last two days of May 1985 to the 56 institutions listed in a pre-publication copy of the 3rd edition of **Academic Programs in Technical Communication** (Kelley et al.). The survey was mailed to the individual at each institution whose job title suggested the closest relationship to the internship function for undergraduates in technical communication. The cover letter indicated that the survey forms should be returned anonymously. Over the next five weeks, 41 survey forms--73%--were returned. A return rate of 73% is generally regarded by social science researchers as excellent, well above what is necessary for statistically reliable results.

The survey form asked respondents to comment on benefits or potential benefits in paid undergraduate internships, problems or potential problems in paid undergraduate internships, and any other perceptions they have concerning paid undergraduate internships. The survey form also included nine quantitative questions soliciting some general information--not otherwise available--on internships and payment to interns in the field of technical communication. The survey form with a tabulation of the responses for the nine quantitative questions appears as the Appendix. I will now present and discuss the findings of the quantitative portion of the survey.

Of the 41 responding institutions, 4 do not offer a major or sequence of courses designed to prepare undergraduate students for careers in technical communication

(Question 1). Out of the remaining 37 institutions, 3 do not have either a required or optional internship (Question 2), and 3 are new programs that have not yet placed an intern. Thirty-one institutions, therefore, met the survey profile.

One important finding of the survey is that payment of interns is prevalent and occurs in at least some instances at 26 of the 31 institutions (84%) meeting the survey profile.

Respondents from the five institutions at which no interns are paid gave the following reasons: institutional policy prohibiting payment for credit-generating activity (one respondent), the personal conviction that credit and payment are incompatible (two respondents), and the conviction that payment leads to a de-emphasis of the educational purpose of the internship (two responses).

The responses to Questions 3 and 5 revealed that part-time internships are far more prevalent than full-time internships. Although most institutions (19, or 61%) offer both part-time and full-time internships, 17 of these institutions place 80% or more of their students on a part-time basis. Only four institutions (13%) place all interns on a full-time basis.

Full-time interns are very likely to receive payment (Question 6). Of the 23 institutions at which there are full-time internships, there is payment for 80% or more of these interns at 14 institutions (61%), and payment for between 40-79% of the students at 6 institutions (26%). It is not surprising that most full-time interns are paid. Organizations sponsoring interns on a full-time basis tend, I believe, to view the intern as an employee. Also, a full-time intern is committing a large amount of time to the company and may well be unwilling or financially unable to commit this amount of time without payment. Finally, faculty may well be unwilling for students to work full time without pay.

The proportion of part-time interns receiving payment varies considerably from institution to institution (Question 4). Of the 27 institutions at which there are part-time internships, there is payment for at least 80% of the part-time interns at 10 institutions (37%), and payment for between 40-79% of the students at 4 institutions (15%). There is payment for 20-30% of the students at 5 institutions (19%), and for fewer than 20% of the students at 8 institutions (30%).

Question 8 was intended to determine the number of cases in which schools arranged payment simply because the educationally appropriate companies in their locales insisted on payment. This question proved unnecessary, because respondents from 25 of the 26 schools at which there are paid internships offered comments in the non-quantitative portion of the survey, and in each case the respondent seemed positive (generally very positive) about payment. Question 8 does reveal widely varying opinions on this question. In addition, six respondents said they didn't know and one chose not to answer this question.

Question 9 was intended to determine how often the unwillingness of companies to pay interns is a major factor in limiting the number of paid internships. In retrospect, it would have been better to have simply asked this question directly. But statistical analysis, presented below, supports the assumption that unwillingness of companies to pay interns is a major factor limiting the number of interns being paid.

The proportion of part-time interns being paid at the various institutions (Question 4) was correlated against the proportion of educationally suitable organizations in the

institutions' locales that are unwilling or probably unwilling to pay these students (Question 9). Of the 22 institutions in which some part-time interns are paid, 3 were excluded because respondents either didn't answer Question 9 or said that they didn't know the answer. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was then calculated using midpoints of each of the percentage ranges, and a strong inverse correlation was obtained ( $r = -0.75$ ). In other words, in locales in which a high proportion of organizations are unwilling to pay interns, a low proportion of interns are receiving payment.

Question 7 concerns the role of faculty and staff in arranging or negotiating payment for interns. The responses indicate a wide variation in the involvement of faculty or staff, with a pronounced tendency toward non-involvement. The following statistics were compiled on the basis of 26 respondents; of the 31 institutions meeting the survey profile, five of the institutions offer no paid internships. Of the 26 institutions offering paid internships, 10 respondents (38%) indicated that payment for interns is arranged or negotiated for less than 20% of the internships, 9 respondents (35%) indicated that payment is arranged or negotiated for 20-79% of the internships, 6 respondents (23%) indicated that payment is arranged or negotiated for 80% or more of the internships, and one respondent (4%) did not answer.

Clearly there is a need for much more statistical information concerning both payment of interns and internships in general in the field of technical communication. For example, it would be very desirable to have information about the numbers of interns in each program, the kinds of organizations full-time and part-time interns work at, the kinds of work they do, and the amounts they are paid.

### **Benefits and Problems of Paid Internships**

In the nonquantitative portion of the survey (Questions 10, 11, and 12), I asked the respondents to comment on, respectively, the benefits or potential benefits they see in having undergraduate interns receive payment, the problems or potential problems they see in having undergraduate interns receive payment, and any other perceptions they have concerning payment for undergraduate internships. For this part of the survey, I expanded the survey universe to include all 41 respondents. (Responses to at least one of the nonquantitative questions were offered by 7 of the 10 respondents from institutions that do not place or have not yet placed undergraduate interns and 30 of the 31 respondents from institutions that do offer undergraduate internships.) In many instances a respondent cited more than one benefit in response to Question 10. Relatively few respondents cited more than one problem in response to Question 11. In many instances no responses were offered for Question 12, or else the responses consisted of an elaboration upon Question 10 or 11. Below I will describe and discuss these responses and contribute my own perspectives as well.

#### **Benefits**

As noted above, the respondents strongly support the idea of payment for interns. Of the 31 respondents whose institutions offer undergraduate internships and thus meet the survey profile, 25 (81%) indicated clearly in their comments that they favor paid

internships. Of the total number of 41 respondents, 31 (76%) indicated clearly in their comments that they favor payment, 5 (12%) are clearly opposed, 3 (7%) offered no response, and 2 (5%) appeared neutral.

The benefit (or potential benefit) most often mentioned (23 respondents) was, stated in general terms, that **payment for interns adds professionalism to the work experience**. Typical comments are these:

Students take work more seriously and develop a sense of professional responsibility.

Students begin to develop an identity as a professional; feel their work is valuable; feel a sense of self-respect.

Payment enhances professionalism and gives the intern added confidence.

It [payment] makes the internship more "real" as a job experience.

Students take their work and their commitment to the organization more seriously; feel more that they have an obligation to turn in a high quality product.

The next most frequently mentioned benefit (12 respondents) was that **payment provides financial assistance**. Typical comments are these:

Students need part-time jobs. Most pay for their education.

[Payment] offsets the time and trouble of going to a special locale for "class." Also, most of our students could use a few extra bucks.

Payment helps interns pay their college expenses.

Three of these 12 respondents also noted that without payment it is difficult or impossible for some students to include an internship in their academic programs, because their need for a paying job makes it impossible for them to schedule an internship. This argument, however, is open to some question--at least if one assumes that the hours required by an internship are equivalent to the hours required by coursework generating the same number of credits. On the other hand, internship work may interfere with student employment because, unlike regular academic work, internship work is normally performed during regular business hours.

Seven respondents noted that **payment improves the attitudes and behavior of the employer**. Typical comments are these:

The employer tends to take the interns more seriously and to regard them more as colleagues.

The employer may feel that the intern is more directly a part of the organization.

The unpaid internship all too often devolves into drudge work.

Paying interns appears to be one way of ensuring that the companies treat interns as professionals. Companies want people they pay to produce.

The more specific assertion that paid interns are likely to be assigned more professional work--which was made by four of these seven respondents--will require some consideration, for, as we shall see, a larger number of respondents took the opposite position.

I would claim a fourth and related benefit that derives from paid internships: Supervisors are more candid and, if appropriate, more critical when evaluating a paid intern. Thus, paid internships provide the intern with more useful feedback concerning his or her work and provide faculty with more useful feedback concerning the intern and, by extension, the strengths and weaknesses of the academic program.

Two other responses were that payment increases the likelihood that the internship will lead to a permanent job within the organization and that a student's resume is more impressive when the student can indicate that his or her internship was paid. Both claims seem correct to me.

Two respondents asserted that payment of interns helps enhance the stature of technical communication as a profession, and one of these individuals referred to unpaid internships as "demeaning." It is appropriate to point out, however, that in colleges of education across the nation student teachers customarily work full time in school systems in return for experience and training rather than money. In fact, I question the position, implied in this respondent's statement, that technical communication interns should always be paid. If a student wishes to work at a public-interest group or some other kind of organization in which volunteer labor is very often the rule, the faculty member should not oppose this choice. Or if, for instance, a particular student is somewhat less skilled or less confident than his or her peers and might benefit from the lessened expectations and pressure that comes with an unpaid internship, the faculty member should not feel reluctant to arrange an unpaid internship for that student.

## Problems

Fourteen respondents of the 41 respondents making up the survey universe (34%) reported problems or potential problems in paid internships. I did not count responses in which the problem was said to be arranging payment, rather than problems that arise from having interns paid. Nor did I count the three respondents who gave as reasons either institutional policy prohibiting payment for credit-generating activity or a personal conviction that credit and payment are *per se* incompatible. When the claim that credit and payment are incompatible is made entirely in general terms, it is difficult to answer. I would note only that I cannot find any *inherent* philosophical incompatibility between academic credit and payment and that there is ample precedent for it in cooperative

education (McMahon), and in internships in at least one discipline related to ours--journalism (Cowdin). I will focus instead on specific problems being cited in paid internships. All of these problems, let me note, are, to categorize broadly, educational in nature.

The most frequently stated problem--9 respondents--was that ***payment can lead both employer and intern to de-emphasize the educational purpose of the internship, particularly in terms of the nature of the work that is assigned and performed.*** This problem was not only the most frequently cited but appears to be potentially the most serious. Some typical comments are these:

They [the interns] tend to forget when they begin to receive those checks that they are in the company for educational benefits.

The program has less control of the intern's activities.

Students will sometimes perform menial tasks because they are being paid--instead of doing the jobs they can learn from.

The supervisor might be more likely to ignore academic requirements in favoring those tasks unrelated to academic interests but needing to be done by somebody (namely the intern).

The concern of these respondents is reflected in the professional literature. Morris T. Keeton, discussing experiential learning in general, states that "more often than not, if work is *paid for* and also the work site is meant to be the primary site of learning, the learning suffers when any potential conflict arises between 'getting the work done' and 'doing the learning'" (268). Clearly, there is some danger that employers of paid interns will fail to recognize that interns are primarily engaged in an educational experience and that employers have a special obligation to these students and to the academic institutions that place them.

This potential problem underscores the importance of carefully selecting internship employers and reaching a clear understanding with them--preferably in writing. Presumably one reason why this potential problem was not mentioned by more of the respondents is the success the respondents have had in identifying employers who recognize the educational nature of the internship and who provide the appropriate kinds of experiences for students.

The comments quoted above reveal that students as well as employers can let the circumstance of payment distract them from the educational nature of the internship. Another of these nine respondents noted this problem: "Students make the error of seeking internships with high pay instead of those with varied and useful work experience." I myself have certainly found that some students will forego an internship in their own technical specialty in order to get a paid internship or a better paying internship. Also, interns who are receiving payment are usually reluctant to leave their site for a second internship experience if the second internship doesn't pay. Clearly, then, it is the job of faculty to determine what internship experiences are most appropriate for each student and to ensure that educational considerations prevail,

even when students are unduly influenced by the prospect of payment.

There are other potential problems in paid internships. One respondent noted that payment can place greater pressure on the student, since organizations that pay have greater expectations. In my experience organizations do not often place undue pressure on students or have unrealistic expectations, even when the interns are paid. Still, this respondent's observation supports the comment I made earlier that some students might do well to simply exchange their work for experience and supervision, either because they are less confident or less far along professionally than their peers or for other reasons.

A different kind of problem mentioned with some frequency--by five respondents--is that ***paid internships can cause friction or competition between students receiving pay and those who are not.*** Typical comments are these:

Students compete for paid internships--they are more prestigious.

Students whose internships do not pay may feel slighted.

One conceivable solution to this problem is for the technical communication program to adopt a blanket policy that either all or no interns will be paid. This solution, however, exacts a heavy price in the loss of flexibility, and, beyond that, some programs are unable to find paid internships for all students.

The problem of competition for paid internships and especially friction among students, while unfortunate, does not strike me as extremely damaging, and none of the five respondents seems to regard it as such. Also, there will always be more and less desirable internship placements--whether for reasons of payment or other reasons--and those who arrange internships will have to find rational and ethical means of matching students to employers. Often, individual students are looking for different kinds of experiences, so there is no real competition among them. But if in fact more than one student were to seek an especially desirable placement, that placement could reasonably be assigned as a reward for superior academic performance.

### Conclusion

Paid internships are both prevalent and highly favored by faculty in the field of technical communication. Almost all full-time interns are paid and a great many part-time interns are paid. Furthermore, the benefits of payment for interns are considerable. The three most frequently noted benefits are these: payment adds professionalism to the work experience; payment provides students with financial assistance; and payment improves the attitudes and behavior of employers.

At the same time, a substantial number of respondents (14) cited problems or potential problems in payment for interns. The problem cited most frequently--by nine respondents--and the problem that appears to be potentially the most serious is that payment can lead both employer and intern to lose sight of the educational purpose of the internship, particularly in terms of the nature of the work that is assigned and performed. The other problem mentioned with some frequency--by five respondents--is that payment for some but not all interns can lead to friction or competition among



students.

These problems, however, do not appear to comprise sufficient reasons for eschewing payment for interns; the first of these problems seems to be avoidable and the second seems to be tolerable. But it is also true that payment makes the internship endeavor more complex. Faculty must exercise more care in screening potential employers, in reaching an understanding with them about the nature of an internship, and in monitoring the internships--in particular the educational value of the work assigned to the student. Also, payment requires faculty to look more closely at the motivations of students for seeking one placement over another and, if necessary, to exercise proper control to ensure that responsible choices are made.

While payment appears to be desirable, at least if extra care is exercised, there is no reason to think that payment is necessary. A university may have an institution-wide policy prohibiting payment for interns. Or, a university may be located in an area in which few companies offer payment. A successful internship program can be maintained, I am convinced, even if few or no students are paid. Nor is there reason to think that payment is always desirable, even when paid internships are available. Some organizations may be ideal placements for certain students, even though they cannot offer payment, and there may be students for whom payment, though available, is not beneficial. In all places and at times, money operates upon human behavior in varied and complex ways, and the consequences of payment in an educational endeavor are especially complex and subtle. If students are to enjoy the benefits that come with payment, technical communication faculty will need to develop a broad view of the issues and at the same time be willing to consider the special circumstances and needs of each student.

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