

UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY'S PRESIDENTIAL INTERNSHIP: ITS HISTORY, PURPOSE, AND POTENTIAL SUCCESS

JAMES S. MCGRAW
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

TANNER ANDERSON
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

KC HOOKER
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

RYAN STEPHENSON
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

ELIZABETH BOWEN
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

NICK VARNEY
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

KHALIUN AMARJARGAL
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

MCKENNA MARCHANT
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

BROOKE SCHROEDER
UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY

Utah Valley University's Presidential Internship is promoted as the premier internship experience on its campus. Nine students are paired with members of the President's Cabinet (i.e., President, Chief of Staff, Chief Inclusion Officer, and six Vice Presidents). The internship offers these students one-on-one mentorship, high impact projects, and lessons in leadership by executive administrators at the university. This article seeks to introduce the model and mission of the internship and introduces the results of a qualitative pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness in meeting its mission. The qualitative results indicate that past interns found high impact projects to be important experiences in leadership, professional, and personal development, even above and beyond the one-on-one mentorship.

The year 2009 was monumental for Utah Valley University. The institution had just transitioned from a state college into a full-fledged university. Its former president, William Sederburg, had been appointed to be the commissioner of education for the State of Utah, and Matthew Holland, a political science professor with little executive experience, had been selected to be his replacement. The timing had an interesting parallel. Both the institution and the new president had undergone a radical change in a relatively short period of time, and both needed to discover and solidify their new identities in the higher education landscape.

Matthew S. Holland began his tenure as Utah Valley University's (UVU) sixth president on June 1, 2009. In his efforts to forge an identity for the new university, he immediately embarked on a listening-tour with stakeholders and rigorously examined the institution's past. These efforts resulted in the development of a new organizational purpose that sought to facilitate student success through being a serious, inclusive, and engaged university.

As President Holland and his cabinet worked to reshape the existing organizational infrastructure around these initiatives, they looked for an opportunity to lead by example. During one cabinet meeting towards the beginning of his term, President Holland asked each cabinet member, "What are you doing personally to enhance student success?" During that meeting, it became apparent that although the cabinet members were working hard to impact student success, they had minimal interactions with students on a daily basis.

Desiring to personally impact student success, President Holland worked with members of his cabinet, specifically his Chief of Staff, Kyle Reyes, to develop a program that would give students more access to the President's Office. As such, the two created the Presidential Internship Program, which would hire nine UVU students and pair each of them with a member of the President's Cabinet (i.e., President, six VPs, the Chief of Staff, and the Chief Inclusion and Diversity Officer) for one-on-one mentorship and access to high impact projects (i.e., tasks given that had the potential to change or influence university policy, practice, and/or culture).

The purpose of this paper is to (a) present the internship's mission, model, and purpose, and (b) qualitatively analyze its effectiveness in giving students meaningful mentorship and leadership developing experiences.

MISSION, MODEL, & PURPOSE

The mission of the Presidential Internship program is to provide a year-long leadership experience for the nine selected students. The internship seeks to maximize an intern's leadership skills, illuminate their potential, foster academic excellence, and increase their ability to have a positive impact on Utah's globally interdependent community. The internship seeks to accomplish this mission through three related, but unique ways.

First, the internship provides the students with one-on-one individualized mentorship with a cabinet member. The President's Cabinet is made up of the President, Chief of Staff, Chief Inclusion and Diversity Officer, and six VPs who steward a variety of organizations from student and academic affairs to public, university, alumni relations, and human resources, as well as other domains such as university finance. Each of these nine members of the President's Cabinet takes one intern to work with for the year. These interns are then mentored and given projects and tasks specific to their mentors' responsibilities and needs. In addition, mentors also counsel and teach their interns on their specific career, leadership, and academic goals. Furthermore, throughout the year, interns are tasked with working on serious and engaging projects of institutional significance that often influence university policy, practice, and/or culture.

Second, the internship provides the students with experiences working with members of an internship cohort and participating in projects as a team. Although these take a variety of forms, the projects and experiences are usually driven and planned by the interns rather than prescribed by cabinet members.

Third, as a group, the interns plan seven to nine excursions to various community organizations and businesses to learn about leadership in a variety of contexts that specific members of the cohort find interesting. Here they also are given important opportunities to network with those in the fields they seek to eventually join (such as higher education, business, tech, non-profits, medicine, and law).

These three related yet distinct approaches create a type of systems model. The internship model offers interns mentorship and leadership experience at the micro (working one-on-one with their mentor), mezzo (working with their respective internship cohort), and macro (working with members of the larger community) levels, while also pushing them to contribute to each of these domains in meaningful ways.

PILOT STUDY

Since its inception, the success of the Presidential Internship has been limited to anecdotal evidence. Despite being a rather unique internship, which pairs its participants with high-level executives as opposed to faculty and staff members, to date there has been no formal attempt to measure its effectiveness. Other research has demonstrated the importance of faculty mentorship (Dugan & Komives, 2010), but few studies explore the effectiveness of executive administrators mentoring students. This lack of self-study limits the actual picture and claims that can be drawn from interns' past experiences. Given that student mentorship has shown to be vital in creating future leaders (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012), we sought to examine the effectiveness of the Presidential Internship by designing and carrying out a qualitative pilot study. Similar research has been conducted at other universities with different student leadership and mentorship programs (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998; Ssemata, Gladding, John, & Kiguli, 2017). Thus, we sought to answer the following research questions in order to begin evaluating the Presidential Internship:

RQ1: To what degree do past interns report the presence of one-on-one mentorship during their tenure as interns?

RQ2: To what degree do past interns report their participation in high impact projects?

RQ3: In what ways did the Presidential Internship teach them to be better leaders?

RQ4: What were successes and challenges the past interns experienced during their tenure as interns?

RQ5: Do Presidential Interns go on to participate in other high-impact projects or careers?

METHODS

Participants

Participants included 42 known former Presidential Interns who were invited via private email correspondence to participate in an anonymous online qualitative survey about their interns experience. Included participants had to self-identify as (a) former Presidential Interns with (b) internet access and (c) English proficiency required to complete the survey. We followed suggestions from the Tailored Design Method (TDM), which encourages follow up emails to increase response rates for online surveys (Dillman, Smythe, & Christian, 2009). Over the course of four weeks all participants were contacted for follow up reminders on three separate occasions to encourage participation. Of the 42 initial emailed participants, eight emails failed, leaving 34 contacted. Of the 34 who were contacted, 26 responses were recorded. Six of those were removed due to incomplete surveys, resulting in a total of 20 survey participants (58.82% response rate).

The study was Institutional Review Board approved by Utah Valley University. Race and ethnicity were not collected in order to maintain participant anonymity. The demographics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics	
Gender	Male – 50%
	Female – 50%
Graduation Year	2018 – 21.1%
	2017 – 15.8%
	2016 – 31.5%
	2015 – 10.53%
	2014 – 10.53%
	2013 – 10.53%
GPA	4.0 – 3.75 – 75%
	3.74 – 3.5 – 25%
Major	Communication – 30%
	Political Science – 20%
	Other – 50%
<i>Number of respondents equals 20 (n=20)</i>	
<i>*Mean = 24.85; Standard Deviation = 1.85.</i>	

Measure

After demographic questions, participants were invited to answer five open-ended questions to explore their experience with the internship. Because over half of the participants had previously been involved in other leadership programs on campus, we asked what made their experience as a Presidential Intern unique as opposed to the other programs (“How did participating in the Presidential Internship, as opposed to other mentorship experiences, help you develop as a better leader?”). In addition, we asked about meaningful projects and lessons they learned while participating (“What was one of the greatest lessons you learned as a Presidential Intern?” “What were the most meaningful projects you worked on as a Presidential Intern?”). We also asked about specific challenges interns faced during their tenure (“What were any challenges that you experienced as an intern?”). Finally, we asked what interns did after they left the internship to examine if they continued to seek high impact internships, careers, or educational pursuits (“Since ending your tenure as a Presidential Intern, what have you gone on to do?”). For the list of questions used, see Table 2.

Table 2. Open-Ended Survey Questions
1. Since ending your Tenure as a Presidential Intern, what have you gone on to do (e.g., continued education at UVU, student government, graduate school, career, other internships)?
2. How did participating in the Presidential Internship, as opposed to other mentorship experiences, help you develop as a better leader?
3. What was one of the greatest lessons you learned as a Presidential Intern? (Please describe one or two briefly)
5. What were any challenges that you experienced as an intern?

Analysis

The answers to the open-ended questions were transcribed and organized by question in a cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990). Using Patton’s (1990) procedures for content analysis, multiple coders (a) independently reviewed the data to identify, define, and record specific occurrences of themes, and (b) subsequently met to assess convergence. In the meeting for convergence, the independent coders resolved disagreements by discussion and agreed upon the found themes.

RESULTS

The results are organized by themes found in each question. In each question there emerged multiple themes.

Since ending your tenure as a Presidential Intern, what have you gone on to do (e.g., continued education at UVU, student government, graduate school, career, other internships)?

Overall, three themes emerged when exploring what Presidential Interns had gone on to do. We found that a large portion went on to pursue graduate studies, meaningful careers, and additional high-impact internships. For example, of the 20 individuals sampled, 45% went on to or were planning on pursuing graduate studies. The most common graduate degree mentioned was a Master of Public Administration.

Furthermore, 50% of past interns described heading into the workforce. A number of them described working in government. For instance, one was actually an elected state official, while another was working in the Governor of Utah's office. Another intern described working as a data analyst for a political consulting firm. Several others stayed closer to higher education such as an academic counseling position.

Finally, 35% of those sampled described participating in additional high-impact internships or projects. Several described working with US Senators, the Utah Board of Regents, and other school internships.

How did participating in the Presidential Internship, as opposed to other mentorship experiences, help you develop as a better leader?

Three themes emerged when asked about how the Presidential Internship made them a better leader, as opposed to other mentorship opportunities. The majority described being given unique and elevated experiences, developing as growing professionals, and a large portion described access to important one-on-one mentorship.

Of those sampled, 60% mentioned how they were given elevated, unique, and extraordinary experiences when compared to other undergraduate students. These past interns described being present in important and often "behind the scenes" meetings with some of the University's most

influential leaders. Here they described being witnesses to great leaders and unique circumstances. As one past intern described:

I had the opportunity to interact with the President's Cabinet at UVU, no other program allows that much interaction with the leaders of the university. Having the privilege to learn from and work with those leaders really elevates your confidence, work ethic, professionalism, and leadership qualities.

Another past intern said similarly that the internship has, "given me an elevated experience in interacting with important officials, opportunities to head projects of importance, and I have learned to better manage my time and prioritize my duties."

In addition, 55% of the past interns sampled described a drastic increase in their professional and personal development. One intern captured this when stating that the internship's interactions "helped me learn how to hold a professional conduct (sic) especially when dealing with VIPs."

Furthermore, 35% of those sampled described the one-on-one mentorship as another aspect that set the internship apart. As one past intern described in detail:

I loved that [my] Vice President set aside an hour for me each week. He didn't just go over projects and deadlines, but he took time for me to discuss what was going on with my life. We discussed school schedules, potential grad schools, potential career routes, and family life. I loved that he took the time to get to know me and my situation. In many of the other organizations I felt like I was just a body to fill a position and I was just there to punch a clock. I felt no real mentorship going on as opposed to the Presidential Internship program. He helped me learn and realize how important it is [to] get to know people and to be approachable.

All those who mentioned this as a defining characteristic of their experience with the Presidential Internship described similar one-on-one experiences with their mentors.

What was one of the greatest lessons you learned as a Presidential Intern?

Three themes emerged when we examined what past interns considered as the greatest lessons they learned. A large portion of past interns detailed that they learned their experience was largely impacted by their own efforts and that they learned important lessons through challenges. Furthermore, a minority of interns said they learned important lessons from their experiences with their mentor.

Of those sampled, 30% described that they learned success depending upon what they put into the internship. Many of these past interns described work environments where their mentor gave them projects with little to no guidance, which would require them to be proactive. They described learning that their experience would be determined by the level of dedication they gave. As one past intern described, “What you put into it is what you get out of it. I tried to make the most of that experience and seek other ways to make an impact while in that position instead of treating it as a part-time job.”

Similarly, 30% of those sampled said they learned important lessons through challenges they faced. Many interns described those challenges as opportunities to elevate themselves. One past intern described this phenomenon, “The internship taught me to step up to the plate, ask questions and learn to execute even when tasks are beyond my ability to perform. The combination of those things set me on the course to do future projects that previously I’d have found impossible.” Others described having to step out of their “comfort zone” in order to accomplish important projects. However, they deemed these experiences as the best experiences for them:

I am terribly grateful I felt uncomfortable every day. I grew so much from it. The best lesson I learned was that I not only should, but I had to step out of my comfort zone. I was pushed in many different levels. I was given challenging tasks that I had to accomplish, working with others well beyond my age. I learned how to interact with individuals that I never dreamed of interacting with because I would have been intimidated by them. I had

to prepare professional and accurate documents for [my mentor], I had to act and look respectable as a representative of the university. I was in uncomfortable situations because I was learning and growing every day. You can't ask for a better college experience than that.

Finally, 15% of those sampled described the most important lessons being from their one-on-one experiences with their mentors. Each shared specific stories, experiences, or phrases they learned from their mentor that have remained with them.

What were the most meaningful projects you worked on as a Presidential Intern? (Please describe one or two briefly.)

Two themes emerged in this question. The majority of interns described their experiences with high impact projects and nearly half of interns talked about their frequent use of research.

Of those sampled, 55% described themselves being involved in high impact projects that made them feel like they were making a difference. We defined “high impact projects” as tasks given that had the potential to change or influence university policy, practice, and/or culture. These projects proved to be quite meaningful and diverse. Examples included participation on important committees on campus, helping raise funds for the construction of new university buildings, writing speeches for university administrators, helping design new Human Resource documents, and creating a new initiative for a minority group on campus.

In addition, 40% of those sampled described research as a key to their everyday work on big projects. Many interns indicated that they were tasked with preparing official reports, examining trends in higher education, and exploring problems experienced at the university through data analysis.

What were any challenges that you experienced as an intern?

Lastly, two themes emerged when examining the challenges interns faced. First, a portion of interns talked about their experience with their intern cohort and a quarter of interns discussed trouble with managing their time. When asked about challenges to their experience as interns,

30% indicated that they had trouble with their internship cohort. As one past intern described:

We had a very diverse group of interns and it was hard to pull them together for group exercises. I found that since we worked in such separate spaces and had such different personalities, our group activities were a little awkward and some of the interns would hesitate to participate.

Another intern described how difficult it was to help other members of the cohort see the vision of the internship and internship excursions. Additionally, some past interns felt like they were outside the “inner circle” of interns in their cohort.

Furthermore, 25% of the past interns sampled described challenges to time management. Several mentioned the difficulty of balancing their academic responsibilities with the projects and work assignments they were given.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative pilot study allowed us to take the first steps in exploring the effectiveness of the Presidential Internship Program at UVU. In regard to our first research question (“To what degree do past interns report the presence of one-on-one mentorship during their tenure as interns?”), we found that 35% of past interns who were sampled described having meaningful one-on-one mentorship experiences. When asked about the most important lessons they learned, three described lessons they were taught by their specific mentors. However, despite the reported positive experience with their mentors, we find it interesting that only 35% of those sampled described it as helping them develop into better leaders. This seems especially strange given the fact that the internship is modeled as a mentorship program.

There are several reasons that could explain why so few mentioned the one-on-one mentorship as relating to leadership development. First, participants could have had a negative experience with mentors. However, this seems unlikely given that this theme did not emerge with the challenges question. Still, past interns who did have a negative time with their mentors could have self-selected themselves out of the survey

completely. Second, the one-on-one mentorship could simply be a taken for granted feature of the experience, since the term “mentorship” was in the question. Third, the questions did not explore how involved each mentor was in actually mentoring the interns. Given that each member of the President’s Cabinet has their own responsibilities, time constraints, and levels of interest, and because the way to mentor is not prescribed to them, some members of the cabinet may be more involved with mentoring their interns than others. Future studies looking into the Presidential Internship or like programs should examine to what degree the participants actually felt mentored.

When looking into our second research question (“To what degree do past interns report their participation in high impact projects?”) we discovered the large majority of interns expressed that they both participated in a variety of high-impact projects and found them quite meaningful and challenging. In fact, 60% of interns described that the internship gave them access to unique and elevated experiences and 55% of interns described being involved in high impact projects; some of which influenced university policy, culture, and practice. This demonstrates not only that their mentors trusted them with such projects, but that these interns were able to rise to those occasions. In fact, having these elevated experiences was the number one most common theme when asked how the internship made them better leaders. Future research should examine what is more beneficial in mentorship programs: one-on-one time, high impact projects, or some kind of combination of the two.

In considering our third research question (“In what ways did the Presidential Internship teach them to be better leaders?”), we found the most common lesson learned was the participants’ experience of the internship was largely predicated on their own attitudes and behavior. Of those sampled, 30% described that much of their success depended on their own attitudes. Many of them were given projects with little to no guidance and thus were required to take initiative. In one instance, an intern described not taking much initiative and feeling like she did not have as great an experience as other interns.

Importantly, 30% of interns also described the most influential lessons coming from the challenging projects they were given. Several detailed

how the internship's challenges taught them how to deal with those situations and instilled in them the confidence to accomplish things they never thought possible. The presence of high impact projects and the challenges and lessons learned from them seemed to be a recurring theme for many of the interns.

Our fourth research question sought to examine the successes and challenges past interns faced ("What were successes and challenges the past interns experienced during their tenure as interns?"). It was clear that many of the interns felt their personal and professional development, as well as participation in high-impact projects, were some of their greatest successes. Interestingly, when asked about challenges, the most common response (30%) was of cohort issues. As noted earlier, the cohort model is an important part of the internship experience. However, the only references to the cohorts by past interns were how difficult it was to either feel included or connected. Future research should consider how to improve the cohort part of the internship.

Our final research question examined what interns went on to do after their tenure ("Do Presidential Interns go on to other high-impact projects or careers?"). We found that nearly half of all sampled interns went on to seek graduate degrees (both master's and PhDs). In addition, 50% of all interns detailed their movement into the workforce. As mentioned in the results section, several described working in government, politics, education, business and financing, and other fields. Importantly, 35% talked about being involved with other high impact internships such as working with US Senators, capital investors, and with Utah's Board of Regents.

Despite these promising findings, one should not conclude that involvement in the Presidential Internship caused these students to have those experiences. Because we did not examine the goals and plans of past interns *before* their involvement in the internship, we are unable to claim any causality. Future research should examine if involvement in programs like the Presidential Internship causes such success or if successful students seek out programs like it.

Furthermore, there are important limitations to the current pilot study. First and foremost, given the limited sample size, we are unable to generalize our findings to all former members of the Presidential Internship

or other executive-level mentorship programs. In addition, because the authors were Presidential Interns when the study was conducted and the findings analyzed, there is the possibility that our results were biased by our favorable view of the internship. Future studies should be conducted by those who are not participants in order to replicate our findings.

Despite these limitations, we feel confident that this pilot study's results show promise in evaluating the Presidential Internship. We believe that these results highlight how influential a mentorship program such as this can be for students. When students are given the opportunity to (a) be mentored by exceptional leaders and community partners and (b) be trusted with high impact projects and tasks, they will develop into more skilled and thoughtful leaders. As such, it is hoped that interns who had good experiences from the program will desire to give such experiences and mentorship to others in the future within their own spheres.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we sought to share the model, mission, and history of UVU's Presidential Internship Program. Additionally, we also sought to introduce a pilot study to evaluate the internship's effectiveness in providing participants with one-on-one mentorship, meaningful projects, and leadership experiences and lessons. Despite limitations, we feel confident that the Presidential Internship does provide students with a meaningful and impactful executive leadership opportunity.

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