

STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE ACCOUNTING INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines students' perception of the accounting internship course activities and experience, offered at the University of Guam. The accounting internship course is a three-credit course offered to students who are majoring in Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting (BBAA). Based on the results of this study, the majority of students indicated that the employer evaluations were found to be "very effective". The reflection journals, the discussion forum, and the progress and final reports were "effective" activities that prepared the interns for their careers. The internship experience helped the students enhance their knowledge of auditing, accounting and reporting, management accounting, government accounting, preparing financial statements, and interpreting and evaluating financial statements. However, it is noted that the students' perception of the internship enhancing their knowledge in tax accounting is that they "neither agree nor disagree".

BACKGROUND

Students enrolled in the accounting internship course must complete 150 hours of work for their employers. This is in addition to the course activities, consisting of employers' evaluations, reflection journals, discussion forums, and progress and final reports. Students were surveyed after the completion of this course.

The accounting internship course is a three-credit course that gives students 150 hours of work experience. The course prepares students who are entering the accounting profession by providing the students with practical experience at an accounting firm, company, or organization; at the same time, the course provides the interns with an opportunity to secure future employment. This course is typically offered to students who are majoring in accounting during their last semester of the accounting major program. In addition, employers will pay the interns between \$500 and \$600 for a contract with 150 hours. In a few instances, the intern will work more than 150 hours, upon which the employer and the intern will negotiate the continuing agreement. It is also noted that there were a few instances in which the intern agreed to work for free.

Course Objectives

The following are the objectives for this course:

- To learn to work with professional accountants in a professional environment

- To apply previous accounting coursework to the day-to-day business needs and problems of the firm
- To expand students' contacts within the local accounting community
- To acquire valuable exposure and experience in an area that will enhance the students' future career potential
- To complete assignments that encourage in-depth reflection of the internship experience
- To communicate effectively in writing to a variety of audiences during the internship experience

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussion Forums. The discussion forum is a place in which interns will share their internship experience with their peers online. Interns are required to provide information about their assigned duties and responsibilities, training, and supervision, as well as discuss the experiences they gained for each week. The purpose of this activity is for the interns to gain knowledge from their peers, especially if the interns are working at a different organization from those of their peers. An online discussion forum is a tool that students can use to interact with each other (Mason, 1998; Thomas, 2001; Riley, 2006; Ting, 2013). In addition, a forum promotes critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995) and social skills (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993).

Reflection Journals. Students write two reflection journals; the first is completed at their midpoint (75 hours), and the second is completed after the student works for 150 hours. The reflection journals are tools for interns to reflect on their experiences and for them to provide suggestions to improve their performances in the workplace, as well as make suggestions for improvements in the accounting program. Reflection journals assess students' achievements of learning (Jarvis, 2001; Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yan, 1995).

Employer Evaluations. The employer evaluation form is given to the intern's supervisor, after the intern works for 75 hours (midpoint) and 150 hours. The form will evaluate the intern's comprehension and communication, attitude/work habits, and overall performance. The evaluation form also includes questions for the supervisor to identify the intern's strengths and to offer a recommendation for improvements that the intern can make in the future.

Written Reports. Each intern prepares a progress report after completing 75 hours and a final report after completing 150 hours. A rubric is provided with a set of criteria, used to evaluate the report. The contents of these reports include the background of the company, agency, or organization, as well as the leadership activities, growth in employability, and a summary of the students' internship experience. The final report includes all of the activities that the student performed during the course, which is also used as his or her final internship portfolio.

Prior to the implementation of the course activities that were previously mentioned, the students were required to perform 150 hours of service at their place of employment; after

completing these hours, they submitted an employer evaluation form and final report. The instructor for this course found it difficult to monitor their progress during the program. The interns were unable to learn how they were performing, until after they completed the internship hours. In addition, the instructor was not aware of the tasks the interns were performing, even though it is assumed that they were performing the duties of an accountant position. Therefore, the instructor implemented these activities to ensure that the students were performing duties applicable to the program. Doing so enabled the interns to receive feedback from their employers and instructor at the midpoint and after completing the program. By implementing these course activities, there were improvements in the communication between the interns and instructor; the interns and the employers; and the instructor and the employers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study examines the interns' perception of the course activities and internship experience. The students' opinions of their internship experiences, as illustrated in Table 2, originated from a study conducted by Muhamad (2009). In preparation for this study, the author submitted a request to the corresponding author for permission to reuse the instrument and was granted approval. The University of Guam's Committee on Human Research Subjects approved this study (Nabobo-Baba, 2013).

The survey instrument was posted by using online survey software to gather the data. The link to the survey instrument was emailed to the interns and remained available for 10 days. The population for this study is 53. The total response received was 38. However, 2 responses were eliminated, due to partial responses. Therefore, the number of responses used in this study was 36 (68%) of the population. According to the Instructional Assessment Resources (2011), seven to ten days is a sufficient amount of time to allow a survey to remain available, and the acceptable response rate is an average of 30% for online surveys.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

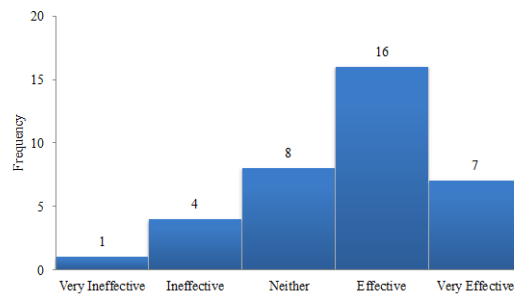
The participants from this study were students who took the internship course between the fall intersession 2012 and fall 2013 semesters, which includes a summer semester, for a total of seven (7) semesters. It is noted that students who took this course prior to the fall intersession 2012, did not participate in the discussion forums, reflection journals, and progress report activities. The instructor for this course began these activities in the fall 2012 intersession semester.

Students' Perception on the Course Activities

The mode statistics were used to analyze the data (See Figures 1 through 5). Based on the results, the students found the employer evaluations to be "very effective" because they felt that the evaluations helped prepare them for their careers. The other activities, discussion forums, reflection journals, and progress and final reports were found to be "effective".

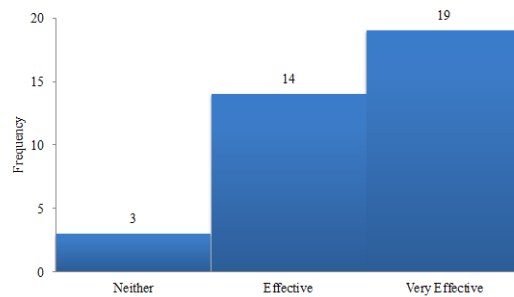
No.	Question	Min Value	Max Value	Mean	Median	Mode	Variance	Standard Deviation	Total Responses
1	Discussion forums	1	5	3.67	4	4	1.03	1.01	36
2	Employer evaluations	3	5	4.44	5	5	0.43	0.65	36
3	Reflection journals	1	5	3.78	4	4	1.15	1.07	36
4	Progress report	2	5	4.14	4	4	0.58	0.76	36
5	Final report	1	5	4.06	4	4	0.85	0.92	36

Figure 1
Discussion Forums



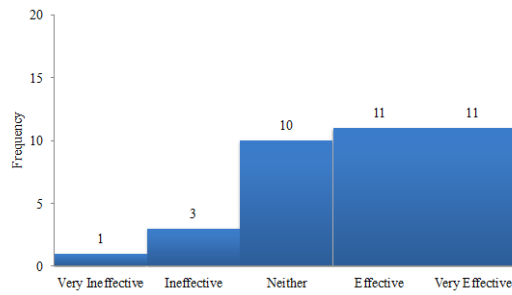
The frequency from this activity showed that discussion forums were “effective” in the internship course.

Figure 2
Employer Evaluations



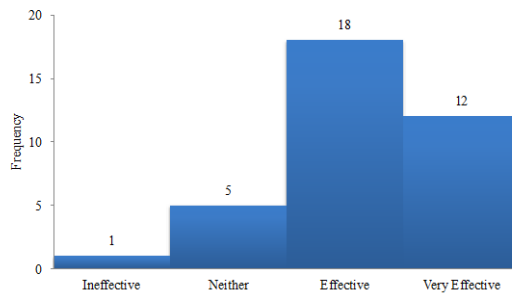
The frequency from this activity showed that employer evaluations were “very effective” in the internship course.

Figure 3
Reflection Journals



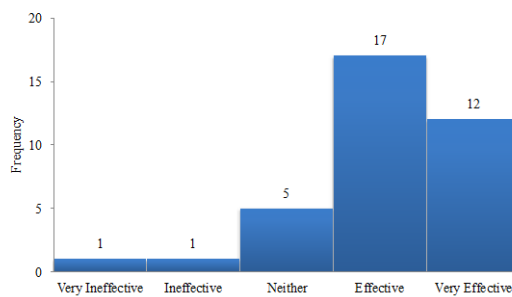
The frequency from this activity showed that reflection journals were “effective” in the internship course.

Figure 4
Progress Report



The frequency from this activity showed that the progress report was “effective” in the internship course.

Figure 5
Final Report



The frequency from this activity showed that the final report was “effective” in the internship course.

Students' Perception on their Internship Experience

The mode statistics were used to analyze the data. Based on the mode (frequency) from Table 2, the internship experience helped the students by preparing them to be better employees in the future; the internship provided them with relevant knowledge and practical experience that helped them to relate the theories about the work environment that the students learned in the classroom.

Students enhanced their knowledge of auditing, accounting and reporting, management accounting, government accounting, preparing financial statements, and interpreting and evaluating financial statements. However, it is noted in terms of the survey question about whether or not the internship experience enhanced the students' knowledge of tax accounting, the students neither "agreed nor disagreed".

In addition, the internship experience helped the students develop their soft skills, specifically problem-solving skills, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. The internship experience helped improve the students' personal confidence and self-esteem; gave the students exposure to the latest technology; created the opportunity for the students to network with people in the industry and business arena; improved the students' chances of getting jobs after graduation; and provided the students with the necessary information and experience to choose the right career paths after graduation.

The total responses may not equal the total population because some of the criteria listed in the survey instrument were not applicable to the intern.

No.	The internship...	Min Value	Max Value	Mean	Median	Mode	Variance	Standard Deviation	Total Responses
1	prepared me to be a better employee in the future.	3	5	4.03	4	4	0.37	0.61	36
2	provided me with the relevant knowledge and practical experience to assist me in adapting myself to my working environment.	3	5	4.08	4	4	0.31	0.55	36
3	helped me to relate the theories learned in the classroom to the work environment.	3	5	4.03	4	4	0.26	0.51	36
4	helped me to enhance knowledge in auditing.	2	5	3.91	4	4	0.71	0.84	33
5	helped me to enhance knowledge in financial accounting and reporting.	2	5	3.91	4	4	0.37	0.61	35
6	helped me to enhance knowledge in management accounting.	2	5	3.64	4	4	0.55	0.74	33
7	helped me to enhance knowledge in public sector (government) accounting.	2	5	3.79	4	4	0.77	0.88	34
8	helped me to enhance knowledge in tax accounting.	1	5	3.41	3	3	0.96	0.98	32
9	helped me to enhance my ability to prepare financial statements.	2	5	3.63	4	4	0.56	0.75	32
10	helped me to have better understanding in interpreting and evaluating financial statements.	3	5	3.76	4	4	0.38	0.61	33
11	helped me to develop my problem solving skill.	3	5	4.11	4	4	0.27	0.52	36

No.	The internship...	Min Value	Max Value	Mean	Median	Mode	Variance	Standard Deviation	Total Responses
12	helped me to develop my communication skill.	3	5	4.25	4	4	0.31	0.55	36
13	helped me to develop my interpersonal skill.	3	5	4.11	4	4	0.39	0.62	36
14	helped me to improve my personal confidence and self-esteem.	3	5	4	4	4	0.4	0.63	36
15	had given me the exposure to the latest technology adopted in the work place.	1	5	4.03	4	4	0.66	0.81	36
16	had given me the opportunity to build up rapport and networking with people in the industry and business arena.	2	5	4.11	4	4	0.44	0.67	36
17	had provided me with the necessary job experience that can improve my chances to get a good job upon graduation.	2	5	4	4	4	0.63	0.79	36
18	had provided me with the necessary information and experiences to choose the right career path upon graduation.	3	5	4.14	4	4	0.41	0.64	36

CONCLUSION

This study examined students' perception of the course activities and internship experiences at the University of Guam. The results of this study showed that the students perceived an employer's evaluation to be very effective, while the students believed the reflection journals, discussion forums, and written reports were effective.

Reflection journals assess the students' achievements of learning. Jarvis (2001) argued that reflective journals could be time-consuming. However, this can lead to personal and professional enrichment and employment, in which she recommended the use of reflective journals in higher and continuing education.

A discussion forum is a place in which students interact with each other, and a forum promotes critical thinking and social skills. In a study conducted by Akhras (2012), the discussion forum improved participation between students and faculty, and it improved student performance. Furthermore, written reports help improve writing skills and critical thinking.

The internship experience helped the students enhance their knowledge in the subject areas of financial and managerial accounting, auditing, government accounting, and interpreting and evaluating financial statements. The students neither "agreed nor disagreed" that the internship helped them increase their knowledge in tax accounting. The internship experience helped to develop the students' soft skills in the areas of their problem-solving skills, communication skills and interpersonal skills. Soft skills are important in one's career and will set an individual apart from those who lacked these skills (Karan, 2012; Dixon, Belnap and Lee, 2010).

The internship experience helped improve the students' personal confidence and self-esteem; provided the students with exposure to the latest technology; gave the students the opportunity to network with people in the industry and business arena; improved the students'

chances of getting a good job after graduation; and give the students the necessary information and experience to choose the right career path after graduation.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research focused on the students' perception of the internship program, based on the course activities and the internship experience. Additional research for consideration is the investigation of the employers' perception—focusing on soft skills or nontechnical skills that the employers seek from accounting majors. Is there a relationship between technical and nontechnical skills? Another topic for further research is related to determining the successes and challenges of accounting graduates, in terms of their current careers, and/or to ask, “Where are they now?”

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