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The Role of a Formal Internship Experience in the Career Ambitions of Apparel and Textile Undergraduate Students

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*Background and Purpose.* Many recent college graduates report feeling unprepared for their careers. However, perceptions of preparedness significantly increase among students who acquire professional work experience during their undergraduate years (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012). Research supports the need to integrate professional development and work experience into undergraduate education, asserting the role these experiences play in terms of influencing knowledge, growth and students' abilities to make career-related decisions (Brown, 2004; Thompson, 2006). Moreover, in a highly competitive industry such as apparel and textiles, it is essential for students to acquire industry-related work experience during their undergraduate studies. Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to understand how a formal, for-credit internship experience influences the career goals and ambitions of apparel and textile (AT) undergraduate students. Specifically, the study looked to answer the following research questions: 1) Do the career goals of students change after the internship experience? If so, how?, 2) How does the students' rating of the internship experience relate to their career goals?, and 3) What factors influence the students' rating of the internship experience?

*Method.* To answer the research questions, this study utilized a phenomenological approach – which focuses on understanding the meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were undergraduate students from an apparel and textiles program at a 4-year college in the US. The program requires a 260-hour supervised internship experience, which students complete the summer after their junior or senior year. The prerequisite to the internship is a 3-credit hour professional development class. Qualitative data was collected from the students in two stages – at the start of the professional development class (through a written assignment focused on career aspirations and goals) and at the conclusion of the internship (through a 10-page internship reflection paper). Data analysis occurred through a standard qualitative process of two researchers coding the data, synthesizing the codes into broader concepts and themes, and interpreting the results – focusing on comparing pre- and post-internship career goals.

*Findings.* Thirty-three students participated in the study (F=32, M=1), all of whom were traditional college-aged juniors and seniors. Six of the students completed their internships in the same city as the university, 16 in the same state, 10 out-of-state, and one student completed an international internship in China. Additionally two of the students' internships were in event planning, two were brand sales representatives, 16 were in apparel retail management, three in apparel design, four in styling and/or visual merchandising, four in marketing or public relations, and one in apparel buying.

Related to whether or not career goals changed after completing the internship, this study found that the internship experience provided some degree of career clarity for all of the

students. For some of the students, the internship reaffirmed their previous career goals and helped them identify the next steps needed in reaching their ambitions. A number of other students, who had very broad career goals before the internship, found the internship helped them narrow down their goals and focus more specifically on one or two career paths of interest. And for a few of the students, the internship allowed them to identify what they did not want to do after graduation. Additionally, the internship also provided a number of students clarity on the type of firm (corporate, independently-owned, fair trade, etc.) that was best suited to them and exposed them to additional career opportunities within the AT industry they previously had not considered. For example, the student who interned in China was a Chinese national and before the internship her goal was to work for an apparel company in the US. After her internship with the Chinese company she realized there were many opportunities for her in China and she was much more open to returning there after graduation.

Most of the students (on a scale of 1-10) rated their internship 8 or higher. Only five students rated the experience less than a 7, with four rating it a 6 and one rating it a 4. Interestingly, the students who rated their internships the lowest were also students whom, at the beginning of the professional development course, had very unclear career goals, stating they had “no idea” what they wanted to do after graduation. There was a sense that these students’ lack of direction led them to accept internships simply to fulfill credit requirements and did not utilize the opportunity for genuine exploration of career ambitions. These students also remained the most ambivalent about career goals upon completion of their internships.

Factors that contributed most positively to internship experiences included being in a formal internship experience with clear expectations and responsibilities, having an effective relationship with mentors, being able to participate in a variety of tasks and having some autonomy in responsibilities, receiving consistent feedback, and feeling valued within the company. Students with lower quality experiences reported a lack of mentoring and limited variety in tasks as common complaints.

Implications and Conclusions. Findings from this study support the continued presence of formal internships in AT undergraduate programs as the experience, when effectively utilized, contributes to the career preparedness and ambitions of students. However, it is also clear from this study that students benefit most from the internship when they already have a general sense of their desired career path prior to starting the internship. Therefore, AT educators should be more proactive about integrating student-led career development and exploration into AT curriculum so that students have a much more holistic sense of the range of career possibilities within the AT industry and a keener awareness of the career path they want to take.

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