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Evaluation of the impact of a Health Care Administration Student Practicum

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As the health care industry becomes increasingly complex, many leaders and practitioners in the field are worried about the quality and preparation of health care administration graduates (Robbins, Bradley, & Spicer, 2001). Academic health care administration programs prepare students for a professional career in the health care field. One of the biggest challenges for university health care administration programs is to meet industry needs by effectively incorporating practical skills and knowledge into the academic curricula. For students, coursework provides some insight into the demands of the industry, but they also require hands-on experience to be relevant in a highly competitive job market. Many academic institutions have incorporated student internships or practicums as a way to meet the needs of both the health care industry and graduates.

Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence to indicate precisely what factors make internships effective. In addition, there are no published studies that specifically investigate the availability or effectiveness of internships in academic health care administration (HCA) programs. Evidence about current practices may be of interest to HCA educators and can serve as a useful reference for institutions in designing internship programs. Empirical data may indicate useful areas for future research about factors that influence the effectiveness of HCA internships.

The aim of this study was to provide qualitative and empirical information on the Health Care Administration and Policy (HCAP) practicum at the University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV). Background information will be provided that

discusses program structure and processes. Using student participation data from the years 2000-2005, descriptive data will be provided on the types of organizations that participated in the practicum, types of student projects that were completed, assessment of the student performance from the preceptor's perspective, and success of the program in placing students in full-time professional positions. Finally, the results of this analysis and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

Background on the UNLV Practicum

The Department of Health Care Administration and Policy is located within the School of Public Health at UNLV. The HCAP practicum is an internship program for undergraduate students entering their senior year of study. The HCAP practicum gives students the opportunity to obtain valuable work experience and provides Las Vegas area health care organizations an opportunity to mentor and train future professionals in a rapidly growing health care environment. The practicum is certified by the Association of Undergraduate Programs in Healthcare Administration (AUPHA), who has cited it as a major strength of the overall degree program because of the quality of the work experience that is provided to students.

One of the differences between the UNLV practicum and those of other health care administration programs is the level of work expected by the student. Although some AUPHA members require a full-time practicum experience, the majority does not. At UNLV, the HCAP practicum is required for all students majoring in health care administration. It is a 12-hour course that requires students to work full-time during the 15-week semester. This requirement allows students to integrate into the organization and fully participate in the day-to-day functions of a health care professional. It also gives students the opportunity to work on management type projects of substance, that is, projects that would typically be completed by an entry-level or mid-level employee. Projects based on clerical type duties do not qualify as practicum experiences.

While in the practicum, students are required to submit a major project proposal for approval from the faculty program director. They must maintain a daily diary for the first two weeks of their practicum project and weekly progress reports thereafter. At the end of the semester, students are required to submit a portfolio regarding their experience that includes the following materials: an executive summary, background and history of the organization, an environmental assessment, an organizational assessment, and a detailed project

report with accompanying attachments. In addition, each student develops a website depicting his/her project and practicum site. Recognizing that students may be required to meet company confidentiality requirements, any information that is posted on the website must first be approved by the sponsoring practicum organization.

Another major difference between the UNLV program and those offered at other institutions is how the students select their practicum sites. In a review of AUPHA member institutions, we found that many institutions offer internships as a “stand-alone” experience in which students are required to find placement on their own with little active involvement from faculty (<http://aupha.org>). At UNLV, a course is taught the semester prior to the practicum and students are introduced to a number of organizations, facilitators, and projects throughout the semester. During this course, students are instructed about the practicum requirements and must complete a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) for the organizations visited during the semester. They also are given the tools for developing their websites. Throughout the semester, classes are held on site at various institutions including hospitals, managed care organizations, long term care facilities, diagnostic centers and large group practices. Senior managers and their staff discuss their organizations and project opportunities with the students. Students then report back to faculty on the major themes of the visits and decide which of these facilities interest them as a potential practicum site. The exposure to a variety of health care organizations with an array of potential projects helps the students find a practicum site that fits their career goals. Moreover, for the inexperienced students, the pre-practicum course provides an initial introduction to the organization’s working environment.

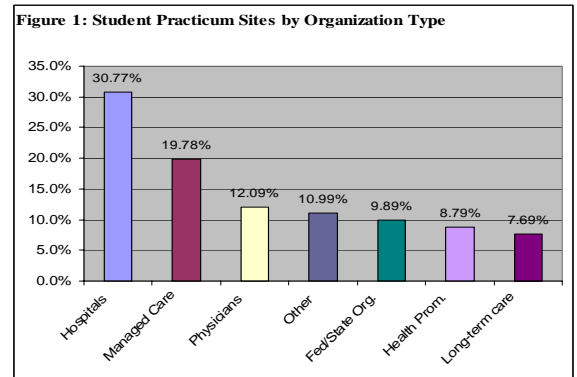
Methods

The aim of this study was to provide descriptive data on the current practices of the UNLV HCAP practicum. Four factors were evaluated: the types of organizations that participated in the practicum, types of student projects that were completed, assessment of the students’ performances as evaluated by the preceptor, and success of the program in placing students in full-time professional positions. Data was collected from records of students who participated in the UNLV HCAP practicum from years 2000 to 2005. Due to the relatively small number of program participants, descriptive statistics and frequencies were used to evaluate each factor. The preceptor evaluation material was collected from evaluations completed by preceptors during the period. Preceptors

completed a ten item questionnaire for each student rating them on a four-point scale where 4 = excellent, 3 = good, 2 = needs improvement and 1 = poor. Means were calculated for each measure to provide a descriptive analysis of the preceptors’ responses.

Results

The analysis of the types of organizations participating in the UNLV HCAP practicum program indicates that hospitals represented the largest number of practicum worksite experiences (Figure 1). The records indicated that 75% of the local hospitals had participated in the practicum during the time period analyzed. Managed care and insurance organizations made up the next largest number of practicum sites. Physician group practices were also largely represented, in part, due to the number of students who work in physician practice offices.



Local federal and state health agencies participated in the program, as well as a few organizations from outside of the Las Vegas area. For example, one project was completed with the Mississippi State Health Department and two projects were completed in the Sultanate of Oman, a Middle Eastern country bordering the Arabian Sea.

One of the unique characteristics about the Las Vegas environment is the large number of for-profit health care organizations compared to not-for-profit or public/government organizations. Fifty-nine percent of student practicums took place in for-profit organizations. Slightly more private, non-profit organizations participated in the practicum (21%) than public for-profit or government run organizations (20%).

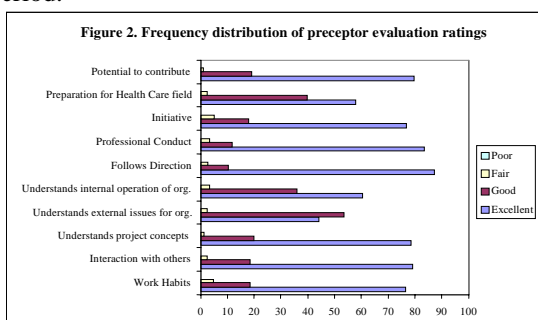
Student projects were completed in a diverse range of categories (Table 1). Marketing and planning made up the largest number of projects accounting for 33.6% of the projects during the period studied. These projects included work on new programs, services or product lines. Quality improvement related projects comprised more than 16% of the projects. Certification projects were the next largest category (12.2%). These projects included preparation for hospital accreditation by

organizations such as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations, National Commission on Quality Assurance, and Medicare or Medicaid certification.

Table 1. Student Projects by Category

Project Type	%	Project Type	%
Marketing and Planning	33.6	Human Resources	9.1
Quality Improvement	16.3	Health Promotion	8.2
Regulatory/Certification	12.2	Finance and Accounting	6.1
Contracting	10.2	Other	4.3

At the end of the semester, the students' supervisors (preceptors) at the practicum sites were asked to evaluate the students' performances over the course of the practicum. The performance evaluation consisted of ten measures specifically designed for the practicum (Figure 2). The frequency distribution illustrates that preceptors rated students as "excellent" or "good" more than 90% of the time across all measures. The highest frequency of "excellent" was in the student's ability to follow directions (87%). The lowest frequency of "excellent" pertained to the student's ability to understand the external issues affecting the organization (44%). A small percentage of students were rated as "fair" on the various performance measures. The largest percentage (4.7%) of "fair" ratings was on the performance measure, Work Habits. No students were rated "poor" in any of the performance indicators during the course of the study period.



The optimum measurement of success of the practicum program in this analysis is whether students were offered employment at their practicum sites. A review was conducted of all students who completed a full-time practicum to determine the percentage of students who were offered employment. Part-time practicum students were omitted from this analysis since the large majority completed their practicums at their current worksites,

which could bias results. Based on student responses during the period studied, 60% of fulltime practicum students were offered a job by their practicum site. On further analysis by year, 2001 and 2005 had the highest rate of employment offers at over 75%. The spring semesters of 2002 and 2003 were the lowest, in which less than half of students participating in the practicum were offered employment.

Discussion

The Association of University Programs in Healthcare Administration (AUPHA) has proposed methods for measuring the competencies of their member programs (Shewchuk et al., 2005). One important component in assessing these competencies is through the evaluation of practicums and internships. Evaluation of internship programs in academic institutions has been the subject of several studies. Stichman and Farkas (2005) found that the primary strengths of internship programs were the ability to integrate theory with practice and the ability of the university to establish relationships with a wide variety of agencies. Other research has suggested that academic programs offering internships have a competitive advantage over those that do not (Anderson, Pulich, & Sisak, 2002).

This study indicates that the UNLV HCAP practicum incorporates a broad base of health care organizations from the public and private health care sectors. Clearly, most of the practicum sites are what would traditionally be expected in a health care administration program. Hospitals and managed care/health insurance related organizations accepted the majority of students. Most of the practicums were completed in private, for profit organizations, which was not unexpected.

One interesting finding was the number of marketing and planning related projects completed by the students compared to other types of projects. One explanation for this may be that rapid population growth during the period necessitated an accompanying growth in health care services. It was surprising to see how few projects pertained to the financial operations of the health care organization. Because most of the students select their own practicum sites, other projects may have been more interesting to them than those related to finance and accounting. However, the health care administration field distinguishes itself from other areas of health care precisely because it is the business side of the profession. Therefore, student experience in understanding the financial operations of a health care organization is very important. Understanding why students are not assigned to more projects involving financial operations in health care organizations merits further study.

A critical tool in evaluating the success of practicum and internship programs is obtaining feedback from the preceptors through the student performance evaluation process. To our knowledge, this is the first study that has been conducted on employer evaluations of student interns in health care administration. Based on the preceptors' evaluations of student performance, it seems clear that the majority of students participating in the UNLV HCAP practicum were successful. The assessments of students by the practicum preceptors show a high level of performance as indicated by ratings ranging from "good" to "excellent" across all performance measures.

However, these results also suggest a need for further research in this area. Performance evaluations, in general, are subject to confounding factors such as rater bias, affect and recall. Often, these biases result in overly generous ratings on performance measures when the employee, in fact, may not have performed at that level in all performance areas for the entire evaluation period (Williams, Klamen, & McGaghie, 2003; Lefkowitz, 2000). This occurrence is generally referred to as the "halo" effect. Employer evaluations of student interns may be more susceptible to the halo effect given that employers may fear that the student's grade or academic standing may suffer. Preceptors were more likely to evaluate students lower on their ability to understand environmental issues affecting the organization. Any number of reasons may account for this including a lack of exposure within the organization to fully understand those relationships. In larger organizations, the complexity of the internal function of the organization may be beyond the scope of the student in general.

The most important outcome measure in understanding the effectiveness of internship programs is the number of graduates who find employment in the profession. The literature supports the value of internships in preparing students transitioning to the workplace. In a survey of 1,117 college alumni who graduated between 1993 and 1997, Knouse, Tanner and Harris (1999) found that for students who had a job at graduation, 55% had participated in an internship. In a similar study, Callanan and Benzing (2004) found that 59% of students who participated in internships accepted employment at graduation versus 17% of students who did not participate in internships.

This study seems to support these findings. Sixty percent of the students completing a fulltime practicum were offered jobs as a result of participating in the HCAP practicum. An analysis comparing the job offers during each year of this period revealed that the majority of fulltime students

were offered a position following their practicums in 2000-2001 and 2004-2005. Less than 50% of students were offered employment during the years 2002-2003. This may reflect the economic slowdown in the Las Vegas economy that was heavily impacted by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Another interesting finding regarding job offers was that the rate of job offers was not significantly different between organizations based on type of service or ownership status.

While being offered a position at their project site is a positive measure of success, this measure cannot be generalized to health care markets outside of Southern Nevada. Even though most students who completed their practicums outside of the Las Vegas area reported being offered jobs as well, the number of students who completed those practicums was too small to draw any conclusions. In addition, the data did not provide information on the number of students who did not accept jobs that were offered. Finally, the unemployment rate in Nevada is lower than the national average and opportunities for the UNLV practicum students may be greater than in other markets. Since part-time practicum students were not included in this analysis, a follow-up study of part-time practicum students would be useful to determine whether their involvement in the practicum or completion of their degree led to a promotion or pay increase.

Participation in academic internships by health care organizations presents excellent opportunities for developing and recruiting future professionals. As the growth of the region continues, organizations will be forced to compete for qualified professionals in both the public and private sectors of health care. Competition for qualified graduates may be particularly intense in the public sector in Nevada. For example, leadership at the Nevada State Health Division voiced concern about the ability to attract qualified health care professionals to their organization. Retaining interns can save organizations an estimated \$15,000 in hiring and training costs per intern (Dixon et al., 2005). Employers can also use internship programs as a marketing tool highlighting the organization's involvement with the community and commitment to education (Anderson, Pulich, & Sisak, 2002). Other benefits to employers included: risk free evaluation of a prospective employee, an inexpensive source of competent labor, access to highly motivated and productive individuals, and release of full-time employees from routine tasks (Coco, 2000).

There is a lack of empirical evidence about the use of internships in undergraduate health care administration programs. This study offers support for the UNLV HCAP practicum as a successful

means for meeting the needs of both the local health care market and health care administration graduates. The objective of this study was to provide descriptive data evaluating an HCA internship program at UNLV. The data presented in this paper can serve as a useful reference point for other academic HCA undergraduate programs. Future research can examine in greater detail issues related to the methods used by institutions to monitor the quality of internships and their effectiveness, the benefits to students (such as paid internships and the extent to which student interns are subsequently hired by the same organizations that provided the internships), as well as the perceptions of students towards internships and the academic characteristics of those who participate. Research also needs to be conducted that quantifies the benefits or disadvantages to organizations that participate in internships and the types of program structures and faculty incentives used in academic health care administration internship programs.

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