

Interrogating Course-Related Public Interest Internships in Communications

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Abstract: This article examines the benefits and drawbacks of for-credit, unpaid internships geared towards the public good. Attention is focused specifically on communication internships with non-governmental, non-profit, and community-based organizations. Drawing on a series of semi-structured interviews with students, staff, faculty, and host organizations, the author advances a critical model of service learning that more fully recognizes the labour of community partners and encourages students to consider what role they can and should play in advancing the public good. The article also highlights two key issues vis-à-vis public interest internships that are of particular relevance to the field of communications. The first is a disconnect between, on the one hand, communications as a theoretical field of study and, on the other hand, the skills communication students are typically expected to bring with them into their placements. The second is a growing tension between what different members of the university community expect out of public interest internships: politically safe forms of community engagement palatable to university administrations versus more activist-oriented placements with organizations and movements that contest structures of control both on and off campus. The author contends that communication programs must critically reflect upon how politically benign and/or contentious internships support their pedagogical goals and what resources need to be in place to meet these objectives.

Keywords: internships, communications, public good, activism, service learning

Significant media attention has focused recently on a range of concerns related to unpaid student internships that deserve greater critical scrutiny. Academic and media critiques have, quite rightfully, targeted exploitive labour practices undertaken by companies benefitting from students and graduates struggling to find employment in an increasingly difficult job market (see, as examples, Harris 2014; Lurie 2013; Neff 2011; Perlin 2012; Sagan 2013; Wood 2011). In addition to calls for interns to be paid a fair wage and a limit to be placed on the number of hours they work, other issues revolve around ensuring that they engage in meaningful work and receive appropriate training and support during their placements. Internships are also often available only to those with the financial means to afford foregoing paid employment during the school year and/or intersession months. Conversely, these placements provide students with real-life experience, an opportunity to put their theoretical training into practice, and a means of gaining a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of their respective fields. As tuition continues to rise and students increasingly feel the brunt of what Jeffrey Williams (2006) calls the “pedagogy of debt” and its attendant pressure to secure employment immediately post-graduation, internships can also serve a utilitarian, résumé-building function for future employment.

In Canada, regulation of internships varies according to each province’s standards. In Ontario, for example, unpaid internships are legal only if they adhere to one of three exceptions set out by the province’s Employment Standards Act.¹ In this article, I explore the implications of unpaid, for-credit placements that are, as per the first of these exceptions, “part of

¹ The other two criteria stipulate that internships must “provide training for certain professions (e.g., architecture, law, public accounting, veterinary science, dentistry, optometry)” and/or that they meet “six conditions required for the intern to be considered a ‘trainee’” (for a list of these conditions, see http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_00e41_e.htm). If an internship fails to meet these standards, the intern “must be paid at least the Ontario minimum wage” (Canadian Intern Association 2014a).

a program approved by a secondary school board, college, or university” (Canadian Intern Association 2014a). More specifically, attention is focused on university-level, communication internships geared towards the public good—that is, placements with local and international non-governmental, non-profit, and community-based organizations (NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs, respectively).² Research in this area is particularly timely as universities promote what appears to be a natural fit between communication programs awash with students wanting hands-on experience, and organizations, often facing budget cuts under conditions of neoliberal austerity, looking for additional support in terms of writing, research, public relations, and social media outreach. Although these internships are part of an academic program and meant to advance the public good in some capacity, it does not necessarily follow, however, that they are always of benefit to the student or the host organization.

The primary objectives of this article then are threefold. First, to interrogate some of the benefits and drawbacks of this form of experiential learning from the perspective of the student (focusing on undergraduates), the university (primarily at the departmental/faculty level), and the host organization (local and international NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs). Second, to challenge a more traditional, institutionalized service learning model that has students unilaterally ‘serving’ the ‘other.’ Instead, the article promotes a critical paradigm that more fully recognizes the labour of community partners and encourages students to consider what role they can and should play in advancing the public good. Third, to highlight two key issues vis-à-vis public interest internships that are of particular relevance to the field of communications. The first is a disconnect between, on the one hand, communications as a theoretical field of study and, on the other hand, the skills communication students are typically expected to bring with them into their placements. The second is a growing tension between what different members of the university community expect out of public interest internships: politically safe forms of community engagement palatable to university administrations versus more activist-oriented placements with organizations and movements that contest structures of control both on and off campus. Although many students prefer the former option, others request the latter, raising questions regarding the legitimacy, safety, supervision, and evaluation of placements that fall outside the traditional service learning archetype. In the end, I contend that communication programs need to consider why they offer politically benign and/or contentious internships, how this form of experiential learning is integrated into their respective curricula, and what mechanisms and resources need to be in place to meet their stated pedagogical goals.

The discussion that follows is informed in part by semi-structured interviews conducted with individuals who have, in some capacity, been involved with unpaid, for-credit, public interest internships as part of a communication program at three universities in Ontario. To capture a range of first-hand perspectives, non-identifying interviews were held with three faculty members and two staff members engaged in administering and supervising internships, two mid-level university administrators, representatives from four organizations that have hosted such interns, and seven former undergraduate students who have completed local and/or international internships.³ These interviewees were chosen based on my previous knowledge of the individual and his/her relationship with a specific internship program. Recognizing, however, my own bias towards emphasizing the positive benefits accruing from public interest-oriented experiential learning, I consciously choose to interview individuals as part of this convenience sample whom I expected would also be able to speak to some of the challenges associated with this kind of pedagogy.

Through these interviews, I gained valuable personal and professional insight into my own subjective perceptions of internships, helping to nuance my experiences serving as the academic supervisor for internships in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS)

² For a useful overview of these and other similar context-specific organizational frameworks, see Haque, 2010.

³ Interviews were conducted between April and June, 2014, and ranged in length from 30 minutes to two hours. To mitigate the power dynamics inherent in student-professor relationships, the former interns interviewed for this research have all graduated from their undergraduate programs.

at Western University.⁴ To date, I have overseen approximately 70 internships and practicum placements with local and international NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs for our undergraduate Media and the Public Interest program (MPI), and 125 internships with local private sector companies for our undergraduate Media, Information & Technoculture (MIT) program. The MPI program, which I co-coordinate, is specifically committed to social justice issues and actively works to connect “media theory learned in the classroom to real world experiences” (FIMS 2014). Along with the possibility of participating in voluntary national and international internships, MPI students must complete a capstone placement in the final semester of their fourth year with a local organization. The placement includes a minimum number of contact hours with the host NGO, NPO, or CBO, one-on-one meetings with the instructor of the course, and time spent in a classroom setting with peers in the program. Given the generally left-leaning approach of my faculty and its commitment to critical, praxis-oriented pedagogy (Dyer-Witthford 2007, 56), I enjoy significant political latitude in this process.

1.1. Context and Framework

Scholarly literature about public interest internships falls primarily under the aegis of service learning, a rapidly expanding subset of experiential learning that intends to prepare “students for civic life” (Ward 2005, 220).⁵ Instead of simply a form of ‘volunteerism,’ this type of hands-on education “aspires to be an active process of ‘real life’ experience formation and intellectual reflection by enabling students to combine insights gleaned from their theoretical course content with their community-based learning activities” (Smeltzer and Grzyb 2009, 9). Concerns have been raised, however, that the rhetoric of ‘service’ connotes unequal power relationships in which one group (e.g., university students and faculty) unilaterally serves another group (e.g., marginalized citizens in the community) in need of external help. Indeed, the idea of ‘service’ underpinning most institutionalized community placements mirrors forms of inequity that are a hallmark of diminishing welfare states under contemporary capitalism. In this environment, expectations that students will ‘serve’ the other function to “reinforce prejudice and replicate power differentials between those conferring and those receiving the service” (King 2004, 123; Brown and Bruce 2010, 10–12; Bruce, Martin and Brown 2010; Mitchell 2008). Notwithstanding these critiques, service learning programs have become increasingly popular with university administrations eager to demonstrate “community engagement as ‘core business’” (Flood, Martin and Dreher 2013, 21). As a case in point, according to its 2014 Strategic Plan, Western University vows to “[p]romote and support [...] service-learning projects with non-profit community groups; study-abroad and academic exchange programs; and social justice or international development initiatives with non-governmental agencies... In these contexts students learn to apply the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom to practical ‘real world’ situations” (2014b). While a substantial commitment by universities to the wider community should be welcomed, this excerpt reflects a more traditional approach to service learning in which charity figures “as a solution to social problems, [and] establishes a hierarchy between academic communities and minoritized contexts” (Porfilio and Hickman 2011, x; Pompa 2002).

By comparison, the term *critical* service learning is often used to signal a pedagogy that, if thoughtfully designed and implemented, encourages students to instead “develop the critical awareness in relation to what gives rise to the dark social realities of the present as well as gain the desire to remake the social world for the purposes of improving the lives of all people” (Porfilio and Hickman 2011, x–xi; Mitchell 2008; Rice and Pollack 2000). As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued in his highly influential *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the

⁴ Recently, the institution has been rebranded (for rather opaque reasons) as Western University, jettisoning its original name, The University of Western Ontario. Located in London, Ontario, Canada, Western is a public research institution home to over 30,000 undergraduates and more than 5,000 post-graduates.

⁵ Given that service learning programs are well-established in the United States (with Canada quickly following suit), much of this literature is American-focused (Benham, Rennick and Desjardins 2013, 5).

younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (34). My focus in this article is explicitly on unpaid, for-credit internships that strive for the latter—a specific form of self-reflective education that operates in the spirit of critical service learning inasmuch as it forefronts “the public good, public issues, and public life” to help young people “develop a sense of agency, particularly in relation to the obligations of critical citizenship and public life in a radically transformed cultural and global landscape [...]” (Giroux 2011, 174).

To contextualize my experience at Western University with other communication/media studies programs, I will briefly survey comparable programs in the province of Ontario. At the time of writing, only Brock University’s Department of Communication, Popular Culture and Film explicitly offers “service-learning internship opportunities” for its students.⁶ Specific internships and co-op placements offered at other universities may be geared towards the public interest, but the departments do not specifically advertise their experiential learning opportunities in such manner. The University of Ottawa’s Department of Communication, the University of Toronto Mississauga’s Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology, and the University of Windsor’s Department of Communication, Media, and Film are good examples of programs that actively promote the pedagogical and professional benefits of unpaid, for-credit internships and co-ops, but do not overtly forefront the public good. It is also important to note that there are no agreed-upon definitions of what constitutes an internship between these communication programs. Based on their publicly available objectives, however, some common themes emerge: the benefits accruing from hands-on work experience, including the acquisition of practical skills; the potential for professional networking; and in many, although not all, cases, the importance of integrating theory and practice.

According to Stirling et al.’s (2014) inventory of the panoply of internships available across disciplines to post-secondary students in Ontario, “the lack of a standardized definition of what an internship entails⁷ is further complicated by the fact that it is not always clearly distinguished from other work-integrated learning opportunities such as co-operative education, apprenticeships, placements and practica” (10).⁸ As a salient case in point, in my faculty we offer students in different programs specialized forms of experiential learning. In addition to the MPI practicum placements described above, we also coordinate competitive paid co-ops for one program; short- and long-term, paid and unpaid internships for another program; and short-term, unpaid internships for yet another program. Faculty and staff involved in supervising and administering all of these programs have come together to discuss best practices. We realized that although diverse formats and descriptors have emerged over time to suit the needs of particular units, we all agree that placements/internships/co-ops must critically integrate theory and practice. Equally important, all parties involved must feel empowered by this form of pedagogy rather than exploited in any way, shape, or form. Ensuring this level of support and care is, however, more easily stated than implemented.

Consequently, in the discussion that follows, I first consider some of the empowering aspects of public interest placements, including potential benefits for students, faculty members and their home institutions, and host organizations. In the next section, I examine possible undesirable consequences for individuals and organizations participating in, hosting, or supervising the internships. Subsequently, I highlight issues particularly relevant to the field of communications and conclude with a critical examination of how activist faculty and universities are willing to be in their commitment to public interest pedagogy.

⁶ McMaster University offers a community-based internship program called CORE (Community Organizations Reaching Everyone) for all humanity students.

⁷ Even within the wider Western University community, internships are defined in very broad terms: they “can be short-term or long-term, for academic credit or for a non-credit course. Some internships are mandatory and some are optional. [...] Opportunities for internship work can be local, national, or international.” (Western 2014a).

⁸ For a recent overview of unpaid internships in Ontario written for the Canadian Intern Association, see Atfield and Couture (2014).

2. Potential Benefits of Public Interest Internships

2.1. Students' Intellectual Labour, Personal Growth, and Job Market Prospects

In our MPI program, students are required to complete mid-term and final papers for their fourth-year public interest placements that critically draw upon readings and theoretical concepts from across the curriculum. Students also attend regular seminar sessions facilitated by a faculty member to reflect upon internship experiences openly with their peers. The objective of these course requirements is to support students intellectually and emotionally as they consider how and in what ways their intellectual labour informs their public interest placements and vice versa. In other words, by critically combining theory and practice—knowing and doing—students are encouraged to incorporate “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire 1970, 36). In our interview, one former student referred to her public interest internship as “putting the theory I’ve learned into practice.” Another stated that her two internships “gave context and meaning to the theory and course material I had learned in my BA, and dramatically shaped my graduate work.” A third commented that “being able to talk to other students in my program doing similar kinds of NGO internships [...] that really helped me understand better my experience at [unnamed organization] and what I was trying to achieve.” These selected interview excerpts illustrate some of the benefits of praxis-oriented, public interest pedagogy if we accept, as I do, that “[t]heory informs practice, while experiential and practical knowledge can be employed as a means to understanding and interpreting theory” (Breunig 2005, 109; Boyd and Sandell 2013; Banerjee and Hausafus 2007).

Internships can also provide students with, what one faculty member referred to as, a set of oars “to help steer their own ‘life journey’ boat,” an analogy he preferred over the seemingly more aggressive action of trying to get a ‘foot in the door’ of a specific sector of the economy. In a similar vein, a staff member believed quite strongly that although students think they should complete a public interest internship for professional reasons, almost all of them want to do it for less utilitarian reasons: “At a fairly young age these students get to tap into their desire to make a difference [...] an experience that most people don’t get until much later in life.”

As a pragmatic corollary to their intellectual and personal development, students often acquire useful skills during their placements—e.g., how to compose a press release or construct a political lobbying campaign. They also receive course credit and an institution-sanctioned internship to add to their résumé, as evidence of hands-on experience is increasingly of value to distinguish job applicants in a competitive employment market (Boyd and Sandell 2012; King 2004). Lastly, students can benefit from networking opportunities, insight into a ‘real world’ workplace environment, and the chance to learn what a faculty member described as “the vernacular of the industry you’re working in [...] understanding the culture and the language that you can only ‘pick up’ in situ.” While the potential job market benefits of internships should incontrovertibly be of secondary importance to overarching academic/intellectual objectives, it is clear that many students want this kind of on the ground experience for a range of tangible and intangible reasons.⁹

2.2. Faculty Benefits

⁹ One concern, however, is that we simply do not have hard figures regarding employment outcomes stemming from internships in the Canadian context to justify claims that internships directly lead to jobs upon graduation (Attfield and Couture 2014; Rigsby et al. 2013). Through continued personal contact, I know that a majority of our former MPI students either received contracts or job offers after the conclusion of their placement, or they enrolled in a graduate program, often in areas outside of communications/media studies (law, public policy, global studies). In writing this article, however, it became clear that we need to conduct a more comprehensive longitudinal study of the relationship between internships and students’ pursuits after they graduate.

In addition to the positive press coverage universities can derive from community engagement activities, individual faculty members can also benefit both personally and professionally from helping to coordinate and supervise internships geared towards the public good. As Flood, Martin and Dreher (2013) contend, even though faculty must devote significant time and energy to facilitating this type of experiential learning (as discussed below), they can also find “meaning and comfort in the sense that their work contributes to the greater good [...] Their personal and political investments in ‘making a difference’ can give impetus to their professional work, motivating both intensified research and public engagement” (18; see also Darby and Newman 2014; O’Meara and Neihaus 2009). As a potential added benefit, public accolades and/or positive performance evaluations may also encourage some individuals to continue their commitment to such labour-intensive critical pedagogy that usually goes above and beyond the expected workload of a faculty member.

2.3 Community Partner Benefits

As governments move farther and farther away from their welfare state responsibilities, public interest organizations are saddled with expanding workloads, trying to make ends meet in the face of diminishing financial support from the state and dwindling individual and corporate donations. For many local and international NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs striving to fulfil their mandates, additional labour in the form of a student intern can help support mission objectives and strengthen the economic bottom line. As a former student commented, for “non-profit, public interest-oriented organizations [...] the existence of these sorts of programs [for-credit internships] can be a tremendous help... With human resource limitations, having a skilled volunteer/intern join the organization, even for a short while, can have a big impact.” Host organizations may also benefit from the vigour and excitement many students bring with them into the placement. As a CBO representative remarked in our interview, “The students keep me young. They help me remember why I got into this kind of work in the first place [...] because it really does matter.”

Notwithstanding the range of benefits potentially accruing to internship stakeholders within and beyond the university described above, there are myriad challenges associated with coordinating, hosting, and participating in public interest placements. In the following section, I consider some of these struggles, beginning with the emotional and financial costs of this form of experiential learning.

3. Balancing Meaningful Placements with Labour, Time, and Finance Expenditures

3.1. Emotional Labour Peaks and Valleys: Guiding Self-reflective Students

Given the amount of time required for students to acclimatize to their new working environment (whether in the office or in the community), to contribute meaningfully to an organization, and to engage in theoretically driven action and reflection, internships should include a minimum number of on the ground “contact” hours. As argued by a former student, short timeframes can be “a limiting factor” not only in terms of a student’s knowledge and skills development, but also in what roles s/he can play beyond “helicopter voluntourism.” Entreaties for longer internship periods are particularly compelling for emotionally fraught placements during which students bear witness to human, animal, and/or environmental injustice and require additional time and support for a productive experience. While many students anticipate an emotionally charged experience, their internship may be one of the first times they have faced up-close acutely disturbing forms of socio-economic inequity and marginalization. Certainly, many students have faced discrimination during their lives and struggled financially to complete their education, making them more attuned to the multitude of difficulties associated with minority positions and poverty. Nevertheless, universities remain spaces of privi-

lege (Hall 2007, 10), which necessitates students engaging in the difficult but important process of interrogating “their own subjectivities and preconceptions of ‘others’” (Smeltzer and Grzyb 2009, 5). Even though I encourage students to believe that they have agency and can make a positive difference in the world, I do not want them to be unrealistic about the political and economic frameworks that control their daily lives. Participating in a public interest internship can, depending on the placement, bring this difficult balancing act to life in a way that is quite unsettling for some students. Another former student, for instance, commented that while her local and international internships made her realize that she has “responsibilities in this world,” the extent of the problems both at home and abroad made her feel “almost paralyzed by it all.”

An intellectually and emotionally challenging experience can also expose students to the difficulties many organizations face in trying to fulfil their public interest mandates. While students are keen to carry out their internships with a range of organizations—from small-scale, municipal, or community-level organizations to large, relatively well-funded organizations with extensive staff complements—they often do not have a sense of what the working conditions will actually be like until they are in their placements or how much agency they might have to make a difference while there or after graduation. Students often articulate how much respect they have for the dedication and commitment to a movement, cause, or community they encounter during their internships. However, they are also sometimes disillusioned with how NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs operate, and express surprise that they can be hierarchical, political places that struggle financially without always achieving their hoped-for objectives. As an NGO representative stated quite honestly, students “have to learn that they shouldn’t put all of us—this sector—on a pedestal, in the same way that we shouldn’t treat all private companies as inherently immoral.” For all of the reasons outlined above, a level of personal and emotional support is necessary to ensure that students are not only productive in their placement, but are also guided through the action/reflection process without feeling paralyzed in the aftermath.

3.2. The ‘Cost’ of Internships

As a counterbalance to arguments advancing lengthy internship placements, three important factors need to be taken into consideration. First, the case has been made that internships should be kept both “short and non-extendable” to limit their “substitution and displacement effects since it would be more difficult for employers to use interns as cheap substitutes for regular employees” (Standing 2014, 164; see also Perlin 2011). Second, there are constraints inherent to a semestered university system and its degree requirements, including potential limits placed on allowable out-of-class credits, which would also serve to keep the internship timeframe more compressed. Third, it is simply not financially feasible for the majority of students to participate in an extended unpaid internship during the summer/intersession months or to take a semester away from school to participate in a full-time placement (see, for example, Benham Rennick and Desjardins 2013, 5; MacDonald 2013; Standing 2011, 2014). Students wanting to participate in an international internship must also cover additional expenses, including the cost of flights, visas, and accommodations. One former student, who described her experiences abroad as personally and professionally invaluable, captures well the dilemma:

My internships/placements were fairly well supported [...] But I still took a hit in terms of the lack of any savings for a 14 month period—which had a big impact on my being able to support myself during graduate school—resulting in more student loans... However, if they had been entirely unpaid, there would have been absolutely no possibility for me to participate, given my (and my family’s) financial situation, and the maximum student loans I had already incurred.

Interviewees conveyed deep ambivalence about the common response to this domestic and international problem: interns should be paid. While some organizations possess the finan-

cial and personnel resources to manage, support, and pay interns, others (especially smaller and community-based ones) do not have the funds to provide students with a wage. Arguably, the intellectual, academic, personal, and professional benefits hopefully accruing to students offset some expectation of financial remuneration. As a former student commented, echoing some of the benefits describe above:

It never occurred to me that I would get paid [...] my internship was the best learning experience because it actually incorporated my theory from class in a real way. I saw how power works and how hard it is to get media coverage for important issues. And, the people I got to know [...] they weren't examples or stories anymore. They were real people facing real systemic prejudices. I suppose I already knew that, but being at [unnamed organization] brought it all to life.

This situation is, however, thorny. Canadian Intern Association¹⁰ president, Claire Seaborn, explains: "I think in some instances the credit is enough because of its educational value, but in other instances the position is sort of hiding behind the credit when it should be paid work" (qtd. in MacDonald 2013). When a public interest placement falls into Seaborn's latter category, we have at least two problems. First, even when students receive academic credit for completing an internship geared towards the public good, concerns have been raised that they are still paying a post-secondary institution for the privilege of working in the community for free (Neff 2011). Second, we should censure internships that contribute to the 'non-profit industrial complex' (Smith 2007) by offering what Standing calls "cheap, disposable labour" (2014, 162) that, as noted, serves to replace already hard-to-come-by employment in this sector.¹¹ As a former student commented, "new graduates who are pursuing careers in the public interest sector find themselves stuck in a perpetual cycle of internships. Unpaid internships could potentially displace the kind of paid, entry-level positions that are appropriate for new graduates, especially those who have just completed an undergraduate degree." The difficulty then lies in trying to strike a balance between ensuring that an intern learns, grows, and contributes to an organization in meaningful ways without replacing the job of an existing or would-be employee.

Additionally, the more prestigious the internship and the organization, the more competitive the placements can be even when they are social justice-oriented and coordinated through a university program. Several years ago, I placed a very strong student with a well-respected NGO that did not regularly accept interns. Promising that the student was a self-starter with excellent writing and research skills, I was thrilled when the NGO agreed to host her for a semester. In retrospect, I can now see how, given the student's knowledge of the work required to secure this unique internship combined with her personal commitment to the organization's cause, the pressure to perform could have impelled her to devote more than the requisite number of course credit hours to the placement, especially if she hoped to receive a letter of reference from her NGO supervisor. In this particular example, the workplace environment was supportive and respectful of our program's parameters and, in the end, the internship proved to be a positive experience for both parties. However, it raises another serious issue discussed by Beth A. Uzwiak (2013) in her hard-hitting critique of a US-based women's human rights NGO. Notwithstanding the very real economic challenges many NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs face, Uzwiak cautions against assuming that public interest organizations always prioritize the interests of their interns, volunteers, and employees. In her case study she describes how working conditions at the NGO were "glossed as ideological: those who truly care about women's human rights will 'volunteer' based on a commitment to the mission and goals of the agency" (2013, 127). This mind-set, she contends, serves to obfus-

¹⁰ Founded in 2012, the association is a non-profit organization, which "advocates against the exploitation of interns and aims to improve the internship experience for both interns and employers" (Canadian Intern Association 2014b).

¹¹ For a useful discussion of some of the gender-related labour issues associated with internships in the communications/media sector, see Shade (2014).

cate very real labour concerns, including unreasonable overtime hours and workload expectations, and even a hostile and heavily hierarchical working environment. In one of my interviews a university staff member made comments that reflect Uzwiak's misgivings, stating that students often want to "put in more hours than they're supposed to" during their placements because they see their work as "supporting good causes." This is just as serious of a concern as students committing too many hours at a private sector internship. If a student genuinely wants to spend time above and beyond his or her internship in a volunteer position with an organization, I do not think it is in the purview of the university to stop him or her from doing so; however, this is not a practice we should encourage or we are rightfully subject to the same criticism levied at other types of internships (Sagan 2013). To mitigate such a possibility, faculty and/or staff must be in regular and open contact with the student and organization to ensure that the internship is proceeding as agreed upon at the outset and that both parties are fulfilling their obligations. It is to these types of labour demands that the discussion now turns.

3.3. The Labour of Departments, Faculties, and the University

Staff, faculty, and administrators interviewed for this research all commented that offering internships is strategically advantageous for recruitment to their respective programs, as potential students (and often their parents) are, more than ever, explicitly looking for experiential learning opportunities. However, the kind of public interest internships described in this article are possible if, and only if, the time and energy are earmarked by departments, faculties, and universities to ensure the process is properly supported. In addition to its moral responsibility, the university also has a fiscal obligation to contribute to the internship experience in a way that justifies the tuition it exacts from students.

From the outset, a significant amount of work goes into matching students with the right organization. Knowing what local NPO or international NGO might be appropriate for a placement, including its supervisory/managerial capacities, and then building a relationship with representative(s) from that organization, requires a genuine commitment to this form of critical pedagogy. Previous knowledge of the student, including his/her interests, strengths, weaknesses, and short- and long-term goals, is similarly beneficial to ensuring a meaningful placement for both parties. In an ideal scenario, students then undertake relevant theoretical training prior to and during their placements, attend regular meetings with an academic supervisor and peers involved in similar internships, and participate in thorough debriefing sessions post-placement.

Given the range of work involved in mounting and implementing these internships, who then in the university should administer and supervise such resource-intensive experiential learning? I contend that a central role must be played by individuals who can draw on relevant theory and help students to thoughtfully consider their own subjectivities vis-à-vis their placements in order to facilitate the action/reflection at the heart of this form of pedagogy (Molee et al. 2010). The labour required to meet these objectives includes, but is not limited to, developing a syllabus, facilitating in-class discussions, and administering and evaluating assignments, all of which should be in the hands of a faculty member. Yet, most departments and faculties are facing deepening cutbacks and are stretched to the limit trying to cover undergraduate and graduate teaching assignments. Moreover, the pressure to publish or perish outweighs the time faculty members can devote to "outreach, engagement, and community service", which do not figure prominently in an academic's performance evaluation (Ward 2005, 219; Chertkovskaya et al. 2013; Few et al. 2007; Hearn and Hanke 2012; hooks 1994). Although qualified staff personnel can play an important role in administering aspects of public interest internships, they too, as a university administrator stressed in our interview, "are already overworked." In the case of our MPI program, I strongly believe that the placements we offer are possible only because we have limited enrollment in the program to 20 students

per year. There is, however, always the fear that higher administration will want more ‘bums in seats’ to justify our faculty expenditure.¹²

The labour required to coordinate international placements is particularly daunting. For many students, the chance to live and work abroad with an organization dedicated to the public good can be transformative. The experience affords students “a broader perspective of local and global practice, and potentially new forms of knowledge in social justice, equity, and rights perspectives, along with practical and ethical challenges that demand our attention” (Drolet 2013, 186). However, as Desjardins (2013) quips, it takes “a whole university to raise an international program” (225) and, unfortunately, “in many cases a great deal of catch-up work needs to happen on the ground for that cart to follow the overworked Clydesdale” (219). In addition to the logistical labour associated with international internships, university programs must also dedicate the pedagogical resources necessary for students to understand and interrogate complex international power relations and cultural imperialism, especially when the internship takes place in the Global South (MacDonald 2013; Tiessen and Huish 2014; Wehbi 2009).

3.4. The Central Role of Community Partners

Clearly, substantial work occurs on the university’s end to coordinate and implement local and international internships. As a result of this commitment, the president of Western University describes service learning as “a win-win for everyone involved—students get the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they learn in the classroom to real-world challenges, while community partners enjoy the tangible benefits of the services our students provide” (Chakma 2013). This more traditional approach does not, however, recognize the considerable time, energy, and resources community partners also dedicate to the process in a variety of capacities. First, they play an important managerial role in ensuring the productive integration of students into the workplace environment and determining projects achievable within a specified time period in line with an intern’s capabilities. As a local CBO representative acknowledged, this managerial role can be difficult as she sometimes struggles to “identify meaningful projects to dovetail with the students’ schedule and varying nature of their other commitments.” She also pointed to the “lack of supervisory time” and a “lack of space/resources” as key challenges, especially given her organization’s size, financial constraints, and the very sensitive nature of its work. Second, as Rowe, Mackaway and Winchester-Seeto (2012) describe, host organizations offer support in the form of “nurturing the personal and professional development of students” (118). This kind of care is especially important in cases where, as noted, students encounter first-hand unjust socio-economic inequities. Third, organizations play a vital educational role in providing “access to ‘real life’ learning opportunities...or helping students construct knowledge through talking and reflecting on practice...or actually providing training for specific workplace skills” (Rowe, Mackaway and Winchester-Seeto 2012, 118).

To meet the demands of these obligations, organizations must not only have the time and energy, but also the skills necessary to supervise, nurture, and educate young people. In a related vein, I admit to feeling trepidation placing certain students with specific organizations. Naturally, some students are more scholastically capable, have more ‘practical’ skills, and/or are more capable of working independently than other students, which means that careful and diplomatic maneuvering is sometimes needed to get the match right. In a select number of instances and for a range of reasons, I have not in fact succeeded in my matchmaking and the experience was less constructive and rewarding than I think both parties had hoped. As a case in point, I arranged a semester-long placement for a fourth-year student with a local organization s/he requested, hoping that the placement would be mutually beneficial. Over the

¹² Our much larger MIT undergraduate internship program requires a full-time staff member to coordinate logistics, and the equivalent of a half-course teaching load for a faculty member (over the course of a 12 month period) to supervise and mark the academic papers students write that connect their hands-on experience with the program’s theoretical content.

course of the internship, which included various research, writing, and event planning assignments, I saw first-hand that the student learned valuable lessons about media relations, non-profit labour in the 'real world,' and how to act in a professional manner in a workplace environment. However, I could also see that s/he required a fair amount of guidance by the host supervisor who became increasingly frustrated throughout the semester, especially given that the organization was already understaffed. From the student's perspective though, the host supervisor was too 'hands-off' during the internship and s/he was discouraged by what s/he considered to be a lack of direction and feedback. As the supervising faculty member, I could not determine exactly how or where things fell apart but could see that, despite the best efforts and intentions of the organization, it did not perhaps have the capacity to effectively mentor this young adult who, in turn, perhaps required more support than the majority of his/her peers. This example not only illustrates the labour-intensive responsibilities of community partners, but it also speaks to an issue of particular relevance to the field of communications: the gap between what participants expect out of internships and what *actually* happens on the ground during placements (see Frenette 2013, 367–368).

4. Communications for the Public Good

In this section, I examine some of the unique challenges associated with coordinating, hosting, and participating in communications-oriented internships with local and international NGOs, NPOs, and CBOs. I begin with what interviewees pointed to as a disconnect they often see between what students study in their critical communications programs and what skills community partners expect students from these programs to possess. Understandably, organizations anticipate that communication interns will bring to the table hands-on public relations or marketing skills, or are able to build websites and/or manage social media campaigns. While many students do in fact possess such expertise, which they develop themselves or learn as part of their educational training, most university communications programs are founded on interdisciplinary, critical approaches to analyzing social theory, the aesthetic dimensions of communications, and the socio-cultural, political, and economic forces at play in the intersection of media and power. The overarching objective of these programs then is to provide students with a critical education, not to impart practical skills for the job market. As a result, "it's harder to quantify what we 'do' in a comms program," a former student said, "so the onus is on us to prove ourselves to organizations in a way that's more tangible." An NGO representative concurred, explaining that from her perspective communications programs are predominantly theory-heavy, whereas "communications as a job title is often about practical, skills-based, day-to-day work tasks. The two don't always match up but the organization has an important role to play in making sure that the internship isn't just technical, but connects back to what the student is learning in school in a meaningful way."

As a corollary, organizations often expect that if interns are young communication students they instinctively bring social media expertise to their placement. A former student argued quite passionately that this expectation is highly problematic because the non-profit sector must, in like manner to the private sector, invest in and take more seriously their communication strategies instead of relying on temporary, young interns to manage their social media. There is, she maintained, "a massive difference between using Twitter as a technical tool and building a communications campaign that is content-driven. If an NGO relies on interns to bring the organization up to a certain level, they're [the student] not learning anything because they're coming in as the supposed expert." The NGO representative quoted directly above agreed—even if students come into an internship with social media experience and know-how, it is essential that they receive what she called "real learning value added" that builds on their existing knowledge base.

Communication placements with international organizations can complicate the situation even further. As a salient example, I have coordinated and supervised undergraduate student internships with two well-respected communication rights NGOs in Malaysia and Thailand. The internships have, I believe, been a life-changing experience for participating students as they live and work in a socio-political, economic, and media environment very dif-

ferent from their own.¹³ In these countries, freedom of expression is significantly more limited and constrained than at home in Canada, and the political landscape can shift dramatically in a very short timeframe. When journalists are imprisoned for reporting the news or bloggers are charged with sedition for criticizing a political figure, safety considerations take precedence over all else and emotional support for interns is vital. Of course, not all international communications internships are as politically sensitive or activist-oriented as these placements. Nevertheless, understanding and respecting the local landscape is absolutely essential in every instance, as is a solid working relationship between the university and local representatives. Again, this work requires a serious commitment of time and energy by all involved in the process. If the requisite resources are not made available, then this type of experiential learning simply cannot be offered even if it is meant to advance the public good at home and/or abroad.

5. Activism and the Public Good

The word ‘activism’ is seldom used in discussions about internships or in service learning literature more broadly as attention is focused more on sanctioned, non-disruptive forms of community engagement. There is, however, a growing subset of material addressing just how far critical service learning can go in its “explicit aim toward social justice” (Mitchell 2008, 50; Bickford and Reynolds 2002; Bruce and Brown 2010; Johnston 2011; Mitchell 2007; Vogelgesang and Rhoads 2003). When asked whether limits should be placed on how activist an internship could be, interviewees overwhelmingly responded that although they would be concerned with activities that might jeopardize a student’s personal safety and/or legal security, all thought that students should be allowed to undertake internships that directly challenge structures of control and the status quo both on and off campus. A student may, for example, request a communications-oriented internship with a movement aimed at freezing or abolishing university tuition. Another student may ask to intern with the Occupy movement, an international campaign contesting socio-economic inequalities, or Idle No More, a grassroots Canadian-based movement in support of indigenous rights. In these examples students would work with social change advocates to contest the institutionalization of community engagement that is, as noted, the hallmark of most experiential learning programs in higher education. As a result, their labour would likely be framed by university administrators as the kinds of “disruptions” that “rarely are seen as raising important political and ideological concerns, but instead are viewed as potential threats to the generation of revenue” (Vogelgesang and Rhoads 2003). While university administrations have moved towards “breaking down the ‘ivory tower’ and connecting academia to the ‘community’” (Dyer-Witthof 2007, 58), they do not want to do this at the expense of jeopardizing their institution’s brand or its relationship with sponsors or alumni benefactors. While neither I nor any of my interviewees have come into direct conflict with an administrative body over a specific internship, all interviewees said that they fully expected that their respective institutions would dissuade or even prevent a placement that in some manner directly challenged the university’s political and economic status quo. As a faculty member lamented in reference to his home institution, “I am pretty certain that the admin would do just about anything to protect the university’s image.”

The extent to which an administration would discourage or suppress activist-oriented internships depends in large part, of course, on context. While I enjoy a considerable amount of pedagogical freedom in my position, colleagues in other locales at home and abroad do not have the same flexibility, often facing “reprisals, both externally from political opponents and internally from those within the university who perceive their involvement as nonconformist” (Flood, Martin and Dreher 2013, 18).¹⁴ Moreover, it can be significantly more difficult for

¹³ See Tiessen and Huish (2014) for an insightful edited collection addressing a range of issues related to international experiential learning.

¹⁴ See also the impressive work of the Scholars at Risk Network, which promotes academic freedom worldwide: <http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/>.

some individuals—e.g., precarious teaching and research labour without the (relative) security of tenure, or staff members more beholden to university management—to advance internships that run counter to an administration's trajectory for its service learning.

Recognizing that "social activism is not necessarily a more 'mature' form of service" (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 240), my aim here is not to privilege activist internships over other forms of communications-related placements that engage with the community. Moreover, it is difficult to make clear delineations between various labels used to describe, for example, 'activist,' 'public interest,' 'community-based,' or 'critical service learning' placements. One interviewee outside of my home faculty eschewed use of the word 'activist' because of its rather radical overtones and instead preferred 'advocacy' to describe the kinds of experiential learning he has helped to coordinate. It seems then that there is a broad spectrum at play, as internships aimed at the public good range from the politically benign (e.g., Big Sisters), to more advocacy-oriented (e.g., Unity Project for the Relief of Homelessness), to overtly activist (e.g., Idle No More). For many students and faculty there is value in trying to reclaim the latter two categories of internships, especially "the activist potential of service-learning, which the process of institutionalization obscures" (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 230). While it may not be easy, part of this process necessitates a willingness to question how and in what ways many of our well-intentioned public interest internships might actually help maintain structures of inequity. Instead of undertaking incremental actions to address systemic problems, what may be needed is to provide students with the opportunity to interrogate how and why conditions of inequity exist *in the first place* and what they can do to about it. Indeed, as Mitchell (2007) maintains, "[h]elping students understand the consequences of service—particularly the way that service can perpetuate need by placing 'Band-Aids' on community problems—is an important aspect of critical service-learning" (103). Students should, for example, be allowed to direct their energies towards advancing a stronger role for the state in protecting the interests of citizens over consumers (e.g., through placements with Occupy or Idle No More). In so doing, they play an active role in seeking "to change the social climate and structures that make volunteerism necessary" (Bickford and Reynolds 2002, 238; Boyd and Sandell 2012; Vogelgesang and Rhoads 2003).

If we agree that education "has the potential to generate citizens/professionals who work for social justice rather than reproducing conformity to the status quo" (Johnston 2011, 177), then institutions should be willing to facilitate pedagogy that encourages students to think critically about the role of internships within a wider socio-political, economic, and historical context *and* which allows them, if they want, to participate in placements that seek to change the social climate both within and beyond the 'ivory tower.' As part and parcel of this approach, students should be permitted to participate in internships that do not fit a standard organizational structure (e.g., placements with an international movement or local protest). This is, however, no easy task. To ensure appropriate educational standards three factors need to be taken into consideration. First, the home department/faculty must have well-reasoned selection criteria to vet credible placements. Second, in like manner to any other type of internship, students need to be matched with an appropriate host supervisor capable of fulfilling the managerial, supportive, and educational roles described above. Third, evaluation mechanisms must be in place to allow for the fair adjudication of an intern's work.

In the case of something like Occupy or Idle No More, it would likely be difficult to identify a suitable supervisor, one capable of not only hosting but also appropriately assessing a student's work. In the past, I have placed a handful of students with rather non-contentious politically oriented groups and networks. I have also placed two students with what I would consider to be more activist-oriented movements that seek a radical shift in the political landscape. In all of these cases, the only reason the placement was acceptable is because, as the supervising faculty member, I was well-acquainted with an individual in the network/group/movement whom I trusted could fulfil the above criteria and would help ensure

that the student did not engage in hazardous activities during the placement.¹⁵ This form of experiential learning clearly needs to be arranged on a case-by-case basis and is contingent upon myriad ambiguous factors that are out of the students' control, including the faculty member's personal and professional contacts. In one case, I believe the placement was not very successful primarily because the student did not seem to take it as seriously as s/he might have if s/he was expected to be present in an office with set 'work' hours along with other employees and/or volunteers. Although this individual was given clear instructions from, and attended regular meetings with, the host supervisor, I should have recognized that s/he needed more structure to the placement.

As part of this discussion, communication programs must also consider how they would respond to a student's request for an internship placement with a network, group, movement, or organization whose work, cause, and/or perspective runs counter to personal and collective beliefs about what is in the 'public good'. A faculty interviewee insisted that we cannot make the 'public good' or 'activist' "shorthand for 'leftist'," arguing that there is an important line between not trying to reproduce students in our own political likeness and steering them away from regressive politics. My own conception of what constitutes the public good, for instance, may be very different from that of one my students or colleagues, but where can the line be drawn and who should be responsible for the decision? Amber Dean (2008) offers readers a particularly honest look into her own struggles with how she would approach a student requesting to engage in a form of experiential learning that she personally considers politically problematic (e.g., a pro-life organization). For Dean, and I agree, context matters and each situation should be approached on its own merit. Instead of deciding in advance that certain internships are acceptable and others are not, we should be clear about our parameters, our reasons for incorporating public interest internships into our academic programs, and our overarching objectives. Next, we must have procedures in place based on these objectives allowing us to determine what placements are in the 'public good,' acknowledging that neither answers nor consensus may come easily.

In the end, I draw attention to the pressing need for all stakeholders—students, community representatives, university faculty, staff, and administrators—to openly discuss and reflect upon what they expect out of internships billed as being of benefit not only for students, but also for organizations and society writ large. This is particularly important for the field of communications as the number of university programs swells and the calls from students for relevant 'real life' experience continue to grow louder. Instead of playing catch-up to the internship wave in an ad hoc manner, communication departments and faculties need to be clear about their intentions and provide the necessary resources to meet them.

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¹⁵ In addition to other required paperwork, students must sign an 'acknowledgement and assumption of risk' form prior to their placement. International internships include supplementary orientation sessions with the academic supervisor and students must sign health insurance forms.

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