Impact of Service Internships on Student Perceptions of Campus Role

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SOCIOL 104

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Affirmation to Honor Code

“I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.”

Signed,

Jessica Jin

**Abstract**

On-campus internships at Harvard provide the unique opportunity for students to work within an office of the university and contribute to the programming and workshops at the university available to students regarding such topics as diversity, inclusion, gender, and more. In this study I seek to understand the ways that these internships affect the student interns themselves; namely, how these on-campus internships affect students’ perception of their role and of their agency to create change on campus. Through interviews with interns at the Harvard College Women’s Center, I find that students’ sense of agency, authority, and legitimacy are increased through their work at the Women’s Center, as well as through the connections that their role as ‘intern’ allows them to forge, whether with administrators or with other students. Overall, the internship role allows for students to perceive a greater sense of connectedness with the university and with other students as a whole.

**Intro**

Through my experience as a Harvard College Women’s Center intern, I have had an opportunity to gain insight into the section of campus that is related to on-campus internships and jobs that have the potential to shape and define student life and experiences on campus through event planning. Examples of institutions that also perform this role for students include the Harvard Foundation, which employs a certain number of interns each year, and the Harvard Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, which has recently begun the internship or “Diversity Peer Educator” program. Something in common that these organizations share is the ability for students themselves to define diversity and inclusivity programming on Harvard’s campus, therefore establishing a way for students themselves to be impacting the events and the discussions on campus.

I am interested in researching this community and the role it provides for student voices and student change on campus because I am a part of it, and also because I am interested in knowing whether or not these student platforms are perceived as effective by the students themselves, and how these positions at university offices affect students’ relationship to the school and their perceptions of their role and sense of belonging at this university. My research questions include, how can on-campus internships affect students’ perception of their role and of their agency on campus?

In this study on the perspective of Women’s Center interns, I seek to argue that on-campus service internships provide an opportunity for students to legitimize their role on campus through their ties to a university-recognized office, and that this legitimation allows for students to perceive greater connection to the college itself and to other students.

**Lit Review**

The first portion of the existing literature deals with community service and its impact on students and students’ sense of belonging. Fitch (1987) focuses on the motivations for college students in doing community service- this is a “pre-service” perspective. The perspective I hope to take is instead one situated in a “present-“ and “post-service” perspective, looking instead at how service, in this case an on-campus internship with a women’s center, impacts the student’s motivations. Beck (1998) discusses service and community involvement as an example of “cooperative learning,” which is seen as strengthening role and belonging through a variety of ways, including enhancing teamwork. This description of a cooperative community could similarly be applied to the community of the Women’s Center. The impact of community service learning is extended in Holsapple (2012), where the effect of service learning on understanding diversity is explored. Further, Soria (2012) looks specifically at the effects of community service on sense of belonging in college students, an angle which is most relevant to my own interests with the women’s center. Soria also notes the benefits, both academic and beyond, of service work, including better relationships with faculty, better peer relationships, and increased understanding of social issues. Additionally, the piece examines the specific role in marginalized students that belonging plays in the form of “connectedness.”

The second portion of the literature deals with student involvement and social change and student agency. Berger (1999) looks at the impact of student involvement on student outcomes- namely student persistence in college. Berger notes that students who are most likely to persist have norms and behavior that are cohesive with established patterns that are existent on campus. I would be interested to see how this can interact with studying student roles on campus. In terms of student role, Klemencic (2015) examines students’ agency and their role and impacting university quality; students themselves possess the ability to influence the campus. Soria (2013) similarly examines this question of student involvement in campus change- particularly in the realm of social change. Soria notes that students, through leadership involvement in different organizations, can develop social networks with other students and be more invested in campus life (2013).

Having looked into these areas of literature, I seek to break up the understanding of the concept of the “campus role” in the context of my project into three key domains: agency, authority, and legitimacy.

*Agency* involves: What does the student feel about their power on campus and the room they have to affect change on campus and off campus? How to students perceive their confidence level in interactions with other students or student organizations? How does their job fit into this perception?

*Authority* involves: How does the student feel about their status on campus? For example, how comfortable are they with adult figures or professional authority figures like professors & administrators, and has that changed in comparison between the period before and after their working at the women’s center? What is their sense of their position in relation to other students who are not interns?

*Legitimacy* involves: How does the student feel in regards to the College’s perception of their work on campus? Does the student feel like their contributions to change are supported by the university?

**Researcher Positionality**

It is important to discuss my positionality as a researcher in this instance because I am an intern at the Women’s Center as well, and have a personal connection to the center and the people whom I will be interviewing. In this case, it is necessary for me to ensure that I am working towards receiving non-biased responses from the interviewees. I intend to accomplish this and reduce bias by making sure that the questions I ask in interviews are not formulated as leading questions, or not phrased in such a way that the desired answer might be readily apparent. Inserting less of the intention of the question into the question itself is important- making questions somewhat open-ended so that responders can answer in a way that is most natural for them, and then leaving room and being prepared to ask follow-up questions based upon their individual specific responses. In addition, when recruiting the interns to participate in interviews, I may describe the intention of my research in terms that might not belie my personal intended results or predicted hypotheses- for example, presenting it as a study of the “impact of the Women’s Center on its interns” rather than presenting more detail and describing it as a study of “how the Women’s Center affects student perceptions of their role on campus,” and instead using the interview questions themselves to try to bring out information that will answer this research question.

**Methods**

*Confidentiality*

Pseudonyms are used in the paper and data to protect confidentiality, and participants receive information forms (Appendix B).

I interviewed 8 of the 12 interns of the Harvard College Women’s Center for approximately 30 minutes each. Interviews were recorded for analysis. The interview protocol is available in Appendix [A].

*Data Analysis*

The interviews were coded for analysis through a few major patterns as follows. “Equivocation” indicated the respondent’s consideration of student impact on campus as both effective and not effective. “Connection” indicated the respondent’s note on a sense of the women’s center connecting them to another group in some way, whether the the College itself or the student body. “Official” indicated the respondent’s mention of the Women’s Center’s position as a recognized office of the university as having a significant meaning or effect. These patterns and codes were helpful in analyzing the findings and understanding the role of the students in relation to the Women’s Center and their positions on campus.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations to the study is the difficulty of being able to tell whether it is the internship itself that impacts students’ perceptions of changes in interactions with the campus or administrators, or whether it is a function of other factors such as being at the College longer. The interns themselves voice this difficulty when deciding on how to respond to certain questions. Regarding whether the Women’s Center had changed her views on what students can change on campus, Lillien responded, “I’m not sure—I want to say yes, because I see Women’s Center interns doing great things on campus and changing things—but I’m not sure I didn’t know that before working here.”

The generalizability of this study is also limited because of the scope of the project. It may well be that the findings produced can apply only to the interns at the Harvard College Women’s Center, and further research into other similar internship programs at the university would be necessary to generate insight into service internships at Harvard as a whole.

**Findings & Discussion**

*Student Impact at the Women’s Center*

Respondents strongly believe in the influential role that students have as interns in impacting the Women’s Center.

Towards the women’s center, interns perceive their own role as having a significant impact. Lane notes,

“We play a huge role— I think the women’s center would be really different without interns. The 3 adult administrators ultimately have the final say, but we are the pulse of the student body.”

Lillien says,

“I think the interns are what make up the space every single day.”

Both interns note this physical presence that students create in the center, which contributes to their role and impact in the center. Another intern, Tessa, echoes this sentiment that interns have a large role in the center:

“I think interns impact it a ton. A few years ago, interns had to create a senior project, which is not the case now. But back then, these senior interns created what is now the Gender 101 workshop. And interns also run hiring.”

In addition to the physical presence of students in the space that Lane mentions, Tessa brings up one of the key components of the women’s center programming, the Gender 101 education workshop, and notes that it was actually intern-created, bringing forward a concrete example of the lasting impact that interns have on the Women’s Center.

Through highlighting the contributions that interns make to the Center through their presence as students, as well as their ability to create physical programming, interns express that their role has a visible and tangible impact on the Women’s Center.

*Limitations to Student Agency on Campus*

In contrast to interns’ strong belief in the influence that student interns have on the Women’s Center, they have relatively less confidence in students’ ability to create change on campus as a whole.

Several respondents noted that students have a voice on campus, but that the ability to create change is limited by factors outside students’ control.

One of the factors interns noted as limiting student ability to create change on campus is the time it takes to enact this change, juxtaposed with the short span of four years that students have at college, after which they graduate and are no longer part of the undergraduate community.

Lillien noted this challenge:

“I think that students really define the culture on campus, and the social attitudes. But I think it takes a long, long, time to make lasting change on this administration—on this campus…I think it’s hard, because you’re only here for 4 years, and it’s hard to make change in 4 years. That’s kind of built into the system.”

Tessa similarly brings up the restrictions of time on student agency, emphasizing the particular challenge that graduating students presents for the durability of activist efforts on campus:

“Generally making change takes a long time, and a big thing that happens is that there are certain people in each year or in different communities who consider themselves to be activists or do activist work, but people graduate and leave the Harvard community, so we have a lot of the same concerns or demands over and over again.”

Tessa sees the time it takes for students to create change on campus as a cause of the ineffective and repetitive nature of student initiatives.

Sandi brings up the example of a recent UC Bill for implementing Gender 101 workshops institutionally to the freshmen class to illustrate the difficulty of enacting change on campus:

“Our voice is influential and our demands as students are what is supposed to sway administrators the most, um, but that’s not always the case, obviously. We’re learning this as education interns, as we’re trying to figure out how to implement gender 101’s to freshmen, and like create that institutional change. Initially, administrators have been like, that’s great! But now we’re seeing hesitance, now that we have actual plans in action…I feel like we have the power to bring up good ideas, but I feel like a lot of them die and fizzle out in the bureaucracy of this place. But at the same time, I think that a lot of things that we want to happen will happen but probably at a much slower pace than we would like.”

Sandi’s perspective is more hopeful, seeing progress and student change on campus as still possible, but both she and Lillien agree that the length of time that it takes to create change within the campus limits the capacity for change.

Here, the respondents’ weak belief in the ability of students to impact the campus directly contrasts with their strong belief in their own ability as students to impact the office and space of the Women’s Center. The Center, then, is a space where students see their own agency as a tangible and accessible quality, where they can create meaningful impact.

*Student ‘Bridges’*

Part of the impact that the Women’s Center has upon students who are involved in the internship program is how these students perceive their role as a student in relation to their role as an intern. Interns see their role as a connector between different groups and individuals on campus and the women’s center. Sandi describes this role as “each one of us, being a representative of the women’s center, connects other people to the space.” Interns see themselves as in a position to represent the Women’s Center as an office.

Lane notes that her role as an intern serves as a bridge of legitimacy between students and administrators:

“To some degree the Women’s Center helps bridge the gap between what is student-accessible and what is not student-accessible, like if I were talking to an administrator as a student and was not a women’s center intern, I guess I could sign up for their office hours, but I just wouldn’t have as much legitimacy. I probably wouldn’t even have the incentive to go talk to them in the first place.”

Tessa notes a similar increased access to the campus through her intern position, through the lens of the work that she does at the Center:

“Because of my involvement in the women’s center, I’ve been asked to speak at some events about gender. But also doing Gender 101s to different student groups and university offices, people see me doing that and ask me questions…people see me as a bridge, a connector, and it makes me feel more affirmed.”

Both Lane and Tessa see themselves in a “bridge” position as student interns at the Women’s Center. Whereas Tessa believes students and administrators see her as a “bridge” because of her visibility while giving Gender 101 workshops to different organizations as part of her intern role, Lane sees herself in the position of a “bridge” mainly because of her affiliation with an office with greater legitimacy to communicate with administrators.

This sense of legitimacy that Lane perceives is shared amongst the interns. Interns at the Women’s Center note that their role as an intern at a recognized office of the university gave them a greater sense of authority and led them to feel that they were contributing to part of a legitimate mode of change.

Maddy notes that her role as part of a recognized office of the university makes the feminist actions of the interns themselves, in a way, recognized by the university:

“We’re not just a student group, we’re an office of the university, so it means that anything we do reflects the views of the university…so we can do things and people aren’t just like ‘oh, stupid feminists, look at them!’”

Tessa contrasts the role of being an intern at a recognized office of the university with the disorganization of being a student within a campus student organization:

“Being an intern at an established university office, that is recognized by the university… it’s not just like we’re some student organization that’s disorganized… it’s a supported entity that does official kind of business.”

The legitimacy that being an intern at a university office provides allows interns to see themselves as in a distinct role separate from those of other students and student organizations on campus—a role that has stronger ties to administration and therefore a greater ability to impact change and dialogue on campus.

The bridge role that interns see themselves in also functions conversely: interns describe their role at the Women’s Center as making them feel more connected to the College itself. Sara notes,

“I definitely feel more involved in what’s going on on campus. I’m not a part of any large organizations on campus, so it makes me feel more connected to the college and the work of student life and that sort of thing.”

Connectedness with other students motivates interns to become more involved on campus. Whitney finds that the Women’s Center has created connections for her that have driven her to become more active in campus change:

“The Women’s Center is a place that has allowed me to connect with other students and see the motivation and drive they have to change their own social spaces or activities on campus, and have pushed me to do the same.”

While interns’ role as a bridge allows them to communicate between hard-to-reach administrators and the student body, it also allows them to become better connected themselves to the campus and to the work of other students, facilitating involvement. Their role at the Women’s Center, then, allows them to envision or understand their role on campus more, providing access points for their involvement, or actively facilitating their involvement on campus and with other students.

**Further Thoughts & Conclusion**

Ultimately, students’ view their position as interns at a recognized office like the Women’s Center as a legitimized role on campus that empowers them to create connections within the college itself and to other students and administration.

Student experiences that allow them to shape the landscape of the campus, such as an internship with the Women’s Center, have implications for higher education. Students experience the ability to visualize a project or event and help make that vision come true in concrete ways that directly impact the students around them. This shapes the ways that students see their positions on campus, and their work on campus both as a student and as a leader of change. Further research would entail understanding the student intern role within different areas of the university, and whether these different roles affect student perceptions significantly, or whether they reflect similar patterns as reported here. Through the opportunity to interact with other student organizations in a role where students themselves are shaping the programming on campus, on-campus service internships provide students with a means to influence the direction of the student experience at university.

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Appendix

**[A]**

**Interview Template**

Perspective on Women’s Center

* How many years have you worked at the Women’s Center?
* Why did you decide to join?
* What do you think is the purpose of the Women’s Center on campus?
* What do you do as an intern at the Women’s Center?
* What do you enjoy most about your job at the Women’s Center?
* What skills or benefits do you think you have gained from working at the Women’s Center?
* Do you think the Women’s Center has changed your role on campus?

Agency

* How much do you think interns impact the Women’s Center? In what ways?
* How much do you think students can impact or create change on campus? In what ways?
  + Would your answer to this question be different if you did not work at the Women’s Center?
* Has working at the Women’s Center changed your views on what students can change on campus?

Authority

* Do you feel comfortable talking to administrators in the Women’s Center? In what ways?
  + What about proposing ideas to Women’s Center administrators?
* Do you feel comfortable talking to administrators in other offices?
  + Would you feel comfortable proposing ideas to administrators in other offices?
* Do you feel comfortable talking to professors one on one?
  + Would your answer to this and the previous questions be different if you did not work at the Women’s Center?

Achievement

* Do you feel comfortable expressing ideas in the Women’s Center (ie at staff meeting, other meetings with interns)?
* Do you feel comfortable expressing different opinions from coworkers in the Women’s Center?
* Do you feel confident in the classroom? If yes/no, in what ways?
* Do you feel comfortable expressing different opinions from classmates in the classroom? In what ways?
* Do you feel comfortable expressing different opinions from classmates in the classroom?
* Do you feel comfortable expressing different opinions from professors in the classroom?
  + Would your answer to this and the previous questions be different if you did not work at the Women’s Center?

**[B]**

**SOCIOL 104 Higher Education: Institutions, Inequalities, and Controversies**

**Course Projects**

**Interview Information Sheet**

My name is Jessica Jin from Harvard University, and I am asking you to take part in my research study as part of the course SOCIOL 104: Higher Education.

I would like to interview you to learn more about the impact of the Women’s Center on student roles. The interview will last about 30-45 minutes.

* You can skip any questions that you do not want to answer or stop the interview at any time.
* I will keep the data I collect confidential, and will not share your personal information with anyone except my course instructor.

Being in this study is voluntary. Please tell me if you do not want to participate.

[*I would like to record this interview to enable me to focus on the questions and keep a record of your statement. I alone will transcribe the recording, keep it in password-protected computer under a code name and delete it after my paper is graded. Only my course instructor will have access to the transcript. Please tell me if you do not want to be recorded*]

Questions? Please contact the SOCIOL 104 course instructor Dr. Manja Klemencic at manjaklemencic@g.harvard.edu.