## Toward Enhanced Criminal Justice Employability: Linking Internships, Curriculum Content and Assessment

Mary Ann Eastep, Ph.D.
Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies
University of Central Florida
PO Box 161600, Orlando, FL 32816-1600
meastep@mail.ucf.edu

Ross Wolf, Ed.D.
Department of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies
University of Central Florida
PO Box 161600, Orlando, FL 32816-1600
rwolf@mail.ucf.edu

### ABSTRACT

Critical self-evaluation is essential for academic programs to be successful. This study addresses institutional efforts at the University of Central Florida (UCF) to involve criminal justice program alumni and internship community partners in curriculum assessment. This cooperative model was formulated to better understand how expectations and outcomes relate to program improvement with an eye toward ultimately increasing graduates' chances at success in employment. It utilizes focus group and survey methodology as means to ascertain curriculum concerns, expectations, and satisfaction. Both qualitative and quantitative measures are used.

**Key words:**

Criminal justice education, internship, program assessment

---

**Introduction**

Criminal Justice programs are not offered, nor do they function, in a vacuum. The important work of educating undergraduate students to assume positions in the tricky business of public policy implementation involves exposing both the students and the academic programs to the community. Service-learning, internships, advisory board participation, and community-based research projects are some ways criminal justice programs interface with community partners. Finckenauer (2005) traces the realities associated with the overlap of training and education in the criminal justice field, and how the evolution of the field has created new professions within the discipline. Furthermore, the discipline must adapt its curriculum to incorporate global and national priorities to retain quality.

In reviewing how criminal justice programs are assessed, Moriarty (2006) reported that data are gathered from grades in major course work (80%), surveys of students (79%), internship (75%), observation by faculty (72%), surveys of department alumni (69%), surveys of employers/internship supervisors (67%) and senior seminar or capstone courses (66%). Tontodonato (2006) focused on student satisfaction and the implications of student input on program assessment. Another link that has been assumed to be important to student success, and one that is critical for program assessment, is the internship experience.

This current study focuses on the assessment of the internship program within the criminal justice curriculum. Internships have long been accepted into criminal justice programs as a way to expose students to practical issues, develop work experience, apply classroom knowledge, acquire specialized skills, and become acquainted with potential employers (Ross & Elechi, 2002; Stone & McLaren, 1999). An academically rigorous internship may add legitimacy to the discipline, allow faculty to maintain professional contacts, provide host

agencies with temporary skilled labor, and supplement agency recruiting efforts (Stichman & Farkas, 2005; Stone & McLaren, 1999). Many students are attracted to the criminal justice major because of field placement programs including internships (Fabianic, 1987; Stichman & Farkas, 2005). Because of these positive attributes, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences has recommended an internship component in criminal justice programs (Stichman & Farkas, 2005; Southerland, Merlo, Robinson, Benekos, & Albanese, 2007). However, whether or not internships actually accomplish these goals, or have any academic merit, has been long deliberated within the academic discipline (Fabianic, 1987; Foster, Magers, & Mullikin, 2007; Sgroi, & Ryniker, 2002; Stone & McLaren, 1999).

Previous research on criminal justice internship programs has focused on several different factors, including student perspectives on internships (Ross & Elechi, 2002), the purpose and utilization of internships in criminal justice programs (Fabianic, 1987; Farmer, 1978; Stichman & Farcas, 2005), the benefits and detriments of internship programs (Assur, Goldberg, & Ross, 1999; Stone & McLaren, 1999), and the integration of the internship program into curriculum (Parilla & Smith-Cunnien, 1997).

This study focuses on the latter category, expanding our understanding of the expectations and resultant satisfaction levels that both alumni and potential employers have of a criminal justice program utilizing internships, and the roles both the internships and the community partners who sponsor them play with respect to the assessment process. A second question relates to the utility of internships in terms of helping students actually find employment in the field, either with the agency that has provided the internship placement, or with another agency. Assuming there is indeed some sound educational value to the internship experience, how does that translate into value added to the student's opportunity for employment?

**The Present Study**

This study was developed to review and assess the internship program at the University

of Central Florida as part of the larger program assessment effort.  The study began with the

creation of a focus group of professionals in the criminal justice field from both private and

public agencies.   This focus group answered questions related to curriculum and internship

programs, and then assisted in the development of a survey instrument that was sent out to two

groups, agency representatives that utilized interns from the university, and alumni of the

criminal justice program (whether or not they had served as interns in their academic program).

The current research explores the results of this focus group interaction and the survey findings,

challenging the assumption that completing an internship makes a student more employable.

This study also attempted to gain some insight as to whether specific identifiable factors might

be responsible for interns being selected or rejected for hire into full-time positions.

**Methodology**

The survey data for this study were collected over a three-month period, which began on

January 9, 2008.  Data were collected through an internet-based survey tool, and predicated on

discussions from the focus group.  Both the survey instrument and the focus group utilized

Institutional Review Board protocols.  Participants were drawn from two sources:  1) a database

of criminal justice alumni from the institution being studied; and 2) community partners who

sponsor criminal justice interns.  A total of 1,479 alumni were sent messages through their email

address explaining the nature of the survey and requesting a response.  Of those, 294 failure-to-

deliver error messages were received (19.88%).  Of the remaining 1185 alumni who presumably

received the email survey requests, 23.88% (n = 286) responded.  Although that rate may

initially be perceived as low, return rates for web-based surveys are consistently lower than other

survey return rates (DiNitto, 2008; Tourangeau, 2004; Couper, 2000).  Community partner

surveys were emailed to 82 agencies and organizations, with 37 partners returning the surveys

(45.1% response rate).

The researchers used this multifaceted approach to collect both qualitative and

quantitative data.   Although the primary purpose of this research was to gather specific, in-depth

information on student interns and their employability, the use of the focus group generated

additional questions related to the criminal justice curriculum.  Thus, the scope of the study

broadened as the community partners' interests in curriculum matters were taken into

consideration.

**Discussion of Findings**

All of the community partners surveyed regularly accept interns into their agencies.  Of

the 37 partners returning surveys, 22 (59.5%) responded that they have hired UCF graduates

from the internship program.  This was compared to 14 (4.9%) of the 286 alumni respondents,

who indicated that they were hired by their specific internship sponsors.  Another 47 (cumulative

21.3%) indicated they are currently employed by a criminal justice agency.

This was contrary to anecdotal information that the researchers had before the beginning

of the study and assumptions made by the focus group participants, both groups hypothesized

that a larger group of students would have been employed by their internship agencies.  This

difference, however, may be a product of the criminal justice community.  Attempts at tracking

alumni in the field have been sporadic at best, and many students discontinue their affiliation

with relevant offices soon after leaving the university.

Cross-tabulations were run using Item 1 of the Alumni Questionnaire as the independent

variable (*Did you complete a criminal justice internship while at UCF?*) and items 11 and 12 as

dependent variables (*Are you currently employed by the agency with which you completed your CJ internship?;* and *Are you currently employed by any criminal justice, private security/asset protection, or similar agency?*).

**Insert Table 1 Here**

There was no association shown between the independent variable, completing an internship at UCF, and being currently employed at the agency with which the internship was completed. The lambda value for V 12 (dependent – currently employed by any criminal justice, private asset protection or similar agency) was .082, therefore indicating a very weak relationship with the independent variable, completing an internship at UCF. This means that an internship may provide students a slightly better chance (8.2%) of gaining employment with a criminal justice, private security/asset protection or similar agency than students not completing an internship.

The limitations to the data must again be noted. First, the return rate of the questionnaires was 19.34% (n = 286 of 1479). Second, although every questionnaire returned had a response to Question 1 (*Did you complete an internship while at UCF?*), Questions 11 (*employed at intern agency?*) and 12 (*employed at other CJ agency?*) had significant numbers of non-responses. There were 286 responses correlated against 106 responses for Item 11, and 114 responses for Item 12, after non-responses were eliminated. More responses would have permitted a more accurate assessment of the employment (or non-employment) situation of respondents.

**Qualitative Data**

A rich source of qualitative data that helped to ground the findings were the comments received related to both the program and alumni interpretation of their lack of success at

obtaining criminal justice positions.  Framed retrospectively, program alumni were asked to comment on two concepts that they could possibly see as related:  program deficiencies and reasons why they believe they have not been hired.  The survey item related to deficiencies was worded as follows:

*Please use the space below to comment on any course, academic, or internship deficiencies you have noted in your CJ education at UCF.  Please identify any courses that you think would improve your marketability as a graduate from the UCF CJ program.*  The item asking alumni to speculate on reasons why they may not have been employed in a criminal justice agency was worded in this way:  *If you are not employed in a CJ agency, please use the space below to list any CJ agencies you applied to, and what your experiences were.  Include here any reasons why you feel you may not have been hired.*

Major themes related to program deficiencies centered in experience, course content and overall program improvement.  Of the 286 surveys returned, 38.8% (n = 111) of respondents entered comments in the 'deficiency' space.  Of those, 17.8% (n = 20) related directly to the internship program, with about half of alumni comments relating to experience.

**Experience**

Experience is an elusive concept that may be perceived as invaluable to those who have not had it, and may be seen as being of minimal value to some of those who have had some internship or volunteer experience.   In the UCF Criminal Justice program, students are restricted from participation in the internship program unless they meet certain (minimum) academic standards which include the following:  senior status, completion of core criminal justice courses with a grade of "C" or better in each core course, and an overall GPA of 2.5 or better.

Comments were received from alumni who perceived that they were not given an opportunity to participate in an internship. Several of those commented on the fact that the resultant lack of experience held them back. A representative comment was, "I do not know if the program has changed since my graduation in fall 2002, but I think an internship should be mandatory. I did not intern and believe I had a hard time starting a career because I lacked experience."

However, the internship experience was seen as a double-edged sword. An alumnus who did engage in an internship and consequently was not hired, made the following comments, "The agencies in which I completed an internship with, weren't at all interested in accepting or helping the internees (sic) with the possibility of an entry level job."

Surveys sent to community partners invited them to comment as well. Of the 37 responding community partners who accept program interns, 27% (n = 10) offered comments, with one specifically addressing the issue of the value of experience. This comment supported the position that an internship might be both a resume-builder and a value-added employment tool: "The importance of pre-graduation work related experience is very important to my agency. When reviewing job applications I see many CJ graduates that do not have the internship, volunteer or service learning experience that would qualify them for the first interview. When the minimum requirement is a BS/BA, in a competitive field, it is the work related experience (paid or unpaid) that will get them to the first interview. Internships etc, that are completed in the last semester of school, are viewed as a resume builder… These are the types of students that show initiative, motivation and career goal management and these are the types of students that I typically hire."

**Course Content**

Regarding course content, the alumni survey produced insight as to course deficiencies that were noted by program graduates by asking: *Please use the space below to comment on any course, academic, or internship deficiencies you have noted in your CJ education at UCF. Please identify any courses that you think would improve your marketability as a graduate from the UCF CJ program.*

Of the 286 surveys returned, 18% (n = 51), of alumni comments centered in perceived course or academic deficiencies. Of those, 46 listed specific courses or cited specific curricular improvements they felt could be made. Figure 1 shows the compilation of the coded responses to this question.

**Insert Figure 1 Here**

Items were coded with those courses shown in Figure 1 if they specifically mentioned the courses indicated, or (in the case of "hands-on,") if the alumnus comment made reference to the need for hands-on criminal justice activities to be incorporated into the criminal justice curriculum. Examples of comments coded as 'hands-on' include the following: "The Crime Scene Investigation Certificate should require more courses involving hands-on experience and even be comparable to the FDLE Crime Scene Investigation/Lab training programs and become accredited in that respect…" and, "…I think the UCF CJ program should offer more courses geared for the real-life CJ field." Other comments that were coded in this category included comments that strongly suggested the need for a mandatory internship ("I think at least one internship should be a requirement for graduation.") or that included a reference to hands-on learning with another coded item (e.g., "l loved the UCF Criminal Justice Program and it was very interesting . . . I do wish there would have been a little more hands on with the classes on victims or computers or something . . ."). The alumni group identified

content with hands-on application most as an item that they believed would improve their marketability.

**Community Partner Course Content Responses**

A large majority (91.9%, n = 34) of community partners agreed or strongly agreed UCF CJ interns seem academically well prepared for a career in their organization. However, even with this academic endorsement of the students' academic preparedness, there was also strong agreement with suggestions that certain curricular changes might be made. The curricular items were included in the survey as a result of input and suggestions from community partners who serve as intern sponsors, and were invited to participate in the earlier focus group on internships and curriculum issues.

Several community partners in the focus group suggested that a course in leadership might be useful. On the survey, most community partners (83.3%, n = 30) agreed or strongly agreed criminal justice core curricula should include a course in CJ leadership.

Respondents were also asked their level of agreement with the following statement on computer skills: *UCF Criminal Justice students are adequately prepared to enter the professional criminal justice job market, when it comes to their computer skills (knowledge of word processing programs, Internet understanding, spreadsheet software and PowerPoint software).* Only one respondent (2.8%) disagreed. 83.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they are adequately prepared.

Over half of respondents (61.1%, n = 22) agreed or strongly agreed with the survey item *college students should receive more training in professional CJ report preparation*. This was an area that several of the alumni specifically mentioned as well. Currently there is no such course in the UCF CJ curriculum.

Although the UCF CJ curriculum currently offers an elective course in cultural diversity (*Cultural Diversity in Criminal Justice*), the course is not mandatory. There was some discussion in the focus group as to whether it might be desirable for all students to take a diversity course, so this item was included in the survey (*Criminal Justice students preparing to enter the job market should have completed a mandatory course in cultural diversity*). A large majority (86.1%, n = 31) agreed or strongly agreed CJ students preparing to enter the job market should have completed such a course.

Consensus was achieved among the focus group members regarding the inclusion of an ethics course in the criminal justice program required core. Currently the required core course list does not include an ethics course, although a course in criminal justice ethics is offered as an upper-level elective. When the survey item was presented to the community partner group, respondents overwhelmingly (97.3%, n = 36) agreed or strongly agreed ethics should be included in the required core courses for the program.

There was a discussion among the focus group members regarding the need for emerging graduates to be better able to synthesize and present research findings. Particularly lacking, according to one focus group member, was the capacity to interpret and make policy recommendations based on the knowledge they learned. To see if others felt the same way, the survey item, *there is a disconnect between criminal justice interns' knowledge, and their ability to synthesize, interpret and make recommendations*, was developed; 66.7% (n = 24) of respondents agreed (63.9%, n= 23) or strongly agreed (2.8%, n = 1) with this statement.

Finally, the issue of inclusion of a foreign language was discussed at length in the focus group and consequently, included on the survey. Two items were developed, since focus group members separated language concerns into Spanish and non-Spanish considerations. The survey

items were developed using the languages mentioned by the community partners in the focus group.   Over half (59.4%, n = 21) of the respondents reported that Spanish language skills were very important for CJ professionals to know.  However, as predicted by some focus group members, a significant percentage (78.4%, n= 29) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that other languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Creole or one of the Eastern European languages, are more useful for CJ graduates to know than Spanish.

**Program Improvement**

Program improvement, as interpreted by the alumni group, centered in three general themes:  the need for additional engagement (identified in the previous section as "hands-on"), an interest in academic rigor, and a desire for some coordination between UCF and state certification standards for law enforcement personnel.  Because Florida's law enforcement certification and advanced training classes are available only through state colleges and community colleges, the alumni group felt it important that the UCF criminal justice program coordinate with these institutions.

Of students who were not employed in the criminal justice or related field while or since attending UCF, several commented on the desire to have additional opportunity for student engagement, either through expanded internship opportunity, through 'hands-on' learning of some (ill-defined) sort (14% cited the need for 'hands-on' CJ activity), or through service-learning in the criminal justice curriculum.

Approximately 8% (n = 21) of responding alumni wrote comments indicating there was not sufficient academic rigor in the criminal justice program at UCF.  Representative comments were, " I never felt challenged . . .very few (classes) required any serious research." Finally,

there was a bit of interest (4% of comments) expressed in some degree of convergence of state

police standards training with UCF's academic program.

The only question related to program quality on the community partners' survey asked

partners to comment about quality of program interns.  Almost all of the respondents (91.9%, n =

34) responded that they found UCF criminal justice interns to be above average or excellent

when asked, "Overall, how would you rate the quality of your UCF Criminal Justice interns?"

The rest of the respondents (4) selected "average."

**Conclusion**

Both community partners and program alumni, as stakeholders in the UCF CJ program,

had various ideas about curricular issues that might contribute to the educational integrity of the

graduating seniors, but there was little agreement in terms of the degree to which a positive

internship experience might enhance employment opportunities.  From the quantitative data, it

appears students who completed internships had a slightly greater chance for employment in a

criminal justice agency or organization.

In terms of program improvement, data from this study were used in program evaluation

efforts.  An ongoing assessment process requires constant program review and this data provides

significant insight into both the direction of programming and specific course additions.  A risk

of focusing on deficiencies with alumni was that the responses would lean toward the negative.

However the risk was balanced by the liberating effect of allowing alumni to provide their most

candid retrospective interpretation of courses and program experiences.

Future research should include the expansion of these survey questions to other

institutions to determine the generalizability of findings.   While this study specifically aimed to

determine the employability of criminal justice interns after graduation, future longitudinal

studies of students examining their service as interns may triangulate the data. Limitations of this study included the small number of agencies that responded to the survey and the lack of good e-mail addresses for former students.

The equilibrium between academic grounding and career preparation is tenuous. What seems increasingly clear is that the gap between the community and the academic programming can be effectively bridged through judicious use of the assessment process. It is in the best interest of criminal justice academic programs to engage the community in which their graduates hope to assume positions. The reciprocity that begins with open dialogue can affirm partnerships that may lead to enhanced employability for students.

# References

Assur, E. T., Goldberg, M. C., & Ross, L. (1999). Student interns: Are they worth the bother? *Federal Probation, 63*(1), 59-61.

Couper, M. P. (2000). Web surveys: A review of issues and approaches. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 64*, 464-494.

DiNitto, D., Busch-Armendariz, N., Bender, K., Woo, H., Tackett-Gibson, M., & Dyer, J. (2008). Testing telephone and web surveys for studying men's sexual assault perpetration behaviors. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 23*, 1483-1493.

Fabianic, D. A. (1987). Criminal justice internships. *Justice Professional, 2*(2), 19-31.

Farmer, R. E. (1978). Internships in police higher education: An evaluation. *Journal of Police Science and Administration, 6*(4), 452-461.

Finckenauer, J. O. (2005), The quest for quality in criminal justice education. *Justice Quarterly, 22(4)*, 413-427.

Foster, J. P., Magers, J. S., & Mullikin, J. (2007). Obsevations and reflections on evolution of crime-related higher education. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 18*(1), 123-184.

Moriarty, L. J. (2006), The current state of assessment in criminal justice programs. *Justice Quarterly, 23*(4), 409-428.

Parilla, P. F. & Smith-Cunnien, S. L. (1997). Criminal justice internships: Integrating the academic with the experiential. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 8*(2), 225-241.

Ross, L. E. & Elechi, O. O. (2002). Student attitudes towards internship experiences: From theory to practice. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 13*(2), 297-312.

Sgroi, C. & Ryniker, M. (2002). Preparing for the real world: A prelude to fieldwork experience. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 13*(1), 187-200.

Stichman, A. J. & Farkas, M. A. (2005). The pedagogical use of internships in criminal justice programs: A nationwide study. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 16*(1), 145-165.

Stone, W.E. & McLaren, J. (1999). Assessing the undergraduate intern experience. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 10*(1), 171-183.

Southerland, M. D., Merlo, A. V., Robinson, L., Benekos, P. J., & Albanese, J. S. (2007). Ensuring quality in criminal justice education: Academic standards and the reemergence of accreditation. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 18*(1), 87-105.

Tontodonato, P. (2006).Goals, expectations, and satisfaction of criminal justice majors: Implications for faculty, students and programs. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education, 17*(1), 162-182.

Tourangeau, R. (2004). Survey research and societal change. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *55*, 775-801.

Table 1.  Lambda values of cross-tabulations of dependent and independent variables.

|        |               | Value | Asymp. Std. Error (a) | Approx. T (b) | Approx. Sig. |
|--------|---------------|-------|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Lambda | Symmetric     | .065  | .145                  | .432          | .666         |
|        | V11 Dependent | .000  | .000                  | .181          | . (c)        |
|        | V12 Dependent | .082  | .181                  | .432          | .666         |

Independent variable:  completing an internship at UCF
Dependent variable:  (Item11: *Are you currently employed by the agency with which you completed your CJ internship?)*
Dependent variable:  (Item 12: *Are you currently employed by any criminal justice, private security/asset protection, or similar agency?)*

Figure 1.  Compilation of coded responses to the item, *please identify any courses that you think would improve your marketability as a graduate from the UCF CJ program.*

_____
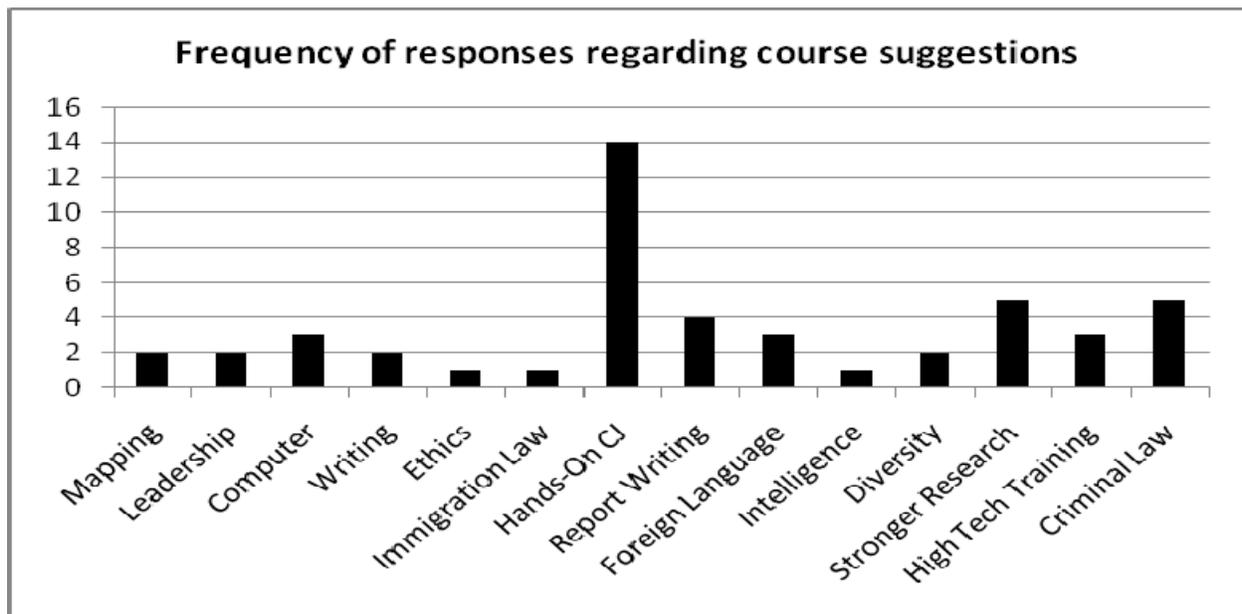
Mary Ann Eastep is the assessment coordinator for the Criminal Justice Undergraduate Program at the University of Central Florida. She holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration with an area of concentration in justice policy. Dr. Eastep serves as both Undergraduate Program Coordinator and the Internship Coordinator for the Criminal Justice Department at UCF.

Ross Wolf is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida and holds a Doctorate degree in Higher Education Administration and Educational Leadership. He has over eighteen years of experience as a law enforcement officer and has worked various assignments including Patrol, Criminal Investigations, and a tactical operation unit. He continues to serve as a police academy instructor and serves as Division Chief with the Orange County Sheriff's Office Reserve Unit.