

**The Effect of a Campaign Internship on
Political Efficacy, Trust and Responsiveness**

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Introduction*

Through a number of highly visible initiatives, colleges and universities across the nation have demonstrated a renewed commitment to promoting civic responsibility, citizenship and community engagement.¹ A common theme in these civic education initiatives is that traditional coursework should be complemented by activities that connect students directly to the larger community.²

By promoting community engagement through internships, service-learning and experiential-learning programs, colleges can provide students with practical exercises and real-world experiences that reinforce their coursework and strengthen their writing, research and analytical skills. These experiences can also help students strengthen their resumes and establish important contacts that will enhance their prospects for post-college employment. Beyond these important benefits, however, there is also the hope that engaging students in internships and similar experience-based programs will help reverse trends of diminishing

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¹ More than 300 colleges and universities signed the *Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education*, embracing efforts that... “insert quote here.” Likewise, *The National Campaign for Student Political and Civic Engagement* brought 12 colleges and universities together to develop programs and experiences that promote political engagement and civic education. See Thomas Ehrlich, “Civic Engagement,” *Measuring Up 2000: the State by State Report card for Higher Education*, <http://measuringup.highereducation.org/2000/articles/Thomasehrlich.cfm> (viewed on 12/17/2006). *National Campaign for Student Political and Civic Engagement*, <http://www.elon.edu/eweb/academics/politicalinstitute> (viewed 12/17/2006). Similar efforts are also being undertaken at the K-12 level, one example being the Carnegie Corporation’s Program to Strengthen US Democracy and Remove barriers to civic and electoral participation. This program promotes community service, service-learning, and political engagement. See http://www.carnegie.org/sub/program/us_dem.html (viewed 12/17/2006).

² Swarthmore College’s Democracy Project, for instance, includes three new courses that focus on “democracy in practice, and the integration of theory and practice through internships, community service and simulation.” Thomas Ehrlich, “Civic Engagement,” at *Highereducation.org*, *Measuring Up 2000: the State by State Report card for Higher Education*, <http://measuringup.highereducation.org/2000/articles/Thomasehrlich.cfm> (viewed on 12/17/2006).

political involvement by increasing students' knowledge of and interest in community affairs, and promoting political awareness, engagement and participation.

Though we are convinced that providing students with opportunities to directly observe political institutions and processes has educational value (opportunity costs notwithstanding), it is less apparent that internships and other experiential-learning activities will lead to higher levels of voting, voluntarism, or other forms of political participation. Accordingly, this paper considers the impact of one important component of civic education initiatives – campaign internships – on factors associated with political engagement and participation. Specifically, we examine the experiences of a group of students participating in a 10-week campaign internship at a liberal arts college in upstate New York and assess whether the internship experience had any measurable impact on student attitudes about political efficacy, trust in government, and government responsiveness, factors that have been associated with voting and other forms of political participation.

The results of this study indicate that students with internship experience are more likely to vote and more likely express higher levels of internal and external efficacy, trust in government, and government responsiveness than students without internship experience. These positive attitudes appear to be the result of self-selection, however; the students who choose to participate in internships are those who already hold positive attitudes about the political system (and their role in it) in the first place. This study finds some evidence that the internship course examined here was associated with statistically significant increases in trust in government. There was no evidence, however, that the internship course contributed to higher levels of internal and external efficacy or government responsiveness. Finally, the data

also suggest that the outcome of elections may be a key factor and students may react differently to internships depending on their party identification, the success of their candidate, and the overall fortunes of their party.

While we believe that internships serve an important educational purpose, the results of this study suggest that internships are likely to attract students who already likely to be politically active and engaged. These findings suggest that unless colleges find ways to incorporate students who are less politically engaged into their internship programs, these programs will be likely to have little long-term effect on voting rates and other measures of civic participation.

Research Question

The main research question is whether students who participate in campaign internships develop higher levels of political efficacy, trust, and engagement as a result of their internship experience. This is important because higher levels of efficacy, trust and engagement have been positively associated with voting and other forms of political participation.

Research Design

In this study, we measured changes in efficacy, trust, and engagement among two groups of students at a small, residential liberal arts college in upstate New York in the Fall of 2006. The first group was made up of 33 students from a team-taught campaign internship course who participated in a 10-week campaign internship. The second group, which served as a control group, included a total of 65 students drawn from four other government courses.³

³ The control group was drawn from four courses, including: Politics, Persuasion, and Public Opinion (Govt 308), Congress and the Presidency (Govt 244), American Political Thought (Govt 249), and Introduction to International Relations (Govt 114).

Students in both groups were surveyed once prior to the start of the internship and again, a second time, approximately three weeks after the end of their internship.

The internship course was part of a non-required, elective course. Though it was available to all students regardless of major and class year, 60.6% of internship students were in their junior and senior years; juniors and seniors made up a similar proportion of the control group (61.2%). Students taking the internship course were required to participate in a campaign internship which began in the first full week of September and lasted through the week of Election Day. Students were also required to maintain an internship journal, attend a weekly, one-hour discussion class and complete a variety of course readings and assignments. Following the internship, students completed two writing assignments, including a 20-page analysis of the election and a 4-page response paper that assessed the effect of their internship experience on their views of the American political system. The majority of students interned for one of two major-party candidates in a highly-competitive race for the U.S. House of Representatives; 16 students interned for the (ultimately victorious) Democratic congressional candidate and 11 for the Republican candidate. In addition, 6 students interned for a (victorious) Republican candidate in an open-seat race for State Senate in a Republican-leaning district.

Representativeness of the Sample

One possible concern is that the sample is drawn entirely from students participating in government courses and, as a result, a high percentage of the students in this study (42.9%) are government majors. We do not believe this is a problem, however, because the vast majority of students who participate in campaign internships are likely to do so through a political

science/government course or under the supervision of a faculty member associated with that department. Thus, to the extent that students will be engaged in a campaign internship while in college and take part in courses that connect them directly with politics, they will do so primarily through participating in a Government or Political Science course or program.

A second concern is whether the results of a group from one particular college (in this case, Hamilton, a small residential liberal arts college in upstate New York) are representative of the broader population of students who will participate in these course. To assess this, we examined the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which provides survey data every four years on freshman and seniors. A total of 76 colleges participated in the survey, including Hamilton and 6 other BAC-LAC colleges. The results show that, as it relates to their levels of engagement, Hamilton's student body is substantially similar to students in the broader sample as well as among their peer group.⁴

A third, and potentially the most serious concern relates to the problem of self-selection. Though there was no cap on the number of people who could register for the internship course, 84.8% of the students who signed up for the internship were male. In this respect, the internship group differed significantly from the control group, which was only 64.6% male. Clearly, having a disproportionate number of men taking part in campaign

⁴ Gordon J. Hewitt and Joshua M. Agins, "The 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement Summary Report," Hamilton College Office of Institutional Research, internal report, Year. NSSE 2004 Frequency Distributions, National Survey of Student Engagement. This report indicates that Hamilton is 83% white, a percentage equal to that at other LA colleges and only slightly higher than the overall average of 75% white for all colleges participating in the study. In addition, in comparison to respondents from other BAC-liberal arts colleges, Hamilton students were similarly likely to participate in a practicum, internship, field experience, co-op, or clinical assignments. Seventy percent of Hamilton seniors participated in a practicum, internship, field-experience, co-op or clinical assignment, a figure similar to that reported by respondents from BAC-liberal arts colleges (68%), both of these figures are higher than the percentage among all respondent colleges, which averaged just 56%. In one key measure, Hamilton students appear less engaged politically than those from other institutions. Only 17% of Hamilton seniors said that voting in local and state elections was quite a bit or very much important, compared to 27% of BAC-LAC and 23% for all colleges participating in the NSSE.

internships is a matter of concern. At the same time, however, a number of studies have found that women, in comparison to men, are less engaged and less likely to participate in state and congressional level political activities than their male counterparts.⁵ If this is the case, we believe that this is a problem that is not limited to our sample, but one that is likely to affect the broader population of elective internship courses and programs.

A final concern which is also related to self-selection is that students who have high levels of efficacy, trust and engagement may be more likely to participate in an internship than students who score lower on these variables. In this study, we attempt to address this concern by focusing specifically on change in these measures, rather than the absolute differences between the groups. In addition, we believe that this concern may be less consequential than it first appears because most college students participating in college internships are not required to take the course. Interns are typically volunteers who are self-selected to the extent that they chose to register for an internship related course or apply to an internship program. In this sense, we believe that this study provides a fairly accurate assessment of the effect of political internships as they are typically run on most college campuses. To paraphrase former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, “we must study the political internship programs we have, rather than the ones we’d like to have.”

Key Variables and Measures

The key independent variable in this study is whether a student participated in the internship course. Intervening variables include sex, political party identification, past participation as an intern or political volunteer, and whether the candidate they interned for won or lost the

⁵ See, for example, Verba, Sidney, Nancy Burns, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, “Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement.” *The Journal of Politics* 59, No. 4 (November): 1051-72.

election. The key dependent variables are levels of political efficacy, trust and responsiveness and whether the respondent voted in the Fall 2006 elections.

Students in both the intern course and the control group were asked a series of questions designed to measure levels of internal and external efficacy, trust and responsiveness. Though there has been considerable debate about the best way to measure these items, we selected measurements based on standard questions and indices used in the NES survey.⁶ The NES measures, for all their faults, remain the most widely accepted measures of the attitudes examined in this study. The NES questions which make up the key indices used in the following analyses are presented in the Appendix.⁷

Results

As a first step, pre-test results were analyzed to assess the impact of prior experience as an intern or political volunteer on political efficacy, trust, responsiveness and engagement. The results of this pre-test assessment appear in Table 1 and indicate that, as expected, those with prior political internship or volunteer experience score higher in measures of trust, efficacy, and engagement. Moreover, the differences in external efficacy, responsiveness, and media exposure are statistically significant.

Table 1
Pre-Test Comparison of Students with and without Internship/Volunteer Experience

All Respondents N=98	Intern/Volunteer Experience		Difference
	Yes	No	(Yes-No)

⁶ “The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior.” Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies (producer and distributor). <http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/gd-index.htm#5> (November 29, 2006).

⁷ Some questions were modified slightly for the purposes of this study. For example, several questions in the post-test were altered to distinguish between activities undertaken in the past and those undertaken over the course of the semester examined in this study.

	N=40	N=58	
External Efficacy Index (pre-test)**	81.3	66.4	15.9
Internal Efficacy Index (pre-test)	68.8	61.2	7.6
Trust Index (pre-test)	37.4	36.0	1.4
Responsiveness Index (pre-test)***	71.9	58.6	13.3
Media Exposure Count (pre-test)**	3.9	3.6	0.3

Comparison of Means, two-tailed T test (** p < .05; *** p < .01).

Though students with internship/volunteer experience express higher levels of efficacy, responsiveness and trust, it remains unclear whether their internships led to higher levels of efficacy, trust and responsiveness or whether students with those attitudes are simply more likely to pursue internships. The concern here is with self-selection; students with high levels of efficacy may be more likely to take an internship course than students in the control group. Table 2 indicates that this is, indeed a concern. Looking at the group of “non-experienced” students who had no prior internship/volunteer experience prior to the start of the semester, the non-experienced students taking the internship course scored higher in efficacy, trust and responsiveness than the non-experienced students in the control group, with statistically significant differences in external efficacy and trust.

Table 2
Students without Prior Intern/Volunteer Experience Only: Comparison of Students in Internship Course and Control Group

Respondents with no Prior Intern/Volunteer Experience Only. N=58			Difference
	Intern Course N=18	Control Group N=40	(Yes-No)
External Efficacy Index (pre-test)***	91.7	55.0	36.7
Internal Efficacy Index ((pre-test)	69.4	57.5	11.9
Trust Index (pre-test)**	45.4	32.1	13.3
Responsiveness Index (pre-test)	62.5	56.9	5.6
Media Exposure Count (pre-test)	3.7	3.6	0.1

Comparison of Means, two-tailed T test (**p < .05; *** p < .01).

During the course of the semester, 18 students with no prior internship or volunteer history gained experience by taking part in the internship course. We compared this group of students with students in the control group who lacked experience. The results, which appear in Table 3, show that the students in the intern course were more likely to vote and received campaign information from a larger number of media sources. In terms of changes in trust and responsiveness, the students in the internship group also saw greater positive changes than those in the control group, though the differences were not statistically significant. In addition, with regard to external efficacy, there was a statistically significant difference between the groups that ran contrary to what might be expected. In this case, students in the control group showed an increase in external efficacy over the course of the semester, while the students in the internship course showed a decrease. Students in the control group also saw a greater level of change in terms of internal efficacy, but the differences here were not statistically significant.

Table 3
End of the Semester Comparison of Students who Started Semester with No Prior Intern Experience; Interns v. Control Group

Respondents with no Intern/Volunteer Experience prior to the start of the semester N=58	Group		Difference (Yes-No)
	Intern Course N=18	Control Group N=40	
Change in External Efficacy Index**	-9.7	11.9	-21.6
Change in Internal Efficacy Index	5.0	15.0	-10.0
Change in Trust Index	4.1	0.0	4.1
Change in Responsiveness Index	9.7	3.8	5.9
Media Exposure Count	3.1	2.8	0.3
Voted	.53	.30	.23

Comparison of Means, two-tailed T test (**p < .05; ***p < .01).

Why the unexpected decrease in external efficacy for non-experienced students who took the internship course? It may partly be a function of the fact that the group started with an exceptionally high level of efficacy (an average score of 91.7 on the index). There was little room to go but down, in that regard. It may also be that students with un-realistically high levels of efficacy were brought down to earth over the course of their internship experience. Given the one-sided results of the 2006 elections, it is also possible that party identification plays a role, with the disproportionately Democratic control group reacting more positively to the election results than those in the internship group, which was more evenly balanced between Republicans and Democrats.

At the end of the semester there were two key groups of students: those with internship experience and those without. The group of “experienced” students was made up of those who had internship experience before the semester began as well as those who gained experience over the course of the semester. The “inexperienced” group was made up of those who had no prior internship experience and, as members of the control group, did not take

part in the internship course. A comparison of these groups indicates that once again, that students with internship experience have generally higher levels of efficacy, trust and responsiveness. In addition, experienced students were more likely to receive campaign information from a larger number of sources and were more likely to vote than students without internship or volunteer experience. Moreover, in all but one case (internal efficacy), these differences were statistically significant at the .05 level or greater.

Table 4
End of the Semester Comparison of Students
with and without Internship/Volunteer Experience

POST-TEST - ALL RESPONDANTS N=98	Intern/Volunteer Experience		Difference (Yes-No)
	Yes N=58	No N=40	
External Efficacy Index***	84.9	66.9	18.0
Internal Efficacy Index	78.4	72.5	5.9
Trust Index**	40.5	32.0	8.5
Responsiveness Index***	75.0	60.6	14.4
Media Exposure Count**	3.3	2.8	0.5
Voted**	.53	.30	.23

Comparison of Means, two-tailed T test (** p < .05; *** p < .01).

As a final step, a regression analysis was conducted to consider the effect of the internship course on respondent changes in trust, internal and external efficacy, and government responsiveness. A number of intervening variables were included in the model, including respondent sex, party identification, prior internship experience and whether the respondent worked on a victorious election campaign. The results of this regression analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Dependent Variable: Change in Index from Pre- to Post-Test

	Trust in Government		External Efficacy		Internal Efficacy		Government Responsiveness	
	B	t	B	t	B	t	B	t
Internship Course	11.64 (5.74)	2.03**	-13.27 (12.31)	-1.08	29.16 (17.45)	1.67*	-2.98 (8.13)	-0.37
Sex	-4.51 (3.73)	-1.21	4.16 (8.26)	0.50	8.63 (11.71)	0.74	5.60 (5.45)	1.03
Republican	-14.21 (4.53)	-3.13***	-11.27 (10.01)	-1.13	-23.78 (14.19)	-1.68*	-3.56 (6.61)	-0.54
Democrat	-4.22 (4.16)	-1.01	0.322 (9.21)	0.03	-21.29 (13.05)	-1.63	-2.25 (6.08)	-0.37)
Prior experience	-2.79 (3.25)	-0.86	3.76 (7.14)	0.53	-2.36 (10.12)	-0.23	-0.54 (4.71)	-0.11
Victorious	-9.97 (6.38)	-1.56	4.13 (13.77)	0.30	-19.05 (19.42)	-0.98	5.58 (9.09)	0.61
Constant	7.70 (3.47)	2.22	8.70 (7.69)	1.13	22.61 (10.90)	2.08**	5.67 (5.07)	1.12
R ²	.15		.07		.06		.02	
Adjusted R ²	.10		.00		.00		-.04	
p > f	.0208		.3937		.4198		.9144	

Standard errors in parentheses. *p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01.

The extremely low R² scores indicate that the model performed very poorly as a predictor of variance for all four of the dependent variables. The regression results suggest that participation in the political internship course did have an impact on both trust in government and internal efficacy. In the case of trust in government, both the internship course and a Republican party identification were associated with reduced levels of trust in government, at the .05 and .01 levels respectively. In the case of internal efficacy, however, those same two variables fall short of significance at the .05 level. Participation in the internship course is only weakly associated with increased internal efficacy (p=.098). Likewise, Republican party identification is associated with a similarly modest decline in internal efficacy (p=.097).

Discussion

This paper considered whether a 10-week internship had any measurable impact on attitudes toward the political system which have been previously associated with voting and other forms of political participation. Do internships make a difference? Based on the evidence from this study, the answer is yes and no. Yes, our study did find that students who participated in the internship scored higher than the control group on measures of internal and external efficacy, trust and responsiveness. Interns were also more likely to vote. These results can be misleading however, because they were driven largely by self-selection: the students who participated in internships had more positive attitudes toward the political system right from the beginning.

A multiple regression analysis showed that participation in the internship was not statistically associated with positive change in the levels of external political efficacy or governmental responsiveness. In fact, the level of external political efficacy was actually negatively associated with participation in the internship, though the relationship was not statistically significant. In addition, although we did find evidence that participation in the internship was associated with an increase in internal efficacy, the relationship was not significant beyond the .10 level.

Why did the internship have so little effect on efficacy and responsiveness? It appears that these results are due to the fact that student interns had extraordinarily high levels of efficacy and responsiveness in the first place. During the course of the campaigns, the interns were exposed to the internal workings of a high-level political campaign. These experiences may have provided them with a more clear – though less rosy and idealistic – understanding

of the American political system. Though these experiences appear to have undermined, somewhat, their positive views of the political system, the respondent's views of their own abilities to accomplish political objectives and participate in political decisions remained largely unshaken.

The one dependant variable that stood out in our analysis was trust in government. In this case, our analysis did find a statistically significant relationship between participation in the internship course and trust in government. Unlike external efficacy and responsiveness, however, the pre-test results showed that both interns and the control group started the semester expressing relatively low levels of trust in government (see Table 1). It may be that the experience of the campaign gave students a greater appreciation of the hard work put in by government officials, candidates and volunteers. Thus, though the political system may not work as well as they thought it did, they appear to have gained increased respect for the candidates and the government in general.

The data also underscore the point that campaign internships involving winning and losing, and this fact can influence how students perceive their internship experience and their place in the larger political system. Our regression analysis showed that Republican party identification was associated with reduced levels of external efficacy. Given the results of the 2006 congressional elections, and the failure of the Republicans to win the congressional seat that was the focus of much of the internship, it is not surprising that Republicans viewed the system as less responsive to their views and needs after the election than they did at the start of the semester.

Clearly, internships are likely to attract the interest of more highly efficacious and politically engaged students. More research is needed to determine whether this is equally true for all types of internships or whether certain types of programs are better suited to draw a more broad cross-section of students. Though internships appear to have little effect on the political efficacy and responsiveness of highly efficacious students, we believe they may have a considerable impact on students who are less politically engaged.

This study raises some important issues for colleges and universities that have incorporated internships into initiatives that aim to increase participation and promote greater levels of civic responsibility. If we want to increase the factors associated with good citizenship and active political participation, we need to think seriously about how to design programs that attract a more broad cross-section of the community. As it currently stands, the students would benefit the most from political internships, may be those who are least likely to participate in one.

**APPENDIX
KEY MEASURES⁸**

Trust in Government Items- Index

The trust in government index was made up of the combined results of four NES questions. The variables were recoded using values indicated below. The variables were then totaled and divided by the number of valid responses and the result was rounded. Scores ranged from least trusting (0) to most trusting (100). Don't know/not sure responses were given a value of 50.

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right -- just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?

- Almost never (1=0)
- Some of the time (2=33)
- Most of the time (3=67)
- Just about always (4=100)
- Don't Know/Not Sure (5=50)

Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?

- Few big interests (1=0)
- Benefit of all (2=100)
- Don't Know/Not Sure (3=50)

Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?

- A lot (1=0)
- Some (2=50)
- Not very much (3=100)
- Don't Know/Not Sure (4=50)

Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?

- Quite a few (1=0)
- Not many (2=50)
- Hardly any (3=100)
- Don't Know/Not Sure (4=50)

⁸ Source: "The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior." Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, Center for Political Studies (producer and distributor). <http://www.electionstudies.org/neguide/gd-index.htm#5> (November 29, 2006).

Government Responsiveness Items- Index

The government responsiveness index was made up of the combined results of two NES questions. The variables were recoded using values indicated below. The values were then totaled and divided by the number of valid responses and the result was rounded. Range is from least responsive (0) to most responsive (100). Don't know/not sure responses were given a value of 50.

Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what the people think when it decides what to do -- a good deal, some, or not much?

- Not much (1=0)
- Some (2=50)
- A good deal (3=100)
- Don't Know/Not Sure (4=50)

How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what the people think, a good deal, some or not much?

- Not much (1=0)
- Some (2=50)
- A good deal (3=100)
- Don't Know/Not Sure (4=50)

External Efficacy Index

External efficacy index was made up of the combined results from the following two NES questions. The variables were recoded using values indicated below. The recoded values were totaled and divided by the number of valid responses and the results were rounded. The results ranged from least efficacious (0) to most efficacious (100).

Public officials don't care much what people like me think.'

- Agree (0)
- Disagree (100)
- Neither agree nor disagree (50)

'People like me don't have any say about what the government does.'

- Agree (0)
- Disagree (100)
- Neither agree nor disagree (50)

Internal Efficacy

To measure internal efficacy, we followed the example of Lonna Rae Atkeson (2003, 1047) and relied on the response to the NES question that appears below:

“Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can't understand what's going on.”

- Agree (0)

- Disagree (100)
- Neither agree nor disagree (50)

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