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**THE MOST VALUABLE ASPECTS OF AN AIRLINE FLIGHT OPERATIONS
INTERNSHIP: THE PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER INTERNS**

Jose' R. Ruiz, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

A large number of collegiate aviation institutions throughout the United States maintain an airline flight operations internship program. "According to the University Aviation Association, students can choose [an airline flight operations internship] from among more than 270 two- or four-year accredited aviation colleges or universities" (Phillips, 1996, p. 43).

A variety of authors have identified the benefits associated with these collegiate aviation and airline industry partnerships. For example, Bradley (1997) noted: "One of the keys for bridging the experience gap among young pilots is to develop closer cooperation between industry and schools, including establishing internship and work/educational cooperatives" (p. 80).

During a presentation conducted at the Air Transport Association Operations and Safety Forum in 1997, Turney mentioned:

...aviation employers can look forward to the following benefits of starting an intern program: Highly motivated and enthusiastic employees; short term commitment; meeting immediate staffing needs; providing a diverse population; freeing professional staff; and facilitating entry-level recruitment. (Kiteley, 1997, p. 3)

The Aviation Management and Flight (AVMAF) Department of Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) has maintained an airline flight operations internship program since 1987. Two hundred twenty-four students, as identified from airline and AVMAF departmental internship records, have participated in the SIUC airline flight operations internship program since its inception in 1987.

At the time of this study, SIUC maintained formal airline flight operations internship agreements with six U.S. major domestic air carriers, including: American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, Northwest Airlines, Trans World Airlines LLC; United Airlines and United Parcel Service. A formal airline flight operations internship agreement also existed between SIUC and Chicago Express Airlines, a regional carrier serving the Midwest.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purposes of this study were to identify the most valuable aspects of the internship as perceived by interns assigned to different airlines and to identify areas of the airline flight operations internship program requiring improvement.

METHODOLOGY

The population for this study included SIUC students who completed airline flight operations internships with at least one of seven U.S. air carriers that maintained a formal airline flight operations internship agreement with SIUC. The SIUC AVMAF department and airline internship partners performed a records review and identified 224

students who met the population criteria from July 1987 through May 2002. Twenty-three airline flight operations interns had served with American Airlines, 9 with Chicago Express Airlines, 20 with Delta Air Lines, 8 with Northwest Airlines, 23 with Trans World Airlines, 136 with United Airlines, and 13 with United Parcel Service. Eight interns served on multiple (two) internships.

A total of 218 intern addresses were obtained from the SIUC Alumni Association and SIUC AVMAF internship records. A total of 226 survey questionnaires were mailed to 218 former interns. Eight of the former interns attended multiple (two) internships and, therefore, received two questionnaires, accounting for a total of 226. Two mailings

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of the survey questionnaire were conducted over a three month period. The first and second mailings of the survey questionnaire resulted in the receipt of 150 survey questionnaire responses, a response rate of 66.4 percent.

A collective analysis of the data was conducted. An analysis of the data by individual airline was also conducted.

RESPONDENT EMPLOYMENT DATA

One hundred forty-four respondents (96%) indicated that they were employed in aviation professions. Six respondents (4%) indicated that they were employed in non-aviation professions.

One hundred thirty-seven respondents (91%) reported that they were employed as pilots by a regional airline, a major airline, a corporate entity, a flight school, or the military. Regional airlines employed the majority of respondents (36.7%). Major air carriers employed 33.3% of respondents. Flight schools employed 17.7% of respondents. Corporate aviation employed 9.5% of respondents. The military employed the fewest number of respondents (2.8%).

United Airlines employed 37 of the 49 respondents (75.5%) flying for a major airline. Other major airlines combined employed 12 respondents (24.4%). Of the 37 respondents hired as pilots by United, 36 of the respondents (97.2%) interned with United. Of the remaining 12 respondents hired as pilots by various other major airlines, 1 interned with UPS, 2 interned with TWA, 3 interned with Delta, and 6 interned with United.

COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS

Responses to two open-ended questions in the survey were manually reviewed, organized and tabulated according to key terms and phrases. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the "Most Valuable"

aspects of the internship identified by all 150 respondents. Frequencies and percentages were also used to describe each recommended program improvement suggested by all 150 respondents.

The first question in the survey was: "What aspect of the airline flight operations internship experience do you consider most valuable?" The second question in the survey was: "How do you feel the airline flight operations internship program could be improved?"

Most Valuable Aspects of the Internship

Comments derived from 150 survey responses identified 12 aspects of the internship experience as "Most Valuable" (see Table 1). A total of 43 comments (19.5%) identified "Observing How an Airline Functions" as the "Most Valuable" aspect of the internship experience. An intern assigned to Delta Air Lines mentioned, "I consider the opportunity to observe how the airline operates at all levels to be the most valuable experience of my internship. It allowed me to evaluate the company, and allowed the company to get to know me. I was able to come away from the experience with a genuine desire to return as a full time employee in the future based on such a positive experience."

An intern assigned to United Airlines had this comment on his experience, "I considered the ability to work in the headquarters of a major airline to be the most valuable aspect of my internship. I was able to see first hand how the airline works from flight and non-flight related departments. Some of these departments include: scheduling, dispatch, safety, flight operations, accounting, payroll and marketing."

Table 1

Respondents Identify the Most Valuable Aspects of the Airline Flight Operations Internship Experience

Most Valuable Aspect	Frequency	Percentage
Observing how an airline functions	43	19.5
Networking	37	17.0
Jumpseat privileges	37	17.0
Access to simulators	24	11.0
Interacting with airline employees	24	11.0
Access to ground schools	17	8.0
Preferential hiring status/"guaranteed" job interview	16	7.0
Greater awareness of the pilot profession	7	3.0
Insight to the hiring process	6	2.6
Meaningful learning experiences	5	2.0
Exposure to company meetings	3	1.0
Job shadowing	2	.9
Total	221	100

Note. Values represent comments/responses to an open-ended question.

Recommended Improvements

A total of 131 comments were derived from 150 survey questionnaire responses. They identified 30 recommended program improvements (see Table 2). A total of 19 comments (14.5%) identified "Provide Meaningful Learning Experiences" as the best method of improving the flight operations internship program. An intern assigned to American Airlines commented, "My only complaint about the internship would be about the actual duties assigned to us. We're all given a position for the entire semester. Not only were my position's tasks mindless and un-educational,

I also felt that I would have walked away with a greater understanding of the airline if I would have been able to work in different departments throughout the internship."

An intern assigned to Delta Air Lines mentioned, "While at Delta, I saw other interns that were stuck in a cubicle organizing stacks of papers, photocopying packets, and answering phones. Make sure their supervisor understands the true meaning of an internship. If they aren't willing to challenge the intern and expose the intern to new experiences - find a new supervisor."

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Table 2

Recommended Improvements to the Airline Flight Operations Internship Program Suggested by Respondents

Recommended Improvement	Frequency	Percentage
Provide meaningful learning experiences	19	14.5
Monetary compensation/salary	18	13.8
No improvement required	15	11.4
Employment bridge program with a regional airline	11	8.0
Not equipped to comment (it's been too long since my internship)	7	5.3
Airline provided housing	6	4.5
Increased communication with SIUC during the internship	5	4.0
Greater internship structure	5	4.0
Post-internship communication between the intern and airline	5	4.0
Detailed information about the internship	4	3.0
More internship agreements with regional airlines	4	3.0
Preferential hiring status/"guaranteed" job interview	4	3.0
Increased access to simulators	4	3.0
Greater exposure to the hiring process	2	1.5
Less hostility toward interns	2	1.5
Internship placement should be unbiased	2	1.5
Establish an internship fund	2	1.5
Offer a greater variety of internships	2	1.5
Offer greater access to ground schools	2	1.5
Fewer travel restrictions	2	1.5
Assignment to a variety of departments	1	0.8
SIUC should play a larger role in the transition to the internship	1	0.8
Timely notification of intern selection by airline	1	0.8
Increased screening of internship applicants	1	0.8
Creation of a short internship program	1	0.8
Panel discussion involving internship providers	1	0.8
Application process requires clarification	1	0.8
Unlimited jumpseat privileges	1	0.8
Greater appreciation for interns by the airline	1	0.8
Offer and publicize more internships	1	0.8
Total	131	100

Note. Values represent comments/responses to an open-ended question.

ANALYSIS BY AIRLINE

Responses to open-ended questions in the survey were manually reviewed, organized and tabulated according to key terms and phrases; they were then categorized by airline. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe data gathered from the survey questionnaire.

MOST VALUABLE ASPECTS OF THE INTERNSHIP*American Airlines*

A total of 18 survey questionnaire responses were received from 23 former American Airlines flight operations interns (78%). Twenty-eight comments identified nine aspects of the internship as “Most Valuable” (see Table 3). American Airlines interns identified “Interacting with Airline Employees” as the “Most Valuable” aspect of the internship; this aspect received six comments (21.5%).

Chicago Express Airlines/ATA Connection

A total of seven survey questionnaire responses were received from nine former Chicago Express Airlines flight operations interns (78%). The Chicago Express Airlines/SIUC AVMAF flight operations internship agreement has only been in place since 1999, explaining the relatively small number of interns that have been placed in the Chicago Express Airlines internship program. Fourteen comments identified six aspects of the internship as “Most Valuable” (see Table 3). Respondents from Chicago

Express Airlines identified “Interacting with Airline Employees” as the “Most Valuable” aspect of the internship; this aspect received four comments (29%).

Delta Air Lines

A total of 18 survey questionnaire responses were received from 20 former Delta Air Lines flight operations interns (90%). Thirty-three comments identified 12 aspects of the internship as “Most Valuable” (see Table 3). Respondents from Delta Air Lines identified “Observing How an Airline Functions” as the “Most Valuable” aspect of the internship, this aspect received eight comments (24%).

Northwest Airlines

A total of four survey questionnaire responses were received from eight former Northwest Airlines flight operations interns (50%). The Northwest Airlines/SIUC AVMAF flight operations internship agreement has been in place for a relatively short period of time (1997), explaining the small number of interns that have been placed in the Northwest Airlines internship program. Ten comments identified six aspects of the internship as “Most Valuable” (see Table 3). Respondents from Northwest Airlines identified “Access to Ground Schools” as the “Most Valuable” aspect of the internship; this aspect received three comments (30%).

Table 3
Most Valuable Aspects of the Airline Flight Operations Internship Program as Reported by Respondents

Most Valuable Aspects of the Internship	American		Chicago Express		Delta		Northwest		TWA		United		UPS	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Observing how an airline functions	5	(18.0)	3	(21.4)	8	(24.0)	-		5	(17.0)	21	(20.0)	1	(33.3)
Networking	5	(18.0)	3	(21.4)	5	(16.0)	1	(10.0)	4	(14.0)	18	(17.0)	1	(33.3)
Jumpseat privileges	5	(18.0)	2	(14.2)	6	(18.0)	2	(20.0)	7	(24.0)	15	(14.0)	-	
Access to simulators	2	(7.0)	-		2	(6.0)	2	(20.0)	3	(10.0)	14	(13.0)	1	(33.3)
Interacting with airline employees	6	(21.5)	4	(29.0)	3	(9.0)	-		1	(3.5)	10	(10.0)	-	
Access to ground schools	-		-		3	(9.0)	3	(30.0)	6	(21.0)	5	(5.0)	-	
Preferential hiring status/"guaranteed" job interview	-		1	(7.0)	1	(3.0)	-		2	(7.0)	12	(12.0)	-	
Greater awareness of the pilot profession	2	(7.0)	-		2	(6.0)	-		-		3	(3.0)	-	
Insight to the hiring process	1	(3.5)	-		-		-		-		5	(5.0)	-	
Meaningful learning experiences	-		1	(7.0)	1	(3.0)	1	(10.0)	1	(3.5)	1	(1.0)	-	
Exposure to company meetings	1	(3.5)	-		1	(3.0)	1	(10.0)	-		-		-	
Job shadowing	1	(3.5)	-		1	(3.0)	-		-		-		-	
Total	28	(100)	14	(100)	33	(100)	10	(100)	29	(100)	104	(100)	3	(99.9)

Note. Responses/comments were to an open-ended section in Part II of the survey questionnaire.

- indicates no comments received

* The majority of respondents (91%) were employed as pilots.

Trans World Airlines

A total of 18 survey questionnaire responses were received from 23 former TWA flight operations interns (78%). Twenty-nine comments identified eight aspects of the internship as "Most Valuable" (see Table 3). Respondents from TWA identified "Jumpseat Privileges" as the "Most Valuable" aspect of the internship; this aspect received seven comments (24%).

United Airlines

A total of 80 survey questionnaire responses were received from 130 former United Airlines flight operations interns (62%). One hundred four comments identified 10 aspects of the internship as "Most Valuable" (see Table 3). Respondents from United Airlines identified "Observing How an Airline Functions" as the "Most Valuable" aspect of the internship; this aspect received 21 comments (20%).

United Parcel Service

A total of five survey questionnaire responses were received from 13 former UPS flight operations interns (38.5%). The UPS/SIUC AVMAF flight operations

internship agreement has been in place for a relatively short period of time (1995), explaining the relatively small number of interns that have been placed in the UPS internship program. Three comments identified three aspects of the internship as "Most Valuable" (see Table 3). Respondents from UPS identified "Observing How an Airline Functions", "Networking", and "Access to Simulators" as the "Most Valuable" aspects of the internship, receiving one comment each (33.3%).

RECOMMENDED IMPROVEMENTS*American Airlines*

A total of 18 survey questionnaire responses were received from 23 former American Airlines flight operations interns (78%). Twenty-two comments identified nine recommended program improvements (see Table 4). Respondents from American Airlines identified "Monetary Compensation/Salary" as the best method of improving the American Airlines flight operations internship program, receiving five comments (23%).

Table 4
Recommended Improvements to the Airline Flight Operations Internship Program Suggested by Respondents

Recommended Improvement	American		Chicago Express		Delta		Northwest		TWA		United		UPS	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Monetary compensation/salary	5	(23.0)	1	(14.2)	1	(5.6)	-		1	(5.6)	10	(16.7)	-	
Preferential hiring status/"guaranteed" job interview	3	(13.6)	-		-		1	(33.0)	-		-		-	
Increased access to simulators	3	(13.6)	-		-		-		1	(5.6)	-		-	
Provide meaningful learning experiences	3	(13.6)	-		3	(16.6)	-		2	(11.1)	11	(18.4)	-	
Airline provided housing	2	(9.0)	1	(14.2)	-		-		-		3	(5.0)	-	
Fewer travel restrictions	2	(9.0)	-		-		-		-		-		-	
No improvement required	2	(9.0)	1	(14.2)	4	(22.2)	2	(67.0)	1	(5.6)	4	(6.7)	1	(33.3)
Increased communication with SIUC during the internship	1	(4.6)	-		2	(11.1)	-		1	(5.6)	-		1	(33.3)
Greater appreciation for interns by the airline	1	(4.6)	-		-		-		-		-		-	
Offer a greater variety of internships	-		2	(29.0)	-		-		-		-		-	
Offer greater access to ground schools	-		1	(14.2)	-		-		-		1	(1.6)	-	
Greater internship structure	-		1	(14.2)	-		-		-		4	(6.7)	-	
Post-internship communication between the intern and airline	-		-		4	(22.2)	-		1	(5.6)	-		-	
Employment bridge program with regional airline	-		-		2	(11.1)	-		5	(27.4)	4	(6.7)	-	
Assignment to a variety of departments	-		-		-		-		1	(5.6)	-		-	

(Table Continues)

Table 4 Continued

Recommended Improvement	American		Chicago Express		Delta		Northwest		TWA		United		UPS	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
SIUC should play a larger role in the transition to the internship	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(5.6)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Timely notification of intern selection by airline	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(5.6)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Offer and publicize more internships	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(5.6)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Not equipped to comment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	(11.7)	-	-	-
Detailed information about the internship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	(6.7)	-	-	-
More internship agreements with regional airlines	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	(6.7)	-	-	-
Greater exposure to the hiring process	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	(3.3)	-	-	-
Less hostility toward airlines	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	(3.3)	-	-	-
Internship placement should be unbiased	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	(3.3)	-	-	-
Increased screening of internship applicants	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(1.6)	-	-	-
Creation of a short internship program	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(1.6)	-	-	-
Panel discussion involving internship providers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	(33.3)	-
Application process requires clarification	-	-	-	-	1	(5.5)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Unlimited jumpseat privileges	-	-	-	-	1	(5.5)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Establish an internship fund	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	(11.1)	-	-	-	-
Total	22	(100)	7	(100)	18	(100)	3	(100)	18	(100)	60	(100)	3	(99.9)

Note. Responses/comments were to an open-ended section in Part II of the survey questionnaire.

- Indicates no response/comment

* The majority of respondents (91%) were employed as pilots.

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Chicago Express Airlines/ATA Connection

A total of seven survey questionnaire responses were received from nine former Chicago Express Airlines flight operations interns (78%). Seven comments identified six recommended program improvements (see Table 4). Respondents from Chicago Express Airlines identified "Offer a Greater Variety of Internships" as the best method of improving the Chicago Express Airlines flight operations internship program, receiving two comments (29%).

Delta Air Lines

A total of 18 survey questionnaire responses were received from 20 former Delta Air Lines flight operations interns (90%). Eighteen comments identified eight recommended program improvements (see Table 4). "Communication between the Intern and the Airline after the Internship" was identified as the best method of improving the Delta Air Line flight operations internship program, this recommended program improvement received four comments (22.2%).

Northwest Airlines

A total of four survey questionnaire responses were received from eight former Northwest Airlines flight operations interns (50%). Three comments identified two recommended program improvements (see Table 4). Respondents from Northwest Airlines identified "No Improvement Required" as the best method of improving the Northwest Airlines flight operations internship program, receiving two comments (67%).

Trans World Airlines

A total of 18 survey questionnaire responses were received from 23 former TWA flight operations interns (78%). Eighteen comments identified 12 recommended program improvements (see Table 4). Respondents from TWA identified "Employment Bridge Program with a Regional Airline" as the best method of improving the TWA flight operations internship program, receiving five comments (27.4%).

United Airlines

A total of 80 survey questionnaire responses were received from 130 former United Airlines flight operations interns (62%). Sixty comments identified fifteen recommended program improvements (see Table 4). "Provide Meaningful Learning Experiences" was identified as the best method of improving the United Airlines flight operations internship program, receiving 11 comments (18.4%).

United Parcel Service

A total of five survey questionnaire responses were received from 13 former UPS flight operations interns (38.5%). Three comments identified three recommended program improvements (see Table 4). "Increased Communication with SIUC During the Internship" and "Panel Discussion Involving Internship Providers" were identified as the best methods of improving the UPS flight

operations internship program, receiving one comment each (33.3%). An equal number of respondents from UPS (33.3%) believed that the internship program did not require improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

Collective Analysis

The "Most Valuable" aspects of the internship allowed respondents to network with airline personnel, assisted in acquiring future employment, provided access to training facilities, and exposed respondents to the operational environment of the airline. An intern assigned to Chicago Express Airlines mentioned, "Within my internship, we not only were able to watch the operations at an airline, we actually became an integral part of the operation. We were tasked with many projects they were not "fluff" projects, but things that had to be done. Our work ethic was tested, and many ideas that were taught in the classroom at SIU were now tested in the workplace. Being part of the management team, working directly for the VP of flight ops, and securing a job immediately after graduation as a pilot - none of this would have occurred if I was just "another" intern, working at a big company."

However, respondents report that there is room for improvement. The top recommendation was to ensure interns were provided meaningful learning experiences while on the internship. Respondents indicated that being delegated a large number of administrative duties, i.e. copying/typing, etc., did little to promote and enhance their professional development. An intern who served at TWA and Delta Air Lines had this comment, "TWA was great!! They understood the purpose of interns and used all of us for real projects that were vital to operations. Delta DFW [Dallas-Ft. Worth] personnel had no idea what to do with interns. We sat around for months at a time stuffing 1200+ pilot mailboxes with Jepp [Jeppesen] revisions and company bulletins. The number of internships given is not as important as the quality of the overall experience. Only send interns if there is real work to be done. ATL [Atlanta] interns sounded busy."

Individual Airline Analysis

Respondents indicate that the amount of value a specific aspect of the internship experience is perceived to possess hinges on the airline hosting the internship. Approaches used to manage and supervise internship programs vary by airline, and can influence the manner in which specific aspects of the internship experience are perceived.

Respondents placed a great deal of value on the opportunity to interact with airline employees, having access to training facilities, and gaining exposure to the airline operational environment. An intern assigned to American Airlines mentioned, "The most valuable part of this internship experience was the ability to interact with pilots in training, and see how to approach ground and simulator

training. My reason for saying this is that SIU prepares you to deal with most of what the FAR 121 training environment is like, but advice on how to approach training was invaluable.”

Respondents provided a variety of suggestions for improving the internship program. For example, respondents indicated that providing interns with meaningful learning experiences would enhance the quality of the internship experience. An intern assigned to United Airlines stated, “I really can’t complain about my internship

experience because I was successful in getting the job I wanted, but I must say that 75% of my internship involved working in the mail room. I don’t feel that I learned a thing stuffing mailboxes. Any job or assignment that challenged me would have been more meaningful.”

Airlines that sponsor internships have direct control over the quality of learning experiences associated with the internships. Properly managed and supervised, an airline flight operations internships can serve as a vital component of a student’s professional development. →

Jose’ R. Ruiz possesses a Ph.D. in Education - Workforce Education and Development from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (SIUC), and a Master of Aeronautical Science Degree from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU). He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Aviation Management and Flight at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Professor Ruiz has been the SIUC Airline Flight Operations Internship Coordinator for the last six years.

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