

# An investigation into the experience of advertising students in seeking and working in internships

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### Abstract

**Internships are an essential part of the work experience** for many students. This study asked advertising students in Humber College's Bachelor of Creative Advertising program what their expectations of their internships were before they started them in January 2016, and afterwards what the experience was like. Most had a positive experience. They particularly valued having real work experience and a supportive environment. These aspects were rated as more important than formal training at their placement. Improvements could be made by providing more mentorship for interns and by paying students. Mentorship in particular was valued by students, but many didn't receive it.

**Keywords:** Internship, work placement, mentorship, advertising

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**Internships and work placements are integral to college programs.** In this context we are defining internships as temporary positions in which students get work experience as part of their education, and which may be paid or unpaid. As such we are using the terms internship and work placement

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interchangeably. At Humber College, internships are a required component of six advertising-based programs involving upwards of 300 students each year (Humber College, 2015). There is also a move to expand internships. The Business/Higher Education Round Table, conducted by the Canadian Broadcasting Company, recently recommended mandatory co-op placements and internships for all post-secondary students in Canada (CBC, 2016).

However, there is also increasing scrutiny being placed on these internships. In 2014, the Ontario government issued orders to *The Walrus* and *Toronto Life*, indicating that their interns would have to be paid unless they were part of a post-secondary course, as per Ontario law. The internships were consequently shut down, though they were later revived, in different forms. (CBC 2013, 2014). Many advertising agencies are reviewing their practice in this area. The Institute of Communications Agencies (ICA), which represents most of the larger advertising agencies, is actively looking at internships, partially because of these issues, but also as part of their larger goal of helping members attract, develop and nurture the best possible talent (ICA, 2016a).

Internships have been found to be valuable to both students and employers. For students they provide real world experience (Attfield & Couture, 2014; Maertz, Stoeberl, & Marks, 2014), training in new skills (Attfield & Couture, 2014; B&T, 2015; Maertz et al, 2014), improved work habits (Maertz et al., 2014), networking opportunities (Attfield & Couture, 2014; B&T, 2015), personal growth and development (Maertz et al., 2014; PRA, 2012), an opportunity to sample a company (Coco, 2000) and enhanced employment opportunities (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2017; Maertz et al., 2014). They ease students' transition into the workplace (Attfield & Couture, 2014; Maertz et al., 2014; Shoenfelt, Kottke, & Stone, 2012). Internships are also popular with students. The Canadian University Survey Consortium (PRA, 2012, p. 33) found university students were "most likely to say that practicums, internships and co-ops related to the program contributed very much to their growth and development." None of

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\***Brief Reports** are papers that report on empirical research, but are shorter and more limited in scope, such as results from a pilot study, or those with a small sample size.

the school-based activities, including regular classes, came close in terms of positive ratings. For employers, internships provide new expertise and thinking (e.g., students engaging in new digital media), cover routine tasks freeing up time of full-time employees, provide a trial period for the employer to preview potential new employees, and enhance retention rates (Yoo & Morris, 2015).

There has been less research on what variables contribute toward a successful internship. Studies looking at internships in general have found that important factors include clear communication of expectations and progress (Maertz et al., 2014; Shoenfelt et al., 2012), being involved in meaningful and relevant work (Maertz et al., 2014; Shoenfelt et al., 2012; Yoo & Morris, 2015), and having high quality supervision (Maertz et al., 2014; Shoenfelt et al., 2012).

Pay has also been found to be a factor in successful internship experiences. A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers in the U. S. (Griffin, 2013) found students doing paid internships regarded them as more valuable preparation for employment and more of an educational experience, and that the students were given more creative tasks than students in unpaid internships.

However, with the exception of Yoo and Morris (2015), these studies were not specific to advertising, and were predominantly U.S.-based. We wanted to see what students' perceptions were with regard to the world of advertising in Ontario, Canada. Additionally, as we have seen, the world of internships is rapidly changing. Therefore, the objective of our research was to address the following main question: What are the elements of a successful advertising internship program according to students? There were three subsidiary questions:

- i. What are the expectations of students for an internship before they begin?
- ii. To what extent do internship experiences meet their expectations?
- iii. Which aspects did the students find most beneficial in their internships?

## Method

### Participants

Thirty five students (of 36 available) from the Bachelor of Creative Advertising (BOCA) program completed a survey in class in December 2015, before they began 14-week internships, and again in May 2016 after they returned from their internships. These internships take place in the penultimate semester of a four-year program and are a mandatory part of the program. Students are required to find the internships themselves. These

students represented the main advertising agency roles (account management, copywriting and art direction). All students were enrolled in a professional practices course. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous, but a \$25 Tim Horton's card was provided as an incentive. Of the surveyed students, 74% were women, the average age was 24, and 56% were recipients of OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program), which for most meant they had student loans to pay off.

### Materials

A voluntary intercept survey consisting of a mixture of dichotomous, open-ended, multiple choice, ranking and short-answer type questions was used. Questions included student expectations and needs in relation to a number of areas: skill development and training, job environment, effect on employability, pay and other specific needs. Students were also asked about the process they went through to get an internship.

A related questionnaire was administered to the same students when they returned from their internships in May 2016. This included the same areas but they were then asked what they found to be valuable and what their actual experience was. It also asked details on what their actual internship involved and their level of satisfaction with it. Responses from 32 of the 36 students were obtained in this post-internship questionnaire.

### Procedure

Both questionnaires were administered in class in paper form. The person administering the questionnaires was unrelated to the students, and their professor was not present. Data were anonymized before they were stored and analyzed.

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 23. A descriptive analysis of the data was carried out. To find the relationship between the main overall ratings (overall satisfaction and likelihood of recommendation) and the ratings of the specific aspects of the internship, a series of Pearson's Correlations was performed. A  $p$  value  $< 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

For the qualitative data, a thematic analysis was done. The text was entered into an Excel sheet and data were coded for recurring themes. The text was filtered based on the codes. The thematic groupings were then formed.

## Results

### The Search Process

Students were asked to answer the question: "What did you find most difficult during the internship search process?" The two main difficulties were: A) waiting for the agencies to respond back once students had reached out to them and B) how to

find the agencies actually interested in hiring an intern. Table 1 summarizes their answers.

**Ratings of importance: Before and After**

Students were presented with a list of a number of aspects of the internship experience, and were asked to rate their importance on a five-point scale, from “Not important” to “Absolutely Essential”. As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of students rating items as “Absolutely Essential” generally increased from before to after their internships reflecting their increased knowledge and their increased appreciation of the value of the internship. However, more interesting were the dimensions that increased the most. “Good experience to add to resume,” “Enhanced personal employability” and “Improved network for future opportunities” showed substantial increases, with the percentage of students rating the item as “Absolutely essential” increasing by 20% or more. By contrast the students did not regard “good chance of getting a job from that company” as important either before or

**Table 1**

Difficulties faced during internship search process (Open-ended)

Improvement	Percentage
Waiting for the response	35.5
Finding agencies actually interested in hiring an intern	25.8
Finding key person to send resume	6.5
Networking	6.5
Balancing school, building portfolio and finding job	6.5
Uncertainty of getting job	6.5
Getting started	3.2
Competition	3.2
Getting an interview	3.2
Choosing where to go after getting multiple offers	3.2

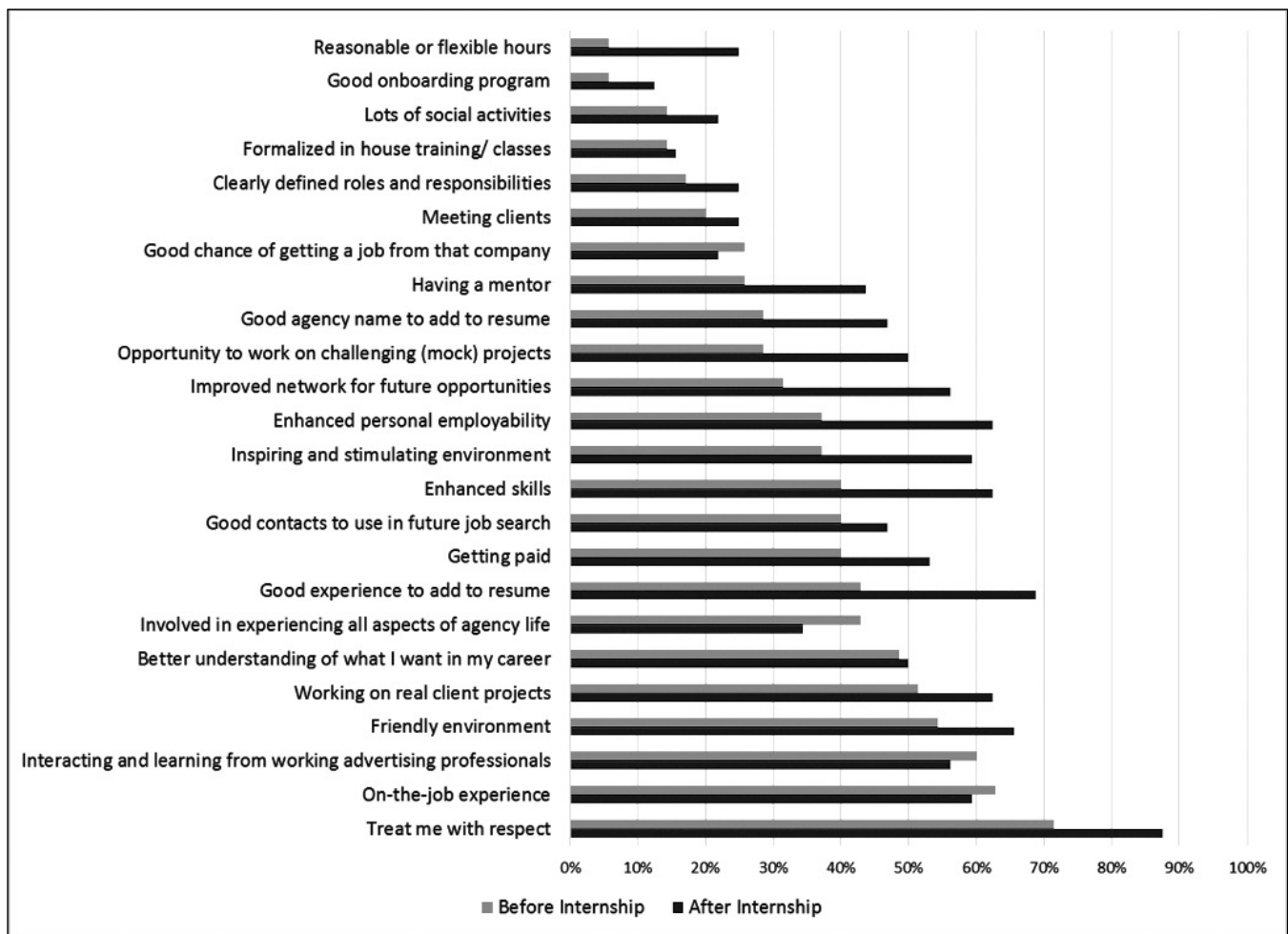


Figure 1: Importance of Factors in Internships. Percentage saying “Absolutely essential” on a 5-point scale  
 Pre-internship: “In terms of what you are hoping to get out of your internship, how important are each of the following factors?”  
 Post-internship: “How important are each of the following factors in making an internship a success in general”

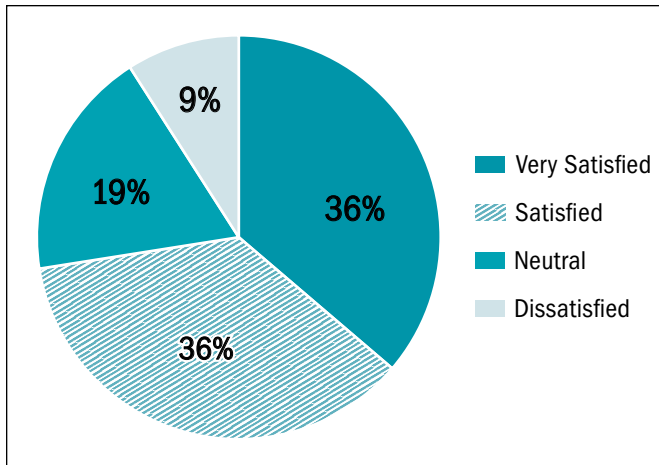


Figure 2: Level of satisfaction with their Internship

after the internship. Another dimension that showed a substantial gain was “Having a mentor”. Prior to going on the internship, only 26% rated it as essential. However, after the internship that increased to 46%.

### What makes a good internship?

A majority of students were satisfied with their internship: 36% were very satisfied and 36% were satisfied. Only 9% of the students reported dissatisfaction with the internship (Figure 2). The quality of specific aspects of their actual internship experience were rated highly. The vast majority of students said the agency “Treats me with respect” (97% excellent or good). Other dimensions that received similarly positive ratings included: “Working on real client projects” (91% rated as “excellent” or “good”), “Friendly environment” (88%), and “Good experience to add to resume” (86%) (Table 2). All of these were also rated highly in terms of importance. Correlations were calculated between the quality ratings for each dimension of the experience (from poor to excellent), with ratings on “How satisfied are you with your internship? They were also correlated with ratings on whether students would recommend the agency for internship to others. All of the above dimensions correlated with “satisfaction.” But two other dimensions also stood out: satisfaction correlated particularly strongly with “On-the-job experience” ( $r = .79 p < .01$ ) and “Inspiring and stimulating environment” ( $r = .76 p < .01$ ). (Table 3)

These ratings were also reflected in the comments given by students:

“It had an amazingly friendly and creatively stimulating environment. They trusted me to handle some of their biggest clients. They had a bar, jam-room and lots of dogs. Agency life was exactly as I hoped.”

“They treated me with respect and really made me feel like a part of the agency family. My opinion and suggestions were always taken into consideration. The trust they gave me allowed me to create better work.”

“My team was unbelievable for challenging me and giving me opportunities to learn.”

“The people are really great and I am learning so much.”

### Areas of dissatisfaction

There were three main areas of dissatisfaction: training, pay and mentorship.

Many reported little formal training; 24% received no “Formalised in house training” and another 15% rated what they received as “poor.” However, this aspect was not rated as important for students: Only 14% regarded formalised training as an essential part of their internship experience, as compared to “Working on real client projects” at 64% (Figure 1). Similarly, few experienced a “Good onboarding program,” but again, most did not regard it as important.

Pay was the biggest single point of dissatisfaction: when rating “getting paid”; 42% said they received “none” or rated it as “poor.” This was the highest proportion of “none/poor” ratings given for any of the dimensions. In terms of the pay they actually received, 9% of our sample were unpaid, 51% received some compensation (e.g., honorarium) which totaled less than minimum wage, and 39% received minimum wage or more. When asked in an open-ended question how the experience could be improved, “pay us” was a repeated refrain. (Summarised in Table 3). Similarly, there was a correlation between good scores for an agency on pay and the likelihood of the student recommending the agency to other interns ( $r = 0.60 p < 0.01$ ). However, this was numerically lower than “On the job experience” ( $r = 0.83, p < .01$ ) or “Inspiring and stimulating environment” ( $r = 0.74 p < .01$ ). Importantly, pay was not significantly correlated with satisfaction ( $r = 0.34, n. s.$ ). (Table 4).

However, pay may have been of particular importance for the 17 students in the study who were on the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), for whom an unpaid internship would provide real hardship. OSAP does not generally cover internships. As one student said, “I live on my own and had to get my parents to help me out while I worked unpaid.” Others had to reject offers from good agencies if they were unpaid. 56% of students on OSAP ended up at agencies that paid them at least minimum wage, as opposed to 31% of non-OSAP students (Figure 3).

Mentorship was an area of dissatisfaction, with 36%

expressing some level of dissatisfaction with their level of mentorship. It was also, with pay, an area where students felt the experience could be improved (Table 3). As one student noted: “I am disappointed by the lack of leadership or mentors that were assigned to interns.” As mentioned, students did not initially regard mentorship as important, but this changed for many students following their internships. Furthermore “Having a mentor” correlated highly with satisfaction ( $r=0.67$   $p<.01$ ).

## General Discussion

Despite many concerns about internships in the media and public policy discussions, our findings were that students’ current internship experiences were largely positive, particularly in the areas of the work experience received and the supportive

environment. There were, however, clear areas where the internship experience could be improved.

The majority of our students received pay well below minimum wage. Currently, Ontario law says unpaid interns are also not allowed to “generate commercial value” (Whitten, 2013). Most other provinces also restrict what you can do without pay (Canadian Intern Association, 2017).

But meaningful work is precisely what students want—to work on real client projects. This is the single aspect of the internship most strongly correlated with satisfaction. This reflects what others have found (Garcia-Borrego, Campos, & Battle, 2017; Maertz et al., 2014; Shoenfelt et al., 2012; Yoo & Morris, 2015). For example, Garcia-Borrego et al. (2017) found a similar

**Table 2**

Student ratings of the quality of their internship experience (Percentages; Ranked in order of reported importance on the post survey)

Factors	None	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Treat me with respect	-	-	3	45.5	51.5
Good experience to add to resume	-	-	15.2	39.4	45.5
Working on real client projects	-	3	6.1	30.3	60.6
Friendly environment	-	6.1	6.1	21.2	66.7
On-the-job experience	-	-	24.2	30.3	45.5
Enhanced personal employability	-	-	21.2	42.4	36.4
Enhanced skills	-	-	27.3	39.4	33.3
Inspiring and stimulating environment	3	9.1	27.3	27.3	33.3
Interacting and learning from working advertising professionals	6.1	3	24.2	30.3	36.4
Improved network for future opportunities	3	3	12.1	36.4	45.5
Getting paid	12.1	30.3	9.1	24.2	24.2
Better understanding of what I want in my career	3	3	12.1	36.4	45.5
Opportunity to work on challenging (mock) projects	6.1	9.1	12.1	27.3	45.5
Having a mentor	6.1	12.1	18.2	42.4	21.2
Good contacts to use in future job search	3	3	15.2	36.4	42.4
Good agency name to add to resume	3	3	18.2	33.3	42.4
Involved in experiencing all aspects of agency life	-	6.1	18.2	39.4	36.4
Meeting clients	21.2	15.2	27.3	21.2	15.2
Clearly defined roles and responsibilities	-	3	39.4	30.3	27.3
Reasonable or flexible hours	-	-	9.1	45.5	45.5
Good chance of getting a job from that company	6.1	12.1	12.1	33.3	36.4
Lots of social activities	-	9.1	24.2	33.3	33.3
Formalized in house training/ classes	24.2	15.2	15.2	24.2	21.2
Good onboarding program	3	24.2	15.2	39.4	18.2

**Table 3**

“What could your agency do to improve the experience?”  
(Open-ended)

Improvement	Percentage
Pay Me	19%
Better Mentorship of Interns	16%
Better Organization of Internship	16%
More Client Interaction	9%
More Inclusion in Agency	6%
Better Communication with Interns	6%
Hire Me	3%
Nothing	25%

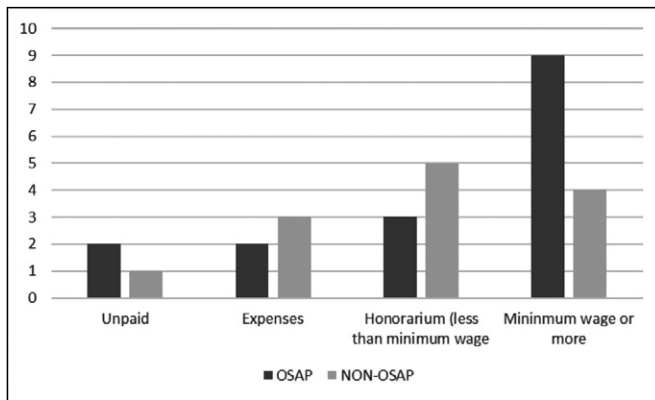


Figure 3: Internship pay levels split by OSAP/Non-OSAP Students (actual numbers)

contrast with journalism students in Portugal: They worked long hours with low pay doing similar work to paid employees, but they were satisfied with the experience because it provided real work experience that made them more likely to get employment.

Pay may not have been a legal issue for the students in this study because they were completing their internships as part of a school program, which exempts them from the employment law in most of Canada (Canadian Intern Association, 2017). Further, although their experience of “getting paid” was rated poorly, it did not correlate with overall satisfaction with the internship. It does, however, remain an issue in terms of equity. Not all internships are equally open to all students, especially those with financial constraints. Equally, it means agencies can miss out on good talent.

One unexpected topic that emerged was that of mentorship. This factor was not highly rated in terms of importance before the internships began, but became recognized as important once students were in their internships: 36% expressed some level of dissatisfaction with their level of mentorship. It was also,

with pay, often spontaneously cited as an area for improvement by students. Although the students in the present study did not initially appreciate the value of mentorship, its importance has been known for some time. Narayanan, Olk, and Fukami (2010), for example, found increased mentor involvement led to improved internship outcomes. Similarly, Maertz et al. (2014) report that having little mentorship support reduces internship satisfaction. This research shows that there is a need to increase awareness among advertising agencies and other employers of the importance of mentorships in creating successful internship experiences. Currently, many agencies do not include mentorship in the internship planning. Similarly, students need to be told of the importance of finding a mentor at their internship. As we saw, many did not initially regard it as important, before they arrived at the internship. It should be noted that since mentorship was self-defined in this survey, it may have included informal mentorships from people within the agency as well as formal ones.

A further area of concern is the process by which students and internships are matched up. As stated, students found the experience of finding an internship difficult and stressful. One concrete way to address this is to have a centralised database of internships available, as noted by one student’s suggestion: “Have one place where all the agencies post their job openings.”

The other areas identified by Shoenfelt et al (2012) as important, including onboarding and other aspects of the orientation process, were not an issue with this group of students. Our students were interested in getting into the job market and having an authentic experience, and their complaints were mostly when something stopped them from doing that. This could be related to the fact that they had completed nearly 4 years of education and were ready to enter the workforce. This is reflected in the increases we saw in terms of importance for enhanced employability. Students see the internship as path to a successful job; not the beginning of that job itself.

Of course, care must be taken in interpreting the results. The sample, though it reflected almost all the available students in the program (N =36), was relatively small, at 35. The group surveyed was restricted to one program from one college and therefore may not be representative of students from other programs. Finally, much of the discussion is based on correlations between the ratings of the elements of the experience and overall satisfaction. There is no proven causality.

In summary, we started off asking what students’ perspectives were on internships. Based on our data, the current system of internships is working well for most students. Students in the present study particularly appreciated the

**Table 4**

Correlations between statements and satisfaction and likelihood to recommend (Ranked in order of reported importance, post survey)

Statement	Satisfaction with Internship	Recommend the agency to others
Treat me with respect	.57**	.52**
Good experience to add to resume	.75**	.65**
Working on real client projects	.64**	.43*
Friendly environment	.67**	.71**
On-the-job experience	.79**	.83**
Enhanced personal employability	.81**	.62**
Enhanced skills	.82**	.75**
Inspiring and stimulating environment	.76**	.74**
Interacting and learning from working advertising professionals	.71**	.54**
Improved network for future opportunities	.66**	.75**
Getting paid	.34	.60**
Better understanding of what I want in my career	.59**	.30
Opportunity to work on challenging (mock) projects	.50**	.31
Having a mentor	.68**	.44*
Good contacts to use in future job search	.75**	.59**
Good agency name to add to resume	.57**	.58**
Involved in experiencing all aspects of agency life	.72**	.75**
Meeting clients	.43*	.32
Clearly defined roles and responsibilities	.55**	.43*
Reasonable or flexible hours	.25	.14
Good chance of getting a job from that company	.60**	.69**
Lots of social activities	.36*	.30
Formalized in house training/ classes	.45**	.51**
Good onboarding program	.53**	.46**
Satisfaction with internship	1	.70**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

real-life experience and the chance to work with active industry professionals. However, internships could be improved in three areas: pay, mentorship, and helping students in their search for placements. This is only one perspective, and others (e.g. those of agencies and the broader public) need also to be considered. Humber College and the ICA are currently working together to develop guidance for member agencies in these areas.

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