

CHAPTER 4

Integral or Irrelevant: What Makes a Desirable Political Science Intern?

Shannon D. McQueen, West Chester University

Clinton M. Jenkins, Birmingham-Southern College

Susan L. Wiley, The George Washington University

Although the benefits of interning are well known, we know less about the qualities and skills of interns that sponsoring organizations value highly. We examine this question using site supervisor feedback about a major urban research university's political science internship program. We analyze quantitative data from site supervisor evaluations of student interns to determine which qualities are valued highly, and find that dependability, work ethic, attendance, usefulness to the organization, and level of initiative are most desirable. We also analyze open-ended responses regarding intern tasks, and both positive and negative aspects of intern performance. This research offers greater insights into the role of internships in undergraduate education, as well as the skills and traits that are perceived to closely affect interns' performance. Our conclusions are relevant to political science educators as well as political science students seeking internships or preparing to search for a job.

INTRODUCTION

Interning is an integral part of the student experience across universities and can have long lasting post-graduation effects. For example, in 2019 the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found that “graduating seniors who applied for a full-time job and participated in an internship received 1.17 job offers, while those who did not intern received 16% fewer job offers” (Koc et al. 2019). However, we know less about what qualities internship employers value in a political science college intern. This information is crucial to the success of our students, and needs to be examined through an academic lens.

In this chapter we explore political science internships from the supervisors' point of view. Using data collected between 2013 and 2018 from nearly 400 site supervisors who oversaw interns participating in-person in a for-credit program at The George Washington University (GWU), we analyze the skills and traits reported as being utilized, which of these were valued in their interns, and which of these that supervisors would like to see improved or developed further. Fundamentally, we offer an evi-

dence-based look at the qualities endemic to political science internships that are conducted in person.

We find that political science internships tend to require substantial amounts of writing, communication, and research. Additionally, site supervisors lamented a lack of attention to detail and lack of initiative, but when interns did exhibit those positive traits their supervisors praised them. According to our respondents, the ideal undergraduate political science intern tends to have a strong team-oriented attitude, produces quality work with attention to detail, and demonstrates significant independent initiative. These results have implications for how political science faculty design curricula and which skills are emphasized in preparing their students for future careers.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT COLLEGE INTERNSHIPS AND SKILLS

Internships are associated with tangible academic gains (Healy and Mourton 1987; Knouse et al. 1999; Routon and Walker 2015, 2018), civic skill development (Eyler and Halteman 1981; Mariani and Klinkner 2009), and employment advantages such as faster integration into the labor market (Klein and Grauenhorst 2014) and greater employability (Nunley et al. 2016; Silva et al. 2016; Teichler 2011). Thus, substantial research has documented that internships provide clear benefits to students across a wealth of areas. Yet much of what we know about the desirability of skills is anecdotal. Some scholars suggest that "... no single set of personal attributes and experiences seems to assure success as an intern... The type of person who seems to function well as an intern is one who is self-confident, tactful, mature and open and responsive to his situation; he is not necessarily an outstanding student, nor has he had prior practical political involvement" (Hedlund 1973, 24). Others note the importance of qualities such as maturity, tact, and energy, and sense of political curiosity (Hennessy 1970).

Previous work focusing on site supervisors has identified their importance to the success of an internship (Benavides et al. 2013; Sosland and Lowenthal 2017). Regular feedback from site supervisors can increase the quality of the intern's learning experience, although many site supervisors fail to do so frequently or systematically (Waters and Gilstrap 2012). In exploring the traits internship supervisors seek in interns, NACE found that they look for strong critical thinking, teamwork, work ethic, and oral/written communication skills (Koc et al. 2019). Additionally, NACE (2020) surveyed employers regarding the attributes they seek in college graduates, highlighting the five most desired attributes: problem-solving skills, ability to work in a team, strong work ethic, analytical/quantitative skills, and communication/writing skills (NACE 2020). Their study includes a wide spectrum of students, but it is not clear that the same set of skills is also most desirable for political science majors.

We build on this work by analyzing five years' worth of site internship supervisor evaluations from the internship-for-credit program at one university. We first provide an overview of the prominent skills that interns utilize or rely on in their internships, ranging from researching to event planning, as well as the traits that site supervisors perceive as essential to performing related tasks. Second, we identify qualities that site supervisors would like to see developed further in their interns: most notably these include writing and communication, taking initiative, and paying attention to details.

DATA AND METHODS

We analyze site supervisor evaluations of participants in the GWU Political Science Department's internship-for-credit program.¹ To receive academic credit, a student must be a declared political science major with at least junior standing,² have a confirmed internship, and have taken a minimum of three introductory political science courses. Each student who has registered for the internship course must complete a learning contract signed by the internship sponsor outlining the nature of the internship, the substantive work to be completed, the student's learning objectives, and a proposed paper topic. The final paper, which is due on the last day of classes, is expected to complement the intern's duties and should be based on some issue or problem that concerns the agency or office in which the student works. Students are expected to meet with or email the Director of Undergraduate Studies every three or four weeks to recap their work and report any problems. Finally, internship sponsors are asked to submit an evaluation of the intern's performance.

Our analysis rests on a dataset constructed from 372 intern evaluation forms collected during fall

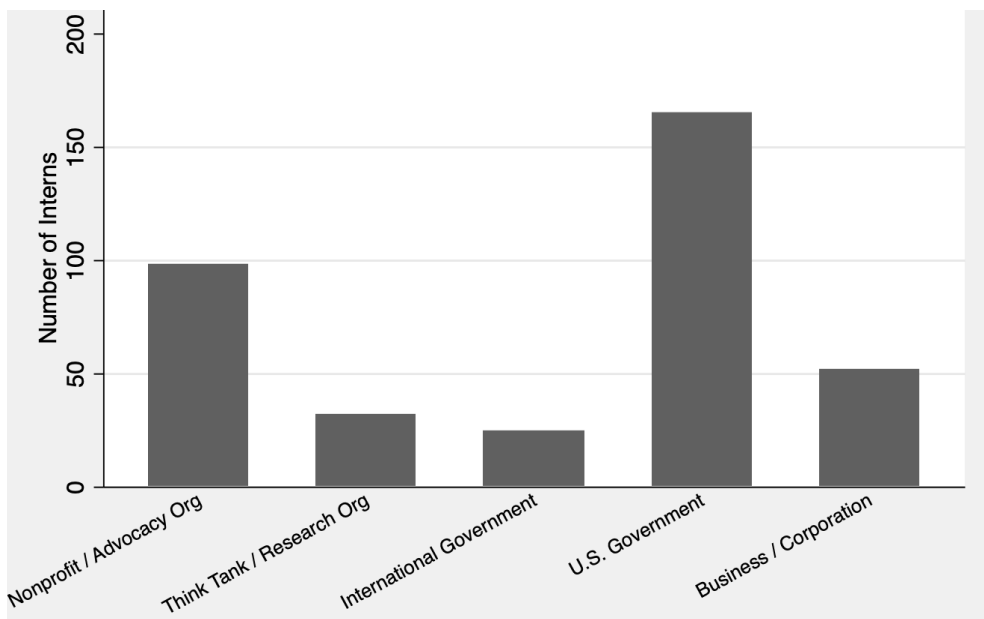
and spring semesters, 2013 to 2018; most internships (76%) were conducted in the spring.³ The forms are emailed to all site supervisors at the end of each semester, and include both qualitative and quantitative measures of intern performance. We use the quantitative data to provide summary statistics about interns' work and we analyze qualitative data with Atlas.ti.⁴ Utilizing an In Vivo coding methodology,⁵ we identify and analyze the occurrence of certain phrases including the overall performance of the intern, positive and negative comments, and internship activities. Because there was very little variation in the results based on the category of the sponsoring organization or students' sex, we present the results aggregated for all evaluations.⁶

RESULTS

Location and Time

GWU students interned at a range of organizations that can be grouped into five major categories: nonprofit or advocacy organizations, think tanks or research organizations, international governments, the United States government, and businesses or corporations.

Figure 1. Number of Interns by Type of Internship



As depicted in figure 1, slightly under half of all internships involved the US government, which includes “Hill internships” in Congressional offices (members or committees), as well as more unconventional placements, such as the Office of the First Lady. About 25% of internships are conducted at nonprofit organizations, including partisan establishments such as the Republican Governors Association, and advocacy groups such as Planned Parenthood, the Human Rights Campaign, or Refugee International. Around 14% of internships take place through businesses or corporations such as law offices or media consulting groups, and even fewer are completed through think tanks or international governing bodies. No statistically significant differences were found when analyzing type of internship placement by sex (female/male).

Overall Performance

Turning now to intern performance, we first provide an overview of how site internship supervisors rated interns on eight different skills or traits. In particular, we observe ratings of interns' performance with respect to their dependability, work ethic, attendance, usefulness, ability to work effectively with others,

quality and quantity of work produced, and level of initiative. These were assessed on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Most interns received 5s or 4s on these assessments, indicating generally very high levels of satisfaction. Each of the assessed qualities had a mean score between 4.6 and 4.9.⁷

All supervisors agreed that the internship was a good learning experience for the student and that academic credit was merited. No supervisor rated an intern's performance as unsatisfactory, possibly because the internship program was structured to facilitate high levels of communication among participants. Additionally, all respondents were interested in having another GWU student intern for them in the future. The item that yielded the most response variation asked if the site supervisors shared their evaluation with the intern. On that question the site supervisors split evenly, with 50% reporting that they shared the evaluation and 49% reporting that they did not share it.

Skill Utilization

To gain insight into the skills that interns employed during their internships, we turn to a question that asked site supervisors to provide a description of a project or situation for which a student was responsible and to comment on their performance.⁸ We coded their open-ended responses to identify the type of work the interns completed, noting each respondent's comments or phrases that referred to a specific activity. We then grouped these phrases to identify the specific skills used.⁹ Based on these responses, we created a typology of intern work that encompasses five main skill categories: writing and communication, event planning, supervision skills, research and analytic skills, and service. The categories and their frequencies are depicted in table 1.¹⁰

About 55% of all interns completed work with substantial writing or communications components. This category covers a wide range of projects, all of which involved summarizing, sharing, and/or communicating information. Specific types of work included giving presentations; writing policy, legal, and research briefs; crafting a proposal for a new podcast; and developing advocacy documents. For example, one intern at a consulting firm developed a new business plan for the firm, "including a marketing plan, budget forecast, and people plan."

Table 1: Student Engagement in Internship Activities

Activity Category	Percentage*	<i>n</i>
Communication and Writing	55.6%	207
Research and Analytics	43.3%	161
Constituent and Customer Service	11.8%	44
Event Planning	9.9%	37
Management or Leadership of Others	8.3%	31
* Percentage of 372 total interns		

The next most common internship activity was research and data management/analysis. Around 43% of interns engaged in these activities, which involved compiling, researching, or analyzing a range of topics. One intern analyzed congressional and think tank hearings, while another built a "national data base [sic] of good news arising from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act." Research included client-focused work for consulting firms, topic-centered research for think tanks and nonprofits, and advocacy planning for interest groups or other non-profits.

Fewer than 12% of all interns used event planning, supervision, and service-based skills. Event planning often involved assisting with preparations for large events, which was the case for an intern who coordinated and marshaled the crowd at a climate march, and another intern who organized "Press Breakfasts" on Capitol Hill. After one intern was so successful in helping plan a forum in Brussels, their organization sent them to assist with the event in person. Supervision skills refers to leading a team or directly supervising others, as was the case with one intern who managed the recruitment, organization, and training of hundreds of volunteers for a congressional campaign, and another who trained new interns and volunteers on how to contact voters. Finally, the service category contains any work done to connect to or satisfy clients or constituents. Most of these comments came from Hill intern supervisors, whose interns engaged in constituent services, such as leading Capitol tours or handling constituent

concerns.¹¹ For example, one supervisor wrote that the intern “learned about the public policy process, client management, communications, Hill advocacy, conducting research and more.” Another noted that the student had learned “the basis of political advocacy from taking research or policy positions and [how to] translate those into advocacy actions.” The skills that internship supervisors described tended to reflect the specific focus of the organization, such as networking, writing, communication, research, data analytics, or policy analysis.

Room for Improvement

To gain insight into the sorts of attributes site supervisors view as valuable but believe their interns did not possess, we asked the site supervisors to provide recommendations to improve students’ performance. We coded their answers by noting which competencies the site supervisors mentioned, identifying 11 broad categories of abilities that respondents wanted to see developed.¹²

Table 2 depicts the percentage of interns who received comments relating to each area of improvement. When supervisors critiqued the intern, they frequently commented on the need for improved written and oral communication skills. Many comments suggested that interns should hone their writing skills and look for opportunities to improve. Other comments in this category noted something more interpersonal, such as a lack of ability to communicate well, to listen to supervisors, or to share progress. For example, one site supervisor suggested that the intern “listen carefully when work instructions were being given,” and another noted how the intern “lacked communication skills” as they did not update supervisors on their progress with projects.

Table 2: Intern Supervisor Comments Regarding Areas of Improvement

Comment Category	Percentage*	<i>n</i>
Lacked communication and writing skills	16.1%	60
Lacked initiative	13.4%	50
Lacked attention to detail	9.9%	37
Lacked topical or specialized knowledge	8.9%	33
Needed increased confidence	6.7%	25
Lacked time management skills	5.4%	20
Lacked interpersonal skills and ability to work with others	4.8%	18
Did not manage their own workflow	3.8%	14
Lacked engagement	2.7%	10
Did not respond to corrections	1.3%	5
Worked slowly	1.1%	4
* Percentage of 372 total interns		

About 13% of interns received a recommendation to take initiative, to act and engage with the work independently. These comments suggest site supervisors desire a certain level of autonomy and self-direction in interns. One site supervisor succinctly noted the importance of taking initiative, and recommended the intern “take ownership of tasks and develop a working knowledge of topics she is not already invested in when they are assigned to her. Doing so would signal to employers that she not only cares about the work she is doing, but she is capable of taking on larger work and thinking about more complex issues.” Many supervisors connected a lack of initiative to a lack of overall engagement with the internship experience, such as one supervisor noting the intern “could be more engaged with the work. I felt she missed out on some awesome projects because she didn’t volunteer for or identify organizational tasks.” Here, the student’s lack of initiative was seen as a lack of investment in the work.

The finding that interns often lack initiative is not unexpected. Students likely feel nervous or vulnerable in unfamiliar semi-professional settings, making them less likely to take risks or demonstrate initiative in their work. One supervisor acknowledged this connection, noting, “With more working experience, she will acquire more self-confidence and will be able to take more initiative.” Nearly 7% of

interns received comments that referred to a student's lack of confidence. Furthermore, a student's prior experience within the classroom can influence their desire to take risks. In some classrooms, opportunities to take initiative can be rare, while the ability to complete a task and follow directions is emphasized. Asking to be put on a certain project or considering directions beyond the assigned tasks constitute new skills for students to learn.

Another common critique of interns was attention to detail. Many supervisors appraised the intern's lack of editing skills or attention to smaller details. For instance, a supervisor noted that the intern is, "very bright but she lacks attention to detail and organization." Other supervisors supplied specific examples, such as encouraging the intern to carefully check citations for projects, better edit their own writing, or "pay attention to minute formatting details." Some supervisors did note the contextual nature of this critique. One supervisor reported that the intern, "can be a bit sloppy in checking pieces for accuracy (he usually figures out his own mistakes) but most of that is accounted for because of the fact that ... the stats that I ask for are needed relatively quickly and he is put under pressure." Thus, in addition to developing better editing skills, interns may not be used to working in fast-paced work environments, resulting in more "little" mistakes.

Around 20% of all comments were positive, regardless of what type of organization one worked for, or the sex of the intern. Some respondents were so impressed by an intern's work that they extended the internships or offered their intern a job. For example, one supervisor noted that the intern "has been a great addition to our policy staff and has contributed in many ways. He has a can-do attitude, and we have invited him to stay on as a paid intern through the summer. He will help to staff our annual conference and trade show in early June."

Interestingly, many of the positive comments discussed level of initiative. This further suggests, as much as site supervisors' lament for more initiative taking, that self-motivation is both a skill and attribute of interns that is highly valued. For example, one site supervisor noted they would "hire the student here in a heartbeat! He was a pleasure to work with and showed a lot of initiative." Another site supervisor specifically noted that "the student doesn't just complete tasks, he goes above and beyond every time he delivers an assignment. He has completely restructured our team site as asked, while at the same time contributing fresh ideas and methods on his own for how to improve it. I can always rely on the quality of his work." Again, there do not appear to be any substantial differences in the frequency or types of critiques based on the sex of the intern.¹³

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Supervisors commonly identify three skills when considering what makes a valuable intern. Primarily, interns with strong written and oral communication skills, both in producing work and communicating interpersonally within the work environment, received frequent positive comments from site supervisors. Additionally, site supervisors often praised interns who showed initiative. Students who enthusiastically asked for more assignments, demonstrated their independence, and brought their ideas to a project were considered exceptional interns. Exhibiting initiative may seem self-evident to the seasoned professional, but many students struggled to exercise it in an internship setting. Finally, site supervisors appreciated when interns consistently produced high-quality work—in particular, when the intern exhibited attention to detail, a team-oriented spirit, and functioned well as part of a team. Thus, it is not only work products that are valued, but the attitudes that students bring with them into the internship.¹⁴ These results correspond to the 2020 NACE report of desired attributes for job candidates more broadly, as the ability to work on a team, possessing a strong work ethic, and communication skills are attributes that over 77% of employers desire on students' résumés (NACE 2020).

Based on these results, we make a series of recommendations for political science programs and educators that should enhance the internship experience for both the interns and the sponsoring organizations. Some of these suggestions require low effort and minimal infrastructure, while others may require more intensive effort and additional support.

Because communication—both content-oriented and interpersonal—appears vital to students engaging in internships, our first recommendation is that political science educators expand opportunities for practicing communication skills in their courses. Ideas for communication skill development include requiring more in-class presentations of student work, providing space for interpersonal interactions with peers in class, and integrating structured meetings with professors for students to practice provid-

ing updates on extended projects. Mastery of these skills is likely to translate into better teamwork and ability to work with supervisors throughout an internship.

Second, we recommend that faculty integrate into their courses more assignments that mimic those that students are asked to produce in an internship or workplace. For instance, interns are often tasked with writing memos, developing proposals or recommendations, or writing briefs, all of which vary significantly from the standard “academic paper” often assigned. While standard academic writing is a crucial skill that demands frequent exercise, practicing alternative types of writing may help interns meet worksite expectations quicker, enabling them to focus on acquiring new knowledge and developing other skills at their places of work.

Third, inviting students into the editing process by assigning longer-term projects with draft milestones (and providing prompt feedback) is one way to help students develop greater attention to detail. Breaking down a major assignment into stages over a semester may have the added advantage of modeling for students the systematic planning of major projects. Five percent of all site supervisors expressed a desire for students to improve on planning and time management, and almost 4% more expressed a wish for students to manage their own workflow.

Fourth, political science faculty should design curricula and assignments that empower students to take greater initiative in and ownership of their research projects. For example, students should be given opportunities to devise their own research questions, plan a project to investigate their questions, and carry out their research and analysis. Faculty might also consider providing students with options for how to present information for a given assignment (podcast, verbal presentation, handouts, videos, and so forth) to emphasize student choice and control. If group work is assigned, students might also develop their supervision abilities. In general, assigning more team-oriented, self-designed research projects can help students prepare for the type of work they may do in an internship or in the workforce, post-graduation.

Fifth, beyond the classroom, we recommend that advisors, whether they occupy that role formally or informally, proactively communicate to students the skills and traits that internships may require of them. This approach can help frame students’ expectations about their internships, helps them anticipate their employers’ expectations about their performance, and can prompt them to focus on developing attributes in preparation for an internship. Reviewing a simple “10 Tips for Interning” handout with prospective interns is one way to share this information. A sample document is available in the Supplemental Internship Resources section.

Our sixth and final recommendation reiterates a strong point made by others in this volume: making expectations clear at the outset is critical for long-term success, particularly with respect to the skills that an intern seeks to develop. While clear expectations won’t make intern performance anywhere near perfect, it may result in fewer site supervisors wishing for greater “x, y, or z” in an intern’s performance.

These recommendations are intended to help faculty prepare students for both internships in political science and professional work in related fields, and we believe that it is safe to assume that site supervisors of political science interns value the same sorts of skills in non-political science interns and in their professional employees as well.¹⁵ Communicating, taking initiative, and paying attention to details are likely to be assets for all students in all sorts of internships and professional settings.

We did, however, identify one set of skills that site supervisors of political science interns may uniquely value: the writing of memos and briefs, and writing generally. These kinds of documents and writing styles often differ from those common to business, corporate settings, or even the natural sciences, so students with majors other than political science may find them to be of limited value. However, we assert that there is merit in offering political science students the opportunity to develop these skills, regardless of their intended career.

Overall, the results of our analysis confirm what most academic internship advisors already know: interns often do an impressive amount of work (with significant variation across interns and internships, of course). Political science interns tend to use five major types of abilities most frequently—communication and writing; research and analysis; constituent or customer service, event planning; and supervision of others—and over three-quarters of the projects named by site supervisors involve writing/communication and research-based skills. Given the great potential for students to excel as interns and future drivers of the workforce, we recommend that political science instructors use the classroom to help students sharpen their transferable skills so that they can meet and exceed the expectations of their site supervisors and future employers.

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ENDNOTES

1. The Political Science department and GWU strive to make the internship class as accessible as possible. Credit may be earned for a paid or unpaid internship, and the GW Career Services Center has funds available for students who are foregoing Federal Work-Study in order to intern. There are also transportation funds available to students who are interning. PSC 2987, Internship in Political Behavior, the department's for-credit internship program, is offered fall, spring, and summer terms. PSC 2987 is variable (1, 2, or 3 credits): for one credit the student must intern a minimum of eight hours per week and write a 10-page paper. For two credits a student must intern a minimum of 10 hours per week and write a 12-page paper. For three credits a student must intern a minimum of 15 hours per week and write a 15-page paper. The class is graded on a pass/fail basis. Up to three credits of PSC 2987 may be earned towards the political science major. During a typical academic year between 120 and 130 majors register for PSC internship credit, around 20% of whom are declared political science majors. Many other political science majors become interns without registering for credit. The Political Science Department maintains a list of available internships, as does Career Services.
2. There are three reasons for the upper-class requirement. First, logistically speaking, neither the internship program nor the internship class can be staffed by the faculty needed to accommodate the large number of majors who would like to intern for credit within the department. Second, first-year and sophomore students are not eligible for internship credit to encourage a greater focus on adjusting to the demands of college. The third reason for requiring junior standing is so that the student will have acquired enough knowledge of the discipline to be able to apply it to the internship. Other internship-for-credit opportunities are available from other programs in the university for those second-year students most motivated to complete an internship.
3. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of The George Washington University and Birmingham-Southern College.
4. Atlas.ti is a qualitative analysis software suite that enables researchers to use a variety of tools to analyze qualitative data found in formats such as audio clips, text documents, images, social media data, and more. More information can be found at: <https://atlasti.com/product/what-is-atlas-ti/>.
5. In Vivo is a qualitative form of content analysis that highlights the language of the respondents. Codes are created from the transcripts themselves, rather than established in advance by the researchers.
6. There is considerable variation in the number of hours students spend interning. The majority of students interned under 500 hours, with a mean of 300 hours (s.d. 159 hours). Students working over 500 hours may have interned for longer than the length of a semester or interned for an extremely demanding organization, such as the White House Office of Public Engagement. Based on institutional guidelines for academic credit, students interning for one credit averaged 120 hours within the semester; for two credits the average was 150 hours; students earning three credits averaged 225 hours. Most students work about 18 hours per week per 16-week term.
7. There are no significant differences in evaluations based on sex of the intern.
8. Site supervisors often requested students to engage and utilize more than one skill or trait in their internship. Very often, those whose work involved a research component were also required to share or summarize findings. When internship supervisors mentioned more than one skill, the individual comment was coded for each respective skill. For example, one intern prepared and then publicly presented updates for a major corporation's leadership on election integrity work, using both research and communication skills. Another followed several conferences on think tanks, and ultimately wrote a report of their findings. Thus, there would be two distinct skills identified and tracked in the supervisor's response.
9. To develop categories for this data, all responses were initially coded based on the skill listed in the internship evaluation. Then, responses were grouped based on coding themes that emerged from the data. Codes were refined to best reflect the themes in the supervisor evaluations. After an initial independent coder explored the code themes in the documents, the larger group verified the patterns found in the analysis. About 17% of all open-ended responses provided by supervisors referred to interns' activities. Many site supervisors used terms such as "research" and "project," suggesting a heavy research component for many internships. Additionally, words like "team," "us," "staff," and "helped" underscore the importance of interpersonal and teamwork skills within the internship.
10. This list was created by first coding the type of activity that the supervisor noted the student completed within the evaluation. Based on all responses, we then grouped similar activities together based on our subjective assessments of the nature of each task to identify common categories. One of the coauthors served as the primary coder making the initial groupings; these were then verified by the coauthors.

11. In assessing skills by sex (binary male/female categories are used in the analysis), there do not appear to be any differences. A Chi-Square test of independence between sex of the intern and internship activity revealed a p-value of 0.157, meaning that we cannot conclude the variables are associated.
12. We followed a coding process similar to that in the previous section.
13. A Chi-Square test of independence between sex of the intern and criticism revealed a p-value of 0.172, meaning that we cannot conclude that variables are associated.
14. Similar to others (Knouse et al. 1999), we find no differences in evaluations of intern performance based on sex of the intern.
15. For the most part, we believe this to be a noncontroversial assumption, as we have no reason to believe that there exist large differences between what is valued by political science internship site supervisors, site supervisors of others, and professional employee supervisors.