

The Effect of Media Arts AmeriCorps Internship Participation  
on Post-Graduation Outcomes

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The AmeriCorps Cultural Technology Internship program in the Department of Media Arts at New Mexico Highlands University (NMHU) provides internship opportunities at New Mexico cultural institutions to Media Arts majors who are completing, or have recently completed, programs at the BA, BFA, and MA levels. The program is funded through the New Mexico Commission for Community Volunteerism and is a collaboration between the Media Arts Department and the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs. Through the program, students are selected for internships by matching their skill sets with positions at museums and other cultural institutions primarily within New Mexico and occasionally out-of-state. The students bring to the museums their knowledge of media arts and computer technology, and the ability to apply that knowledge to enhance museum exhibits in both physical and on-line environments. The cultural institutions provide a mentor from their staff for each intern and, working with the Department of Media Arts AmeriCorps Internship Director, develop a written agreement that details tasks and products the member will work on during the internship. The duration of the internships ranges from three months to one year, and a student may participate in up to four terms. The internship positions are funded through a 50% match, with one-half of the funds provided through the AmeriCorps grant and the other half by the cultural institutions. The majority of the interns come from ethnic backgrounds that are traditionally underrepresented in professional media arts and computer technology positions and in media arts graduate programs. A primary goal of the internship experience is to prepare students to gain employment or to attend graduate school in these areas. This paper reports on the success of the AmeriCorps Cultural Technology internship program in achieving that goal.

### **Previous Research on the Effects of Internship Participation**

A review of the internship research literature reveals numerous examples of survey research (e.g., Mombourquette, 2014; the annual National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveys on internship effects) and qualitative or mixed methods studies focusing on internship satisfaction and benefits (e.g., Hoy, 2011). The results of these studies are generally positive regarding the effects of internship participation. Mombourquette (2014) found that post-secondary interns rated their internship experiences in rural non-profit voluntary sector (NPVS) organizations positively (e.g., “degree to which interns valued the learning experience,” mean of 7.8/10 on a Likert-type scale; “Increased their understanding of the type of work done by the nonprofit/voluntary sector,” 7.9/10), and that the NPVS organizations valued the contributions of the interns (e.g., “Valuable’ was the most common word used when organizations described the worth of having interns,” p. 177). Hoy (2011) found that “General reflections on internships by the participants indicated an overall positive experience” (p. 35), and that “The participants believed their internships helped them gain positions in collecting institutions, through their being able to demonstrate practical experience as well as theoretical knowledge” (p. 36). These findings support previous research on the effects of internship experiences. For example, Knouse, Tanner, and Harris (1999) found that 55% of college students who had a job at graduation had previously participated in an internship while 47% had not, and that interns

achieved a significantly higher grade point average (GPA) by graduation compared to those who had not participated in internships.

While the benefits of internships are well-documented through survey and qualitative research, a review of the peer-reviewed literature conducted through several on-line sources identified only one quantitative quasi-experimental study that empirically examined the effects of internship participation on employment and short-term outcomes leading to employment (Taylor, 1988). Two recent research reports on the impact of internship participation on employment after college graduation and related shorter-term outcomes (e.g., job offers) noted that, while there is a wealth of survey and testimonial evidence regarding internship benefits, there is scant empirical evidence for the effectiveness of internship participation (Finley & McNair, 2013; Nunley, Pugh, Romero, & Seals, 2014).

In preparing the annual AmeriCorps program evaluation reports, the AmeriCorps Internship Director and the external program evaluator noticed that AmeriCorps interns were either employed in media arts positions or enrolled in media arts graduate programs more often than Media Arts students who had not participated in an AmeriCorps internship. They consulted with an NMHU School of Education faculty member and began monitoring the employment and graduate school enrollment figures for Media Arts students, enabling the comparison of these outcomes between AmeriCorps interns and a matched sample of students who had not completed an AmeriCorps internship. A brief report summarizing the results of this comparison was prepared for the Media Arts Department in 2013 (Nelson, 2013), and this white paper represents a more formal report of the results that includes the most recent program data.

The purpose of this white paper is twofold: 1. To document for the NMHU Department of Media Arts the effects of the AmeriCorps Cultural Technology internship experience and 2. To report the most recent results of the ongoing quasi-experimental research that is being conducted to empirically determine the effects of AmeriCorps internship participation.

## **Method**

This study uses a quasi-experimental non-equivalent control group design to compare the employment and graduate school attendance outcomes (the dependent variable) of NMHU Media Arts majors who participated in an AmeriCorps Cultural Technology Internship (N=35, the treatment group) with the outcomes of NMHU Media Arts majors who did not participate in an AmeriCorps internship (N=37, the control group) – internship participation being the independent variable. Students in these two groups comprise the “naturally assembled collectives” (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) that are typical of quasi-experimental research design in applied settings.

Data on employment and graduate school enrollment were gathered by the Media Arts Department from multiple sources including: 1. The NMHU Media Arts and AmeriCorps Cultural Technology Facebook pages, through which graduate school enrollment and employment status is requested annually; 2. E-mail correspondence between the Media Arts

Department and former students; and 3. AmeriCorps annual program evaluation reports (Navarette, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014).

The participants in this study were majors in Media Arts working toward a BA, a BFA or an MA during the time period from 2010 through 2014. In this study, those who did and did not complete AmeriCorps internships were matched on ethnicity and grade point average (GPA) based on data in the Media Arts Department files. The ethnicity of the students in the treatment and control groups combined was 55.6% Hispanic, 25.0% Anglo-American, 9.7% American Indian, 6.9% African American, and 2.8% Other. Their combined average GPA was 3.36.

The ethnic breakdown of the participants by treatment and control group is summarized in Table 1. To determine how well the treatment and control groups matched on ethnicity, a chi-square test of independence was run. This test was not significant. Because of the small sample sizes for three of the ethnic groups (African American, American Indian, and Other), this chi-square had several expected cell sizes less than 5, so another chi-square test was run comparing the percentages of Hispanic and Anglo American students (the two largest demographic groups) in the treatment and control groups. This test was not significant, either, and together the chi-square tests establish the equivalence of the treatment and control groups on ethnicity.

Table 1

*Intern Characteristics*

Group	Hispanic	Anglo	Am. Ind.	Afr. Amer.	Other
AmeriCorps Intern (N = 35)	60.0%	20.0%	8.6%	5.7%	2.8%
No Internship (N = 37)	51.4%	29.7%	10.8%	8.1%	0.0%

Treatment and control group mean GPAs are contained in Table 2. GPA data were not available for all the students, so the sample sizes in Table 2 are reduced from 30 to 19 for the treatment group and from 37 to 29 for the control group. The mean GPAs were compared using an independent samples t-test. The test was significant at the .05 level, although not at the .01 level  $t(46) = 2.092, p = .042$ , so there is evidence that the mean GPA of the treatment group was higher than that of the control group, and that the two groups are not equivalent on GPA.

The possible effect of this difference on the internal validity of this study will be addressed in the Discussion section.

Table 2

*Mean Grade Point Average*

Group	N	Mean GPA	s
AmeriCorps Intern	19	3.50	.31
No Internship	29	3.27	.40

**Results**

Table 3 shows the percent of AmeriCorps interns (the treatment group) versus non-interns (the control group) who were employed or enrolled in graduate school after graduation. Employment and graduate school enrollment data were available for 30 students in the treatment group and 37 students in the control group. The table shows that students who completed an AmeriCorps internship were employed or attending graduate school at a significantly higher rate (80%) than those who did not complete an AmeriCorps internship (43.2%), Chi-square (1, N=67) = 9.304,  $p < .01$ . Cramer's V for this statistic was .373, which is considered a "moderate" effect size.

Table 3

*Percent Employed or Enrolled in Graduate School*

Group	N	Employed/Enrolled in Graduate School
AmeriCorps Intern	30	80%
No Internship	37	43.2%

## Discussion

The results of this study provide empirical evidence that NMHU Media Arts majors who participated in the AmeriCorps internship program were employed or enrolled in graduate school at a significantly higher rate than NMHU Media Arts majors who were not AmeriCorps interns. The Media Arts students in the two groups that were compared in this study had similar academic histories except for participation in the AmeriCorps internship experience, lending support to the conclusion that it was the AmeriCorps internship that resulted in better employment and graduate school enrollment outcomes.

In matching the two groups, it was determined that, although they did not differ in ethnic composition, they differed in mean GPA, with AmeriCorps interns having a higher mean GPA than the non-interns. This GPA difference is a possible alternative explanation for the difference observed between the two groups on the dependent variable (i.e. a potential threat to the internal validity of the study). However, given that the internships were competitive (students were chosen for internship positions based on skill set and performance in the Media Arts program), it is not surprising that the AmeriCorps interns had higher GPAs. Nor is it surprising that students with higher GPAs were more likely to enroll in a graduate program or successfully gain employment – two other competitive situations where internship experience and good academic performance would provide a competitive edge. What is most likely is that both AmeriCorps internship participation *and* higher GPAs contributed to student success, that they go together hand-in-hand, and that is in line with we would expect.

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