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# **Music Industry Internship Administration: Overcoming Common Administrative Obstacles That Hinder Student Learning**

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## **Abstract**

Internships are a critical component of music industry education and often serve as the capstone experience in many music industry degree programs. Internships are intended to connect theory with practice and help the student transition from the classroom to the working world. Successful internship administration requires both the academic and worksite supervisors to adopt a team teaching mentality and to work together in order to achieve student learning objectives. Ten common obstacles in music industry internship administration are identified and discussed from both the academic and worksite supervisor perspective. Recommendations for overcoming these obstacles are offered to make the music industry internship a positive and rewarding experience for all concerned.

Keywords: music industry, music business, internship, administration, education, experiential learning, learning objectives, learning agreement, intern abuse

## **Introduction**

Internships are a critical component of music industry education. This form of experiential learning provides students important opportunities to put into practice theory learned in the classroom. In many programs, internships also serve as the capstone experience to the degree program. These capstone internships often serve as a stepping-stone for students transitioning from the classroom to the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

Internships also represent an important opportunity for employers to train and assess potential employees. The digital revolution has torn down many historic barriers of entry into the music industry and reinvigorated the “do-it-yourself” entrepreneurial spirit.<sup>2</sup> The lowering of these barriers has precipitated an explosion of small, entrepreneurial startups, “and a

lot of startups with unstable cash inflows usually need interns.”<sup>23</sup> With the increasing number of entrepreneurial startups flooding the marketplace, the demand for college-educated music industry interns is growing, and a cursory internet search will reveal a multitude of postings, listings, and advertisements for music industry internships.

While much has been written on the value and effectiveness of students interning in the music industry, there has been little formal discussion on the administration of these experiences and how common administrative obstacles hinder student learning. Overcoming common obstacles in music industry internship administration is critical in achieving the student’s learning objectives. Successful internship administration requires both the academic and worksite supervisors to work together to co-educate the student during the transition from academia to the working world. With enough cooperation, communication, and regular touch points between the academic and worksite supervisor, common administrative obstacles can be overcome thereby making the internship a positive and rewarding experience for all concerned. Not overcoming these obstacles can result in a poor internship experience that fails to achieve the student’s learning objectives, and potentially damages the relationship between academic and worksite internship supervisors, which in turn could limit the internship opportunities for future students.

## Methodology

Obstacles in music industry internship administration were identified using qualitative methods that included the observational study of over 250 undergraduate internships in which the authors participated as either the worksite or academic supervisor. Observational research was supplemented through the review of interns’ reflective writing assignments, worksite supervisor evaluations, student exit surveys, and interviews with academic and worksite internship supervisors. Internships surveyed were conducted primarily in the Los Angeles market from 2001 through 2015 and spanned five different music industry sectors: music publishing, recorded music, live music, music in media, and music products.

Motivated by the need to overcome these administrative obstacles and help students achieve their learning objectives, the authors first describe the differing perspectives on interns and internships held by the academic and worksite supervisor. Next, they identify the theoretical mod-

el used to frame their observations and recommendations. Finally, they identify, describe, and offer recommendations to overcome ten common obstacles to music industry internship administration.

## Supervisor Perspectives on Interns and Internships

Academic supervisors are frequently full-time faculty members who have at least one area of expertise in the music industry. They often work to strike equilibrium between achieving the student's learning objectives, meeting the needs of the company offering the internship opportunity, and minimizing the liability and risk management concerns of the university. Worksite supervisors are frequently junior-level industry employees with little to moderate experience working with interns. They often work to strike equilibrium between training the intern, managing their own workload and productivity, and maintaining a working relationship with the academic supervisor in order to guarantee a steady flow of interns in the future.

Academic supervisors tend to view interns as individual students with unique learning objectives and career aspirations. In their view, student learning objectives are intended to guide the intern's work. Internship tasks should be carefully assigned to ensure alignment with the learning objectives. The priorities of the internship are to achieve the learning objectives and ensure that the student gains valuable work experience.

Worksite supervisors, on the other hand, tend to view interns as an inexperienced pool of free laborers. They often see internships as opportunities for students to work alongside professionals in the real world. In contrast to academic supervisors, worksite supervisors often believe that intern tasks should be assigned as needed and that the available work should guide the internship learning objectives. While worksite supervisors hope interns will gain something from the internship experience, often their priorities are to manage their own workflow and not let the interns negatively affect their productivity.

While the differing perspectives between the academic and worksite supervisor seem at odds with one another and counterproductive to the administration of the internship experience, there is common ground that brings these two together. Both recognize the value of experiential learning and both want the interns to succeed in reaching their educational objectives. It is the intern that binds them together and requires them to work

as a team to successfully administer the internship experience. However, the administrative obstacles in which academic and worksite internship supervisors commonly find themselves entangled can stress this relationship.

### What Constitutes an Internship?

While it is generally understood in both academia and industry that an intern is a student who works for a temporary period of time in order to gain experience, perspectives on what actually constitutes an internship can vary widely within the music industry. The music industry has historically relied on worksite experience as the main mode of educating its workforce and has frequently used the internship as more of an entry-level rung on the ladder of employment rather than the type of holistic learning experience academics desire for their students.<sup>4</sup> As a result, music industry internships have, in general, leaned more towards internships resembling jobs rather than educational experiences.

In an effort to establish uniformity in the use and application of the term “internship,” The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) recommends the following definition:

An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, NACE also recommends that the following criteria be met to ensure that an internship experience is considered educational and legitimate.

NACE Criteria for an Experience to be Defined as an Internship:

1. The experience must be an extension of the classroom: a learning experience that provides for applying the knowledge gained in the classroom. It must not be sim-

- ply to advance the operations of the employer or be the work that a regular employee would routinely perform.
2. The skills or knowledge learned must be transferable to other employment settings.
  3. The experience has a defined beginning and end, and a job description with desired qualifications.
  4. There are clearly defined learning objectives/goals related to the professional goals of the student's academic coursework.
  5. There is supervision by a professional with expertise and educational and/or professional background in the field of the experience.
  6. There is routine feedback by the experienced supervisor.
  7. There are resources, equipment, and facilities provided by the host employer that support learning objectives/goals.<sup>6</sup>

This definition makes it clear that internships are courses and not jobs, and that the goal of an internship is learning through practical application and experience. It is a definition that attempts to strike a balance between both academic and industry perspectives. It is this model that serves as the theoretical framework through which observations and recommendations are founded.

### **Intern Abuse in the Music and Entertainment Industries**

Unfortunately, the entertainment industry does not have the best track record when it comes to the treatment of unpaid interns.<sup>7</sup> The historical use and abuse of unpaid interns by the music industry to fill entry-level positions has largely been enabled by the disproportionate demand of students, and others, willing to work for free, who were seeking to launch their careers in the business.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the lure of being close to music, creativity, fame, and fortune can be overwhelming to many students. The excitement of finally being free of the classroom and working in the field, coupled with a general lack of music industry experience, often place students in a position to have their labor exploited in the workplace.

In 2013, a class action lawsuit was filed by over three thousand interns against Warner Music Group alleging "blatant violations of minimum wage and overtime requirements, and major infractions of the Fair

Labor Standard Act.”<sup>9</sup> The interns alleged that “Warner Music Group and its subsidiaries routinely abused interns by focusing their energies on... fetching coffee and grabbing lunch for paid employees.”<sup>10</sup> Every intern is occasionally asked to do these things; however, these tasks provide no educational or vocational value, “which is a critical requirement for unpaid, apprentice-style internships.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, an internship consisting largely of such menial duties is very likely to fall within the definition of intern abuse. The mindset of students looking for internships in the music industry perpetuates this negative perception, as evidenced by an intern for a company that books music talent who spent her time “photocopying, filing, and responding to routine e-mail messages for her boss.”<sup>12</sup> She was quoted as saying, “If you want to be in the music industry that’s the way it works. If you want to get your foot in the door somehow, this is the easiest way to do it. You suck it up.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to Warner Music Group, Viacom, ICM, and Universal Music Group have had to answer to complaints filed by unpaid interns.<sup>14</sup> According to the complaint filed against Universal, the company “did not provide academic or vocational training,” yet the plaintiff “regularly worked between forty and fifty hours a week,” with duties that consisted almost solely of non-educational, non-vocational tasks such as “stocking drinks, delivering mail, and organizing storage rooms.”

In light of recent litigation over internships, more attention than ever is being placed on how these student work opportunities are conducted. The governing law applicable to internships, which contains the legal definition of “employee,” is the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, and while it appears that the legal text sets a high bar for classifying a worker as an intern, the reality of the situation is otherwise. Without full knowledge of the 1938 Act, many employers classify student workers as “interns” solely on the basis of their receiving credit for the internship, and this, employers believe, allows them to take on unpaid workers while remaining in compliance with the Act.<sup>15</sup> In 2015, “21 internship-related lawsuits were filed,” and “the targets of unpaid interns’ lawsuits included Condé Nast Publications, Warner Music Group, Gawker Media, Fox Entertainment Group, NBCUniversal, Viacom, Sony, and Universal Music Group.”<sup>16</sup>

The term “provisional labor” is used by some to “describe the temporary, conditional, and ambiguous standing of interns, as they simultaneously build their employability and provide inexpensive labor.”<sup>17</sup> This

ambiguity of standing often results in interns not being fully aware of their responsibilities or their employers' expectations, which in turn yields an unfruitful internship for students, a waste of resources and energy for firms, and a deterioration of the relationship between academic programs and key industry partners. Today, "[v]irtually every four-year program offers its students an opportunity to intern in the industry," and it is becoming increasingly apparent that it is "critical to participate in a music industry internship as, in this competitive business, an education is likely not enough for entry into the field."<sup>18</sup> Internships are essential for imparting relevant, industry-specific experience, which is practically mandatory for a job in the music business,<sup>19</sup> but these internships are also vital for the industry itself as it faces new challenges to its cost/revenue structure and attempts to keep expenses low while maintaining pace with a rapidly-shifting business landscape.

With the growing scrutiny placed on entertainment industry internships, employers need to be cognizant of how their internship programs are conducted. They must work more closely with academic supervisors to ensure, first of all, that the nature of the employment falls within, and fits the proper definition, of an internship, and subsequently, that the internships provide a meaningful learning experience for the students while creating a value-add for the firm. Many internships either function as entry-level positions, but without placing any impetus on the firm to compensate the interns, or they skew too far in the other direction, and in an effort to prevent substantive, compensable work being done by the interns, simply relegate them to menial tasks.<sup>20</sup> Both of these scenarios are unsuitable, but through a deliberate, controlled, and coordinated effort by both the academic supervisor and the worksite supervisor, such scenarios are avoidable. Music industry internships can and should be reevaluated and revamped to ensure a rewarding experience for the intern and a lasting, beneficial relationship between the academic and industry worlds.

## Common Administrative Obstacles and Recommended Resolution Strategies

The ten common obstacles to music industry internship administration are categorized into four groups: 1) Academic/Worksite supervisor-centered, 2) Academic supervisor-centered, 3) Worksite supervisor-centered, and 4) Student-centered obstacles. While strategies to overcome individual obstacles vary, common strategic themes for resolution are sug-

gested. Overcoming these obstacles is critical in meeting the common and, at times, divergent needs of the academic and worksite internship supervisors while at the same time ensuring that the student's learning objectives are being achieved.

### 1) Academic/Worksite Supervisor-Centered Obstacles

These administrative obstacles lie with both the academic and worksite supervisors and center on how they view and relate to each other, and how the supervisors individually view and relate to the intern.

#### Failing to Embrace a Team Teaching Mentality

A fundamental obstacle in internship administration is the lack of a common understanding between the academic and worksite supervisors that they are co-educating the student and that their individual instructional efforts are asynchronous. These supervisors generally do not actively collaborate after the completion of administrative paperwork required by each respective institution. While both supervisors should work collaboratively with the student to develop the student's learning objectives, outside of that, these supervisors generally work in isolation from each other on a daily basis. Because of this lack of communication, the internship supervisors may not always agree on specific methods employed to achieve the internship learning objectives.

Academic and worksite supervisors may hold vastly different viewpoints on business practices, work ethic, and the stability of the intern's intended career path. Academic supervisors may feel that worksite supervisors are painting a distorted view of the music industry, one in which they unfairly present their personal experiences and biases as the definitive word on the subject. Worksite supervisors may feel that academic supervisors are too far removed and out of touch with the daily realities of the industry. At a point where the students are dealing with the transition from the academic to the working world, they are often caught in the middle trying to determine to which supervisor they should listen. Ultimately, it is important to understand that the supervisors' focus must be on the value that each brings to the student. While academic instructors may not have the depth of professional experience leveraged by worksite supervisors, they generally have more experience communicating and educating young people. And while the worksite supervisors may lack the depth of professional education experience possessed by the academic supervisors,

they tend to have more specific knowledge and experience in navigating the daily rigors of working in the music industry. In this co-educating arrangement, it is vital that each supervisor keep lines of communication open while respecting and relying upon the other's strengths rather than focusing on the weaknesses. Implementing regular touch points such as worksite supervisor performance evaluations and regularly scheduled telephone conferences can help to mitigate this obstacle and provide opportunities for the two supervisors to align their efforts.

### Failing to Recognize Differences in Intern Relationship Dynamics

An internship is not entirely a class nor is it entirely a job. Through the internship experience, students move their educational endeavors from the classroom to the professional worksite. For this transition to be successful, it must also be accompanied by a corresponding shift in the supervisors' relationship dynamic with the students. When academic and/or worksite supervisors lose sight of this, obstacles such as the intern favoring one supervisor over another or the intern feeling overwhelmed and caught between supervisors may result.

For the academic supervisor, the relationship with the student should move from the typical instructor-student classroom dynamic to a role more like a coach who is helping a star player reach his or her highest potential. If this is the student's capstone internship experience, the student should be ready to move beyond the normal instructor-student relationship to something more professional and collegial. Academic instructors want their students to act professional in the workplace. That training extends beyond the classroom and is carried through how the academic supervisor engages and interacts with the student. It is important however to remember to establish professional boundaries in this evolving relationship dynamic. As the student becomes aware that the relationship with the academic supervisor is maturing, there may be a potential for the student to become too familiar, cross professional boundaries, or rely too heavily on the academic supervisor. The academic supervisor should not become the student's guidance counselor or employment agent. The academic supervisor should be there to encourage students to take their first steps into the working world, and to offer assistance should they stumble.

In contrast, the worksite supervisor should remember that interns are not employees and they therefore cannot adopt the typical employer-employee dynamic when working with them. Because most music indus-

try internships are unpaid, interns have different motivational levers than regular employees. Worksite supervisors therefore need to employ varied forms of motivation such as channeling the intern's intrinsic interests into corresponding learning opportunities and providing opportunities to interns that might not normally be available to employees such as brief mentoring meetings with company executives. It is important to remember however that the nature of any relationship must grow over time. With regular employees, professional growth is often managed in yearly cycles with the prospect of advancement only attainable after a certain amount of growth has been achieved. While employers expect it to take a few years for employees to move up the learning curve and reach a new plateau of professional development, that expectation needs to be recalibrated and compressed with respect to interns. The learning curve for interns should be relatively shorter than that of a regular employee, and should be judged accordingly. Interns should be empowered to move up their curve as rapidly as they can assemble the necessary skills and experience; however, it should always be recalled that interns are there to learn first and foremost, while still bringing value to their respective firms. As a result, internship duties and responsibilities, and the dynamic between the worksite supervisor and the intern, should evolve as the internship develops.

## 2) Academic Supervisor-Centered Obstacles

These administrative obstacles lie with the academic internship supervisors and center on how they ensure the validity of the internship offering, and the quality and consistency of the worksite supervision.

### Determining the Viability of the Internship Offering

The digital revolution has torn down many historic barriers of entry into the music industry and reinvigorated the "do-it-yourself" entrepreneurial spirit. With an increasing number of entrepreneurial startup companies flooding the marketplace, the academic supervisor must exercise due diligence to ensure that the internship opportunity being offered is legitimate and that viable learning objectives can be achieved. Many of these startups are run on such a lean budget that the prospect of young, energetic (and often free) labor is very attractive. Many employers erroneously believe that students will learn just by passive observation. While once a common method of training in the music industry, students studying the music industry today have a breadth and depth of industry knowledge

that once took years of on-the-job experience to attain. Before employers reach out to educators seeking interns, they need to assess whether they have enough legitimate work to keep the interns engaged or whether they are just looking for unpaid assistants. They also need to consider whether the work is of significant merit to make a meaningful learning experience over an entire academic term.

It is important to note that the Wage and Hour Division of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) provides general information to help determine whether interns must be paid under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) for the services they provide employers. Conveniently summarized in FLSA Fact Sheet #71, academic and worksite supervisors should use these guidelines as a litmus test to help ensure that the internship opportunity being offered does not stray from its educational intentions and off into the realm of using interns to displace or substitute for regular employees. For interns to remain unpaid under the DOL, all six of the following criteria must be met.

FLSA Fact Sheet #71 – Test For Unpaid Interns:

1. The internship, even though it includes actual operation of the facilities of the employer, is similar to training which would be given in an educational environment;
2. The internship experience is for the benefit of the intern;
3. The intern does not displace regular employees, but works under close supervision of existing staff;
4. The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern; and on occasion its operations may actually be impeded;
5. The intern is not necessarily entitled to a job at the conclusion of the internship; and
6. The employer and the intern understand that the intern is not entitled to wages for the time spent in the internship.<sup>21</sup>

Academic supervisors need to keep in mind these criteria when assessing an internship offering. Not doing so can lead to superficial experiential learning opportunities and/or the intern being improperly used to fill what would normally be a paid employee position.

## Ensuring that the Worksite Supervisor is Actually Working with the Intern

The bait-and-switch gambit is nothing new to the music industry. In the context of internship administration, the student and academic supervisor are lured into accepting an internship opportunity with the belief that the intern will be working with a particular worksite supervisor (usually a department head or some other senior manager), only to later find out that he or she will actually be working on a daily basis with a subordinate. In these instances, the senior staff member usually wants to be designated as the worksite supervisor in order to maintain a higher-level relationship with the academic supervisor and ensure the continuity and quality of future interns. Unfortunately for the academic supervisor, the intern often accepts this arrangement without fully understanding the difficulties this obstacle can bring to the internship. The intern just wants the prestige that comes with having some connection to the senior staff member. The senior staff member may indeed spend some time working with the intern, but the real growth and learning for the intern is accomplished through the contact and mentoring of the day-to-day worksite supervisor.

This obstacle can further complicate the administration of the internship when senior staff members insist on completing the intern performance evaluations. For academic supervisors, the way to avoid this obstacle is to make it clear to senior staff members that while their time with the intern is encouraged and appreciated, the administration of the internship, and all accompanying intern performance evaluations, is to be completed by the day-to-day worksite supervisor. The academic supervisor often has a difficult enough time forging the team teaching dynamic with one worksite supervisor. Requiring the academic supervisor to interface with a hierarchy of worksite supervisors only serves to further complicate this administrative relationship.

### 3) Worksite Supervisor-Centered Obstacles

These administrative obstacles lie with the worksite internship supervisors and center on their inexperience at working with interns, perpetuating the cycle of music industry intern abuse, and not investing enough time and energy in interns during the first critical weeks of the internship.

## Worksite Supervisors Who are Inexperienced at Working with Interns

While many music industry professionals like the idea of giving back and having interns in their companies, not all worksite supervisors have the experience necessary to make this a productive relationship. This obstacle often manifests itself in a number of ways including the worksite supervisors, 1) not being prepared or having enough assignments for the intern each day, 2) unclear and/or confusing instructions on how to complete assignments, and 3) becoming irritated with the intern when they feel they have to explain everything. Worksite supervisors in this position will often not admit this lack of experience to their superiors, and they rarely have the time or the inclination to reach out to the academic supervisor for assistance. Instead, they often find some way to blame the intern for the poor internship experience.

To further complicate matters, students typically do not inform the academic supervisor of this situation because they have a very limited point of reference from which to judge the worksite supervisor's performance, and do not want to be known for criticizing their worksite supervisor for fear of later retaliation. As a result, the academic supervisor is often unaware of this situation and must rely on reading between the lines of internship status reports from both the intern and worksite supervisor to identify the problem. Once identified however, the academic supervisor, who is positioned to offer assistance and perspective to both parties, can usually overcome this obstacle. By ensuring that worksite supervisors understand team teaching objectives, perspective and experience are gained, and they will often become willing participants and valued partners in the internship experience.

## Worksite Supervisors Teaching the Way They Were Taught

A natural instinct for all teachers is to teach the way they were taught. Through education research, we now know more about how students learn than we did a generation ago.<sup>22</sup> And while researchers have illustrated that teacher-centered instruction is not always the most-effective practice to follow in the classroom, worksite supervisors are not career educators and often rely on whatever instincts they have to make it through the internship experience.<sup>23</sup> Historically, the music industry has relied on worksite experience as the main mode of educating its workforce. Specialized knowledge was often compartmentalized in a relative few who protected

this knowledge as a form of job security. This knowledge tended to be passed down only to those who suffered through a rather oppressive apprenticeship that bordered on indentured servitude. This practice didn't reward the most capable and/or promising candidates, but instead favored those who simply persevered and survived. Those who clawed their way up the industry ranks in turn perpetuated the practice on those they trained. Though waning, this instructional culture can still be found in certain music industry sectors today.

As a result of the proliferation of music industry degree programs in higher education, students entering internships today have a much stronger foundational understanding of the music industry than their predecessors. With the entrepreneurial spirit of the industry revived in the information age, there is increased competition among firms to secure high quality interns who possess an understanding of the industry's customs and practices. Worksite supervisors who persist in the poor treatment of interns generally find it difficult to secure interns. Those who still cling to the notion that the only way to learn the business is to teach the way they were taught need to let go of the protectionist doctrine of "not wanting to train their replacement." They would do well to remember that in this relationship-centric industry, it is important not to burn bridges, because one never knows when a former intern could be one's future boss. For the academic supervisor who runs into this administrative obstacle, there is little that can be done short of keeping lines of communication open and trying to work with worksite supervisors to improve their educational practices. Unfortunately, this culture can be so ingrained in a company that the academic supervisor is left with few alternatives and either ends up removing the student from the internship, appealing to company management to select a different worksite supervisor, or not recommending this internship to students in the future.

### **Worksite Supervisors Who are Not Patient as the Intern Progresses Up the Learning Curve**

A common complaint from worksite supervisors is that they do not have enough time to train interns and that it would be faster to do the work themselves. This obstacle usually results in an underutilized intern, poor intern performance evaluations (because the worksite supervisor does not perceive the value the intern brings to the firm), and an overall poor learning experience. What worksite supervisors need to remember is that

interns are not temporary employees and instead should be seen as an investment in future productivity.

The intern's learning curve will typically be longer than that of a temporary employee with some previous experience. While worksite supervisors can become frustrated with an intern's learning pace around week two of the internship, interns typically start hitting their stride about week four, assuming the intern is working approximately twenty hours per week. These first few weeks of the internship are a critical investment period for worksite supervisors that may result in more work initially, but will pay dividends later on if they remain patient and see it through. Students are interning to learn and that takes time.

For the academic supervisor, this obstacle can be difficult to identify. If the intern is receiving poor performance evaluations, is it because the intern is truly performing poorly, or is it because the worksite supervisor has not invested enough time to set the intern up for success? The academic supervisor is often forced to read between the lines from both intern and worksite supervisor reports to determine what is actually happening. Once identified however, this obstacle can usually be managed or remedied by the academic supervisor who is positioned to offer perspective to both parties.

One technique that has been employed by worksite supervisors who simply do not have the time or patience to invest during the early weeks of an internship is to engage multiple interns and stagger their internship periods so that a senior, more experienced intern can help train the junior and less experienced intern. This also provides the senior intern an opportunity to train and supervise a pseudo-subordinate while providing the junior intern with a slightly more experienced peer upon whom to rely. While this method does have some advantages, it can also contribute to the worksite supervisor's lack of engagement in the intern's training and overall development, which in turn can present difficulties when the worksite supervisor is required to complete the intern's performance evaluations.

#### 4) Student-Centered Obstacles

These administrative obstacles lie with the students and center on their failure to connect theory with practice, utilize the academic structure of the internship to focus, guide, and ultimately maximize their experiential learning, and remember their academic obligations even though they are not physically in a classroom.

## Students Who Fail to Connect Their Academic Knowledge to Their Internship Experience

A primary educational objective of an internship is to connect theory to practice. Students weary of the classroom and eager to begin their experiential learning often forget to consciously connect their academic knowledge with their internship experience. They can become so engrossed in the internship that they begin to erroneously believe that their academic classes were of little value and that their internship is where the “real learning” is occurring. And while worksite supervisors often appreciate their zeal and dedication to the internship, if interns don’t connect their academic knowledge to their worksite assignments, they can appear undereducated and unaware of basic industry concepts, customs, and practices. This can erode a worksite supervisor’s trust in the intern’s abilities, which often results in less significant tasks, assignments, and learning opportunities for the intern.

Students need to be reminded by their academic supervisors of the value of their foundational academic knowledge and how it helps them consciously (or unconsciously) succeed in the internship. Many times, what students perceive as industry “instinct” or “common sense” actually has roots in prior classroom lessons and discussions. Required weekly reflective writing assignments, especially during the critical first weeks of the internship when the student is moving through the worksite learning curve, can help to overcome this obstacle. In these reflective assignments, students should not only detail what they are working on and what they are learning, but also how their weekly work assignments connect back to their academic knowledge gained in the classroom. In reviewing and commenting on these reflective assignments, academic supervisors should take every opportunity to connect students’ internship experiences to core knowledge learned in academic settings so that students explicitly see the crossover and interrelation between academic concepts and real-world experiences.

## Students Who Fail to Use a Learning Agreement to Guide the Internship Experience

Because of the amount of competition involved in entering the music industry, many students are just happy to get an internship and be in the same room as music industry professionals. Furthermore, once they are in, students tend to think that knowledge and experience will flow

around them like a rushing river and that they will somehow pick up what they need to succeed along the way. Academic supervisors understand that this is a naïve approach and the likelihood of having a successful internship experience is greatly enhanced when all interested parties enter into a formal learning agreement. While these agreements can vary in length and specificity, and can at times resemble employment contracts complete with liability waivers, non-disclosure agreements, and work-for-hire clauses—in the event a student creates protectable intellectual property within the scope of the internship—at its heart, a well-conceived learning agreement should detail the fundamental duties and responsibilities of the intern and worksite supervisor as well as the specific learning objectives of the internship experience (see Appendix 1 for an example). Learning objectives should be specific, measurable, and attainable. They should not be broad and vague such as “learn about artist management.” Clearly defined learning objectives serve as extremely useful tools to shape and focus the internship experience. A simple method to get students to focus their learning objectives is to have them begin their list of objectives with the following sentence fragment:

“At the conclusion of this internship, I will be able to demonstrate...”

This sentence fragment communicates to the student the time frame in which the learning objectives must be achieved, and the level of experiential proficiency expected. To ensure that all interested parties buy into the learning objectives, they should be jointly developed by the intern and the worksite supervisor before, or at the latest, during, the first week of the internship and then approved by the academic supervisor. With this oversight, the academic supervisor can offer assistance in further refining and focusing the internship’s learning objectives.

Not employing a learning agreement with defined learning objectives can lead to a rather amorphous internship experience. This can leave the intern rudderless while simultaneously placing the academic supervisor in an awkward position if the internship begins to descend into a string of menial tasks with little educational value. While many worksite supervisors are willing to complete learning agreements at the beginning of the internship experience, many only use it as a tool to shape the beginning of the experience and not as a continuing roadmap throughout the

internship. It is important to understand that as interns learn and grow, it is natural for their duties and responsibilities to be adjusted. This does not mean however that the overall internship learning objectives are abandoned. The internship learning agreement should be viewed as a guide and not necessarily as a mandate. Academic supervisors need to remind both students and worksite supervisors of the importance of this agreement and encourage both to review it and use it as a tool to refocus the internship at defined intervals.

One such way to accomplish this is for worksite supervisors to have students complete an “entrance survey” at the beginning of the internship outlining their interests, competencies, and desired learning outcomes. This should be followed with a “midpoint survey” halfway through the internship which has the students reflect on how they believe the internship is progressing, including their perception of whether their assigned tasks align with their learning objectives and the value their work brings to the project, department, and/or firm. At the conclusion of the internship, the students should complete an “exit survey” where they reflect on what they have learned, discuss progress in achieving the internship learning objectives, detail achievements of which they are most proud (which might be used in letters of recommendation), and possibly even include suggestions for future interns based on insights they gained during the internship. And if the internship devolves into areas that were clearly not agreed upon or productive to the student, the academic supervisor has a signed agreement, as well as multiple follow-up documents, to support discussions with the worksite supervisor, or as justification for removing the student from the internship altogether.

### **Students Who Forget that the Internship is an Academic Course**

The music industry can be seductive. The lure of being close to music, creativity, fame, and fortune can be overwhelming for some students. If the internship in question is the student’s capstone experience, it will likely be one of the last classes taken prior to graduation. These students are prepped and eager to begin working in the industry. The excitement of finally being free of the classroom and working in the field can cause some students to forget that the internship is yet another academic course. This usually happens around week three of the internship. This obstacle often results in the student not responding to the academic supervisor’s correspondence, missing administrative deadlines, and submitting late re-

ports. While this is a period where academic supervisors should be working to wean students off academia, they also need to remind them that the internship is still an academic course, and that the academic supervisor has a significant role in the administration of the internship and in the final course grade.

Worksite supervisors need to remember that the music industry is seductive and that interns are impressionable. They need to set a good example of professionalism and not downplay the role of the academic supervisor, especially to the intern. They need to take the various administrative forms required by the academic institution seriously, including the internship learning agreement as well as all intern performance evaluations. By not doing so, the worksite supervisor is sending a strong message to the intern that the academic work associated with the internship is not important. This can place the academic supervisor in an awkward position and erode the team teaching dynamic.

For academic supervisors, keeping the worksite supervisor engaged and participating in the process as well as maintaining regular touch points with the students (such as meetings, assignments, telephone updates, e-mail correspondence, etc.) can help keep that connection alive and remind the interns that the academic supervisor is not going to compete for their attention, and that the internship experience is still a graded academic course.

## Conclusion

Music industry internships are not without administrative obstacles. Overcoming these administrative obstacles is critical in achieving the student's learning objectives. To do this, both the academic and worksite supervisor must work together to co-educate students during their transition from academia to the working world. And while their goal of achieving the student learning objectives may be the same, they may disagree in any number of ways regarding how to actually achieve those objectives.

Successful internship administration requires that both the academic and worksite supervisors work together to assess the viability of the internship offering, adopt a team teaching mentality, and understand the inherent differences in intern relationship dynamics. Together, internship supervisors must work through common worksite-related obstacles including remaining patient as the intern progresses up the learning curve, helping inexperienced worksite supervisors move beyond their instincts to

teach the way they were taught, stopping the cycle of unpaid intern abuse common to the music industry, and ensuring that the worksite supervisor is actually spending enough time with the interns to enable them to achieve the internship learning objectives. In addition, the internship supervisors must work together to navigate through student-related obstacles such as students forgetting that the internship is still an academic course, failing to connect their classroom academic knowledge to their worksite experiential learning, and failing to use the internship learning agreement to focus and guide the internship experience.

With enough cooperation, communication, and regular touch points between the academic and worksite supervisor, these ten common obstacles can be overcome thereby making the administration of a music industry internship a positive and rewarding experience for all concerned. And in turn, the successfully administered internship nurtures a symbiotic relationship between the academy and industry. It is this relationship that one hopes, in time, will grow to guarantee the music industry a more productive, college-educated workforce while at the same time empowering the industry to evolve and abandon outdated practices that take advantage of unpaid interns.

## Appendix 1

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### Internship Learning Agreement (excerpt)

The following excerpts are examples of the language that could be used to detail the critical components of any internship learning agreement:

1. Fundamental Responsibilities of the Student
2. Fundamental Responsibilities of the Worksite Supervisor
3. Internship Learning Objectives
4. Internship Duties and Responsibilities

Language is intentionally written in a conversational tone directed at the student and worksite supervisor by the academic supervisor. It is recognized that some academic institutions however may prefer, or require, language of a more legal nature.

#### Fundamental Responsibilities of the Student

**Show respect for the company in which you are interning.** This internship is a valuable educational opportunity and a privilege for you. While you are providing a service to the company, it in turn is investing precious resources in your learning process.

**Use common sense and conduct yourself in a professional manner at all times.** Every company has its own rules, policies, procedures, and expectations for which you are responsible. Be sure to familiarize yourself with these and other aspects of the company's culture at the beginning of your internship.

**Be punctual and responsible.** Even though you may not be paid for your services, you are participating in this internship as a reliable, trustworthy, and contributing member of the larger team. Always arrive on time and immediately notify your internship supervisor if you are unable to come in or anticipate being unavoidably late.

**Appropriate attire.** Your internship is being conducted in a work environment. Your attire should be neat and appropriate at all times.

**Ask for help when in doubt.** Discuss any questions or concerns about your internship with your worksite supervisor. Should a problem arise that cannot adequately be resolved by the worksite supervisor, bring your concerns to the attention of your academic supervisor.

**Student:** I have reviewed and agree to adhere to the guidelines for the Fundamental Responsibilities of the Student during my internship.

**Student Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Fundamental Responsibilities of the Worksite Supervisor

**Be prepared to have your intern work.** One of the most consistent problems in dealing with interns is not having enough work prepared (in advance) in order to keep them consistently busy (as tasks and deadlines don't always align with an intern's work schedule). Though some interns may be natural self-starters, most interns will look to the worksite supervisor for assignments and project guidance. It is in everyone's best interest (from a worksite and academic perspective) to use the intern's time as efficiently as possible.

**Interns are not free labor.** "An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied ex-

perience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; *and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.*” ([http://www.naceweb.org/connections/advocacy/internship\\_position\\_paper/](http://www.naceweb.org/connections/advocacy/internship_position_paper/))

This definition makes it clear that internships are courses and not jobs, and that the goal of an internship is learning through practical application and experience. Accordingly, interns should not exclusively be relegated to such tasks as data entry, answering telephones, filing, photocopying, etc. Though it is understood that interns will occasionally be assigned such duties as part of their learning experience, it is understood that these duties should not be an ongoing or majority part of the internship. For additional information on this topic, please see *Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act* (U.S. Dept. of Labor, Wage and Hour Division: <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf>).

**Internship Supervisor:** I have reviewed and agree to adhere to the guidelines for the Fundamental Responsibilities of the Worksite Supervisor and the guidelines in *Fact Sheet #71* (U.S. Dept. of Labor, Wage and Hour Division) during this internship.

**Supervisor Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Internship Learning Objectives

Detail at least three learning objectives that the student will achieve by the conclusion of this internship. Ensure that all learning objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and can be completed within the duration of the internship.

*“At the conclusion of this internship, I will be able to demonstrate...”*

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## Intern Duties and Responsibilities

Identify and describe the duties and responsibilities in which the student will be engaged. Duties and responsibilities should be designed to help the student achieve the above learning objectives.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

## Endnotes

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