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Disney College Program: Valuable Experience or Trivial Job

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DISNEY COLLEGE PROGRAM:  
VALUABLE EXPERIENCE OR TRIVIAL JOB

By

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## Abstract

This paper aims to provide aspiring entrepreneurs and companies with insight on what governs a beneficial, successful, and effective internship program. It will apply its findings to Walt Disney Corporation's College Program to analyze their strengths and weaknesses. It will consider factors, such as corporate culture, compensation programs, and personal development opportunities. The paper will be guided by three principal questions- *What constitutes a well-developed internship program? Is Disney exercising effective strategies to produce diligent workers? How do internship programs indirectly and directly affect corporations?* For college students, an internship is a way to gain experience, but it is important to know what kind of experience that they would value.

The primary objective of this paper is to provide a framework for what students should look for in an internship and what type of internship experience that corporations should provide. I believe that my research will reaffirm that internships should be more than about making money and establishing a job, but also concerned with adding value to individuals. Moreover, I expect to find that Disney has a thriving program since it is a well sought after internship. Lastly, this paper will provide a comprehensive study on the setbacks and benefits of participating in the Disney College Program.

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## I. Introduction

The Walt Disney Company has reigned as one of the most well-known entertainment conglomerates in the world due to their corporate reputation, dominant influence, and global impact. Since *Fortune.com* named the Walt Disney Company as the top Fortune 500 Company that Americans most want to work for, this paper will analyze the validity and social construct of this statement by solely focusing on the demand and effectiveness of their Disney College Program (Zillman). The Disney College Program is an internship opportunity that offers participants “valuable, on-the-job experience in [their] parks and resorts, and [to] expand your knowledge in a classroom with international diverse students from all over the country and potentially the world” (Disney College Program). In this paper, I will discuss five proposed factors that constitute a well-developed internship program that benefits student interns and employers, and how the Disney College Program fits this framework. These factors include academic extension, career relevance, mentorship, networking, and work environment. Simultaneously, I will consider the importance of value creation and how this concept applies to the professional relationship between both participating interns and companies. This evaluation will determine the Disney College Program’s areas for improvement based on the suggested criteria of evaluation, while assessing the program’s overall success. By studying this topic, I hope to produce a professional standard for companies to apply to their internship programs and a comprehensive guideline for college students seeking career advancing experiences that align with their goals and aspirations. For this paper, I will determine how The Walt Disney Company builds upon their synergetic creation of value through their Disney College Program.

## 2. Methodology

My methodological approach will be supported by a cost benefit analysis regarding what corporations and student employees stand to gain and lose by participating in an internship program. I also apply my educational background and experiences from the Disney College Program, and interviews of corporate executives and college students. I will also reinforce my findings with a sociological analysis that will address the social obligation college students experience in order to find an internship and secure a career. I will apply this social construct to the financial and personal costs that people endure to work for the Walt Disney Corporation.

## 3. History

The Disney College Program was established in 1981 in Buena Vista, Florida as an internship program to employ college students within the theme parks. Although Walt Disney World was not the original Disneyland theme park, it's larger scale allowed the Company more flexibility when it came to introducing new programs, like The Walt Disney World College Program. It originally was known as The Magic Kingdom College Program or The Walt Disney World College Program. It was offered for every semester and accepted a few hundred students each session. In the 1990s, the introduction of the internet supplemented the growth of the Walt Disney College Program to expand rapidly and quickly (Solis). Their original average of a few hundred participants every session increased substantially to a couple thousand every semester. In order to accommodate this increase in the number of participants, they expanded their participant housing to include four apartment options: Patterson Court, The Commons, Vista Way, and Chatham Square. After the Walt Disney World College Program proved to be a success in Florida, the

Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, California adopted the program in 2006 as the Disney College Program, which would from then on by the uniform name of the program (Solis). As previously mentioned, Anaheim's Disneyland Resort is a much smaller scale compared to the Walt Disney World Resort. Therefore, Anaheim's Disney College Program is considered more exclusive with an acceptance averaging at about 300 students per session and one housing option called Carnegie Plaza. This past 2016 year California's Disney College Program celebrated their 10-year anniversary, while Florida's Disney College Program celebrated their 35<sup>th</sup> year anniversary (Solis).

Since the beginning, the key core values that the Disney College Program has been centered around are living, learning, and earning. The living aspect highlights the opportunity for college students to live with other College Program participants, while experiencing all the opportunities that the program has to offer. The learning component justifies the collegiate and seminar classes that the Disney College Program offers college students to earn academic credit toward their education. Lastly, the earning element is characterized by the monetary compensation that is offered for the participants' employment. The combination of these three core values is intended to simulate an experience, similar to the typical college experience of dorming, attending lectures, and working part-time.

#### 4. Internship Evaluation Criteria

Employers benefit from an internship program by selecting and developing future talent. It is equivalent to a trial screening of a potential employee's ability to execute required tasks, interact with the corporate culture, and demonstrate work initiative (Stevenson University). On the other end of this relationship, interns receive real-world



experience and career advancement opportunities. It allows college students the chance to gain a deeper understanding of the career paths they've chosen, and puts their given professions in perspective. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a well-developed internship program that mutually benefits both parties involved. If employers aren't offering a valuable internship experience, then the company suffers due to an insufficient use of company resources. In regards to the interns, they, too, are expected to contribute their full commitment and effort toward the internship by adding value to the company. A lack of resistance from either side results in a waste of time and money from orientations, training sessions, and development workshops. In order to ensure that both parties are receiving mutually exclusive benefits, companies need to focus on five main criteria: academic extension, career relevance, mentorship relationships, networking opportunities, and work environment. Therefore, this paper will be using these factors of evaluation in regards to the Disney College Program as an internship.

#### 4.1 Academic Extension

The intent of an internship is to offer industry or position specific opportunities to people that have demonstrated an interest in their desired field. Although it is not required for all interns to be college or graduate students, this paper will be focusing on these types of internships. More specifically, internships that allow students to apply their knowledge from their classroom settings to real world work issues. In order for employers to provide a mutually beneficial and valuable internship experience to their constituents, companies must ensure that their internship programs will harness and develop skills that are transferable to other employment settings (Gold). Hence, an academic extension of their

college education will allow them to connect and build upon their experiences, which will create new value that could benefit the employing company.

In regards to the Disney College Program, their academic extension is characterized by their course curriculum of a variety of seminar series, collegiate courses, and development studies. Disney College Program participants are required to enroll in at least one of these classes per seasonal term, as a prerequisite of admittance into the program. Students are encouraged to choose classes that most align with their field of study or subject of interest. These classes are similar to university ones in that they offer syllabi, scheduled class sessions, and grading scales. The Disney Exploration Seminar Series offers students the opportunity to learn more about how the Walt Disney World Resort operates in key areas, such as horticulture, hospitality, and marketing. The Disney Professional Development Studies allows students to study a specific line of business within the Walt Disney World Resort. However, this category of classes is limited to engineering and entertainment show production. The Disney Collegiate Course selection is focused around an area of expertise within the Walt Disney Company. This bracket of classes is approved by the American Council on Education to offer academic college credit that are transferable to participants' universities (Hand and Winningham). Although not all their classes offer academic credit, each class offers participants the ability to learn transferable skills in a subject of their choice. The Disney College Program ultimately allows participants to develop their skills, while training potential future employees in The Walt Disney Company's culture, traditions, and values.

Although their academic offerings are ideal, there is still room for improvement. A majority of the previously mentioned classes are only offered at the Florida site. Since the

California- based Disney College Program is on a much smaller scale, they only offer two collegiate courses and three seminar series options. They should consider expanding their selection of classes or interchanging seminars with more technical-based classes, like SAP or Photoshop. Also, the California program's teacher to student ratio average is 1 to 150. In recent terms, the California program admits approximately 300 students out of 3,000 applicants. However, their teaching staff only employs two teachers to teach five class offerings with multiple sessions. One or two more professors should be hired to maximize this unique learning experience for these interns. A better selection of classes and an increase in staff would strength this internship's academic extension.

#### 4.2 Career Relevance

The career relevance criterion of evaluation holds more weight in terms of the intern. Potential interns are expected to have an idea of a career path or field of interest that they would like to pursue. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the applicant to apply to internship opportunities that are relevant to their aspirations and career goals. On the other hand, employers must, in a sense, provide a service through their internship program (Gault). A company's internship program should be structured around meaningful work that helps interns identify their own personal and professional goals from their experience. The host employer is responsible for providing resources and facilities that support their learning objectives and goals (Bryant University). Accordingly, career relevance is a mutual understanding between interns and employers about what both parties will be gaining from this relationship.

The "earning" aspect of the Disney College Program is the working expectation of the program. Participants work within the theme park and resorts as a variety of different

roles. There are roughly 20 role options from operations, entertainment, lodging, food and beverage, retail/sales, or recreation categories that applicants are offered to apply for. Some of these roles include guest services, costuming, attractions operator, food and beverage cashier, or lifeguard. Each role is unique and proposes a different and diverse working experience. However, all roles focus their efforts on teaching universal soft skills that are applicable to most jobs, such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving. During the application process, students are directed to rank each position based on preference. This does not guarantee that their first choice will be offered upon acceptance. Once applicants are offered an acceptance into the program, their offer of employment clearly states a specific role that is non-negotiable. It is a take it or leave it type of concept. Students are placed into these specific roles based on their personality test results and interview at the recruiter's discretion. In terms of career relevance, this program's target demographic is typically students that are seeking general work experience with the Walt Disney Company or attempting to work in the theme park industry.

The difference between a career and a job is that a job is simply earning money, while a career is a series of connected employment opportunities. From a devil's advocate perspective, the Disney College Program cast members weren't any different than regular cast members. Disney College Program employees were given three years of seniority to apply toward scheduling purposes. This allowed them to obtain ideal hours over other workers. In terms of meaningful work, there was no distinction between work duties of interns and regular employees. My recommendation for improving this area is to offer exclusive shadowing opportunities to managers of each Disney College Program

applicants' respective locations. This will provide an additional opportunity for interns to explore possible career choices.

#### 4.3 Mentor Relationships

Another important aspect of an internship is an accessible supervisor or mentor that provides guidance to an intern by offering feedback on areas of strength and areas of improvement. Regular supervision by a professional with an educational background and field experience is necessary to ensure full submersion into the internship experience and accurate completion of tasks. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to establish an open and safe working environment for all their employees. Typically, interns are temporary, so managers have limited time to connect with these types of employees. Therefore, a personal mentor is the best way to assimilate interns into a company's corporate culture. Interns perceive this relationship as a way of extending their networking system, as well. A mentor supplies them with a designated person of contact after employment with said company (Francoeur). Conclusively, mentor-mentee relationships are mutually beneficial and directly affect the effectiveness of an internship.

Designated mentors are not established within the Disney College Program. There are a variety of unofficial mentors that college program interns interact with daily. Teachers, shift leads, and trainers serve as possible mentors that Disney College Program participants can look to for guidance and advice (Shook). However, in regards to the following mentor relationship criteria, this internship program does not offer an effective mentorship program. This is due to the absence of a delegated person to guide an intern through their internship and toward their desired career paths. Although there are many people that can offer insight based on their own experiences, each person's story is unique

and not relevant to college program intern proceedings. Each authoritative figure is only well versed in their respective fields. Disney teachers do not know relevant information of each intern's work location in the theme parks. Similarly, managers are not informed of Disney College Program protocols, events, or any other proceedings. This lack of communication and cross over causes unclear instructions and confusion for interns.

A proposed mentorship relationship could be to appoint previous Disney College Program participants as mentors for incoming participants. To guarantee a smooth transition between seasonal interns, there is an overlap for fall/winter participants and winter/spring participants. Therefore, interns that have already experienced their respective work locations and completed their Disney classes can relay their comprehensive advice onto the next class of interns. They could encourage students to take advantage of specific events, convey tips on their Disney College Program lifestyle, or offer professional advice for career development. This program could be a consecutive routine or a class project to convey what they have learned from their experience to their peers. This mentorship program combined with a more personal and interactive relationship with teachers and managers would fortify their college program experience.

#### 4.4 Networking Opportunities

Networking is the professional development of relationships that can benefit your career exploration. Through internships, students can gather information about the necessary skills and career steps needed to work toward their aspirations and goals from experienced individuals in their related fields. The people you meet help shape the way you present yourself and the standards that you hold yourself accountable to. Therefore, it is pertinent for employers to have multiple networking opportunities for their employees.

Available networking resources will encourage progression and upward movement within a company. This directly affects a company's retention rate because it encourages growth and development among the workforce. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, networking helps satisfy the self-fulfillment need to achieve one's full potential. Consequently, networking opportunities, like mixers, are significant resources that should be offered to interns to cultivate their network of colleagues and expand their career horizons.

In addition to the previously mentioned authoritative figures, the Disney College Program offers more networking opportunities that extend further than just teachers and managers (Roush). The Disney College Program Coordinators host special events that are exclusive to college program participants, like movie screenings, behind the scene tours, or professional workshops. One of those regularly scheduled events is the NOM-Working opportunity, which combines networking with Disney executives and casual dining. This event promotes a relaxed and informal atmosphere for the featured guest executive and college program interns to interact and communicate. It is held once a month at Ink & Bean, a local coffee café that is conveniently located near Disney College Program Housing. Each NOM-Working event has limited spaces to ensure a reasonable ratio of students for the speaker. Some past special guests include casting directors, event managers, and program coordinators from various divisions and segments of the Walt Disney Company. The purpose of this event is to allow college program participants to practice their networking skills and widen their network platform.

Within this criterion of evaluation, the Disney College Program demonstrates optimal networking opportunities for their interns. In addition to their monthly NOM-

Working events, they also host professional mixers for interns and executives in formal settings, such as the Disneyland Resort Hotels. The diversity of available professionals to network with contributes to the multitude of career possibilities. Each Disney executive has had a unique “Disney Journey” to get to where they are. By learning about their career steps, people can apply the best aspects of their experiences to their prospective career efforts. A possible recommendation to enhance the Disney College Program’s networking opportunities is by broadening their occupational scope toward more scientific and mathematical based professions. Disney executives with careers in data analysis, engineering, or technology are an untapped networking resource that has not been taken advantage of in the Anaheim Disney College Program. Overall, the available resources to interns are supplementing their career aspirations.

#### 4.5 Work Environment

A positive working environment includes employees’ involvement and relationship with managers and colleagues, organizational culture, and motivation at work. In order to foster a positive work environment, factors, such as open communication, a work-life balance, and recognition and awards, must be implemented to encourage and motivate employees. It is impertinent for employees to know and feel like their work is valued. Therefore, fluid communication between all levels of management stimulates discussions and involvement. Although professionalism is important in a work environment, there should be a balance that fulfills certain needs and goals in life. People need an outlet to relieve stress and humanize their processes. Lastly, recognition and awards reiterate an employer’s appreciation and acknowledgement of an employee’s work. Thus, the positive



feedback supplies employees with direction and motivation. These factors are considered by interns to determine their desired employment or continuation with a company (Breiter).

The Disneyland College Program fosters an inclusive, respectful, and fun workplace within the Disneyland Parks and Resorts. Based on the above criteria, the Walt Disney Company has systems and procedures in place that encourage open communication, a work-life balance, and recognition. Although there is a clear chain of command that is applicable throughout all segments in the parks and resorts, employees can openly communicate with higher executives, like CEO Bob Iger. Disney also tries to advocate a positive work-life balance by supplying every employee, or cast member, with a set number of Disneyland guest tickets. Although these tickets come with rules and guidelines, it is meant for employees to share their work experience with their friends and family. Additional perks and privileges are also available to Disney College Program participants, such as exclusive tours, professional workshops, and special events. In terms of awards and recognition, extra Disneyland Park tickets are awarded to exemplary employees that demonstrate quality performances. This recognition is in the form of a “Four Keys Card.” Since employees are trained to follow four primary guest service standards (safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency), they are rated and given feedback based on these values. College Program participants are also given educational awards such as perfect attendance certificates and certificates of completion based on their enrolled Disney classes. Through these procedures and incentives, the Walt Disney Company promotes a positive work environment.

The Disney College Program cultivates an effective and encouraging work environment through their combination of academics, housing, and work lifestyle. Within

the Disney classes, the professors create an open atmosphere for students to communicate their opinions and contribute to each other's learning experiences. Projects and discussions are main aspects of the curriculum to inspire creativity and out of the box thinking. The housing component aids in the participants' work environment because they live with other Disney College Program participants that share the same struggles and achievements. They have special Disney housing events that promote connecting with their community. Lastly, the actual work environment varies based on each Disney College Program intern's work location and role within the Disneyland Parks and Resorts. However, they all encourage inclusion, learning, and development through additional work specific promotions that support a healthy and open work environment (Tudor). Through these three components, the Disney College Program offers an immersive and positive work environment for their interns.

## 5. Conclusion

A well-developed internship program constitutes an array of available resources that foster a student's development, while adding value to the company. These resources are characterized by the opportunities for academic growth, career progress, mentorship, networking, and a work-life balance. Although the Walt Disney Company is effectively exercising their strategies to produce diligent workers through their Disney College Program, there is still room for improvement. As a fairly-young general internship program, they can widen their scope to incorporate more science and math- based professions through their Disney collegiate course offerings and networking opportunities. They should also establish more programs that encourage a smoother transition from this internship to their post work-life. By focusing on continuously improving internship

programs, employers receive more capable pools of talented applicants to select from. It is also more efficient and ideal to convert interns that full-time employees. It is also more efficient and ideal to convert interns into full-time employees. This theory supports Disney's value of creation, which illustrates the synergy within The Walt Disney Company (Zenger). Every action has a purpose and a reaction that creates or adds value to another segment of their company. In this case, the installment of corporate values in Disney interns contributes to the development of existing human assets of the company. Overall, an internship should be a mutually beneficially experience between employers and interns that adds value to both parties involved.

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