

Summer 2005

# The Internship Program At Manhattan Christian College: The Problem Of Continued Improvement

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## Recommended Citation

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**Regis University**  
School for Professional Studies Graduate Programs  
**Final Project/Thesis**

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Running head: THE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM AT MANHATTAN CHRISTIAN

The Internship Program at Manhattan Christian College:

The Problem of Continued Improvement

Jeffrey G. Davis

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### Abstract

Manhattan Christian College (MCC) has been educating, equipping, and enriching Christian leaders for over 75 years. An important part of that training process has been the academic internship program, now titled the “Directed Field Experience” (DFE). The program has encountered a period of complacency, which has some participants questioning the effectiveness of the current internship program. This action research project used questionnaires, both online and in personal interviews and focus groups, with students and DFE supervisors to identify areas of potential improvement. Potential interventions include refined definitions, communicating earlier in the process with supervisors, and developing a DFE website.

## The Internship Program at Manhattan Christian College

The mission of Manhattan Christian College (MCC) is to “educate, equip, and enrich Christian leaders.” MCC has focused on leadership development by encouraging students to take the lead in on-campus ministries and experiences. For many years the college has employed practical ministry internship experiences within and without the scope of the curriculum to complement the academic classroom preparation. The academic internship has recently been renamed the “Directed Field Experience” (DFE). The past success of the internship program has created a positive reputation for the college for training students who are extremely well prepared for vocational ministry. This reputation has led school leadership to evaluate the program to ensure continued excellence and to even explore new ways to incorporate internships and be on the cutting-edge of ministry preparation.

The DFE program has experienced increased levels of dissatisfaction that, if ignored, will harm the college’s reputation. The goal of this action research project was to examine the program for any possible causes for this increased discontent among students and internship supervisors, and identify interventions to improve the program’s academic performance and reputation.

### *Background*

Manhattan Christian College is a small college that has been training students for full-time professional/vocational ministry for over 75 years. Opening her doors on September 12, 1927 as “Kansas Bible College”, MCC has been preparing Christian workers ever since. Stites (2002) explained that MCC was strategically placed across the street from the Kansas State Agricultural College so that students could “partake of the advantages offered . . .” (p. 14).

MCC's founder, E.C. Sanderson believed that Thomas Jefferson was correct when he suggested that educational institutions should share educational opportunities and modeled his ideas after similar school pairing that had taken place at the University of Virginia and the University of Chicago. His first pairing took place in 1908 in Eugene, Oregon at the University of Oregon; the ministry training school there is now called Northwest Christian College (Stites, 2002, p. 14). This same model was also followed to start Minnesota Bible College "next to the University of Minnesota in 1913" (Stites, 2002, p. 17).

MCC was founded as a Bible college, a type of school that would prepare what D.L. Moody would call "gap men", filling "the void between the highly prepared clergy and the common people" (Stites, 2002, p. 21). To this end he began what is now Moody Bible Institute.

Bible colleges are distinctive in three areas from other colleges. They require their graduates to have a major in Bible; they provide their students with professional ministerial courses; and they provide opportunities for – usually require – their graduates to have extensive "hands on" experience through part-time ministries and internships during college. (Stites, 2002, p. 21)

For over 25 years the curriculum at MCC has required a professional internship component (now the DFE). The current requirement for students is to complete a minimum 10-week DFE under the direction of a full-time church/organization staff member. This supervisor must have specific duties that match the student's ministry degree program (i.e. Pastoral, Family/Counseling, Worship, Missions, Youth, or Education).

### *History of the Problem*

The DFE program has been an important part of the success of MCC's graduates. This being the case, recent feedback from both students and supervisors has revealed several issues, or

inadequacies, with the current program, the first being clear communication of expectations between faculty, students, and supervisors. Not clearly communicating expectations for academic requirements, the variety of required experiences, and even the arrangements for housing/living during the DFE have created negative feedback from both students and supervisors.

### *The Importance of the Problem*

In the last few years there have been increased indications of program inadequacies and signs of frustration from both church officials and faculty when student internships have been evaluated. The Academic Dean (AD) and faculty recognized the need to address the DFE program and evaluation process. The inconsistency between church/organization expectations and degree program requirements needed examination. These inconsistencies appeared to relate to a failure to communicate clearly and consistently with the wide variety of supervisors the college uses to provide these DFE experiences. The communication of academic expectations that the college has for the student DFE was one possible area that could be improved. Although clarity of expectations appeared to be an issue, other factors played a significant role in the success of the internship program and needed to be explored.

A well-planned DFE is essential to providing the best learning environment for students. When a well-planned, clearly communicated, DFE experience does take place, the college is fulfilling its goal of providing a quality “hands-on” learning experience. MCC has had a reputation for producing some of the country’s best-prepared students. Much of this reputation has had to do with the quality of the DFE program. This project is needed to maintain the distinguished reputation of the institution as an excellent ministry training organization. The goal

of the project is also to continue to provide students with the best possible education and experience.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Organizational supervisors and students expressed decreased satisfaction and increased frustrations with the current Internship Program (DFE) at Manhattan Christian College. Several inconsistencies in expectations between churches/organizations and faculty were recognized. The purpose of this action research project was to determine why the current DFE program is experiencing these negative characteristics and to suggest potential interventions to reverse this negative trend.

### *Literature Review*

Initial review of available material on internships reveals a great deal of material that endorses the idea and practice of internships in many corporate settings. Colleges and universities offer many learning experiences, but focus on internships because they “are often viewed as the capstone learning experience that ideally draws on previous knowledge and skills that students gain from the entire professional preparation program” (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 2002). This endorsement of internship programs is extended not only to students as their best way to gain “invaluable work experience” (Employers Say, 2003; DeVries, 2003; Careers & Colleges, 2001), but also to employers as a way to tap into a valuable resource. Hickey (2003) quoted Gary Emerson of Sara Lee:

There is not enough time in the day to do all the projects you have. A company has three alternatives. One is to postpone the project. The other is to hire a consultant, which costs an arm and a leg, and the third is to hire an intern. It is a win-win situation. You take a little bit of risk but you also take a risk with a consultant too at the end of the day. (p. 29)



In their study of students in business college internship programs, Knouse, Tanner, & Harris (1999) observed:

College internships offer a variety of benefits to students both for improving performance while in college and for increasing opportunities for finding a job upon graduation. While students are still in college, internships can help them develop immediate skills that can improve course performance, such as better time management, better communication skills, better self-discipline, heightened initiative, and an overall better self-concept. (p. 35)

Students considering many fields are encouraged to participate in an internship experience. Internships can help students to determine if the career they seek is fit to their personal gifts and abilities. Neuman (1999) advised students making career decisions:

In *Be True to Your Future*, Elwood N. Chapman says that "about 50% of those who graduate from college are, by their own admission, in the wrong [field]." Internships may eliminate these mistakes by helping you find out early on what fields interest you and what fields do not. When you can see for yourself what it's like to be in the workplace, it becomes easier to make career decisions that fit your interests and goals.

Vocational Training News (2003) cited a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) saying, "Other than relevant work experience, participants in internship or cooperative education programs is the best way for college graduates to increase their employability" (p. 12). The benefits of real-world work experience also help those who have participated in an internship gain the skills necessary to find jobs more quickly than their contemporaries. These benefits include confidence, improved work and social skills, as well as access to job sources (Knouse, Tanner, & Harris, 1999; Fetters, 2003). The same NACE survey

found that “staffing managers agree that their own internship programs are their best sources of full-time employees among recent grads” (Weisser & Chatzky, 2003). “Many companies favor internship experience. About 54% of the recent college graduates that Dell hires each year come from its internship program, and the percentage is on the rise” (Poe, 2003, p. 97).

The significance of an internship experience is even more important when there is a poor job market. *Black Issues in Higher Education* (2003) quoted Tony Lee of CollegeJournal.com:

Internships help you build professional experience, and that’s important because you can prove you have ‘real world’ skills,” Lee says. “With an internship on your resumé, it shows you have a commitment to your field and that you’ve invested time and effort to get ahead of the learning curve.” (p. 13)

Some consultants encourage students to take any internship, paid or not, to gain the necessary experience and personal connections to get good job interviews (Newsweek, 2003).

The ASHE\_ERIC Higher Education Report (2003) also outlined several components of effective assessment of student learning in an internship experience. These include self-evaluation, journaling or weekly reports, final summary reports, the development of portfolios, group seminars, on-site supervisor assessment by faculty, as well as on-site assessment of the interns by faculty or an internship coordinator.

The current literature review of academic internship programs in vocational ministry fields made it clear that this project will be gathering and presenting new data in the areas of ministry internship evaluation and improvement. I did not find any specific literature about academic internships for vocational ministry available that would be of help designing survey instruments.

I did, however, find limited material from the field of education that may help make valid recommendations to the college concerning potential changes to the internship experience. One of these changes can be found in titling of the student's practical semester, "Student Teaching," to the "Professional Semester". MCC has made a recent similar change of the experience title from the "internship program" to the "Directed Field Experience." The goal of refining the program title is to try to get students and supervisors to see the difference between significant mentoring versus the business model of hiring inexpensive help.

Another trend, however, that the education field is exploring is extending the time of the internship. Some teacher education programs have begun to experiment, with some success, extending the teacher preparation internship to a full academic year (Pollard & Pollard, 2003, ¶ 3). Again, additional valuable literature was not discovered, especially in the area of vocational ministry.

### *Gaining Entry*

The scope of this problem was specifically contained within the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs (AD). The Dean had all the necessary authority to supervise and authorize this project, and he recommended the subject of this project himself. As an internal consultant I did not have the personal or positional power to implement this project on my own, but the active involvement of the AD ensured the necessary momentum to complete the project. The faculty also acknowledged the need to seriously evaluate the current internship program. Having over 8 years at the institution had enough personal respect to garner the necessary cooperation from faculty.

This project option was made available to me as I discussed my need to pursue action research for completion of MSM program at Regis University. The AD was extremely

encouraging about the project potential and suggested several project opportunities. The issue of the internship program was selected for long-term impact and time-frame considerations. The AD has offered whatever assistance and influence his office can provide to complete the project. I was promised access to faculty and necessary lists of internship supervisors for survey and interviews.

In an initial meeting with members of the college's Practical Ministries department, I was able to explain the project and the intended methodology. The professors indicated an interest in participating on the collaborative team, as their schedules allowed. The decision was made for the collaborative team to consist of the head of the Practical Ministries department and one other professor. The team will also have two students from different majors and two supervisors who are located close enough to the college to actively participate.

#### Method

Coghlan and Brannick (2001) defined action research as “an approach to research which aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action” (p. xi). This model of research often is chosen because it involves more than the creation of knowledge. Action research seeks to not only learn but to explore possible solutions to identified problems. These problems are most often identified by an organization seeking to improve or change its organizational system(s) through the research process. “Action research works through a cyclical process of consciously and deliberately: (a) planning; (b) taking action; (c) evaluating the action, leading to further planning and so on” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001, p. xi). Action research, in contrast with traditional research, incorporates the members of the organization in the cyclical process. French and Bell (1999) described the process this way:

Action research is the process of systematically collecting research data about an on-going system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data. (p. 130)

### *Model*

There are many models for action research. The model I felt most adequately met the research needs of the issue of the internship program is Burke's seven-step model. Burke's model is a modified version of W.L. French's 11-step model. My project fits well into the seven steps of the model illustrated in the table below.

Table 1

#### *Burke's Adaptation of W. L. French's Action Research Model (1982)*

| Step # | Activity   |
|--------|--|
| Step 1 | Perception of the problem                                      |
| Step 2 | Enter consultant   |
| Step 3 | Collect data   |
| Step 4 | Feedback given to client                                       |
| Step 5 | Joint action planning  |
| Step 6 | Action   |
| Step 7 | Assessment with data collection, return to Step 4 for feedback |

Step one is the recognition of the problem. Academic internships (DFE) over time can be overlooked within an institution since other courses and curricula are constantly being examined and evaluated. The very nature of a DFE places the student in an off-campus situation that is

supervised by non-college personnel. While supervisor evaluations and assignments are completed, accurate academic and professional benefits are difficult to measure. Step two brings in the consultant. In discussing the possible problems that might be addressed for the research project, the AD recommended the DFE issue. The third step is to collect data using various methods. During this step the collaborative team works to contribute to the selection of data pools and instruments. Step four is to provide feedback to the client. Step five is to begin joint action planning. During this step the collaborative team works to interpret and plan any necessary changes. Step six is to implement the recommended changes. Finally, step seven provides for the necessary component of feedback and follow-up. As students complete their DFEs, data will continue to be collected, and this feedback loop will be used as necessary to provide opportunity for continued program improvement.

### *Validity*

Validity refers to the degree a measurement actually reflects the intended variable. Validity of the project is determined by the extent any variables are accurately measured (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p. 182). Validity was enhanced by using multiple data-gathering methods, by gathering input from different groups of people with different perspectives, and by having the collaborative team contribute to the design of the questions and interpretation of the data gathered. Cummings and Worley (2001) explained that validity of a measurement is difficult to establish until it has been used (p. 183). The action plan must address the identified problem and actually measure the variable of interest.

The problem of an effective DFE program should be looked at from multiple perspectives. “If several different measures of the same variable correlate highly with each other . . . then there is increased confidence in the measure’s validity” (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p.

183). Cummings and Worley (2001) stated that validity can be improved is for the researcher to utilize “multiple measures of the same variable” (p. 182). Students, professors, and supervisors have different points of view; each of these will be examined to evaluate the successes or inadequacies of the program. The collaborative group had input into the design of the survey instruments(s) and the interpretation of the results.

The focus of the problem was the effectiveness of the current DFE program, and survey questions were limited to that issue. The experience of the collaborative team helped focus the survey questions and determined which questions to ask. These questions were developed from the experience of the collaborative team in administering, participating in, and evaluating the current DFE program. This is discussed in more detail in the data gathering methods section of this paper. The multiple measurement of the same variable technique also increases reliability, so the project included a survey, focus groups, and personal interviews. Questions within these instruments measured the same variable(s) to increase content validity and improve confidence in the results (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p. 183). A pilot test of the instruments was not conducted because all potential respondents were needed for the study.

#### *Data Gathering Methods*

MCC’s DFE program has always included an evaluation by the supervisor, but participating students were not surveyed. While students have been given the opportunity to react to their supervisor’s comments, no real data was available from students. The students who have recently completed a DFE have a good idea whether it was a helpful experience. They may not have been able to identify missing components, but were certainly helpful in identifying components that are not advancing the educational and experiential goals.

The professors on my collaborative team identified that the current DFE evaluation for

the supervisors was skewed toward one particular degree program and the evaluation forms for 2005 have been revised. This seemed to indicate that many of the DFE supervisors had unheard input for the program. The supervisors were in key positions for knowing exactly what elements would be beneficial to improve the educational experience for the students in the DFE. I was very interested to see their reaction to the current program and what, if any, suggestions they had for elements that needed improvement, addition, or deletion.

*Secondary data.* The only additional data that was available were records of the previous evaluations of student internships at MCC. Having an understanding of past evaluations of the internship program, and most recently the DFE, by both students and supervisors was important in developing questions for the focus groups and personal interviews that followed. All available evaluations for previous year's internship programs were collected for analysis.

Several attempts to contact colleges similar to MCC revealed that their internship programs were also regularly evaluated, but the data had not been compiled into any usable form. If any data had been compiled, it was within a single degree program, and the data was not made available to me for this project.

*Surveys.* The primary data gathering instrument was an on-line survey to provide ease of access and anonymity of results. A survey is the best way to obtain data from as large of a sample as possible "when the information you need should come directly from people" (Fink & Kosecoff, 1998, p. 3). Separate surveys were developed for each group (students and supervisors) using similar questions within the specific topic area. To provide consistent and accurate information the survey questions were carefully structured so that language and culture did not create confusion.



My team helped design these questions to ensure that design and content resulted in valid data, and to ensure that participants had adequate “buy-in” to the project and perceived the usefulness of the data to their own academic programs and goals. The professors had already evaluated the current supervisor’s evaluation form and were excited about the opportunity to explore the entire program.

The initial design intent for the surveys was an online questionnaire using a simple Likert-type scale, and was seven questions in length. It was decided that the questionnaire should be as brief as possible to increase the response rate. The team worked from initial sample questions that I presented to them. The questions were crafted and chosen very carefully because of their very limited number.

The online questionnaire started with an instructional page and was completed as an online form. Once completed, the participant submitted the survey (form) by e-mail. The form had my e-mail as the ‘sender’ to maintain anonymity. The only method for tracking participants would have been by their IP address. This address is usually only associated with an individual’s Internet Service Providers (ISP) and not specific to the individual. This tracking method is also only available if implemented, and the necessary software was not implemented to maintain respondents’ anonymity.

The instruction page detailed the purpose of the questionnaire and outlined the value of participation, and thanked them in advance for their help with the project. They were directed to answer all questions (the questionnaire was designed so that any incomplete questionnaire could not be submitted to the system). Participants were assured that their responses were totally anonymous and not being tracked by any software. Upon submission of the questionnaire, the

participant saw a 'thank you' screen, thanking them for their time and participation. Students and DFE supervisors were invited by mail twice during a six-week period to participate in the survey.

The rationale for this first approach was that questionnaires provide for the largest sampling, and provide a cross-section of degree programs and types of DFE experiences. This did increase the validity of the data. "The survey feedback technique is essentially a procedure for giving objective data about the system's functioning to the system members so that they can change or improve selected aspects of the system" (French & Bell, 1999, p. 204).

*Focus groups.* The second method of data gathering was focus groups. These groups were interviewed after the initial questionnaire data had been gathered. Focus groups are adaptive and allow the interviewer to modify the questions and to probe emergent issues during the discussion (Cummings & Worley, 2001).

The use of focus groups can provide more in-depth understanding of the issues and is one of the best methods to obtain direct information. Focus groups allow for questions that probe specific emotions, reasoning, and actions identified by the survey. I formed and interviewed two separate focus groups, one comprised of students and one of supervisors.

The student group consisted of four seniors who had recently completed their DFEs. Students in the focus group represented three of the four majors in which students completed DFEs in the last year. These majors included Cross-Cultural Ministry, Family Ministry, and Pastoral Ministry.

Because distance and time constraints were issues for supervisors, this particular group was interviewed when as many as possible could be in one place at the same time. The student focus group was much easier to assemble and consisted of students from pastoral, family, and cross-cultural majors. The rationale for using this method was to make comparisons to the

questionnaire data collected earlier in the project for the purpose of validity.

The same set of questions was asked to the various focus groups to maintain reliability. I maintained complete notes from the sessions as well as reflective notes about underlying issues and biases.

*Individual interviews.* Individual interviews provided another avenue to gain in-depth insight and direct information about the DFE program. These interviews were conducted with individuals who did not participate in the focus groups. The interviews were scheduled after the focus groups so that the questions could address specific issues or areas of concern that were raised by the questionnaire and focus groups. The rationale for using personal interviews was that they allow for validation of previously gathered data and provide information that would be unattainable using other data gathering methods. Well-designed questions and the ability to develop an empathetic atmosphere in a one-on-one interview allow for expression of in-depth opinions and viewpoints, and to uncover other unforeseen problems (Cummings & Worley, 2001, p. 118). I took complete notes from all of the interview sessions.

#### *Analysis of Data*

Because of the small sample size, the primary data analysis technique utilized in this study was content analysis. This process of analysis is useful because it reveals themes that can be categorized from the survey results (Cummings & Worley, 2001). Cummings & Worley described content analysis as a three-step process that includes finding repeated answers, generating themes from these answers, and finally placing responses into the identified categories.

The team looked for reoccurring themes by reviewing the responses to the questionnaires. The common themes of poor communication issues and unclear expectations were used to

further develop the questions for the focus groups and individual interviews. The data from all instruments utilized helped the team formulate the recommendations to the client (Academic Dean) for continued improvement(s) of the DFE program.

Attitudes encountered during the data gathering process revealed extremely positive attitudes about the college and DFE program in general. Students and supervisors all expressed the need and benefit of the program. Attitudes about specific organization supervisors and professors were more wide-ranging. The negative or positive emotions associated with the experience definitely affected focus group and interview results. This affected the discussion and additional questions that I asked in an attempt to discover further issues that may be affecting the quality of the DFE experience.

### Results

Analysis of data provided a clear and remarkably consistent picture of the DFE program at MCC. Each of the data instruments provided a unique picture of the program and the potential for improvements.

#### *Student Questionnaires*

MCC has graduated 95 students since 2000 that have completed academic internships or DFEs. These students were asked to participate in the online questionnaire. The pool of 95 students had 19 responses to the online questionnaire. There were an additional five responses, but date/time stamping on the e-mail form and default responses indicated that an individual clicked the 'submit' button several times while waiting for their initial submission to process. These five responses have been omitted from the results.

The questionnaire revealed a number of positive attributes as well as several specific concerns about the academic DFE. The consensus was that the DFE program overall is very

positive. The survey revealed an 89% positive response (agree and strongly agree) concerning the importance of the DFE program to preparation for a lifetime of ministry. A majority (53% agree or strongly agree) also felt that additional internships were necessary for adequate preparation for ministry. Fifty-three percent of students felt that the academic requirements for completion of their DFEs were beneficial to gaining the most from the experience.

The response to the question regarding extending the required length of the DFE was evenly split with 42% (agree or strongly agree) for and 37% (disagree or strongly disagree) against a full semester requirement. Twenty-eight percent of those responding did not agree or disagree with a required full semester internship.

The remaining questions examined the issues of communication and expectations within the DFE program. Eighty-nine percent of students had a good understanding of the college's academic expectations. The results were mixed when it came to whether the students felt their supervisors understood the college's academic requirements. Forty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that their supervisors did not know what was required of students to successfully complete the DFE. When those who responded 'neither agree or disagree' are included, the negative response rate for this critical communication issue is 53%. An issue of internship needs versus academic expectations was discovered when only 47% of students indicated that they felt that the expectations for their DFE were similar, or mutually supporting, on the part of the sponsoring organization and the college.

The comments section of the survey allowed respondents to make any comments about the DFE program they felt relevant. Eight students provided additional comments. Some of these comments focused on the need for the ability to individualize a DFE to available DFE

opportunities and flexibility to adapt to unique circumstances. The other major concern focused on the ability of the college to provide a positive, quality DFE experience for every student.

### *Supervisor Questionnaires*

Supervisors who had been associated with MCC's internships and DFE program since 2000 provided a pool of 84 potential respondents to the online survey. The DFE supervisors generated only 15 responses.

The two most positive responses were about the preparation of the MCC student for the DFE and the supervisor's opportunity to make a positive contribution to the student's preparation for a lifetime of ministry. There were 7 negative responses to any of the questions on the questionnaire. Three questions received a neutral response. These questions seem to correlate with many of the comments made on the surveys. Five of the comments related directly to communication issues between the supervisor and the college (question #4). Question #4 is also the question with the lowest positive response (53%).

The only other question had a comment that was in direct correlation. The question had to do with clarity of expectations for supervising organizations. This is significant because the respondent also signed his name to the comment, and the individual has made the comment several times previously to the AD.

### *Student Focus Groups*

The group was asked to address each of the areas of concern in the DFE program as referred to in the survey. General impressions of their DFE experiences matched the survey results. The group indicated that direct communication such as phone calls, personal visits, or e-mails between faculty and supervisors was lacking. Most felt that the expectations of the organization where they had performed their DFE did not match the academic expectations of

the college. While all supervisors made time for required academic experiences, those academic experiences did not always align with the organizational internship responsibilities. Most organizations/churches have a business-like approach to the DFE in that interns provide additional help in the ministry focus area to the supervising organizations.

Other than meeting regularly with the interns, the students felt that MCC's other academic requirements were not a primary consideration by the organization/church supervisors when they hired the student and agreed to participate in the DFE program. This perception led most students to believe that their supervisors were not familiar with the college's internship manual. They felt that their supervisors were unaware of many of the college's expectations and placed completion of these responsibilities/tasks upon the intern. The expectation of most students was that their supervisor would mentor them through the academic requirements. This did not often happen. When students reviewed the Field Supervisor Manual (given to supervisors by the college) most were concerned that it was too detailed for the college to expect that most supervisors in relationship-based ministries would thoroughly read the manual.

Several students mentioned that their DFE field supervisors also expressed frustration over their inability to communicate with the supervising faculty member before and during the internship period. Faculty members at MCC have nine-month contracts and are not required to maintain office hours during the summer months when nearly all students are completing their internships. The Practical Ministry department head, however, does have summer office hours, and therefore was the only possible contact for students and supervisors.

Two students in the Family program expressed frustration over the lack of an exit interview with their supervising professor after they returned from their DFE. After several appointments were canceled they felt that they did not have a chance to find out if they had

gained the experiences their DFE was supposed to provide. They also felt that their situations were isolated and not the 'norm' for other students in their major.

One cross-cultural student mentioned that an additional exit review would have been beneficial. Since a cross-cultural internship can be emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausting, a second review at a later date would allow additional time for students to debrief and reflect further about the learning experiences.

### *Supervisor Focus Groups*

After several attempts to gather a larger group, the supervisor group consisted of the only two supervisors in the area who were available to meet at the same time. One of the supervisors has had several students as interns and one had only two. These two supervisors have supervised DFE students in several majors including most recently students in Family Ministry and Pastoral Ministry.

Supervisors who participated in the focus group discussions responded in a very similar manner to those who completed the survey. They generally had very good experiences with their MCC interns and felt that the whole process was very good. Comments concerning the supervisor's manual included that the manual was too detailed in many areas of theory for the DFE, and the format discouraged reading and understanding of the practical areas of student assignments and supervisor responsibilities.

There was also a feeling that many of the academic expectations and experiences required in a DFE were outside the normal internship experiences provided in a typical summer. The DFE supervisors expressed concern about less-than-positive DFE experiences for students. These supervisors had been asked by faculty to supervise last-minute DFE's to help students complete their DFE requirement, even though there was not adequate time to plan for a positive



experience. These DFE supervisors felt that these “last minute” internships did not allow them to provide the practical experiences that the DFE supervisors felt would be the best for the student. The supervisors felt that the informality of these types of DFEs may actually turn out to be negative for the students later in their ministry because they were not able to formalize the student-supervisor relationship.

This group of supervisors felt strongly that the DFE program was a valuable experience for them and their student interns. While they indicated that they would seek an MCC intern (for DFE) in the future, they also felt that semester-long DFEs may not provide a significant benefit over the current 10-week program, and may in-fact make the whole process too complicated for many involved (students, faculty, the supervisor, and the supervisor’s organization).

#### *Student Interviews*

I conducted individual interviews with three students who have completed their DFEs from Family and Pastoral majors. Like the students in the focus group, these students indicated a strong appreciation for the DFE experience. All indicated a need for more than one internship experience, something before or after the academic DFE to be better prepared for full-time ministry. Students also indicated that the academic requirements for their DFE were helpful in fully experiencing their internships. Students were intrigued by the idea of a full semester DFE, but had concerns about how the DFEs would be developed and supported.

The only major area of concern, mentioned by two of the students, was with the level of communication with their major professor during the internship period. Attempts to contact supervising professors would be abandoned when, after repeated tries, they were unable to contact the professor at the office. The reason given was that the students were concerned about disturbing the faculty supervisor during their vacation period, even though they had been given

permission to contact the faculty supervisor at home. In the interview the students also indicated that there was no e-mail communications between student and professor.

One student indicated that her DFE experience, while a valuable church ministry experience, did not provided adequate supervision to be considered a successful DFE. This student's comments were reflective of other reports of negative experiences that influence the AD's desire to pursue this specific action research project. The student reported that she received little-to-no supervision during the 12-week experience. The student was sure that the supervisor had a full understanding of the academic requirements necessary for successful completion of the DFE, but the student was not allowed the necessary time during the workweek for completion of those requirements. The student was responsible for completing the academic requirement on her own time without guidance or supervision. This same student also indicated that she did not receive an exit interview from her faculty supervisor.

### *Supervisor Interviews*

I interviewed four supervisors by phone because of time and distance. These supervisors have had several DFE students over the last 5 years in their church's internship programs from majors including Educational Ministry, Family Ministry, and Pastoral Ministry.

The interviews with supervisors revealed a strong commitment to providing internship (and DFE) opportunities to students. In general terms, these supervisors had good experience with MCC interns. All would seek another MCC student for DFEs, and three of the four indicated that they have already arranged for future DFEs. All supervisors indicated that their interns were well prepared for their DFE and that they understood their responsibilities as supervisors.

All supervisors interviewed did indicate that they had no personal contact with supervising faculty before, during, or after the DFE. None of the supervisors were questioned or contacted by faculty prior to the student's DFE. One of the supervisors who has had several interns over the last 6 years reported that she has never spoken with any person affiliated with the college about the experience(s) provided to the student. This field supervisor indicated she would welcome an evaluation of the experiences being provided by their organization to make sure that the DFE experience is providing the best learning environment possible.

Another common response had to do with longer DFE experiences. The entire group of field supervisors believed that longer DFEs would only provide better experiences. Directed Field Experiences that could be a full semester in length would help the organizations provide a more robust experience that would be more realistic than a 10-week summer DFE.

During the discussion about MCC's preparation of the student-intern, one supervisor indicated that it would be extremely helpful if the college provided a more in-depth profile of the student. This information might include results from leadership profiles, spiritual gift assessment, or even results from a psychological type tool such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) profile. The purpose of this information would be to help the field supervisor better match the internship experiences and expectations to the individual student's personality and spiritual gifts. A summary of the major findings is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

*Summary of Major Findings*

| Respondents | Strengths  | Improvement Opportunities   |
|-------------|--|---|
| Students    | Provides opportunity to gain real-world experience.                                  | Improve Communication between faculty and DFE supervisors   |
|             | Understanding of academic expectations   | Provide clear definitions of DFE and internship experiences   |
|             | Additional internship participation is necessary to be ready for full-time ministry. | Clarify expectations for supervisors prior to DFE   |
|             |  | Encourage more non-DFE internships<br>Provide more guidelines for supervisors for each major program and improve exit interview process |
| Supervisors | Students adequately prepared prior to DFE  | Increased length of DFE   |
|             | Program is perceived to be making significant contribution to students               | Better match between academic expectations and organizational needs   |
|             | Would seek additional MCC students for DFE   | Improve DFE manual for supervisors for clarity and brevity  |
|             | DFE is seen as a necessary part of academic preparation                              | Better communication with faculty before and during DFE   |

Discussion

The collaborative team met to review the data and formulate short- and long-term recommendations to be presented to the Academic Dean (AD). The team noted that the supervisors survey response rate was lower than expected. This observation was based on previous academic experience of team members and team expectations for more participation by alumni DFE supervisors. There was some discussion about validity and how the results indicated an overwhelmingly positive experience with the college’s DFE program. The questionnaire

responses seemed to be generally from people already committed to the program, and taken without other survey data may have created a problem in analysis.

It was also noted that comment on the questionnaire made about expectations for supervisors is representative of comments made by area ministers of smaller churches who would like their summer job opportunities to be considered for DFE credit. Often smaller churches with only one full-time staff member would like help with summer youth and children programs. This type of situation is outside the guidelines for a proper DFE experience. Many of these churches have students as part-time staff during the academic year, but the student will have to leave during the summer to complete his/her academic DFE where he/she can observe and work under a full time staff member in his/her area of study. This situation is frustrating to ministers at small churches and their frequent complaints are what I believe has created the impression with the AD that there are high negatives about the DFE program among supervisors. Several of these ministers have also supervised appropriate DFEs, but would like their supervisory role to be expanded beyond the current DFE supervisor definitions.

Based on the team's review and discussion of the results a list of 10 possible improvement opportunities was created, and after consultation with the AD, the list was prioritized for final recommendation. Even without detailed information about the communication process, it was determined that observed weaknesses in the formalized communication process were the major contributing factors to the decreased satisfaction by supervisors and the increase in frustration by students. We concluded that this communication problem is also the major contributor to the inconsistencies in expectations for supervising churches/organizations.

The 10 recommendations to enhance the communication of expectations between the supervising faculty and the field supervisors, and improve the channel of communication with students include the following.

1. Help students and supervisors by clarifying the difference between a DFE and an experience internship. Creating a clear, positive definition to organizations and students about how the college defines a “DFE” and an “internship” would be extremely helpful to clarify expectations for all involved. There was considerable discussion about the value of both types of experiences to students and the desire to make sure that there was not the perception among supervising organizations of the creation of an “A-list” and “B-list” by the college.
2. Create and maintain accurate lists of supervising organizations that provide excellent DFE experiences, with notes about single-staff church and multi-staff church experiences.
3. Create realistic deadlines for students to initiate and finalize the academic internship experience. These deadlines could be established within the course syllabi for “Orientation to Directed Field Experience,” a course required prior to the completion of a DFE.
4. Clarify the course sequence so that students understand that their DFE can be completed in many different time-frame options, including a full year, semester, or summer (10-week) experience.
5. Provide an “executive-type summary” to be placed at the front of the supervisor’s manual to provide a quick-look at the DFE expectations. It was also suggested

that each major have its own manual so that materials from other DFE majors would not confuse the supervisor.

6. Increase the length of the faculty contract to 10-months so that communication between faculty and supervisor could be required at two points – before the DFE during the recruitment phase, and at some point during the DFE. The communication could be in any form appropriate to the circumstances, including phone calls, e-mail, and individual appointments. Additionally, clarify to students that they can contact their faculty supervisor if need be, understanding that summer DFEs could overlap with vacations and periods when the professor is not in the office. Faculty and students should be encouraged to communicate with one another by e-mail as needed.
7. Develop a survey for supervising organizations to help define the type of experience and opportunities that their organization could provide to students, and to measure these experiences against the expectations of the DFE program.
8. Ensure that a debriefing of DFE supervisors by the appropriate MCC representative takes place.
9. Appoint a faculty or staff person to coordinate the DFE program for the college who will develop and refine the supervisor manuals, maintain accurate opportunity lists of supervising organizations, and help to provide debriefing of DFE supervisors.
10. Develop a DFE website within the college's academic section of the current website. This would make the presentation of much of the DFE material available to everyone at any time needed. It could also provide the platform for the

supervising organization survey used to provide self-evaluation for the DFE program and internship (non-academic) opportunities.

### *Recommendations*

In discussion with the team and AD, three of the improvement opportunities above were selected for implementation since they will have the most immediate positive impact on the DFE program. A major criterion for these three included the ability to implement without expense. Considering the college's financial situation, any improvements to the DFE would have to come with little to no additional expenses. The final criterion was an agreement by the team that the suggested change would make a significant impact on communication of DFE expectations with supervising organizations. The three action items recommended for implementation included:

1. Beginning work immediately on clear, concise, positive definitions for “DFE” and “internship”.
2. Communicating with supervising organizations earlier in their search process.
3. Developing a program website.

### *Implementation*

The highest priority is to develop a clear and concise definition for the “DFE” and “internship” programs. The direct benefit of this change is to remedy many of the misconceptions and under-communicated expectations for the DFE program among students and supervising organizations. Participating organizations that are identified to provide an “internship” experience often do not realize the importance of such an opportunity to a student's total educational experience. *DFE* organizations and *internship* organizations are not identical, but both are necessary. Communicating this concept clearly and in a positive manner is essential



for addressing the communication issues related to DFE supervisor expectations and student academic requirements.

Once a draft of the new definitions has been completed, the team will recommend changes and finalize the definitions. These new definitions will be presented to the Practical Ministry department for approval before they can be included in the next edition of the DFE supervisor's manual. The task of department approval will fall to the members of the team from the faculty, which includes the head of the department. The new definitions can then be used by all the Practical Ministry professors as they speak to potential supervising organizations, as well as included in the materials that the professor sends to the organizations seeking DFE students.

The team indicated that its primary recommendation of developing a clear, positive definition of the "DFE" and "internship" experiences will be the one idea that can be implemented with an immediate impact on the issue of communicating expectations to supervising organizations. Creating ownership among the Practical Ministry faculty, developing support, evaluating the implementation, and institutionalizing the changes will be described in detail below.

### *Creating Ownership*

The initial meeting with the Practical Ministry department revealed a consensus among faculty that the DFE program had weaknesses in the area of communicating expectations. The faculty expressed an understanding of the need of all three legs of the program (students, faculty, and supervisors) to be at the same level of understanding for the DFE to be successful. The problem for faculty is to look closer at the program to see that the success of the DFE will be measured one student's experience at a time. Faculty members understand the big picture of their individual majors, but based on findings about communication with students and supervisors it

appears that faculty treat the DFE simply as a program requirement. The challenge will be to encourage each to take a closer look at the role of the DFE in their program and how it can become a key component to successfully educating, equipping, and enriching their students.

The AD is committed to ensuring that the DFE is a positive experience for students. He is also committed to the continued development of the DFE experience. The AD will need to take a significant lead in creating a vision for the DFE program being a key component to bringing *practical* experiences into the *practical* ministry degree programs.

My continued role will be to help remind the Practical Ministry faculty of the importance of their responsibility in communicating with supervising organizations early and often so that all parties involved in a DFE can have a positive experience. The initial milestone identified by the team is the new DFE recruitment cycle that begins this fall. The addition of the new definitions to the supervisor's manual and provided to the students in the DFE Orientation course will be the first milestone to measure implementation.

The AD will need to continue to keep the improvement of the DFE program in front of the Practical Ministry department. This should not be difficult, since his position is where complaints about the DFE will continue to be heard.

#### *Developing Political Support*

As stated earlier, the AD already has expressed an interest in the implementation of steps that will lead to improved communication with supervising organizations and faculty. In October 2004 the academic office received feedback about the need for better outcomes assessment during the North Central Association (NCA) accreditation site visit team. The NCA accreditation site team will make another spot-check visit in 2 years (Fall 2007) to see what progress is being made in the area of assessment. This assessment visit is, in my estimation, the most powerful

political sway that could influence the faculty, as well as meet any resistance from administration based on financial considerations.

### *Evaluating the Intervention*

The goal of the team is to implement as many of the recommended changes as possible before another survey, currently planned to be administered in the Fall of 2006, is taken. This next feedback loop should help to provide another set of valid data to re-evaluate the DFE program. The recommendation of the team for the next feedback loop is to include a survey of supervising faculty to discover additional options for improvement.

The team is aware that the second and third action plan options should be easier to implement once the primary plan is completed. The second, communication, can begin with initial phone conversations between faculty and supervising organizations, and can be developed for implementation during the college's Internship Fair held annually each November. The goal is to help supervising organizations understand the expectations the college has for students involved in a DFE experience.

The team also believes that the third action plan, to develop a web site, could be developed quickly since my job responsibilities also include being the college's Webmaster. This option also did not require bringing another department or employee into the process, thereby allowing for a faster deployment.

The team members concluded that the current assessment plan had provided interesting data that had not been revealed by previous surveys. They felt that any of the recommendations that are implemented will improve the current DFE program. The team's suggested feedback system should help maintain the flow of data on the internship program. The plan to implement the feedback loop every 2 years is reasonable because the college has a small enrollment and

there is a low number of students who participate in the DFE program each year. This plan will formalize the action research and continued collaborative examination of the program. The continued collection of data is essential for accurate diagnosis of problems and discovery of new methods that may enhance the learning experience.

#### *A Critical Review of the Action Research Process*

The action research process has been a mixed experience for me. I believe that I selected the correct model for this project but there were some problems with the actual completion of the project. The contracted project turned out to have too many floating deadlines. There was a sincere desire to see the project completed by the AD and myself, but MCC's academic department priorities were constantly distracted during the term of the project. These distractions included budget constraints, the retirement of the college's President, and the NCA site visit for accreditation renewal. The academic office consists of only three people, the AD, his assistant, and a part-time coordinator for the Christian service program. The lack of staff means that the AD must also function as the registrar. These factors contributed to the reality that the project often fell victim to the "tyranny of the urgent." There were also occasions where my other job responsibilities and schooling caused the rescheduling of a deadline.

The project was also difficult to complete since some stakeholders, specifically the supervisors, are spread out throughout several states that include Kansas, Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska, Arizona, and California. This makes their involvement in the process difficult to coordinate with other participants. While the development of the collaborative team was essential to the process, it will remain difficult to maintain a consistent team for continued study of the internship until more of the initial recommendations can be completed. I believe that until the college can employ, or assign, a DFE coordinator to oversee this project it will be difficult to

maintain project objectives and priorities. This position will also be necessary for real action to take place within the current faculty structure. With extremely limited finances and other faculty and academic staffing priorities it may be several years before such a position will exist.

Suggestions for significant changes within the DFE program will need to come from a respected peer rather than a perceived outsider. Changes will have to be made in cooperation with each practical ministry professor because each professor has significant control of their curriculum and how the DFE for their major is structured and implemented. This level of ownership can create a personal reaction to any critique of the DFE.

I believe that I have learned significant lessons about the action research process. While many projects may be easier, or quicker, to complete, this project involved a large number of people outside of the physical organization. Therefore, it was often difficult to keep the project moving forward in the 'collecting data' phase (step three). This also increased the difficulty in communicating the importance of the project to some stakeholders (especially graduates and other supervisors). They had to make a special effort to complete surveys or to be available for focus groups or interviews.

If I had the ability to do something differently, I might make sure that there was more information and research materials available before agreeing to lead a similar project. I would also rather have worked on a project that was more related to my current roles within the organization. I believe this would have helped my diligence, specifically, getting material completed in a timely manner for the MSM paper. I also believe that it would have been easier to create a vision for a project that was closer aligned to my areas of expertise.

*Conclusion*

The research demonstrated that many stakeholders are pleased with the college's Directed Field Experience. The research also revealed several areas that will provide opportunities for continued improvement to the program. These areas of improvement were observed in questionnaires, focus groups, and individual interviews with both students and organizational supervisors. The results lead the Collaborative Team to suggest improving definitions for the academic DFE and the typical internship, improving communication process between faculty and supervising organizations, and developing a program web site. These interventions should be work well in the next step, step 6, of Burke's model for action research (1982) (refer to Table 1). This will allow MCC to move beyond the period of complacency to continued improvement in the DFE program so that students can have the best possible learning experience.

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