

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast, my name is Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. NEXTcast is a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. Every episode we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation, both inside and outside the classroom. This episode we speak to Colin Flint who teaches advertising in the School of Media and Information Technology.

Nathan Whitlock: We'll be talking to Colin about research he's done into the way students perceive and experience their internships. Research that was recently published in the first issue of JIPE, the Journal of Innovation in Polytechnic Education.

Nathan Whitlock: Welcome to NEXTcast Colin.

Colin Flint: Thank you, Nathan.

Nathan Whitlock: To start out I was wondering if you could just briefly tell us what kind of work you do here at Humber?

Colin Flint: I teach in various advertising programs, it was called media studies, I teach creative advertising, degree program and account management program.

Nathan Whitlock: And in those programs, there's one of the programs where your students actually go out and do an internship.

Colin Flint: Well all of them do.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh, they do? Okay.

Colin Flint: One particular one, which is the one I did research amongst but just about all the students in the advertising program go out for internships at some point in their programs.

Nathan Whitlock: Okay and you mentioned you did some research, and what you did was you sort of looked into their perceptions of these internships, before and after they'd gone through them. How did you come about just wanting to look into that, what was the inspiration for that?

Colin Flint: Well, I was kind of... was a lot happening in the kind of media world talking about internships and as people having opinions on whether they were good or bad and whether they should be paid and unpaid and what they should involve in all that kind of stuff. Which I thought, yeah it is all important questions, but simply one voice was missing, which is for students.

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Colin Flint: Nobody's actually asking them what they wanted or what they got out of the internship and how valuable it was to them. So I thought, lets go out and talk to them, lets ask them.

Nathan Whitlock: It's that simple? Just bring them into the conversation.

Colin Flint: Yeah and no one had up to that point so I wanted to do that.

Nathan Whitlock: And what was the process, when did this start, when did you sort of start doing this research?

Colin Flint: It seems like it's taken forever. I have to say. I guess the first thing is if you're doing research at Humber it has to be applied research. First thing I had to do was to find a partner, so I went out and talked to the ICA, the Institute of Communications Agencies, to see if they would be, if they were interested in this topic, too and it turns out they were. 'Cause very obviously, they represent all advertising and other agencies in town or in the country. One of their mandates is to kind of help the next generation of people coming into the industry, to keep the industry alive and to find those people and to nurture them. They were very interested to know sort of what was happening around internships, so you have a number of programs if they'd have spoken to our members and things like that. But they were also interested in what the interns felt.

Nathan Whitlock: Do they bring in internships, interns themselves or...

Colin Flint: Occasionally.

Nathan Whitlock: ...more of their members have the number of them.

Colin Flint: It's more their members bringing interns, just a vast majority of their members do bring in interns. It was owned by half of their members, were interns.

Nathan Whitlock: Right, but it is a conversation that's going on in industry?

Colin Flint: Absolutely, yes.

Nathan Whitlock: Are these effective, are they doing it right?

Colin Flint: Yes and on top of that there's kind of concerns about what's a fair way to treat the interns and those kinds of things, those issues are there. What's the most effective way getting the right people and helping them succeed. That was the starting point, the next thing was to come and get Humber on board and Humber were great. The research department at Humber were very helpful, Krista originally and Magdalena, were very useful and helpful in getting, helping me get the money and helping me also to get a research assistant. So Juhi, who's by joint offer, was my research assistant and she was just invaluable because she knew all the stuff about kind of programs and entering data and manipulating data. All that stuff I really knew nothing about.

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Colin Flint: She kind of took that role.

Nathan Whitlock: You brought the soft skills and she brought the data skills.

Colin Flint: I guess, that's right. And also my associate dean which at the time was Nancy but Bob took over, who were really supportive in terms of finding me time to do the whole thing. I had a lot of help. But it still, it took, it takes a lot of time, there's a lot of processes you have to go through.

Nathan Whitlock: While you were doing it were there some surprises you were finding as you were talking to the students?

Colin Flint: One of the obvious issues going in was pay.

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Colin Flint: In my particular case about 39% of the students were paid minimum wage or more. But the majority weren't and that's fairly standard I think you across a lot of industries. So I was kind of looking, wanted to see what they thought about of that and not surprisingly they weren't too happy about that. It was one of the biggest dissatisfaction they had and when I asked them how could you improve the internship, pay me.

Nathan Whitlock: Absolutely.

Colin Flint: It was a common thing. Kind of what slightly surprised me was that it didn't seem to impact how their satisfaction they had with the experience. They were all, nearly all, satisfied with their internship experience, they had good time, they learned a lot. The lack of pay didn't seem to be a big issue in that, what really mattered to them was, were they getting the good experience, were they getting real experience, were they working on real projects.

Nathan Whitlock: Right and I would imagine going into the internship before that was the bigger, it was almost a more looming concern that this idea of being or not paid but then when they're in midst of it maybe did they feel like, oh there's this other currency we're sort of picking up?

Colin Flint: I think it's more that they, it's kind of is a given.

Nathan Whitlock: Right, you resign yourself to that.

Colin Flint: You resign yourself to it, it's not ideal but I'm still, I'm gonna get something good out of this so it's still worthwhile. I think that's kind of more of their attitude to it.

Nathan Whitlock: And was that probably the biggest take-away you took from that?

Colin Flint: That's certainly one of the take-aways. The other thing that kind of struck me when kind of digging into the data was looking at some of the students which was about a third or just over a third who were on OSAP. Those were accumulating student loans and the crazy thing is, your internship isn't covered by OSAP.

Nathan Whitlock: Oh right, it cuts off at the end of your in class term.

Colin Flint: Yes, that's right. So suddenly you're not actually getting any money and if you're not being paid that becomes critical. The majority of our students had to seek out internships which paid and a lot of them found that. That's kind of struck me as fundamentally wrong, it's disadvantaging those students, those students are cut off from a lot of internships which were probably wanted. But also from the other point of view the agencies are losing some of the best talent because that talent can't afford to spend, in our case 14 weeks, without being paid.

Nathan Whitlock: Did you, this was probably outside the scope of your research but did you find any suggestions on how to fix that or was it just that, that was the concern?

Colin Flint: And there are genuine issues here, I know certainly from the agency's point of view, they have to actually invest quite a lot in looking after interns, particularly the early, in their first few weeks. They're not getting, if they end up paying the interns they're probably not getting full value from those interns, from the other hand they are getting value. I think there are some solutions, in the end I think that probably the best solution is to end up paying them and it's not going to be a full amount but sort of minimum wage and things like that. And that avoids a lot of the issues.

Colin Flint: One issue related to it is that the Ontario law doesn't want people to be doing real work if they're not being paid. But that's what constitutes exactly what they students want. They want to have that real work, a solution which says lets steer them away from real work and give them project when the students wouldn't be happy with that.

Nathan Whitlock: Beyond the question of pay, what were some of the other findings you had? You mentioned one the biggest deciding factors in terms of their perception, was this issue, are they really getting something out of it, are they learning something? Is it an enriching experience? What were some of the factors that were at play at there, what were some of the things that made them feel it was an enriching experience?

Colin Flint: Well the two main things that really made them feel good, that it was satisfying was doing real work. Real projects with real clients and the second thing is working with industry professionals. So being, working closely alongside people they respected who had done the job before them. There was another element which kind of related to that last one, which really, which came out quite strongly which was also a bit of a surprise to me, which is the whole area of

mentorship. What I found was before they went in the students didn't really think that having a mentor when we got to the agencies was that important. But once they'd been there, that really changed, it was 26% said it was absolutely essential before it went up to 44%, thought it was absolutely essential to have a mentor. And if you included people that thought it was very important, that's 91% of people thought it was really important or essential to have a mentor.

Nathan Whitlock: Why do you think that is? Why do you think, even if you were just to guess, why do you think the numbers were so low going in and then spiked once they'd gone through the experience?

Colin Flint: I think when they find themselves in situations and a lot of the time they don't know what to do. We do our best to kind of train them, give them all the knowledge...

Nathan Whitlock: Of course.

Colin Flint: ... but they're still, it's kind of, they're gonna find things that they don't know how to handle. Having someone they can go and talk to and help them, or if they're just getting stressed out by stuff, to find someone to talk to who isn't the person who's evaluating their performance I think they find incredibly useful. And someone to model their behaviour of all those kinds of things. I think they thought of it very much as I'll go in there, do the job and everything will work out fine.

Nathan Whitlock: Right, right.

Colin Flint: I think there was a little bit of a surprise to them but the other side of that is it's actually, it's one of the areas that they expressed quite a lot of dissatisfaction with, 36% of them expressed some level of dissatisfaction with the level of mentorship they got in agencies. One of the things I found actually is going and talking to agencies afterwards. This was probably the biggest piece of news they got from my research was the importance of this, I think they kind of, when they heard it, it was kind of 'uh yeah!'...

Nathan Whitlock: Of course.

Colin Flint: ...type of experience.

Nathan Whitlock: The light goes on.

Colin Flint: The light goes on but a lot of them hadn't actually insured that happened, they just kind of go, oh we'll get the interns in, we'll give them some work to do. Sometimes they'd set up structures rather they hadn't thought about this whole area of mentorship and that seems to be one which is kind of fertile ground I've found when talking to agencies, they go, oh yeah that's something we should do more of. Hopefully that will come out of this research.

Nathan Whitlock: Alright, excellent and I should mention as well that part of the reason we're talking about this right now is that your research, the paper you wrote about this research was recently published in the first issue of JIPE, the Journal of Innovation Polytechnic Education, which is published by Humber Press which also publishes, puts out this very podcast. The whole point of that journal is to share this kind of research, what do you think is the benefit of sharing that kind of research? I mean you mentioned the industry itself, we'll see that you spoke to them and they were amazed that they had this sort of mentorship gap was existing. What do you think that would also do even for other faculty for people who are working in other schools who have internship programs?

Colin Flint: One of the things I find could certainly help faculty, but I think it helps students and that's for me probably more important and certainly I use this research to set up for students who are going on internships, to set up some expectations for them and tell them, this is what you should expect, this is the experience other people had when they went. So you should expect that experience the vast majority of my students said they were treated with respect. You should expect to be treated with respect. But on the other hand not very many actually met clients, so don't expect to meet clients. I find giving these results to my students and setting up some of those expectations I think is useful and I think, although mine is specific to one industry I think a lot of the findings are common, that I think other programs would find passing on some of their information useful as well.

Nathan Whitlock: And I guess there's that idea that you can say these things in the abstract, you can create those expectations for students in the abstract but if you're actually saying, here is what students that came before you experienced, here are the actual numbers, you don't have to take it from me, you can take it from the people who are a year to two years older than you.

Colin Flint: And we all know as teachers what we say is never believed, what people before them say is clearly much more believable and in that context the finding on mentorship, I go out and tell my students try and make sure you get a mentor. It may not be that they appoint one for you but find one.

Nathan Whitlock: Right.

Colin Flint: And I think that's something that can apply, you have interns, would it apply to yours as well?

Nathan Whitlock: It did apply to the interns that I worked with and it's something that I bring to the students that I'm talking to in terms of the dreaded internship where you're just given a corner office and a desk and a computer and see you in three months. I was always talked to them that they have to kind of at that point recognize what the situation they're in and go out and find somebody who seems approachable and find a mentor. Actually link to someone and when I was working in magazines that often became how I ended up mentoring interns

because they found I was the one they could speak to. And I actually enjoyed it, I enjoyed sort of sitting them down, going through the work they'd done and saying you could work on this and this is the voice were looking for and these are the steps. Just as you said they often found, oh no ones actually explained this to me before they just said here's the task, hand it in when you're done.

Colin Flint: My experience, I don't know what your industry's like but my experience through the advertising industry is that people are very giving and generous and I think you were alluding to, they enjoy the process of helping the next generation and guiding them and giving them the benefit of their knowledge. It's usually not that difficult.

Nathan Whitlock: It's just sometimes a matter of asking, of actually building up the courage to ask.

Colin Flint: Yes, absolutely. And sometimes time because we're all busy people.

Nathan Whitlock: Absolutely.

Colin Flint: Yes, if you can get out there and ask, you'll probably get a positive response.

Nathan Whitlock: The one thing I wanted to sort of end up was going back to the students that you did this research on that you spoke to directly. We often in a lot of the courses and programs and the way we teach here often try to add a reflective element to some of our assignments to get students to kind of think, okay now you've done this task now you've gone through this process, how do you feel differently about it? How do you perceive it differently? How do you perceive your own skills and your own developing skills? Was there any sense when you worked through this process with these students and did the research that their perceptions changed a lot? That the process of actually answering the questions you were asking made them think through their internship a little more, have a little more reflection?

Colin Flint: I'm sure that's the case and hopefully not too much because I don't want to have skewed all their answers. Essentially the research was in some ways just a very big reflection. I think to a large extent it did do that and I haven't followed up to find out exactly what that effect was but I'm sure there was one.

Nathan Whitlock: There's an opportunity for more research.

Colin Flint: There's always an opportunity for more research, more research always needs to be done.

Nathan Whitlock: Exactly. Well thank you very much Colin, it was great having you here.

Colin Flint: Thank you very much.

Nathan Whitlock: And just as a reminder if anyone wants to read the results of your research, you just have to go to JIPE.ca and click on the paper with your name on it.

Colin Flint: Yes and if people have reflections on my paper I'd love to hear what they have to say.

Nathan Whitlock: Excellent, thank you.

Nathan Whitlock: NEXTcast is produced by Humber Press and the creative productions team at The Centre for Teaching and Learning at Humber College.

Nathan Whitlock: Special thanks to Puneet Wagh, Santino Pannozzo, Allison LaSorda, Darren Richards and Eileen DeCourcy.

Nathan Whitlock: To suggest stories for future episodes of NEXTcast or to let us know what you think e-mail humberpress@humber.ca.

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Nathan Whitlock: Thanks for listening, see you next time. That's not a pun.