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Access Delayed is Access Denied: Barriers to Student Participation in Internships

Thomasena Shaw and Lisa Bergson

Introduction

Internships are a mainstay at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in North America, Europe and beyond. About 1.5 million internships (roughly 10% of college grads) are filled in the United States annually and nearly 61% of graduating seniors participated in a co-op or internship (NACE 2019). Internships can be paid, unpaid, part-time, or full-time experiences and typically involve working at a company or organization and performing tasks similar in nature and skill level to tasks done by entry-level employees in the organization. In some instances, they are more informal arrangements initiated by job seekers themselves to network or “pad out” a résumé, referred to as “open-market” internships.

Internships undoubtedly have significant early career advantages for students including less time finding a first employment position, increased monetary compensation and greater overall job satisfaction. But, despite the much-lauded benefits, the prevalence of unpaid internships constitutes a significant barrier to student participation, particularly low-income and first-generation students. We conducted a study to explore undergraduate student perceptions and experiences with internships – paid and unpaid, and the extent to which access/participation is impacted by factors including demographics and life/employment situation.

Benefits of Internships:

It's all good, right?

Pedagogically, internships provide experiential learning beyond the traditional classroom, can foster generative

thinking, and create conditions that lead to unique growth for participants. According to NACE (2019), students who completed internships felt the experience significantly improved their ability to work in a team, their professionalism, their oral and written communication skills; Finley and McNair (2013) also reported higher average levels of engagement in deep learning and perceived gains among students who participated in internships versus those who did not.

For the academy, benefits of internships include attracting high-caliber students and building strong networks among commercial and nonprofit entities, potentially facilitating fundraising opportunities and improving university teaching via a more realistic approach to the learning experience. Research also

indicates a strong correlation between high impact practices like internships with retention and graduation rates and timely degree completion.

Advantages for the “host” organizations include providing a “test run” of potential employees and access to a more diverse pool of female and minority candidates for employers. Additionally, the more engaged employees were, the more likely they were to be graduates who participated in internship programs.

Challenges with Internships: *The other side of the coin*

Despite all of the positives, a raft of legal and ethical questions also surround internships – particularly unpaid internships. Research indicates that unpaid interns are often less satisfied with their first jobs, and their skill development was impacted negatively compared with those engaged in “paid” internship experiences. Hart (2014) cites a survey that found that paid interns were twice as likely to receive a job offer at the end of their internship than unpaid interns, delaying the latter’s ability to contribute to social security plans, the economy and investing in retirement plans. Employers can exempt interns from protections that are guaranteed to paid employees via the Fair Labor Standards Act such as payment of minimum wage and overtime compensation. Furthermore, interns may receive less protection when it comes to workplace environment abuses, like sexual harassment and discrimination.

Many low-income and first-generation students in particular don’t do internships (especially unpaid internships) because they often lack the social and financial capital needed to pursue them. Financial constraints also impact funding for transportation, childcare, and tuition costs. Sociocultural factors such as lack of access to relevant social and professional networks that

Internships help in obtaining a job after graduation

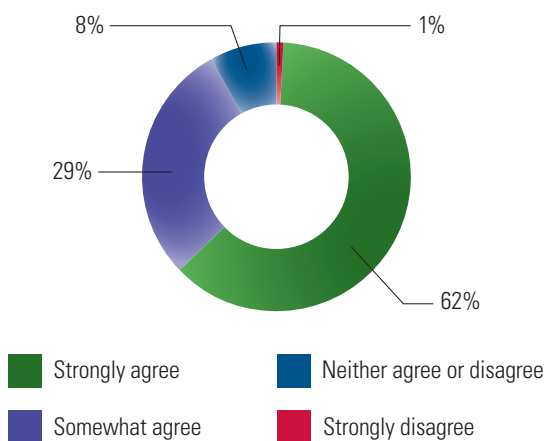


Figure 1

afford position and prestige to more well-connected students also facilitate and constrain the access to opportunity, class mobility, and power that high impact practices like internships confer. Institutional barriers include heavy course and scheduling problems, absent or inferior career coaching, and insufficient interview and résumé skills-building. These and other factors

Sector internship is in

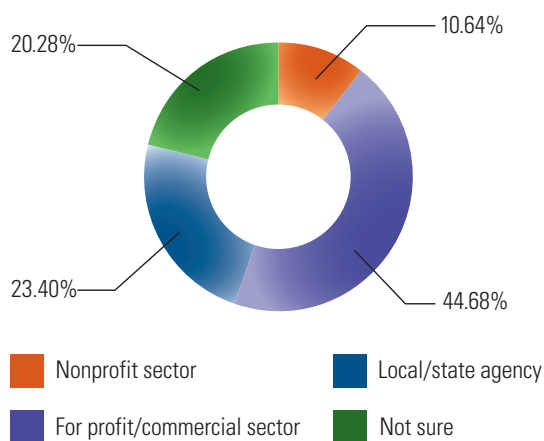


Figure 2

Despite the clear role and importance of internships as a vital experiential learning experience, few empirical studies explore factors that influence students' nonparticipation (including the role of paid/unpaid internships). Studies also fail to identify or address barriers to pursuing internships, and the extent to which participation varies by demographics, life/employment situation.

The Data

In April of the spring 2020 semester, a Qualtrics survey link was circulated via email to all BSU communication studies students (n = 473) where internships are elective, not required. An initial solicitation email with web-link to the IRB-approved survey was distributed, and one reminder email yielded 159 completed student surveys (n=159; response rate = 34%). The survey consisted of four sections. The first gathered relevant demographic data from respondents, the second section explored perception of the role and importance of internships. The next two sections were divided into two categories based on whether students i) have had or are currently pursuing an internship, or ii) had not pursued an internship. The final section of the survey asked respondents to answer one open-ended question seeking additional insights not covered in the survey.

What We Discovered: It's complicated!

The majority of students strongly agreed that internships help in securing a job after graduation (figure 1) and that there is a high demand for graduates in their field of study. However, the majority indicated that they have not had an internship related to their chosen field of study but were "planning to do one/working on it" (interestingly,

“I believe if I had the opportunity to do a paid internship, I would have done one. But ... it was impossible to find one. I just can't afford to work for free, I would have applied because I know that it would give me an edge over someone else applying for a job after graduation.”

ultimately perpetuate a cycle of systemic inequality as job applicants with the financial means to take an unpaid internship will have an advantage over students who could not afford to work for free.

Our study explores these factors and provides suggestions to strengthen course design and teaching practices to address deficits that impede students' ability to access the personal and professional benefits of the pedagogy.

Hart (2014) cites a survey that found that paid interns were twice as likely to receive a job offer at the end of their internship than unpaid interns, delaying the latter’s ability to contribute to social security plans, the economy and investing in retirement plans.

29% indicated that they were not planning on doing one). For those who answered YES, most worked in for-profit/commercial sectors, followed by nonprofit local/state agencies (figure 2). Most of these students indicated that their internships were paid, but over half said they needed financial support to help cover expenses associated with the internship (figure 3). The support was mostly from “Parents/Guardian/Family,” and for some it came via an “Internship Stipend” provided by the university. Students who completed internships indicated they did so

because they felt it was “essential to getting real world experience,” and that it “has given me an edge with experience and contacts that my friends who don’t have internships don’t have.” Another student said that while she appreciated that she was given valuable work experience:

“[I]t was just enough to cover gas and my lunch. I mean I know I’m lucky they covered anything but they should pay us at least minimum wage when we are actually working on projects and not doing coffee runs and photocopying.”

This study confirms that there are many challenges facing students wishing to pursue internships (figure 4). The majority of respondents indicated that they needed financial support to pursue their education. For the majority, financial aid was ranked the main source of help with expenses, for others parent/guardian contributions were ranked number one, other students relied mostly on income from work, and for others, scholarships. Most respondents reported that they work part-time (about a third reported they work full-time). The majority worked between 11 and 30 hours per week.

Most students in this study indicated that an unpaid internship would represent a significant financial hardship and is the primary reason they have not pursued the opportunity. The irony is that many cited time as an obstacle, too; they need to work full/part-time to pay for school and therefore lack time *and* money to participate in unpaid internships. One student explained the predicament:

“I just can’t do an internship that doesn’t pay, I don’t think it is fair or even possible to have a full class load,

Do you need financial aid to participate in an internship?

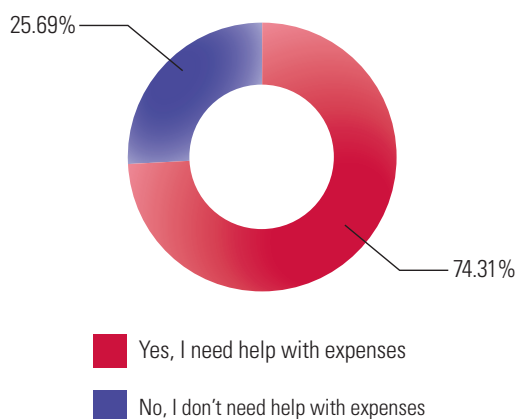


Figure 3

Which if any of the following factors affect your decision to not participate in an internship?

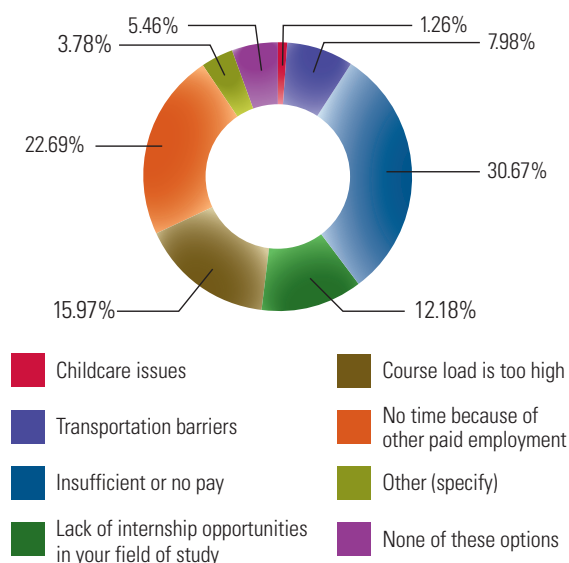


Figure 4

plus an internship, on top of a regular job that's practically full-time. I feel like it's so messed up, there's always something in the way of my goals."

Another shared:

"I think [internships] are extremely necessary to secure any interest from potential jobs, but often they aren't paid or if they are paid, you don't make enough to cover bills/save/pay tuition with them, so you have to work in addition to school and your internship."

as my business is a nonprofit. It's not a matter of not wanting to do it, but rather physically not having the time to be able to. Fortunately for me, running my business completely by myself gives me experience of what I assume an internship would offer."

Concluding Thoughts: *Costs outweigh the benefits?*

The results of this study are important because internships clearly produce important benefits for all parties

Research indicates that unpaid interns are often less satisfied with their first jobs, and their skill development was impacted negatively compared with those engaged in "paid" internship experiences.

Other students highlight the frustration they feel knowing the value that's placed on pre-professional experience in the job market, but the barriers that prevent their participation.:

"I believe if I had the opportunity to do a paid internship, I would have done one. But ... it was impossible to find one. I just can't afford to work for free, I would have applied because I know that it would give me an edge over someone else applying for a job after graduation."

Another student shared:

"I work full time on top of taking 6 classes, and also own my own business, so taking an internship would either mean sacrificing my own business or losing the job that I rely on for income,

involved – for students, the academy, and external organizations. They have the potential to foster generative thinking and create opportunities for students to become more independent, ambitious, and focused. Despite these benefits, this study highlights how the lack of paid internship opportunities remains a key barrier to student participation. While the majority of respondents (91%) acknowledged the important role that internships play in securing a job after graduation, 70% had not completed one listing the financial hardship of unpaid internships as the primary reason why. Undoubtedly, a lot of work remains to be done to strengthen course design and teaching practices to address inequalities/imbalance that impede students' ability to make the most of this pedagogical innovation.

Recommendations:

We must do more!

- Challenge how classed/socioeconomic barriers – especially unpaid internships – prohibit and/or negatively impact students' access to valuable internship experiences.
- Dismantle barriers that prevent students from accessing paid internships by advocating for work experiences that are safe and properly compensated.
- Normalize internship opportunities that promote greater flexibility in roles, responsibilities, and activities that allow students to showcase their strengths and knowledge.
- Innovate and lead in the pursuit of nontraditional opportunities like virtual internships that prioritize access and inclusion for traditionally underserved groups
- Reconsider the inclusion of internship(s) as a graduation requirement with alternative, innovative, classroom-based opportunities focused on pre-professional experience.



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