



How do students experience internships?

Exploring Student Perspectives on College Internships for More Equitable and Responsive Program Design

SEPTEMBER 2019

MATTHEW T. HORA, EMILY PARROTT, PA HER



Wisconsin Center for
Education Research
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Key findings

1. Students conceptualized internships in more multi-faceted and complex ways than official definitions.
2. Standard internship definitions are often overly positive, contributing to an optimistic conception that minimizes the diverse challenges, risks and negative outcomes many students experience when pursuing an internship.
3. Our data suggests that students without prior internship experience had a less nuanced conception of the nature and value of internships.
4. Debates about employability tend to be dominated by employer and advocates' voices and interests, with little to no representation of students' interests.
5. Ignoring students' insights results in a basic lack of understanding of their internship experiences.
6. Including students in internship policy making is essential to reframing the discourse about internships and informing a more student-centered and user-friendly design approach that caters to individual student needs.

Introduction

Internships are widely praised as a co-curricular activity that enhances students' employability and future wages.¹ Consequently, many government and post-secondary institutions around the world view internships as a cornerstone to their employability policies, in some cases making them mandatory for graduation.² In the United States, the inclusion of internships as a "high-impact" practice that contributes to student engagement and completion³ has policymakers and professional associations advocating for their widespread adoption. At the same time, a growing body of empirical research is documenting the positive benefits of internships,⁴ leading to what could be considered "the era of the internship" in global higher education.

There is little empirical research on how college students understand and experience their internships.

However, one aspect of internships is poorly understood: how students themselves conceptualize and experience them. We know how educators and advocates define internships,⁵ and there is also a promising line of inquiry examining students' opinions of their quality⁶ and differences in how students and employers view program quality and efficacy.⁷ But to date, no empirical research exists on how students define and conceptualize the internship experience on their own terms.

1 Knouse, S. & Fontenot, G. (2008). Benefits of the business college internship. *A research review. Journal of Employment Counseling, 45*(2), 61-66.; Maertz, C., Stoeberl, P., & Marks, J. (2014). Building successful internships: lessons from the research for interns, schools, and employers. *Career Development International, 19*(1), 123-142.

2 Klein, M., & Weiss, F. (2011). Is forcing them worth the effort? Benefits of mandatory internships for graduates from diverse family backgrounds at labour market entry. *Studies in Higher Education, 36*(8), 969-987; Silva, P., Lopes, B., Costa, M., Melo, A., Dias, G., Brito, E., & Seabra, D. (2018). The million-dollar question: can internships boost employment? *Studies in Higher Education, 43*(1), 2-21.

3 Kuh, G. (2008.) *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

4 McHugh, P. (2017). The impact of compensation, supervision and work design on internship efficacy: implications for educators, employers and prospective interns. *Journal of Education and Work, 30*(4), 367-382.; Silva et al., 2018. Ibid.

5 National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2018b). *2018 Student survey report*. Bethlehem, PA: NACE.

6 Alpert, F., Heaney, J. & Kuhn, K. (2009). Internships in marketing: Goals, structures and assessment—Student, company and academic perspectives. *Australasian Marketing Journal, 17*(1), 36-45.

7 Knemeyer, A. & Murphy, P. (2002). Logistics internships: Employer and student perspectives. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management, 32*(2), 135-152.

There are at least three reasons why understanding students' perceptions of internships is important:

1. Debates about employability tend to be dominated by employers' and advocates' voices and interests, with little to no representation of students' interests.⁸
2. In order to center students' perspectives,⁹ students need to be involved in the design of internship programs, including courses, pedagogical approaches and co-curricular experiences.¹⁰
3. Internships are part of a critical phase in students' psychological and professional development. Understanding how they are interpreting these experiences can provide valuable information for appropriate, positive, and effective program creation.¹¹

Without these insights, however, current descriptions of internships reflect the preconceived assumptions of researchers and advocates. In this paper, we address this problem by drawing on theories and methods from cultural anthropology to document the “emic” or the insider perspectives of students.¹² This way, we aim to center student perspectives within discussions of employability and internships.¹³ To elicit students' accounts, we use a free-listing method to document the words or phrases that are most salient to students as they consider the cultural domain of “internships.” In this case, we gathered free-list data from 57 students at three U.S. colleges, and analyzed the data using saliency analysis, inductive thematic analysis, and techniques from social network analysis to address the following questions:

Understanding students' perceptions of internships is important because:

1. Students' interests are underrepresented in debates about employability
2. In order to center students' perspectives, students need to be involved in the design of internship programs, including courses, pedagogical approaches and co-curricular experiences
3. Understanding how students interpret internship experiences can provide valuable information for creating more relevant programs.)

- 1. What are the most frequently and psychologically salient reported terms associated with internships?**
- 2. What underlying themes are evident in students' descriptions of these terms?**
- 3. What, if any, differences in term frequency, salience, and themes are apparent between students who have and who have not taken an internship?**

8 Higdon, R. (2016). Employability: The missing voice: How student and graduate views could be used to develop future higher education policy and inform curricula. *Power and Education*, 8(2), 176-195.; Tymon, A. (2013). The student perspective on employability. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(6), 841-856.

9 Carini, R., Kuh, G., & Klein, S. (2006). Student engagement and student learning: *Testing the linkages*. *Research in higher education*, 47(1), 1-32.

10 Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: implications for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(2), 133-145.

11 Hilton, S. & Slotnick, H. (2005). Proto-professionalism: how professionalisation occurs across the continuum of medical education. *Medical Education*, 39(1), 58-65.; Jackson, D. (2016). Re-conceptualising graduate employability: the importance of pre-professional identity. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35(5), 925-939.; Lown, N., Davies, I., Cordingley, L., Bundy, C., & Braidman, I. (2009). Development of a method to investigate medical students' perceptions of their personal and professional development. *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 14(4), 475-486.

12 Wolcott, H. F. (1985). On ethnographic intent. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 21(3), 187-203.

13 Higdon, 2016. Ibid.; Tymon, 2013. Ibid.

Background

Research on internships is increasing across disciplinary and national boundaries, as more governments and postsecondary institutions advocate for their inclusion in students' educational programs.¹⁴ However, despite this diverse literature, existing studies are only to a limited degree comparable and valid. One of the main problems is the lack of a standardized definition of internships.¹⁵ In order to address this problem, the [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\)](#) developed the following internship definition:

An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical applications and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths, and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.¹⁶

There are several notable things about this definition. Firstly, this standardized definition erases the differences between the different perspectives of employers, educators, and students. Furthermore, it idealizes internships as uniformly facilitating students' social capital and professional networks. In reality, these are not guaranteed outcomes of an internship.

Consequently, NACE's¹⁷ definition should be viewed as more aspirational than descriptive. Internships can, in fact, open a range of possibilities. But this homogenous definition obscures negative and potentially harmful aspects of internships, such as worker exploitation,¹⁸ negative influences on students' career aspirations,¹⁹ and how internships may reproduce inequality.²⁰ The presence and influence of definitions like these are one of the reasons why a more ethnographic and student-based account of internships is warranted.

NACE's description is more aspirational than descriptive, because professional connections are not a guaranteed outcome of internships. It suggests a homogenous, positive experience of internships, which obscures negative and problematic outcomes.

The role of student voice: Principles of student-centered instruction

While research on students' opinions about the quality of their internship experiences exists,²¹ these studies do not delve deeply into how students construct their understandings of the experience itself. Specifically, there are three problems with the lack of insights into this process:

14 See Narayanan, V., Olk, P., & Fukami, C. V. (2010). Determinants of internship effectiveness: An exploratory model. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 9(1), 61-80. for review

15 National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2018a). Position statement: U.S. internships. Bethlehem, PA: NACE.; Silva et al., 2018. Ibid.

16 National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2018a). Ibid.

17 National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2018a). Ibid.

18 Chan, J., Pun, N., and Selden, M. (2015). Interns or workers? China's student labor regime. *Asia-Pacific Journal*, 13(36), 1-25.; Perlin, R. (2012). *Intern Nation*. London, UK: Verso Books.

19 Walmsley, A., Thomas, R., & Jameson, S. (2012). Internships in SMEs and career intentions. *Journal of Education and Work*, 25(2), 185-204.

20 Curiale, J. 2009. America's new glass ceiling: unpaid internships, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the urgent need for change. *Hastings LJ*, 61, 1531.

21 Alpert, F., Heaney, J., & Kuhn, K. (2009.) Ibid.; Cho, M. (2006). Student perspectives on the quality of hotel management internships. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 6(1), 61-76.; NACE, 2018b. 2018 Student survey report. Bethlehem, PA: NACE.

1. Existing power hierarchies facilitate the marginalization of student experiences in discussions about education. Employers and college administrators may suppress student voice in favor of their own interests.²²

Including students in these debates is not only a moral responsibility but also key to enhancing educational quality through the incorporation of “user feedback”.²³

2. Students need to be actively engaged in the learning process.²⁴

Not only in crafting more engaging classroom activities, but also in co-designing courses, teaching methods, and the curriculum itself. This has a positive influence on student motivation, student-teacher relationships, and instructor understanding of student learning processes.²⁵ Student insights can then be incorporated into improving academic programs.²⁶

3. Educators need to understand how students are experiencing their entry into new professional communities, in order to adequately support their personal and professional growth.

Internships are a potentially transformative experience, where students are socialized into new professional cultures²⁷ and may begin to develop a “pre-professional identity”.²⁸ With information about student experiences, educators can adjust how they advise students,²⁹ and how they design internship programs.³⁰

These reasons for accessing information about students’ internship experiences raise the question—how can the field best elicit their accounts about internships?

Methods and Scope

Sites: This paper draws on a larger mixed-methods, longitudinal study of internships at three post-secondary institutions:

1. a comprehensive Predominantly White Institution (PWI) with an undergraduate headcount of 4,168 students (hereafter named Institution A),
2. a technical college with 20,801 students (Institution B), and
3. a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) with 2,038 undergraduates (Institution C).

Existing power hierarchies facilitate the marginalization of student experiences in discussions about education. Employers and college administrators may suppress student voice in favor of their own interests.

The free-list method:

The free-list method is commonly used in anthropological field research to document cultural domains, meaning the distribution of certain concept across a group. The technique entails asking respondents to list words or short phrases that come to mind regarding a specific concept.

22 Cook-Sather, A. (2006.) Sound, presence, and power: “Student voice” in educational research and reform. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 36(4), 35.
 23 Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Ibid.
 24 Carini, R., Kuh, G. & Klein, S. 2006. Ibid.
 25 Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Ibid.
 26 Matthews, K., Cook-Sather, A., and Healey, M. (2018). Connecting learning, teaching, and research through student-staff partnerships: toward universities as egalitarian learning communities. In V. Tong, A. Standen, & M. Sotiriou, eds., *Shaping higher education with students: ways to connect research and teaching*. London: University College of London Press.
 27 Dailey, S. (2016). What happens before full-time employment? Internships as a mechanism of anticipatory socialization. *Western Journal of Communication*, 80(4), 453-480.
 28 Trede, F, Macklin, R., & Bridges, D. (2012). Professional identity development: a review of the higher education literature. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(3), 365-384.
 29 Lown, N., Davies, I., Cordingley, L., Bundy, C., & Braidman, I. (2009). Ibid.
 30 Rothman, M. (2007). Lessons learned: Advice to employers from interns. *Journal of Education for Business*, 82(3), 140-144.

Sampling frame: Students in their junior and senior years (Institutions A and C), or in the second half of their degree programs (Institution B)

Data collection: Focus groups with 57 students (two to four students per group).

During the focus groups, all students first completed a free-list exercise, where they were asked to identify short words or phrases associated with the term “internships.” After completing their free-list, students were asked to elaborate on the first term on their lists and to explain what the term meant. Following this exercise, students were then asked several open-ended questions. For students who had taken an internship, questions were asked about their motivations for pursuing an internship, the nature of their work in the internship, etc. Students without an internship experience were asked about obstacles to pursuing internship opportunities and general concerns about internships and their future careers.

Data Analysis and Results

In order to analyze students’ responses, we completed the following steps, gaining different layers of insight as we proceeded:

1. Conversion of raw data into standardized terms

The first step was to convert the students’ original responses into standardized terms. Therefore, two analysts independently reviewed the focus group transcripts for recurring, related themes. For instance, the standardized term “experience” encompasses several terms such as “hands-on experience,” “work experience,” and “new experience.” (see Table 2).

Table 2. Raw Free List Data Examples of Standardized Terms

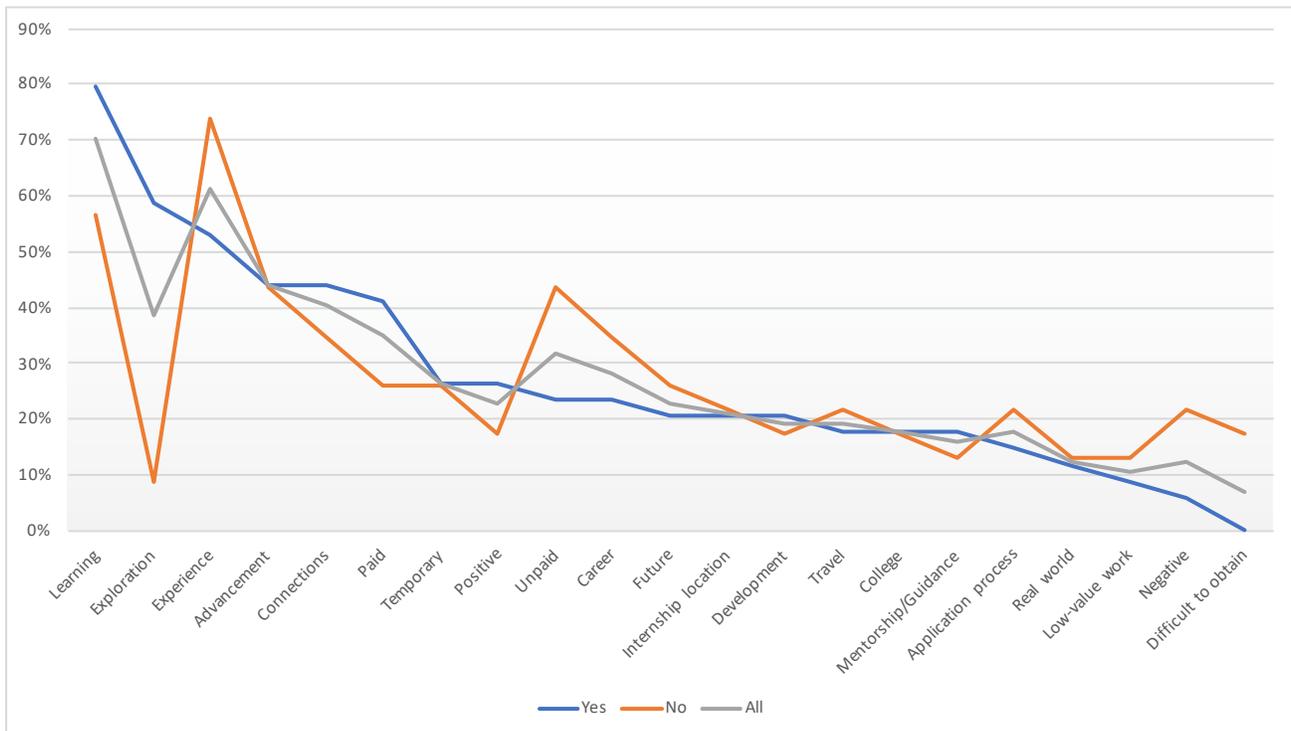
Standardized Term	Raw Data Examples
Experience	Experience, hands-on experience, work experience, new experience,
Learning	Learning, knowledge, educational, extra training, learning experience, repetition, difficult, challenging, teaching, shadowing, training
Paid	Paid, money, stipend, compensation,
Connections	Connections, networking, coworkers, network, meeting new people, friends, social capital, relationships, connections to future career, people
Career	Career, job work, labor, in your career field, career moves
Advancement	Advancement, possible job, foot-in-the-door, stepping stone, good for jobs, resume booster, workshops, GRE & MCAT prep, beginning
Unpaid	Unpaid, no compensation, little or no compensation, cheap labor
Opportunity	Opportunity, opportunities, chance, career opportunities
Exploration	Explore, exposure, new, test run, trying something new, try before you commit, trial and error, new adventures, eye-opening
Temporary	Temporary, short-term, short, summer, part-time, six months,
Research	Research
Development	Development, growth, inspiration, gaining skills, apprenticeship, personal development, personal growth
Future	Future, goals, setting/achieving goals, planning for the future, inside look at future career

2. Frequency of term reference:

Next, we used Anthropac software to identify the most frequently reported and salient terms³¹—first for the entire sample, then separately for students who had and who had not completed an internship.

All students most frequently reported “learning” (reported by 66.7% of participants), “experience” (61.4%), “advancement” (43.9%), and “connections” (40.4%).

Figure 1. Frequency of free list terms



For students who had taken an internship, the most frequently reported terms were “learning” (73.5%), “exploration” (58.5%), and “experience” (52.9%). Students who had not taken an internship reported the terms “experience” (73.9%), “learning” (56.5%), “unpaid” (43.5%) and “advancement” (43.5%) most frequently.

These results indicate the importance of concepts such as learning, experience, and advancement across the study sample, which shows some consistency in the cultural domain of “internships” for this group of students. However, the variation in term frequencies, particularly with respect to compensation (i.e., paid and unpaid), and the ideas of exploration and opportunity indicate differences between groups.

³¹ Borgatti, S. (1992). ANTHROPAC version 4.0. Columbia, South Carolina: Analytic Technologies.

Saliency is a measure that reflects the average percentile rank of a term across all respondent lists while weighting terms by the order each respondent reported them.³² It indicates how much a term “stands out” from other terms.

3. Saliency analysis of standardized terms

As a basis for further analysis of the data, we searched for key words with a saliency score of .175 or higher. Eight terms met this criterion. The most salient concepts for all students included “experience” (0.479), “learning” (0.41), “paid” (0.256), and “connections” (0.226). These suggest a shared concern about issues related to gaining workplace experience, the experiential learning aspects of internships, compensation, and developing professional connections.

As with the term frequency results, some similarities and differences between the two groups of students are evident. For students who had an internship, the terms “experience” (0.46), “learning” (0.432), “paid” (0.302), and “exploration” (0.272) were most salient, while students who had not taken an internship held “experience” (0.508), “learning” (0.379), “career” (0.273), and “unpaid” (0.262) as the most salient terms. These results indicate that experience and learning are highly salient concepts across the sample, but that differences exist with respect to compensation and an emphasis on exploration and careers.

4. Respondent elaborations of salient terms:

We then analyzed students’ utterances in response to questions posed after the free-list exercise. Through inductive open coding,³³ we examined nuances of how they interpreted and discussed the most salient terms. The analysis indicated 18 themes. Below we report a selection of these standardized themes and their most prevalent connotations.

Experience	Learning	Career	Paid and unpaid (compensation)	Connections	Opportunity
Something to get to be competitive	Occurs via hands-on experiences	Career goals and ambitions	Resignation about unpaid internships	Using personal or family networks.	To learn and advance in career
Learning new things	Develop new understandings/ techniques	Re-starting a career	Money makes work serious	Importance of faculty connections.	Limited opportunities
Hands-on experience complements college	Learn about yourself/future	Undecided about career	Many willing to work for free	Challenges with developing networks.	Chance to leave home
Exploring career options	Learn about professional cultures		Unpaid internships untenable for some		

32 Smith, J. & Borgatti, S. (1997). Saliency counts-and so does accuracy: Correcting and updating a measure for free-list-item saliency. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 7, 208–209.

33 Miles, M., Huberman, A., & Saldaña, J. 2013. *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd edition.). California: SAGE.

- Experience:**
The most prevalent way that students discussed the notion of “experience” was as *something to “get,” to be competitive on the job market*, e.g. by “building up” one’s resume. In several cases, an internship was described as an opportunity to get *“hands-on learning experience” to complement academic knowledge*, because it was unavailable or inapplicable in the classroom. Finally, some students reported that their internship experiences were primarily *as a form of career exploration*. For example, one student saw his internship as “a way to get work experience and understand the reality of whatever career choice I’m looking at.”
- Learning:**
For several students, the internship provided an opportunity to “learn by doing” *via hands-on experiences*. The internship provided the chance to take what was learned in the classroom and apply it in practice. Another way that students discussed the idea of learning was in relation to *learning about oneself and one’s own future*. As one student reported, the internship was, “less about on-the-job learning, and more just personal growing for me with work in general.”
- Career:**
Most references to the term “career” pertained to students’ *career goals and ambitions*. These statements included goals to “break into” fields. Some study participants were adults who were in the process of transitioning or *re-starting a career*, due to layoffs and/or a realization.
- Paid and Unpaid:**
Several students showed *resignation and acceptance that many internships are unpaid*, as “the way things were” and a necessary price for valuable workplace experience. Some students mentioned that *money adds a level of seriousness* to their positions, with some equating pay with the value or importance an organization gave to their position. Several students in our study felt that an internship is a necessary addition to one’s resume and *is so important that some are willing to work for free*. As one student explained: “the company knows that you want to be there...and are paying you with experience.” For many students in our sample, *money (or lack thereof) is a deciding factor* in their ability to take an internship. As one student said, “There’s very few [internships] I could find where they will be paid, which could be difficult for some people who are trying to work to put themselves through school.”
- Connections:**
Some students reported *using personal or family networks*, in order to find and pursue an internship. Several students discussed the *importance of faculty connections*, e.g. of their advisors, in identifying internship opportunities, in some cases even before career service offices, because of faculty’s direct connections with potential employers. A few students *described challenges with developing networks*, often due to lack of time.
- Opportunity:**
Several students spoke about *opportunities to advance*, by learning new things about a profession or sector or by getting a new position. Many saw an internship as “an opportunity to get your foot in the door”. Some students spoke about *limitations to opportunity*, especially due to time (e.g. in the case of full-time employed students) or location (e.g. in the case of students at rural universities).

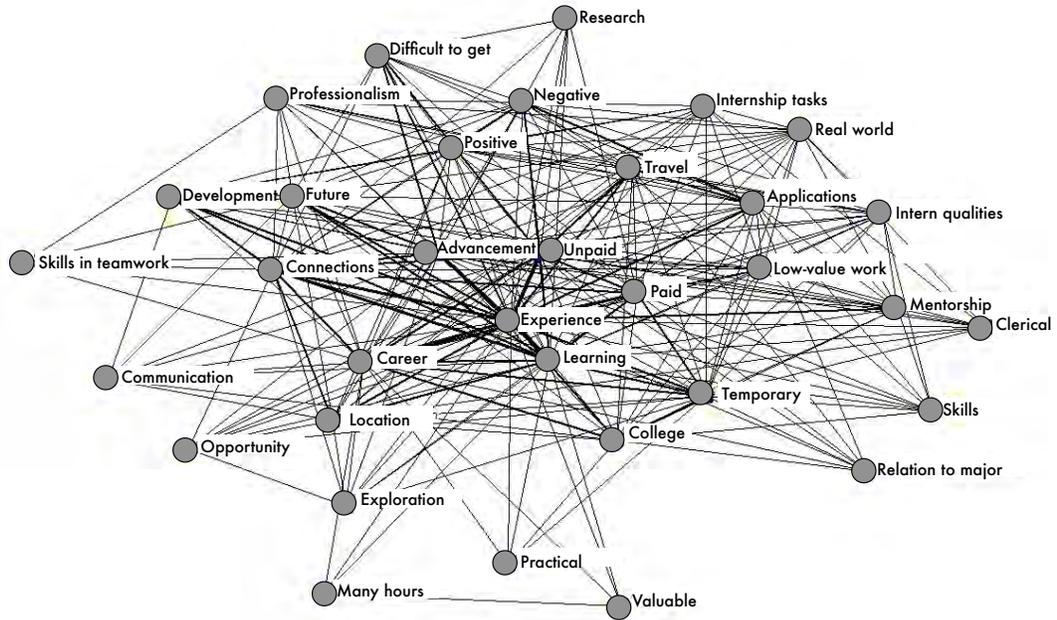
5. Differences between interns and non-interns

Finally, we analyzed the differences between the utterances of interns and non-interns using comparative thematic analysis and affiliation graphing.

Comparative thematic analysis

Comparing the use of salient terms between the two groups of students revealed differences in interpretation and meaning.

Figure 3. Affiliation graph of terms reported by students who had taken an internship.



In these graphs, terms that were frequently referenced are located near the center of each graph, such as “experience,” “learning,” “exploration,” “future” and “connections”. Terms that are connected by thick, dark lines represent terms that were frequently reported together, while terms connected by thin lines indicate less frequent co-occurrence.

“Network density is a general indicator of how connected people [or in this case certain codes] are in a network. It describes the proportion of links in a network relative to the total number of links possible.”³⁵

Essentially, the two graphs indicate a more complex and denser network of ideas and terms for the students who had taken an internship (density 0.5795) in comparison to those who had not (0.4813). Along with the results from the thematic analysis, this suggests that students who have not taken an internship have a less fine-grained and nuanced conception of the experience. These students also prioritize the role of compensation (both unpaid and paid), advancement, experience and learning as the core elements of the internship experience. In contrast, students who have had an internship also highlight the future, exploration, connections, opportunity and internship tasks and locations. These conceptions not only reflect a more detailed perspective of the internship as a site for workplace tasks, but also an emphasis on exploration and the future that is less evident with students who have not yet had an internship.

Along with the results from the thematic analysis, this suggests that students who have not taken an internship have a less fine-grained and nuanced conception of the experience.

³⁵ Department of the Army, Headquarters. (2014). *Social Network Analysis. Field Manual 3-24*: B11-B12.

Discussion

The results from our study reveal that students conceptualized internships in more multi-faceted and complex ways than official definitions. We conclude that these definitions reflect a uni-dimensional and overly rosy view that overlooks critical features of student perspectives and development. We suggest that NACE's³⁶ influential definition of internships as a form of experiential learning with multiple student benefits, advances a homogenous and aspirational perspective of internships that does not align with student accounts.

The NACE³⁷ definition overlooks problematic features of internships themselves (e.g., inadequate pay, poor mentoring, inane tasks). For instance, one student in our study described his internship as one of the worst experiences of his life, with a supervisor that was disorganized and vindictive. Instead of acknowledging the prospect that an educational program may be potentially harmful to student success, aspirational definitions of internships portray an overly optimistic type of experience.

Another problem with the NACE³⁸ definition is that it does not take students' level of knowledge of internships into consideration, which – as our data indicates -- varies considerably. Students who lacked internship experience largely viewed them as a vehicle to “get” experience that could strengthen their resume. Those who had taken an internship, in contrast, saw the benefits of the experience in terms of applying academic knowledge and as well as professional and personal exploration. Thus, former interns had a conception that was more akin to the NACE definition, while students lacking this experience had a much less rich, comprehensive, and accurate perspective.

But do these differences in how students and internship advocates define and perceive the experience really matter? We argue that yes, this disjuncture does matter, and for three primary reasons that we turn to next.

1. Students need to be represented in discussions of internship programs

Much of the discussion and debate about graduate employability tends to ignore the insights of students, while the voices and interests of the business community and policymakers are prominent and influential.³⁹ This absence of student voice is problematic for two reasons: (1) it is unethical to ignore and silence the interests of a group that has been historically marginalized and underrepresented in debates about education (i.e. students) and, (2) ignoring student voice results in a basic lack of understanding of their experiences and insights on matters ranging from what it takes to get a job⁴⁰ to which features of internships are most beneficial (e.g., orientations) and/or problematic (e.g., lack of transportation).⁴¹ Consequently, including students in internship policy making is essential to not only re-frame the discourse about internships but also to inform a more student-centered and user-friendly approach to their design.

2. Avoiding one-size-fits-all internship programs and responding to student situations

Some scholars have argued that student “engagement” must go beyond increased involvement in classroom or campus activities, and should involve student participation in the educational design process itself.⁴² To avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to internship design and advising, internship programs should adopt a similar approach.

36 NACE, (2018a). Ibid.

37 NACE, (2018a). Ibid.

38 NACE, (2018a). Ibid.

39 Higdon, R. (2016). Ibid.; Tymon, A. (2013). Ibid.

40 Higdon, R. (2016). Ibid.

41 Alpert, F, Heaney, J., & Kuhn, K. (2009.) Ibid. Cho, M. (2006). Ibid.; Knemeyer, A. & Murphy, P. (2002). Ibid.

42 Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., & Felten, P. (2011). Ibid.

As O’Neill observes, “the beauty of internships is that they can serve different purposes for different students”.⁴³ Ideally, how a student is advised and how an internship is structured would vary depending on their unique goals and situations. Of course, in some cases (e.g., mandatory internships in allied health programs) such differentiation may not be possible, but in other situations, students will have considerable flexibility with respect to the type of internship they could pursue.

Our data also indicates that students lacking prior internship experience had a less nuanced conception of the nature and value of internships. In response, advisors could educate inexperienced students about the various benefits of internships, perhaps through orientation workshops or in-class presentations. Without education about internship types and benefits, students lacking prior experience could be at a disadvantage when pursuing opportunities, settling for inadequate positions.

3. Facilitating self-reflection to spark development and inform program design

One of the key insights from student-centered perspectives on development is that learning and professional growth are processes in which students actively construct their own identities and perceptions of opportunity.⁴⁴ Having students actively reflect and articulate how they are constructing their own worlds, options, and sense of self would have two benefits. First, self-reflection is crucial for personal growth and development,⁴⁵ an important part of an effective internship. Second, career advisors can use these insights to tailor their counseling and advising to address students’ own unique situations and goals.⁴⁶

However, these issues raise questions about the ability of staff at postsecondary institutions and internship host organizations to adequately mentor and advise students. Ideally, colleges, universities, and employers will need to ensure that such skilled mentors are available, e.g. through allocating resources to hire and train such staff, with the goal of facilitating the personal and professional development of all student interns.

Conclusions

Our findings contribute new insights into how students conceptualize college internships. Future research should investigate a larger sample, particularly across a variety of disciplines, countries, and institution types. Researchers and practitioners should explore how engaging students more substantively in internship design may function in practice.

Contrary to the common perception that students have similar goals and understandings of internships and gain uniformly positive experiences and outcomes, our data demonstrates that in fact, considerable variation exists. Consequently, our findings indicate that higher education professionals, policymakers, and workforce educators should include students in discussions about internships, keeping their diverse experiences and needs in mind.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the student participants in this study, advisors, and administrators at participating institutions, and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their critiques and advice. We would also like to thank Vivien Ahrens for her excellent job in editing and distilling a long research paper down into this research report.

43 O’Neill, N. (2010). Internships as a high-impact practice: Some reflections on quality. *Peer Review*, 12(4), 4–8. <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=aph&AN=57276395&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

44 Baxter Magolda, M. (2014). Self-authorship. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 166, 25–33.

45 Savickas, M., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J., Duarte, M., Guichard, J., & Van Vianen, A. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 75(3), 239-250.

46 Rothman, M. (2007). *Ibid.*; Trede, F., Macklin, R., & Bridges, D. (2012). *Ibid.*



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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

Center for Research on College to Workforce Transitions (CCWT)

1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706

For more information contact Center Director Matthew T. Hora (hora@wisc.edu)

ccwt.wceruw.org