Multiple Internships: A Ladder or a Treadmill?

Vivien Ahrens, Zhixuan Wu, and Matthew Wolfram

Center for College-Workforce Transitions

Abstract

Multiple internships are often associated with positive academic and employment outcomes (Silva et al., 2016; Townsley et al., 2017). But little research exists on who takes multiple internships and why.

This paper is based on data collected for the College Internship Study, a national, mixed-methods, multisited, longitudinal investigation of college internships. Our survey indicates that only students with additional resources (time, financial security, social support) take multiple internships.

Our qualitative analysis of focus group participants in the study identified four main contexts that influenced students to pursue multiple internships, which we describe as:

1. Marketability culture
2. Outcome focused persistence
3. Gatekeeping navigation
4. Lateral career path exploration

These observations raise concerns about the accessibility and equity of the benefits of multiple internships.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the demographic and socioeconomic factors that are associated with multiple internships for students?

RQ2: What are the motivations, experiences, narratives, and strategies that influence students’ pursuit of multiple internships?

Mixed Data and Analysis Methods

Data Collection:

• At four four-year comprehensive colleges and a technical college
• T1: Spring 2018
• T2: Spring 2019
• A total of 3,751 students

Quantitative Analysis of Survey Results:

• 3 groups: no internship, one internship, and multiple internships

Case Study 4: Lateral Career exploration

• IT student: Completed “Service Center Technician” Program and is now transitioning into IT Cloud Support Program.
• Is using a second full-time unpaid internship to explore a lateral career move in the same company.

“…I enjoy being over there at least. I would rather, I would much rather be paid but like I enjoy it so why not and even though I get plenty of hours and I don’t get penalized for anything, mainly if I work more than 40 hours a week.”

Discussion and Outlook

• Internships are being promoted as a “high-impact practice” (HIP) to enhance students’ employability (Kuh 2008).
• As our interviews illustrate, many students see multiple internships as a way to build their credentials and demonstrate exceptional motivation and determination. Yet our data show that access to multiple internships is limited to students with the necessary resources. In addition, many high-quality internships require previous internship experiences.
• While multiple internships can potentially represent both a blessing and a curse, on the one hand they can be a ladder towards high-quality employment for students with the necessary resources. On the other hand, they may function as an endless treadmill of false promises and unpaid work for students that cannot make the jump to high-quality internships and employment.
• Further research is needed to better understand the contexts of multiple internships and their implications for students’ internship experiences and outcomes.
• For now, we call for careful consideration of the findings outlined here when advocating for multiple internships as a HIP.

References