




**UNDERSTANDING
THE IMPACT OF
UNPAID INTERNSHIPS
ON COLLEGE STUDENT
CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND
EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES**

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Funded by the NACE Foundation**



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Abstract

In recent years, the topic of unpaid internships has grown increasingly important—and controversial—within the field of higher education and the court of public opinion. This study explores the developmental and employment outcomes of undergraduate students participating in unpaid internships at one large, public research university in the Southeastern United States.

Drawing upon previous research and existing theories of experiential learning and psychosocial development, a mixed-method analysis was conducted to understand how unpaid internship participation impacts factors such as full-time employment, job satisfaction, professional skill development, goal-setting, networking, academic performance, and job-search success. Overall career development benefits and exposure to quality supervision were also considered in the analysis.

In general, the study confirmed that unpaid internship participation exhibits a negative impact on graduate employment outcomes. Additionally, unpaid internships were shown to play significantly different roles in student career development than paid internships, particularly in regard to professional skill development and academic performance.

Executive Summary

In the world of college career development, it is certainly no secret that unpaid internships are one of the most hotly contested topics among students, employers, and society at large. A quick Google search of the term yields a number of troubling results—articles decrying the systemic unfairness of working without compensation, legal guidelines for employers (such as the U.S. Department of Labor’s Fact Sheet #71), advice for students on evaluating internship opportunities, and, of course, information on class action lawsuits.

In 2015, the NACE Foundation issued a call for research proposals on the topic of unpaid internships. In response, the author examined student data from the University of Georgia (UGA) Career Center and conducted a mixed-methods study on the role of unpaid internships in undergraduate career outcomes.

The Study

Each year, the UGA Career Center surveys students returning from summer break to assess their work experiences. The response has been favorable, averaging more than 3,000 student participants annually with feedback on part-time jobs and internships. Interestingly, 85 percent of respondents in recent years had reported that their unpaid internships were highly beneficial (either “extremely beneficial” or “very beneficial” to their career development on a 5-point Likert scale).

However, a further analysis of the data somewhat discredited this initial finding. Compared to paid internship participants, unpaid interns were 10 percent less likely to give their experience a top rating (“extremely beneficial”). A combined analysis of internship survey responses and first-destination data reinforced this differential, showing that students completing an unpaid internship the year before graduation were more likely to be still seeking employment six months after receiving their degree.

The study was framed around the following research questions:

- Who does unpaid internships, and why?
- Does the method of finding internships impact quality of experience?
- Why do students find their unpaid internships to be useful to their career development? How do their perspectives differ from the perceived benefits identified by paid internship recipients?
- What correlations exist between unpaid internships and career outcomes, particularly in comparison to similar students who complete paid internships or no internships at all?

Some of these questions were answered more effectively than others. In particular, questions of “why” are particularly difficult to assess when discussing unpaid internships, as student decision-making about career opportunities is highly contextual. However, all of the key points outlined above were addressed in some form or fashion through the application of the mixed-method approach.

A brief note on the theoretical foundation of the study: This is based primarily upon David Kolb’s theory of experiential learning.

Methods

The approach used for this study consisted of a concurrent, mixed-method research design and an initial sample of 12,220 recent graduates from the academic classes of 2013 through 2015 at UGA. A total of 348 students completed a survey consisting of 66 multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and one-on-one interviews were conducted with an additional six students via phone or webcam. While the survey portion of the study collected data from a diverse range of recent alumni and reflected a variety of college experiences (including internship participation as well as

other varied forms of campus engagement), the interviews were conducted with students who had completed both paid and unpaid experiences during their time in college, allowing the participants to contrast their experiences and reflect on the unique impacts of each opportunity.

The survey portion of the study focused on several different aspects of the student experience, including not only reports of participation in paid and unpaid internship activity, but also questions about other elements of their college experience, such as Greek life, community service, leadership, intramural sports, and involvement with general social or professional organizations. Students rated their participation in each activity relevant to their peers, ranging from no participation at all to extreme levels of involvement for each area. Students were also asked to report on their three most beneficial activities during college and categorize whether each activity was a paid internship, unpaid internship, or other type of involvement. For these involvements, ratings were also requested for key developmental outcomes drawn from Kolb, Bandura, and Super. These areas included the activity's impact on goal setting, professional skill development, networking, academic performance, job-search success, quality supervision, confirming or rejecting a field of interest, and overall benefits to career development. In addition, demographic data were collected for each student as well as general feedback on their post-graduate careers, including overall satisfaction with their first position after college. Survey data were then combined with reported first-destination information from the *UGA Career Outcomes Survey*, providing a more complete picture of the student's career journey.

While the bulk of the data collected for the study was quantitative, interviews from participants helped bring additional context to the study. Qualitative data informed analyses of the survey data and helped situate the role of paid and unpaid internships within the students' career narratives. This exercise was also extremely useful from an evaluative standpoint, providing information on classes, faculty members, part-time jobs, and student organizations that the students found to be valuable. Some students cited on-campus experiences that enhanced their internship experiences or provided useful feedback on ways to improve career services at the institution. Although most of the data shared here are drawn from the quantitative portion of the study, the value of these conversations should not be understated.

Lastly, it is important to note that this study did include some limitations. The expanded survey painted a more balanced picture of student career development experiences, but self-selection of participants may still have resulted in a final sample that was not wholly representative of the campus population. Positive skewness is also a concern since students were often asked (in both the survey and the interview) to report on their most beneficial experiences. In general, students at UGA exhibit high levels of engagement with on-campus and career development activities, which is a further consideration when generalizing findings to the broader college student population.

Findings: Paid Versus Unpaid Internships

A quantitative analysis of the survey data was conducted using 21 different regression models, beginning with an exploration of which students on campus were pursuing paid and unpaid internship experiences.

Male students and business or agriculture majors were significantly more likely to pursue paid internships, while journalism students and students in the College of Family and Consumer Science (including diverse majors such as consumer economics, financial planning, nutrition, human development, and fashion merchandising) proved more likely to pursue unpaid experiences. Students majoring in political science and international affairs were also more likely to report high levels of engagement with unpaid internships. Lower grade point averages were correlated to lower participation rates for both types of internships. It should be noted that the logistic regression models for this initial question seemed to do a better job of explaining paid internship participation (with higher R-squared values).

Altogether, students in the survey sample (n=348) reported participating in unpaid internships at higher levels than paid internships.

Models gauging the impact of unpaid internship participation on job-search success showed that unpaid internship participation was negatively correlated to student salary and employment outcomes. One model showed that participants in unpaid internships were 11 percent less likely to report high levels of satisfaction with their first job. Another calculation assessing time-to-hire found unpaid internship participation to be one of the most significant factors

among 24 independent variables, exhibiting a strong negative influence on student acceptance of a job offer prior to graduation. Participation in unpaid internships—as well as research activities and study abroad—was correlated to a longer job-search process upon graduation, which helps support the argument that unpaid internship experiences are largely academic exercises. Part-time off-campus work was also correlated to a longer job-search process, while, interestingly, intramural sports participation was correlated to earlier full-time job acceptance. While unpaid internship participation was consistently found to be a negative influence in graduate career outcomes, these examples illustrate the complexity of interpreting student engagement data and the need for further research in this area.

Another portion of the analysis gauged the impact of reported experiences on specific developmental outcomes drawn from the study's theoretical framework. These models included dependent variables gauging whether experiences helped students confirm or reject career interests, set and attain career goals, develop their network, enhance professional skills, succeed in the job search, experience quality supervision, or better understand academic coursework. Students were also asked whether experiences were beneficial to their overall career development. In total, 645 individual activities were reported in the survey (students were asked to share up to three beneficial experiences). Unpaid internships were correlated to positive outcomes in the areas of confirming or rejecting career interests, setting and attaining career goals, quality of supervision, and networking. In the latter two categories, unpaid internships proved to be slightly more impactful than paid internship experiences (although both were significant). Notably, unpaid internships were rated as being significantly beneficial to gains in understanding academic coursework, while paid internships were not rated as significant in this area.

Likewise, paid internships were rated as significant to professional skill development, while unpaid internships were not significant in this area. Participation in paid and unpaid internships was fairly evenly split within the sample (103 paid, 101 unpaid).

Unpaid internships represent more experimental, academic activities that offer early opportunities for immersion and socialization in a chosen field. Meanwhile, paid internships—with their enhanced influence on professional skill development—often allow students greater opportunities to manipulate the external environment. Obviously, the divide between these categories is blurred, as many unpaid internships also allow students to apply and grow their skill sets. However, these distinctions are helpful in a general sense for articulating the developmental considerations of the internship process. The learning processes presented here are also borne out in the qualitative interviews, as students discuss the process of conceptualizing a career interest, seeking out an exploratory opportunity, and reflecting on their experience. As career interests develop, students increasingly sought out more meaningful work experiences that allowed them to play a greater role in manipulating their work environment.

Next Steps in Determining True Impacts of Unpaid Internships

For most career development professionals, the study's findings will not be particularly shocking. Most working in the field realize intuitively that employers that choose not to pay interns (whether due to resource limitations on their part or qualification/experience limitations on the student's part) are not likely to convert unpaid interns to full-time employees. However, studying this issue through an empirical lens is helpful in more fully understanding the true impacts of unpaid internship participation, as well as identifying opportunities for further research.

First and foremost, undertaking this study provides an eye-opening look at the need for better data on student experiences. Recent gains in measuring graduate outcomes offer numerous avenues for advances in career development research, and knowledge of student engagement with on-campus activities is also growing exponentially. However, surprisingly little is known about the off-campus career development experiences that lead to graduate outcomes. Further consideration of this issue is needed to truly understand the role of paid and unpaid internships as well as other nuanced aspects of student career development, as working with incomplete data only offers a partial understanding of the role of these experiences.

One solution to this issue may be to continue expanding the structured integration of internship experiences into the academic curriculum. Data from this study show that approximately half of the internship experiences reported by students were unpaid, and that unpaid internships were significantly tied to enhanced academic performance. Class

assignments and other forms of intentional reflection may help support students in fully leveraging these growth opportunities, particularly early on in their academic careers. Meanwhile, paid internships—which are more closely tied to professional skill development—may be encouraged later in a student’s college career in a format that is more decoupled from the academic curriculum. One hypothetical model might include a three-credit academic course for unpaid internships and a zero-credit course for paid internships, with each type of experience carrying implications for degree completion. This concept aligns closely with Kolb’s model of experiential learning, which suggests the need for various levels of concrete experience and emphasizes reflection as a gateway to higher levels of abstract thought.

A greater emphasis on tracking internship and work experiences would not only facilitate ongoing research and assessment, but could also be useful in the creation of strategic interventions for students who are at risk. Since unpaid internships are correlated negatively to a number of desired employment outcomes, students who overemphasize these forms of experience should be informed of the potential risks and, if necessary, supported in creating a plan for broadening their experience.

Above all, one thing remains clear: While unpaid internships remain controversial within both the court of public opinion and the field of student development, they are not likely to go away anytime soon. These experiences, while not as empirically beneficial as paid internships, still lead to important gains for many of our students. As career development professionals, we have an obligation to help our students understand the multifaceted risks and benefits of such opportunities and, if possible, leverage *all* of their internship experiences on the path to desired graduate outcomes.

Introduction

Each year, millions of college students, employers, and higher education professionals devote a significant amount of attention to the topic of internships. Over the past several decades, internships have become a preferred method of helping students learn about careers and transition into the work force. A recent employer survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) indicated that more than 90 percent of the organizations that were polled had a formal internship program, with the majority of employers using their internship program as a way to source full-time, entry-level hires.¹ In a related study, NACE found that approximately two-thirds of college students had participated in at least one internship, with students who completed an internship also being significantly more likely to receive at least one job offer.²

In the wake of a recession, a growing focus on the return on investment for a college degree has heightened student awareness about the importance of gaining work experience, and internship programs have subsequently become an even greater focus on many college campuses.³ In fact, a growing number of programs or institutions now require students to complete at least one internship in order to graduate.

However, as experiential learning gains more attention in the broader landscape of higher education, students, parents, and career development professionals are also beginning to ask more critical questions about the type of training that students receive.⁴ In particular, there is mounting concern over the topic of internship compensation as leaders in media,⁵ policy,⁶ and popular press⁷ spheres have highlighted concerns about a lack of quality and potential unfairness related to unpaid internship experiences. Critics claim that unpaid internship programs create an insurmountable burden for lower-income students, offering “a great way of giving the children of affluence a leg up in life,”⁸ while certain sectors of the economy—including fashion, entertainment, and even Congress—have been particularly exploitative of America’s aspiring youth. A handful of empirical studies have been conducted in an attempt to more fully understand this topic,⁹ but further research is still needed. In a 2015 call for research proposals, the NACE Foundation argued that “research clearly supports the proposition that experiential education helps college graduates when they leave academia and enter the work force,” but prominent questions remain about the possibility of “differential consequences”¹⁰ associated with whether or not the student receives payment.

Thus, the primary purpose of this project is to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the topic of internship outcomes and compensation. In this paper, I will review current literature on the topic of internship outcomes and further discuss the legal tensions surrounding this issue. I will then conduct a mixed-method analysis of undergraduate students from a large public research university in the Southeastern United States to assess the potential implications of unpaid internship participation on student employment and developmental outcomes. In short, this study will seek to address a number of pressing questions:

- Who does unpaid internships, and why?
- Does method of finding internships impact quality of experience?
- Why do students find their unpaid internships to be useful to their career development? How do their perspectives differ from the perceived benefits identified by paid internship recipients?
- What correlations exist between unpaid internships and career outcomes, particularly in comparison to similar students who complete paid internships or no internships at all?

Since internships are so important to college students’ career development and (in many cases) their ability to meet graduation requirements, an enhanced understanding of these questions will enable faculty, staff, and employers to more effectively guide students through the internship process. Upon concluding my analysis, I will assess how my findings contribute to the broader conversation on this issue and suggest opportunities for future research.

Current Issues

Before discussing prior scholarship on internship outcomes, it is important to further outline the current tensions surrounding the topic of internship compensation. In the wake of the Great Recession, a spate of lawsuits, government regulations, and media debates has generated a frenzy of attention to the topic of internship compensation. The *New York Times*' "Room for Debate" forum featured this issue in February 2012 with a number of articles responding to the question, "Do unpaid internships exploit college students?" Ross Perlin, author of the book *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*, offers a particularly scathing commentary. Calling the modern internship a "racket," Perlin laments the "rash of illegal, exploitative situations" that pervade the modern internship market, and he calls for college and government officials to hold employers to more ethical standards. Alex Footman, a claimant in a prominent internship lawsuit against Fox Searchlight Pictures—*Glatt et al. v Fox Searchlight Pictures, Inc. et al.*—argues in a similar vein that students should not be the ones responsible for ensuring they receive ethical treatment from employers. "Interns should be focused on preparing for their careers," Footman writes, "not worrying about whether their employer is exploiting them." Footman's lawsuit, known in popular media as the *Black Swan* case, was most recently decided in favor of the employer, as was a similar lawsuit brought against the blogging company Gawker Media—*Mark v. Gawker Media LLC*.

Part of the debate around unpaid internships centers on the Fair Labor Standards Act and the court system's definition of employment. The U.S. Department of Labor attempted to specify the exact parameters of an internship experience through the issuance of Fact Sheet #71 in 2010, a six-point litmus test that outlines when a student may technically be considered an employee. However, this approach has proven to be very problematic, with judges in recent lawsuits rejecting Fact Sheet #71 in favor of their own definition. In the *Black Swan* and *Gawker Media* cases, the court developed its own list of seven key parameters for assessing fair treatment, including an assessment of who was the primary beneficiary, whether a mutual understanding existed about compensation, and the extent to which the internship provided training similar to that of an educational environment.¹¹ On its website, NACE also weighs in on the topic, outlining a clear position statement that aligns closely with the seven standards established by the U.S. Department of Labor's Fact Sheet #71.¹² In particular, NACE emphasizes that students must gain some educational benefit from their experience, even if the employer also benefits from the relationship (differing slightly from the U.S. Department of Labor in this regard). Going a step beyond Fact Sheet #71, NACE also specifies seven standards that may be used to gauge the legitimacy of internship experiences, such as an opportunity to apply academic training, obtain transferable skills, and receive regular feedback from an experienced professional. NACE also argues that internships must have clearly defined learning goals, defined start and end dates, and sufficient organizational resources to support the achievement of desired student outcomes.

While the specific nuances of the legal and ethical debate surrounding internship compensation is beyond the scope of this paper, this basic overview should help readers to understand the broader legal context of this debate. It is clear that intern compensation and fair treatment are important concerns for our society as a whole, and a more empirical understanding of internship outcomes could further elucidate this issue.

Literature Review

As we begin to explore existing research on the topic of internships, it is helpful to contextualize just how widespread the internship phenomenon has become. It is notable that organizations as broad as the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS)¹³ have taken steps to address the topic of internships. Increased efforts to standardize internship experiences, both within higher education and across various professional fields,¹⁴ further demonstrate the importance of this training mechanism for students, employers, and institutions of higher education. Consider for a moment the following recent statistics provided by NACE.¹⁵

- 92 percent of employers reported having a formal internship program, with more than 70 percent of those internship programs being focused on converting students into full-time, entry-level employees.
- In 2015, the intern conversion rate (successful transition to full-time hire) was more than 51 percent.
- 65.4 percent of student respondents reported participating in an internship, co-op, or both.
- 60.8 percent of interns were paid, with unpaid interns being most common in the social services industry.
- More than 56 percent of students completing an internship or co-op received at least one job offer, compared to less than 37 percent of students with no internship or co-op experience.

These statistics, although just a sample of existing data on this topic, reinforce the growing importance of internships (and practical training in general) within the broader landscape of higher education.

However, as we have seen, the exact definition of the word “internship” is a point of contention, with various organizations offering their own conceptualization of the term. NACE defines an internship as:

“...a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application 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

Offering a similar perspective, CAS defines an internship as “a deliberate form of learning” that involves reflection and feedback aligned with specified learning objectives.¹⁷ While there are many variations of what an internship is, the themes of intentional learning, feedback, practical career application, and connection with academic curriculum resonate frequently throughout both post-secondary institutions and organizations serving as internship providers. These distinct characteristics are key, because they separate internship experiences from other forms of experiential learning, such as volunteering or service learning.¹⁸ For the purposes of this study, the term “internship” will be conceptualized using the above definitions, including both paid and unpaid opportunities.

Beyond the implicit labor market advantages suggested by the widespread popularity of the phenomenon, there are a number of additional studies citing the developmental benefits of internship experiences. Numerous researchers studying this topic have found that internship experience enhances student marketability in the job search,¹⁹ increases career self-efficacy,²⁰ and may positively impact academic outcomes²¹ and other areas of development, such as multicultural skills.²² Prior studies also report that internships may help students develop their professional networks,²³ commit to or reject certain career fields, and land higher-paying jobs upon graduation.²⁴ Although a large proportion of prior research on this topic is concentrated in specific disciplines, such as medicine,²⁵ business,²⁶ journalism,²⁷ or liberal arts,²⁸ the scholarship is consistent in reporting positive effects of internship experiences across disciplines. It should also be noted that several studies emphasize that the quality of the internship is perhaps the most salient aspect of the student experience, although this variable is presented differently in different studies, ranging from the

quality of supervision received²⁹ to structural components such as socialization into the organization and the nature of daily work,³⁰ including very specific characteristics such as the autonomy of the intern.³¹ Overall, the wide degree of variability among internship experiences makes the factor of quality difficult to assess.³²

Despite the myriad studies that explore this topic, the issue of compensation is rarely raised within the larger context of the internship discussion—an important point for the relevance of this project. In a number of studies over the past several decades, researchers have attempted to identify predictors of successful internship experiences³³ and/or empirically assess the developmental outcomes related to internship participation.³⁴ However, compensation is almost never mentioned as a potential factor in either of these frameworks. One reason for this omission may be attributed to changing cultural norms—it is possible that unpaid internships were once less controversial and/or less commonplace than they are today, having become somewhat ubiquitous in fields such as government, fine arts, and nonprofit work.³⁵ Although further research would be needed to confirm this theory, such sociocultural changes would help to explain the paucity of attention given to the distinction between paid and unpaid internship outcomes prior to this time.

However, that is not to say that the topic of compensation remains entirely unaddressed. There have been several scholarly studies that have included compensation as a key variable for comparing internship quality. Two notable examples are Basow and Byrne's study on internship expectations and learning goals, and Beard and Morton's study on predictors related to successful internship experiences. Both studies provided inconclusive evidence on the topic of compensation, with Basow and Byrne finding that:

“Receiving payment seems to increase students' feelings of educational preparedness, perhaps because a paid job provides a better reflection of the real world environment. Students who received payment showed less agreement with statements about self-esteem, however, which suggests that students who were unpaid may have received preferential treatment such as more mentoring by employees.”³⁶

Similarly, Beard and Morton argued in favor of intern compensation, claiming that payment would result in students rating their experience more highly, reduce stress levels for participants, and signal the importance of the commitment to all parties. However, the authors went on to conclude that compensation was the least important of six factors in measuring internship quality.³⁷ Thus, during the 1990s we see the emergence of scholarship on the topic of unpaid internships, but little conclusive evidence.

Recent efforts by organizations such as NACE and Intern Bridge (an internship research and consulting organization) have contributed further to the dialogue on the possible benefits and/or limitations related to internship compensation. Specifically, NACE reported in a 2013 statement that, “Students coming off of an unpaid internship and seeking a job prior to graduation had no greater probability of receiving a full-time job offer than students with no internship experience in their background,”³⁸ based upon a quantitative analysis of three years of data from an annual student survey. While NACE stipulates elsewhere the potential value of unpaid internship experiences,³⁹ the organization admits that this “interesting counter-intuitive result...begs for further, more detailed research” on the topic.⁴⁰ Likewise, Intern Bridge conducted an analysis of more than 27,000 student respondents with the goal of presenting “the latest research into the...psychosocial and socioeconomic factors” affecting unpaid internship participation.⁴¹ This study produced helpful descriptive data, including the fact that women and students in certain majors (led by arts and humanities) are more likely to participate in unpaid internships, while myriad other variables (such as family income, type of institution attended, and GPA) had little or no connection to unpaid internship participation. However, while the Intern Bridge report provides a comprehensive view of who participates in unpaid internships, the study stops short of addressing any differences in outcomes related to involvement in such experiences.

Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this study, I will primarily draw upon Kolb's experiential learning theory, and will also give consideration to Super's self-concept theory of career development and Bandura's theory of self-efficacy.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

The first important framework related to this study is Kolb's experiential learning theory. Based upon previous philosophical and psychological studies by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, Kolb's model emphasizes the importance of personal experience in the learning process. In particular, his theory outlines a series of developmental stages—acquisition, specialization, and integration—through which individuals progress during their lifetimes. Kolb defines learning as a process of adaptation through the integration of experiences, citing that, "Human beings are unique among all living organisms in that their primary adaptive specialization lies not in some particular physical form or skill or fit in an ecological niche, but rather in identification with the process of adaptation itself—in the process of learning."⁴² This essential learning process, Kolb argues, is distorted during historical periods when educational philosophy focuses more heavily on rational or behavioral models of learning. While some critics claim that experiential learning is vocationalist or anti-intellectual, Kolb counters such arguments by contending that his model illustrates the link between personal development, education, and work. In essence, Kolb perceives experiential education as a means for helping students make meaning of their classroom experiences, rather than serving as a replacement for traditional teaching methods.

For the purposes of this study, Kolb's model provides an excellent theoretical context for understanding the potential benefits of internships. Particularly relevant is the second stage of Kolb's model—specialization—which is the period of time when students begin to acquire competencies "that will enable them to master the particular life tasks they encounter in their chosen career..."⁴³ Furthermore, Kolb's framework also explains a process by which the concrete experiences of learners can lead to progressively more complex levels of reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.⁴⁴ This perception of learning as a process (rather than a transaction) is crucial to understanding the possible latent benefits of internship experiences. In short, real-world work experiences acquired by students have the potential to unlock doors for further pursuit and integration of classroom learning experiences. For the context of this study, the real question is whether paid and unpaid internship experiences affect this process in quantifiably different ways.

Super's Self-Concept Model of Career Development

Like Kolb, Super perceives personal experience to be a significant factor in individual development. However, whereas Kolb views these experiences largely as a mechanism for learning and adaptation, Super's model characterizes the integration of experience as a process of identity formation. In essence, Super argues that all individuals have a perceived self-concept, which impacts their vocational choices and aspirations throughout life. This perception evolves progressively, growing more complex as individuals integrate new experiences and competencies into their identity. Super outlines the typical sequence of developmental stages in the following order: growth (ages 0-14), exploration (ages 14-25), establishment (ages 26-45), maintenance (ages 45-65), and disengagement (ages 65+). In this model, traditional college students (those most likely to complete unpaid internships) are located in the exploration phase, learning about many different areas of work, progressively making a commitment to a specific field, and beginning to engage in more focused training. Thus, it is clear that there is potential for internship experiences to affect this exploration process.

Additional components of Super’s model that are relevant to the internship experience are the five developmental tasks associated with vocational identity formation. In sequential order, these tasks are:

- **CRYSTALLIZATION**—The process during which individuals begin to explore vocational options, discarding some, and begin to apply an understanding of their skills, interests, and abilities to the formation of their vocational self-concept. This process also requires an expanding understanding of environmental factors (such as the labor market) that may impact career goals. Super suggests this task should occur between ages 14 and 18.
- **SPECIFICATION**—The process of committing to one occupation, which includes the pursuit of focused training activities and a growing sense of confidence in one’s vocational goals. Super suggests that this task should occur between ages 18 and 21.
- **IMPLEMENTATION**—The process of completing training for a selected occupation and landing one’s first job in the field. Ideally, this task should occur between ages 21 and 24.
- **STABILIZATION**—The process of settling into an occupation, making contributions to the field or employer, and realizing the benefits of having made a good choice. Super suggests that this task should occur between ages 25 and 35.
- **CONSOLIDATION**—The process of continued commitment to the chosen field through advanced positions of seniority or productivity that come with experience. This task continues until retirement.

Viewed from the lens of these developmental phases, one can further see how the internship experience could be an influential component of the growth process, particularly in relation to increasing individual understanding of the self and world of work (crystallization), deciding to commit to a specific occupation (specification), and the process of completing training and transitioning to the first job (implementation).

Bandura’s Model of Self-Efficacy

Closely related to Super’s model is Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy. Bandura argues that self-efficacy is one of the most influential predictors of human behavior, dictating an individual’s ability to cope with challenges, impacting the degree of effort that individuals contribute toward a goal, and affecting the length of time an individual may persist toward a goal in the face of obstacles. Bandura defines self-efficacy as the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments, with four important sources for this belief: personal performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional factors. Bandura indicates that personal performance is the most influential source of self-efficacy, which also appears to be the area most likely to be impacted by internship experiences.

Furthermore, Bandura outlines the means by which self-efficacy impacts behavior, indicating that overly high or low self-efficacy may lead to negative effects, such as psychological damage or an unwillingness to expand one’s skills. Optimum self-efficacy, Bandura argues, is slightly higher than one’s actual ability, which encourages the pursuit of reasonable challenges that will allow the individual to grow. Normative levels of self-efficacy are also associated with increased motivation, lower stress levels, and a greater sense of control over one’s destiny. Taking all of these factors together, it follows that healthy amounts of self-efficacy would influence one to identify more ambitious career goals, and would likely create a positive impact on one’s ability to achieve those goals. Bandura refers to this relationship as the Triadic Reciprocal Model of Causality, wherein one’s personal attributes, external environment, and overt behavior (experiences) work simultaneously to influence an individual’s outcome expectations.

Method

The approach used for this study consisted of a concurrent, mixed-method research design⁴⁵ and an initial sample of 12,220 recent graduates from the academic classes of 2013 through 2015 at a large public research university in the Southeastern United States. A total of 348 students completed a survey consisting of 66 multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and one-on-one interviews were conducted with an additional six students via phone or webcam.

While the survey portion of the study collected data from a diverse range of recent alumni and reflected a variety of college experiences (including internship participation as well as other varied forms of campus engagement), the interviews were conducted with students who had completed *both paid and unpaid experiences* during their time in college, allowing the participants to contrast their experiences and reflect on the unique impacts of each opportunity.

The survey portion of the study focused on several different aspects of the student experience, including not only reports of participation in paid and unpaid internship activity, but questions about other elements of the college experience, such as Greek life, community service, leadership, intramural sports, and involvement with general social or professional organizations. Students rated their participation in each activity relevant to their peers, ranging from no participation at all to extreme levels of involvement for each area. Students were also asked to report on their three most beneficial activities during college and categorize whether each activity was a paid internship, unpaid internship, or other type of involvement. For these involvements, ratings were also requested for key developmental outcomes drawn from Kolb, Bandura, and Super. These areas included the activity's impact on goal setting, professional skill development, networking, academic performance, job-search success, quality supervision, confirming or rejecting a field of interest, and overall benefits to career development. In addition, demographic data were collected for each student as well as general feedback on their post-graduate careers, including overall satisfaction with their first position after college. Survey data were then combined with previously reported first-destination information from the participants, providing a more complete picture of each student's career journey. An overview of independent variables used in this project is provided in Table 1.1. Table 1.2 contains a summary table of dependent variables used in the study.

TABLE 1.1. SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND DEMOGRAPHICS (INDEPENDENT VARIABLES)

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	MEAN	STD. DEV	MIN	MAX
CONTROL	109	.313	.464	0	1
PT_ON_PARTICIPATE	182	.523	.500	0	1
PT_OFF_PARTICIPATE	211	.606	.489	0	1
UNPAID_PARTICIPATE	160	.460	.499	0	1
PAID_PARTICIPATE	142	.408	.492	0	1
SHADOW_PARTICIPATE	146	.420	.494	0	1
RESEARCH_PARTICIPATE	170	.490	.501	0	1
IMSPORTS_PARTICIPATE	144	.414	.493	0	1
GREEK_PARTICIPATE	129	.371	.484	0	1
SERVICE_PARTICIPATE	302	.868	.339	0	1
SERVICE_ORG_PARTICIPATE	202	.580	.494	0	1
PROF_ORG_PARTICIPATE	209	.601	.490	0	1
NONGREEK_ORG_PARTICIPATE	198	.569	.496	0	1
LEADER_PARTICIPATE	244	.701	.458	0	1
STUDY_ABROAD_PARTICIPATE	106	.305	.461	0	1
SERVICE_LEARNING_PARTICIPATE	72	.207	.406	0	1
ARTS_PARTICIPATE	24	.069	.254	0	1
FIELD_PARTICIPATE	8	.023	.150	0	1
COOP_PARTICIPATE	9	.026	.159	0	1
CAES (Agriculture)	23	.066	.249	0	1
COE (Education)	32	.092	.289	0	1
CENGR (Engineering)	7	.020	.141	0	1
CED (Environmental Design)	2	.006	.076	0	1
FACS (Consumer Sciences)	29	.083	.277	0	1
PubHealth	4	.011	.107	0	1
Franklin (Arts & Sciences)	139	.399	.490	0	1
Grady (Journalism)	28	.080	.272	0	1
Odum (Ecology)	2	.006	.272	0	1
SPIA (Int'l Affairs)	26	.075	.263	0	1
SocWork	3	.009	.093	0	1
Terry (Business)	66	.190	.393	0	1
Warnell (Forestry)	6	.017	.130	0	1
Other	8	.023	.150	0	1
RACE	58	.206	.405	0	1
TRANSFER	61	.213	.410	0	1
MALE	88	.309	.463	0	1
GPA	286	2.16	1.23	1	7
YEAR_ONE	118	.177	.382	0	1
YEAR_TWO	244	.366	.482	0	1
YEAR_THREE	400	.600	.490	0	1
YEAR_FOUR	391	.586	.493	0	1
YEAR_FIVE	89	.133	.340	0	1

TABLE 1.2 SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR GRADUATE OUTCOMES (DEPENDENT VARIABLES)

VARIABLE	OBSERVATIONS	MEAN	STD. DEV	MIN	MAX
EMPCAT	348	1.86	.892	1	4
EmpType	108	1.194	.587	1	3
SAL	113	\$39,330.84	\$13,881.72	\$4,430	\$74,000
BONUS	33	\$4,587.88	\$3,359.55	\$500	\$15,000
EMPTIME	145	1.538	.764	1	4
HIGH_SATISFACTION	348	.540	.499	0	1
BENEFIT_VAR	667	.747	.435	0	1
CONFIRM_VAR	667	.768	.423	0	1
GOALS_VAR	667	.814	.389	0	1
NETWORK_VAR	667	.753	.432	0	1
PROFESSION_VAR	667	.889	.314	0	1
ACADEMICS_VAR	667	.681	.467	0	1
JOB_SEARCH_VAR	667	.702	.458	0	1
SUPPORT_VAR	667	.751	.433	0	1

While the bulk of the data collected for the study was quantitative, interviews from participants helped bring additional context to the study. Qualitative data informed analyses of the survey data and helped situate the role of paid and unpaid internships within the students' career narratives. This exercise was also extremely useful from an evaluative standpoint,⁴⁶ providing information on classes, faculty members, part-time jobs, and student organizations that the students found to be valuable. Some students cited on-campus experiences that enhanced their internship experiences or provided useful feedback on ways to improve career services at the institution. Although most of the data shared here are drawn from the quantitative portion of the study, the value of these conversations should not be understated.

Lastly, it is important to note the limitations of this study. The expanded survey painted a fairly detailed view of students' career development experiences, but self-selection of participants may have resulted in a final sample that was not wholly representative of the campus population. Positive skewness is also a concern since students were often asked (in both the survey and the interview) to report on their most beneficial experiences. In general, students at this institution exhibit high levels of engagement with on-campus and career development activities, which is a further consideration when generalizing findings to the broader college student population.

Findings

A quantitative analysis of the survey data was conducted in StataMP v13.1 using 21 different regression models, beginning with an exploration of which students on campus were pursuing paid and unpaid internship experiences.

Male students and business or agriculture majors were significantly more likely to pursue paid internships (using the College of Education as a reference category), while journalism majors and students in the College of Family and Consumer Science (including diverse programs such as consumer economics, financial planning, nutrition, human development, and fashion merchandising) proved more likely to pursue unpaid experiences. Students majoring in political science and international affairs were also more likely to report high levels of engagement with unpaid internships. Lower grade point averages were correlated to lower participation rates for both types of internships. In general, these statistics seem to align with earlier findings by Intern Bridge. It should be noted that the logistic regression models for this initial question seemed to do a better job of explaining paid internship participation (with higher R-squared values). Altogether, students in the survey sample (n=348) reported participating in unpaid internships at higher levels than paid internships.

Models gauging the impact of unpaid internship participation on job-search success showed that unpaid internship participation was negatively correlated to student salary and employment outcomes. One model showed that participants in unpaid internships were 11 percent less likely to report high levels of satisfaction with their first job. Another calculation assessing time-to-hire found unpaid internship participation to be one of the most significant factors among 24 independent variables, exhibiting a strong negative influence on student acceptance of a job offer prior to graduation. Table 2 provides statistical output data for this latter model, explaining the relationship of various on- and off-campus activities to landing a job prior to graduation. This regression model provided an adjusted R-squared value of 0.25. Using rough estimates for timeline to full-time job offer acceptance of 0, 3, 6, or 9 months after graduation, this analysis demonstrates the correlation between unpaid internship participation and early employment, showing that such activities appear somehow connected to a longer job-search process. Participation in research and study abroad had a similar effect, which may be helpful in beginning to frame unpaid internship experiences as something of an academic exercise. Part-time, off-campus work was also negatively correlated to early employment, but interestingly, intramural sports participation showed a positive relationship to early employment that was statistically significant. These findings point to the complexity involved with understanding the meanings behind such correlations (i.e. perhaps intramural participation is merely a marker for high levels of campus engagement) and the need for additional research comparing these activities.

Another portion of the analysis gauged the impact of reported experiences on specific developmental outcomes drawn from the study's theoretical framework. These models included dependent variables gauging whether experiences helped students confirm or reject career interests, set and attain career goals, develop their network, enhance professional skills, succeed in the job search, experience quality supervision, or better understand academic coursework. Students were also asked whether experiences were beneficial to their overall career development. In total, 645 individual activities were reported in the survey (students were asked to share up to three beneficial experiences).

Unpaid internships were correlated to positive outcomes in the areas of confirming or rejecting career interests, setting and attaining career goals, quality of supervision, and networking. In the latter two categories, unpaid internships proved to be slightly more impactful than paid internship experiences (although both were significant). Notably, unpaid internships were rated as being significantly beneficial to gains in understanding academic coursework, while paid internships were not rated as significant in this area.

Likewise, paid internships were rated as significant to professional skill development, while unpaid internships were not significant in this area. Participation in paid and unpaid internships was fairly evenly split within the sample (103 paid, 101 unpaid).

Not only do these results help to demonstrate an empirical distinction in outcomes between paid and unpaid experiences, but the pattern of results demonstrated in the survey data aligns closely with key concepts of the learning

TABLE 2 VARIABLES INFLUENCING UNDERGRADUATE TIMELINE FOR ACCEPTING A JOB OFFER

VARIABLE	COEFF.	VARIABLE	COEFF.
CONTROL	0.00660 (0.864)	PROF_ORG_PARTICIPATE	0.00624 (0.521)
PT_ON_PARTICIPATE	0.00941 (0.471)	NONGREEK_ORG_PARTICIPATE	0.117 (0.506)
PT_OFF_PARTICIPATE	0.958* (0.471)	LEADER_PARTICIPATE	-0.371 (0.573)
UNPAID_PARTICIPATE	1.244* (0.597)	STUDY_ABROAD_PARTICIPATE	0.962* (0.472)
PAID_PARTICIPATE	0.534 (0.678)	SERVICE_LEARNING_PARTICIPATE	-0.650 (0.549)
SHADOW_PARTICIPATE	0.267 (0.483)	ARTS_PARTICIPATE	-1.355 (0.980)
RESEARCH_PARTICIPATE	1.063* (0.493)	FIELD_PARTICIPATE	-1.120 (1.246)
IMSPORTS_PARTICIPATE	-1.376** (0.491)	COOP_PARTICIPATE	-0.257 (1.253)
GREEK_PARTICIPATE	-0.271 (0.518)	Constant	0.383 (1.312)
SERVICE_PARTICIPATE	-0.501 (0.762)	Observations	118
SERVICE_ORG_PARTICIPATE	-0.809 (0.504)	R-squared	0.458

Standard errors in parentheses, * p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05**

process identified by Kolb. In describing structural foundations underlying the experiential learning process, Kolb highlights four core concepts of comprehension, apprehension, intention, and extension. Two of these processes—apprehension and extension—appear to be particularly well-represented within the paid/unpaid internship dichotomy. These processes are described by Kolb as the “tangible, felt qualities of immediate experience” (apprehension) and “active external manipulation of the external world” (extension).⁴⁷ In the former case, unpaid internships represent more experimental and/or academic activities that offer early opportunities for engagement and socialization in a chosen field. Meanwhile, paid internships—with their enhanced influence on professional skill development—often allow students greater opportunities to manipulate the external environment. Obviously, the divide between these categories is blurred, as many unpaid internships also allow students to apply and grow their skill sets. However, these distinctions are helpful in a general sense for articulating the developmental considerations of the internship process. The learning processes presented here are also borne out in the qualitative interviews, as students discuss the process of conceptualizing a career interest, seeking out an exploratory opportunity, and reflecting on their experience. As career interests develop, students increasingly sought out more meaningful work experiences that allowed them to play a greater role in manipulating their work environment.

Conclusion

For professionals working in the field of college career development, few of these findings are likely to come as a surprise. Most career services staff realize intuitively that employers who choose not to pay interns (whether due to resource limitations on their part or qualification/experience limitations on the student's part) are not likely to convert unpaid interns to full-time employees. Thus, such opportunities may be inherently less likely to lead to employment. However, studying this issue through an empirical lens is helpful in more fully understanding the true impacts of unpaid internship participation, as well as identifying opportunities for further research.

First and foremost, undertaking this study provided an eye-opening look at the need for better data on student experiences. Recent gains in measuring graduate outcomes offer numerous avenues for advances in career development research, and knowledge of student engagement with on-campus activities is also growing exponentially. However, we still know surprisingly little about the off-campus career development experiences that lead to graduate outcomes. Further consideration of this issue is needed to truly understand the role of paid and unpaid internships as well as other nuanced aspects of student career development, as working with incomplete data only offers a partial understanding of the role of these experiences.

One solution to this issue may be to continue expanding the structured integration of internship experiences into the academic curriculum. Data from this study show that approximately half of the internship experiences reported by students were unpaid, and that unpaid internships were significantly tied to enhanced academic performance. Class assignments and other forms of intentional reflection may help support students in fully leveraging these growth opportunities, particularly early on in their academic careers. Meanwhile, paid internships—which are more closely tied to professional skill development—may be encouraged later in a student's college career in a format that is more decoupled from the academic curriculum. One hypothetical model might include a three-credit academic course for unpaid internships and a zero-credit course for paid internships, with each type of experience carrying implications for degree completion. This model would align closely with Kolb's theory of experiential learning, which suggests the need for various levels of concrete experience and emphasizes reflection as a gateway to higher levels of abstract thought. Furthermore, a greater emphasis on tracking internship and work experiences would not only facilitate ongoing research and assessment, but could also be useful in the creation of strategic interventions for students who are at risk. Since unpaid internships are correlated negatively to a number of desired employment outcomes, students who overemphasize these forms of experience should be informed of the potential risks and, if necessary, supported in creating a plan for broadening their experience.

Above all, one thing remains clear: While unpaid internships remain controversial within both the court of public opinion and the field of student development, they are not likely to go away anytime soon. These experiences, while not as empirically beneficial as paid internships, still lead to important gains for many of our students. As career development professionals, we have an obligation to help our students understand the multifaceted risks and benefits of such opportunities and, if possible, leverage *all* of their internship experiences on the path to desired graduate outcomes.

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