# Internships

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Internships have existed for a long time. For example, back in the 1700s, young apprentices would work under an experienced professional in their specific trade or craft so one day they could run their own business (Lei & Yin, 2019). Over the years internships have expanded and changed to fit the time period and the available jobs, which explains why there are so many different kinds of internships.

Today, college internships are commonly used to help students make progress toward their future career goals. Rather than reading a textbook, students in internships experience learning in a real-world setting. Internships require a significant amount of communication, coordination, and collaboration among the intern, the university faculty adviser, and the employer (Lei & Yin, 2019). Even though it is an arduous process to set up and coordinate, internships have proven to be worthwhile because they allow students to lead their own learning process. Internships are a student-centered approach to university learning and have a variety of types, outcomes, and limitations.

## Types of Internships

There are several different kinds of internships across various colleges and universities. Internships can be paid, unpaid, assigned, voluntary, mandatory, optional, full-time, part-time, during the semester, or outside of the semester. Different colleges have specific requirements for something to be considered an internship. They also differ based on which major a student is participating in. For instance, an engineering student may be assigned an internship to participate in during the semester that is required in order to graduate (Powers et al., 2018). Because there are many kinds of internships across all universities, they are bound to each have their own benefits and limitations. Even though there are many types of internships, we will focus on the overall impact of internships on student learning.

## Student-Centered Approach

Student-centered learning allows students to take the lead in how they learn the material and show understanding (Keiler, 2018). Internships provide college students an opportunity to take a hands-on approach to learning for their majors by giving them the choice of how they gain knowledge. They encourage students to be “motivated, committed… and achievement-oriented” (Lei & Yin, 2019, pp.182-183). In self-assigned internships, students choose where they want to learn so they can experience a real workplace environment. Internships have proven to have more positive effects when students do them voluntarily because they have the chance to decide how their learning will take place (Tu, 2022). This suggests that when students are allowed the choice of where they get this hands-on experience, it makes their learning personally important and pushes them to gain more from their schooling. Internships provide a unique opportunity for students to learn in a way that prepares them for their future while encouraging excitement about how they are being prepared.

## Outcomes

Internships have many academic, effective, and career outcomes. Internships influence students’ academic performance, emotions, feelings, attitudes, and career prospects. Though each of these categories influence each other, we will discuss academic, affective, and career outcomes separately.

### Academic Outcomes

Academics require a variety of skills, including memorizing, studying, critical thinking, planning, organizing, and communicating with professors and group members. The phrase "playing the game of school" refers to figuring out how to get the best grades. There are several skills learned during an internship that help with "playing the game," such as communication and critical thinking (Powers et al., 2018). These gained skills may explain the increased likelihood of attending graduate school among those who participate in an internship (Routon & Walker, 2019). There are several other academic benefits from skills learned during an internship, such as an improved GPA and problem-solving abilities.

Despite the evidence that internships help students gain helpful skills, there is conflicting evidence as to how and whether internships improve academic outcomes. The largest evidence of a student’s academic outcome is a student’s GPA. Internships require a significant amount of time which can distract students from their coursework. During the semester in which the student is interning, their GPA tends to go down ever so slightly (Prescott et al., 2020). However, during the semesters after they participated in an internship, students’ GPAs actually slowly improved, possibly because of the life skills developed during the internship, such as better communication skills and more confidence (Adamczyk et al., 2022; Prescott et al., 2020). This evidence demonstrates how internships have a long-lasting effect on students and their academics.

### Affective Outcomes

Internships may positively and negatively affect students' feelings, attitudes, and values. One positive effect is that students gain a feeling of self-confidence and an attitude of optimism through internships (Goodenough et al., 2020; Lei & Yin, 2019). Positive experiences with internships help students gain a higher level of self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as an ability to self-reflect and see their own strengths and weaknesses (Lei & Yin, 2019). Therefore, internships not only improve a student’s self-image but also give them the confidence to look internally and see how they can improve. Through their internship experiences, students gain confidence in their ability to present in class, verbally express their ideas, write professional letters or emails, talk with the professor out of class, and talk on the phone in a professional setting (Adamczyk et al., 2022). Confidence in these academic and professional settings helps students to take charge of their own learning. Students who participate in internships become more challenge-oriented, resilient, and optimistic (Goodenough et al., 2020). With self-confidence and optimism, students are armed for success.

Another positive outcome of internships is increased satisfaction in college. Especially when the internship does not cause a gap in college studies, internships are correlated with students feeling more satisfied (Routon & Walker, 2019) and enriched by their college experience (Wolinsky-Nahmias & Auerbach, 2022). According to a study by Wolinsky-Nahmias and Auerbach (2022), different models of internships can all provide high levels of satisfaction, especially when students are given more challenging tasks and the opportunity to take initiative. The outcomes of this study illustrate that students appreciate student-centered methods of learning, such as internships, rather than traditional classroom learning because they value being trusted to solve problems independently. Given the opportunity to lead and be innovative, students feel increased satisfaction and fulfillment in the learning experience.

There are some emotional downsides to internships. Some students are bothered by being labeled as an intern and feel valued less than other workers (Lei & Yin, 2019). Students often get bored from being limited to routine and menial tasks (Lei & Yin, 2019; Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). If students don’t find the internship to be a good fit for them, they may feel as though they are stuck for the rest of the semester (Lei & Yin, 2019). However, being limited to clerical/administrative tasks for a semester may be a small price to pay for getting a foot in the door and getting to experience firsthand what a real job is like.

Internships can help students reassess their values and find direction in life. Studies have shown that students who participated in an internship experience showed an increased desire to help in the community (Adamczyk et al., 2022) and to have jobs that help people (Routon & Walker, 2019). Internships have empowered students to feel as though they could make a difference (Adamczyk et al., 2022) and as though they have “contributed to an important cause” (Wolinsky-Nahmias & Auerbach, 2022, p. 594). Students received a more meaningful and purposeful direction in life thanks to their internships (Goodenough et al., 2020). These experiences are valuable tools that guide students to look outside themselves and find value in helping others in order to make a difference in the community and find purpose in life.

Though there may be some small inconveniences, internships have an overall significant positive outcome on students’ attitudes, emotions, and values. Internships enable students to gain self-confidence, optimism, and satisfaction in their college experience, as well as a big-picture view of wanting to help others and help in the community. This student-centered learning experience definitely changes students’ perspectives for the better.

### Career Outcomes

Research on internships shows that there are many positive effects on future career opportunities. Because students are approaching the end of their schooling, one of the main purposes of internships is to provide them with the chance to learn about and experiment with their future careers. Internships have been shown to help “crystalize college students’ career interests, values, and choice” (Lei & Yin, 2019, p. 183) while giving them purposeful direction (Goodenough, 2020) in their goal-setting and task completion. In a study on engineering internships, research showed that the students who had participated in internships were more likely to be committed to engineering and to working at a large or medium-sized company following graduation (Powers et al., 2018). Internships pave the way for students to find the direction they want to go in their future careers.

Internships also increase the chances of future employment opportunities. By enhancing career-focused skills, students have an increased chance of being hired (Lei & Yin, 2019), while widening their potential career prospects (Wolinsky-Nahmias & Auerbach, 2022). Results from a study on the effects of paid versus unpaid internships found that companies in support of paying interns extended job opportunities to 55% of their interns following the internship (Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). Having the possibility of a future career can boost students’ enthusiasm about school and their internships.

Internships help students gain skills that are applicable to their future careers. Interns are given the chance to gain professional skills, learn proper work etiquette, enhance professional communication skills, and develop proper work behavior (Lei & Yin, 2019). This gives them a career trial period and decreases their entry shock when starting a new career (Lei & Yin, 2019). Students participating in a survey about the career skills they gained through their engineering internships reported that internships gave them a smooth transition from school to the workplace (Powers et al., 2018). They reported that their internships had given them a chance to learn how to work in high-stress environments, gain communication skills, and develop a team culture (Powers et al., 2018). All of these skills transfer nicely to the workplace and are valuable to employers.

## Limitations, Criticisms, and Challenges

Even though there are many benefits, internships also have their limitations. Students who come from an impoverished background or a household with less family financial support are more limited in the kinds of internships they can participate in. Students whose circumstances require them to balance classes and earn an income may not be able to participate in an unpaid internship (Adamczyk et al., 2022). This makes unpaid internships less accessible to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who would not be able to provide for themselves while working for free (Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). Not only do unpaid internships neglect to provide monetary compensation for labor, but they also might not provide legal protection against injury, harassment, or discrimination. Interns may not be covered by OSHA or worker’s compensation (Lei & Yin, 2019), and they also might not be protected against harassment and discrimination because interns are not considered full-time employees (Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020). Unpaid internships may put an unnecessary financial strain on struggling students, and may not provide the legal protection that paid workers are guaranteed. These limitations and drawbacks are limited to unpaid internships, as current data demonstrates.

When collecting data on the effects of internships, one limitation is that most of the studies use only self-reported surveys, particularly when measuring affective outcomes and limitations. Self-reported surveys are not the strongest form of evidence; however, it is important to hear students' personal opinions on the effects of internships. A way to improve the study of the effects of internships would be to perform several randomized control trials that measure the outcomes and limitations of paid and unpaid internships.

## Conclusion

Though there are many different kinds of internships with varying outcomes, all types of internships enable students to take charge of their own learning. This student-centered approach to learning has several beneficial aspects that affect students’ academics, career readiness, and ability to develop valuable skills (Tu, 2022). Internships also help students better know what they want to do with their future because they are working in a real-world setting in their field of study (Lei & Yin, 2019). Benefits and disadvantages differ among students and the various types of internships they participate in during their college experience. Despite drawbacks, the benefits and real-world experience of this student-centered approach are invaluable.

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