

Building Better Internships

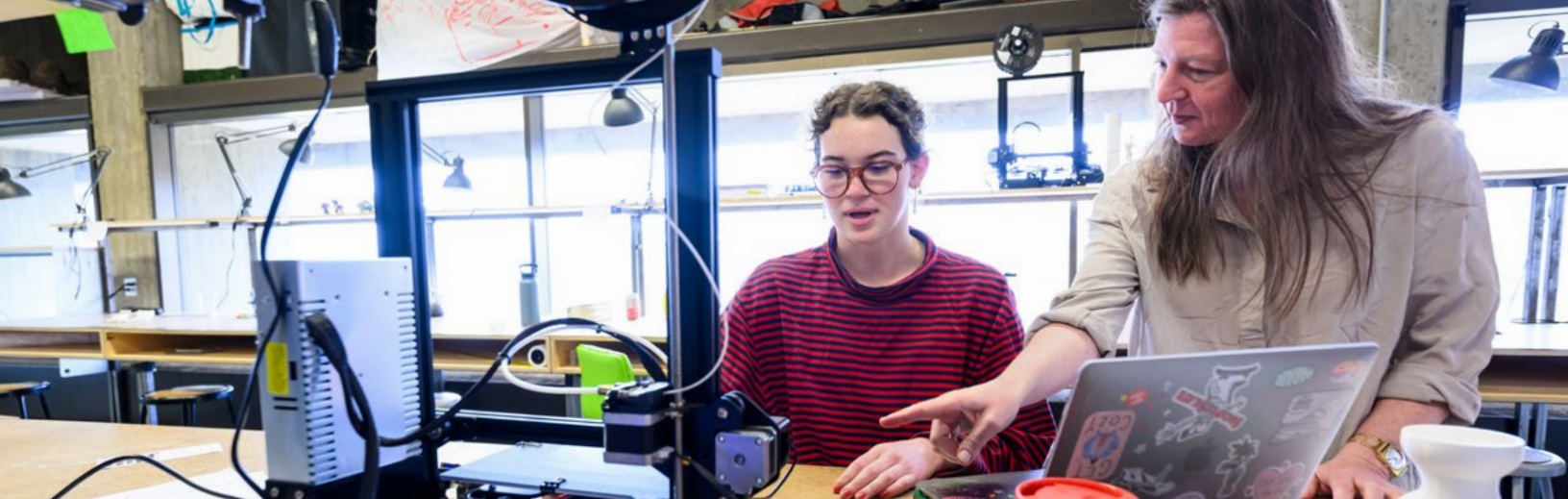
Understanding and Improving the Internship Experience



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EDUCATION
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Introduction

Internships and other forms of work-based learning, long considered essential components of a student's education and preparation for the workforce in other countries, are now gaining increased recognition in the United States. Both institutions and policymakers see the potential value of these experiences for both students and employers.

Evidence from interdisciplinary scholars around the world, as well as Strada's own research on work-based learning (and paid internships specifically), shows how internships can positively impact individual outcomes in the labor market after graduation.¹ For example, college students who completed a paid internship during their undergraduate education have higher-paying jobs after graduation, even when accounting for differences in pay based on field of study, gender, and race/ethnicity.² Graduates who completed a paid internship also are much more likely to report having a first job that requires a degree compared to those who did not complete an internship, and they are more likely to be satisfied with their first job.³

Many students recognize the benefits of internships; about 70 percent of first-year students plan to complete an internship during college. Despite this interest, less than half of students find and complete an internship, and less than a quarter secure a paid internship.⁴

State leaders also recognize the valuable role internships can play, especially for workforce development. In 2023, Virginia established the goal that every postsecondary student seeking an internship is able to complete one, and tasked a [working group](#) to study its feasibility. Along with other activities that support this goal, the state also is investing in [public-private partnerships](#) to provide innovative paid internship opportunities for students. States such as California and Indiana also have turned more attention and funding toward the goal of expanding access to paid internships.⁵

¹ Hora, Matthew T., Matthew Wolfgram, and Samantha Thompson. "What do we know about the impact of internships on student outcomes? Results from a preliminary review of the scholarly and practitioner literatures." Center for research on college-workforce transitions research brief 2 (2017): 1-20.

² Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Elaine Leigh, and Dave Clayton. "[The Power of Work-based Learning](#)." (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, March 2022).

³ "[State Opportunity Index](#)." (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, April 2024); "[Talent Disrupted: College Graduates, Unemployment, and the Way Forward](#)." (Bala-Cynwyd, PA: The Burning Glass Institute; and Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, February 2024).

⁴ Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Sowmya Ghosh, and Dave Clayton. "[From College to Career: Students' Internship Expectations and Experiences](#)." (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, May 2023); "[State Opportunity Index](#)," April 2024.

⁵ Todd Stottlemeyer, "Viewpoint: Every Virginia college student deserves a paid internship," Washington Business Journal. March 7, 2024. California Learning Aligned Employment Program (LEAP). (Rancho Cordova, CA: California Student Aid Commission).

HOPE (Hoosier Opportunities & Possibilities Through Education) Agenda. (Indianapolis: Indiana Commission for Higher Education).



Yet despite the growing interest and promising evidence, there is still a lot we do not know about the internship experience. Limited data about participation, quality, and specific design features [e.g., length, pay, nature of tasks, modality], in addition to concerns about accessibility and equity, can make evaluating and improving the internship experience challenging.⁶ Targeted research that focuses on these important issues can help ensure internships and other work-based learning experiences live up to their potential and benefit both students and employers in measurable ways.

To help address these and other questions, the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Center for Research on College-

Workforce Transitions developed the [National Survey of College Internships](#) [NSCI] and the [Internship Scorecard](#) to capture metrics for internship structure, quality, and accessibility.⁷ The survey, now administered in partnership with Strada, examines the reasons students seek internships, common barriers they face in securing internships, the overall quality of the experience, and connections to career goals.

This summary highlights the 2023 NSCI key findings from third- and fourth-year students attending four-year institutions. The complete NSCI 2023 findings are available in the [full technical report](#) and also include results from two-year institutions.⁸

⁶ Matthew T. Hora, Chen Zi, Emily Parrott, and Pa Her. “[Problematizing College Internships: Exploring Issues with Access, Program Design, and Developmental Outcomes in three U.S. Colleges](#).” [Madison, WI: Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin–Madison, March 2019]. Henrietta O’Connor, and Maxine Bodicoat. “[Exploitation or opportunity? Student perceptions of internships in enhancing employability skills](#).” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 4 (2017): 435–449.

⁷ Hora, et al. “[The Internship Scorecard](#).” [Madison, WI: Center for Research on College Workforce Transitions, University of Wisconsin–Madison, July 2020].

⁸ Findings are largely consistent across two- and four-year institutions, with the notable exception that overall participation in internships is much lower at two-year institutions. The sample included third- and fourth-year students from four-year institutions (n=2,824) and students of all class years from two-year institutions (n=2,531). Data are weighted to be nationally representative by gender, race/ethnicity, class year, and financial aid status.



Key findings from the 2023 NSCI include:

- Nearly every student (96 percent) participating in an internship sought a way to connect education with career opportunities, either to gain relevant experience in a specific career (70 percent) or to explore a potential career interest (26 percent). It appears that students are savvy in seeking ways to differentiate themselves from peers “without experience” and/or wanted to discover whether a field of study was a “good fit” for them.
- Three-quarters (74 percent) of students are extremely or very satisfied with their internship. Satisfaction is tied to supervisor support and mentoring, career developmental value, and opportunities to develop durable skills.
- The vast majority of these internships (more than 75 percent) were in-person. The median time worked in an internship was 13 weeks.
- The majority of internships occurred in the final year of college, with juniors about half as likely to have had an internship in the past year compared to seniors.
- Most students who did not participate in an internship reported that they wanted to, but could not for a range of reasons (more than 6 in 10 students at four-year institutions). Among the biggest obstacles they faced were a lack of time due to heavy course loads and/or other jobs.
- Financial challenges also impeded students from participating in internships. About one-third of four-year internships were unpaid, and even paid internships sometimes require students to forgo wages or pay for additional transportation and/or housing.
- Many students reported that they were unsure of how to find an internship or that there were not sufficient internships available in their field of study.

SATISFACTION WITH INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE



- **74%** Three quarters of students (74%) were extremely or very satisfied with their internship.
- **18%** Less than a quarter of students (18%) were somewhat satisfied with their internship.
- **8%** And 8% experienced little satisfaction or none at all.

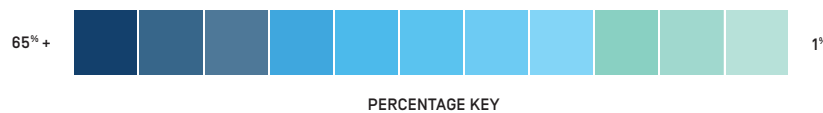
Demographic Differences in Access

The NSCI also provides a deeper analysis of the common obstacles facing students who want to participate in an internship experience. Most of these obstacles were similar across demographic groups, as seen in the chart below, but there are a few differences worth noting.

- Male students were less likely to report financial obstacles such as insufficient pay or needing to work at their current job.
- First-generation college students were more likely to face financial obstacles.
- Hispanic, Black, and students of another race or ethnicity were more likely than white or Asian students to identify transportation as an obstacle.
- Male students and Asian students were more likely than others to report not being selected for an internship as an obstacle.

Percentage breakdown of obstacles impacting internship participation by race, gender, and first-generation status of four-year students

	Heavy course load	Applied to internship but not selected	Lack of internships in field	Work at current job	Not sure how to find internships	Insufficient pay	Lack of transportation	Internship canceled (COVID)	Lack of childcare
ASIAN	58%	48%	33%	21%	26%	14%	15%	3%	1%
BLACK	52%	28%	25%	29%	27%	22%	22%	4%	3%
HISPANIC	65%	32%	35%	38%	30%	23%	26%	5%	3%
OTHERS	54%	37%	32%	37%	22%	34%	21%	4%	3%
WHITE	57%	34%	32%	34%	27%	29%	11%	5%	2%
MALE	51%	48%	29%	25%	27%	17%	14%	4%	2%
FEMALE	60%	32%	34%	34%	27%	28%	17%	4%	2%
FIRST-GEN	59%	34%	33%	34%	27%	29%	17%	4%	4%
NOT FIRST-GEN	57%	38%	32%	30%	27%	22%	15%	5%	1%



From Research to Action

While the potential for internships and other work-based learning experiences to support students in their journey from education to employment is clear, educational institutions, employers, and researchers will need to work collaboratively to ensure that more students have the ability to participate in a positive internship experience. To support those efforts, the NSCI report provides action steps for increasing access and maximizing the benefits internships provide to students.

EDUCATORS AND INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS

- **Use internships intentionally.**
Support students and employers in the development of structured learning plans and objectives so that students have clear targets for skill development or other goals they want to achieve during their internship. Dedicated advisors, including faculty advisors, could facilitate the development of these learning plans and assist students with securing aligned internships.
- **Prepare students to secure and thrive in internships.**
Provide additional ways for students to engage in career exploration early in their academic journey in preparation for an internship. This could include site visits, employer visits to the classroom, and collaborative projects with employers that are embedded in coursework.
- **Connect internships to other student experiences and supports.**
Integrate and coordinate internships and other experiential learning experiences across departments on campus to ensure a more holistic, student-centered approach that is based on research and uses resources effectively. This includes intentional collaboration across those entities that lead career services, service learning, and alumni engagement.

EMPLOYERS

- **Embed internships in your talent strategy.**
To overcome the known financial obstacles facing some students, prioritize investments in paid internships as a means to develop a more diversified workforce and talent pipeline.
- **Have a voice in design.**
Engage with colleges and universities to design and scale industry-specific internships and other learning opportunities for students.
- **Strengthen supervision.**
Establish processes and standards for the supervision and mentorship of interns, including clearly defined roles and responsibilities for interns and measures of accountability for supervisors.

RESEARCHERS

- **Understand the spectrum of opportunities.**
Continue to examine and differentiate the range of internships and other experiential learning experiences offered to students, focusing especially on quality, access, and equity.
- **Identify the contributions of component parts.**
Develop and advance more nuanced definitions and assessment tools for internships, focusing on both skills and social capital.
- **Examine “best fit” student experiences.**
Measure and examine student goals and expectations for internships (program features, learning goals, student satisfaction) to better understand what types of internships are best suited for a range of students.
- **Document employer experiences.**
Investigate employer perspectives on the value of internships and other work-based learning models to better understand employer motivations and identify opportunities for improvement.



Principles for Effective Work-Based Learning

Educational institutions, employers, and researchers all have an important role to play in supporting the policies and practices that will allow more students to benefit not only from internships, but also other work-based learning experiences. While the NSCI findings and recommendations focus solely on internship, [Strada's research](#) and similar work done by other experts in the field support a broader set of principles that can inform programmatic and policy discussions about the many kinds of work-based learning experiences.

PAY

Unpaid internships are often out of reach for students who work part time to pay for their education. The gold standard is an employer-paid, quality internship or work-based learning experience that is both affordable and accessible to a wide range of students. In some internship models, government entities, education providers, or philanthropic resources can help offset any additional costs, but any student-required costs should be kept to a minimum to maintain accessibility.

CREDIT

Ideally, all internships and work-based learning experiences should be for credit and/or embedded into a course and aligned to the student's major and field of study.

MENTORSHIP AND COACHING

Students should have supervised, human-supported mentorship and coaching from both the educational institution and the employer that includes guidance,

feedback, and career planning. At the institutional level, this might include assigning advisors that help place students in internships.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Internships and work-based learning experiences should provide in-demand, transferable skills and related disciplinary knowledge that connect to a student's education and career goals, as well as their talents and interests. This means identifying specific disciplinary skills that students can acquire during the internship and ensuring that these are incorporated into orientation, mentoring, and everyday work.

EQUITY FOCUS

Internships and work-based learning experiences should be designed and measured so they are accessible to all interested individuals, regardless of the financial, logistical, and systemic barriers they face.

AVAILABILITY

Quality internship and work-based learning opportunities should be accessible through a range of education, training, employer, intermediary, and workforce providers and contexts.

Developing more research-based guidelines for internships and the broader work-based learning landscape will require both will and resources, but as the available research shows, the potential benefits often outweigh the costs. For more detailed information and research on internships and work-based learning, please visit www.stradaeducation.org.