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Who are the unpaid interns? Preliminary findings from 13 institutions in the College Internship Study

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Internships are currently one of the most widely promoted “high impact” practices in higher education, largely because the research literature has shown that they are positively associated with personal, academic and career outcomes (Garcia et al., 2016; Ocampo et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2018; Routon & Walker, 2019). Given the significance of internships in helping college students “open the doors” to their first post-graduate job, over time there have been increasing numbers of students who participate in a college internship, even if they have to work for free (Gardner, 2010; Rogers et al., 2019).

While unpaid internships may provide students opportunities to explore the world of work and may bring them some form of social and cultural capital (Leonard et al., 2016), they have been widely critiqued with respect to their legality, general equality, economically discrimination, and racism (Gardner, 2010; Holford, 2017). For example, lawsuits against the film industry charged that they used unpaid interns to do the work of full-time employees (Gardner, 2016), a scenario that confirmed the fear of some observers that an unpaid internship could represent an exploitative labor situation (Curiale, 2009). In addition, given that some students simply cannot afford to work for free, unpaid internships may represent yet another way that higher education can reproduce privilege for well-resourced students, while students without ample financial or professional resources miss out on these potentially transformative experiences.

Furthermore, an unpaid internship may also yield some negative outcomes. For instance, compared with a paid internship, an unpaid internship may be less structured, and associated with lower job satisfaction and

The data snapshot series at CCWT is intended to get key findings from our various research projects into the public domain as quickly as possible. Data reported in these snapshots also may be included in reports, working papers or peer-reviewed journal articles. Results included here have been conducted with close attention to data quality and analytic rigor.

crystallization of vocational self-concept (Rogers et al., 2019). In contrast, some studies have found that unpaid internships also provide benefits to students including early job offers upon graduation and higher starting salaries (Guarise & Kostenblatt, 2018).

However, relatively little research exists on the critical question of which students are participating in unpaid internships. The few studies on the topic have demonstrated that unpaid internships tend to be in fields such as political science, journalism and human development in contrast to business or agricultural majors (Crain, 2016), and that unpaid interns tend to be female and in the government and non-profit sectors (Gardner, 2010). These results suggest that participation in unpaid internships, which may be screening out considerable numbers of talented yet under-resourced college students, are not equally distributed across the student population.

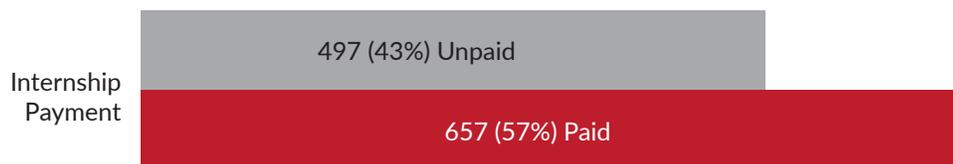
Another gap in the literature is descriptive data on the prevalence of unpaid internships on a national basis, which existing surveys of internships or high-impact practices do not capture. Perhaps the best available data source on internship compensation comes from Burning Glass, which aggregates online job postings that indicate in 2019 there were 675,594 internship postings, with 28.9% listing some type of pay while 71.1% did not (Burning Glass, 2020). It is important to note, however, that these listings without pay may not be unpaid internships, but simply position announcements with that detail missing.

In this data snapshot we provide a portrait of unpaid internships based on data from our College Internship Study, which is a mixed-methods longitudinal study underway in four different types of institutions (i.e., 4-year comprehensive public colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions and technical colleges) in the US. The data were collected from online surveys that were distributed to 16,191 undergraduate students in 13 institutions, and 3,809 students completed the survey for a total response rate of 23.53%.

Among these participants, the majority of respondents had no internship experience ($n = 2,655$, 70.7%), while only 30.3% of them ($n = 1,154$) had participated in an internship in the past 12 months. Thus, it is important to recognize that the unpaid internship experience (and the internship experience overall) is limited to just 30% of the students in our sample.

For those participants who had an internship experience ($n = 1,154$), 57% of them were paid ($n = 657$), while 43% of them were unpaid ($n = 497$) (see Fig. 1).

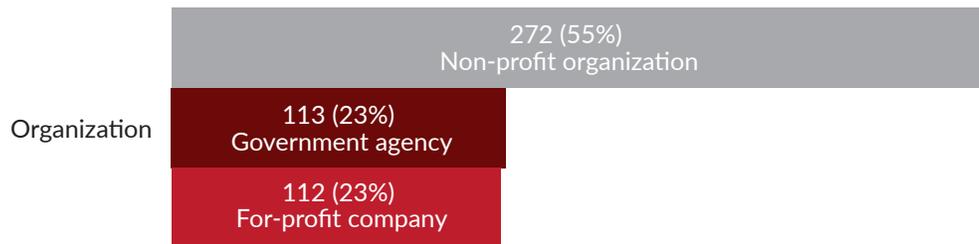
Fig. 1 The numbers and the percentages of the payment of interns



The remainder of the data reported here focuses on these 497 students who had an unpaid internship experience. The majority of unpaid interns were female ($n = 375$, 75.5%), and 111 (22.3%) were male, two (0.4%) were transgender, while nine (1.8%) reported “other “type of gender. In regard of the racial identities of these unpaid interns, the majority of participants were African American ($n = 224$, 45.1%) and white ($n = 158$, 31.8%). There were also 48 participants (9.7%) who were Latinx, 19 who identified as Asian (3.8%) and 35 from other race and ethnicity groups (7.0%).

Regarding the institution type of the unpaid interns, the majority of them were from HBCU ($n = 224$, 45.1%), and 131 of them (26.4%) were from a 4-year public institution. There were also 80 interns (16.1%) from HSIs and 62 (12.5%) from technical colleges. In terms of the sector that intern host organizations represented, 272 (54.7%) were non-profit organizations, while 113 of them (22.7%) were government agencies and 112 (22.5%) were for-profit companies (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 The numbers and the percentages of the sectors of interns who were unpaid



Future analyses of this critical topic will explore in greater depth the institutional, disciplinary, gender and racial differences in the cohort of college students who participate in unpaid internships, and subsequent impacts on student satisfaction and early career outcomes. In addition, CCWT will be examining the experiences of employers in the non-profit and government sectors to explore their capacity for hosting interns and prospects for providing paid positions in the future.

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