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CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON
College-Workforce Transitions

RESEARCH BRIEF

Matthew T. Hora, Mindi Thompson,
Kyoungjin Jang-Tucci, Alexandra Pasqualone,
Tamanna Turenne-Akram, Matthew
Wolfgram, Changhee Lee

What are the longitudinal impacts of a college internship (during a pandemic)?
Findings from the College Internship Study on program participation, quality, equitable access, and student outcomes



Continuing Studies
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Executive Summary

Internships are widely considered valuable co-curricular opportunities that have multiple benefits to students' academic, social, and post-graduate career success. A college internship may be especially valuable for low-income, first-generation, and/or students of color, where work-based learning can effectively serve as a "door opener" to social mobility (Saniter & Siedler, 2014).

Yet, there are many challenges facing students when it comes to finding and successfully completing an internship. Consider that only 30% of the nation's students take an internship during college (Baccalaureate & Beyond, 2022), and along with long-standing concerns about the legality and ethics regarding the ubiquitous unpaid internship - the prospect that these "high-impact practices" act as yet another exclusionary gatekeeping mechanism in our society cannot be ignored.

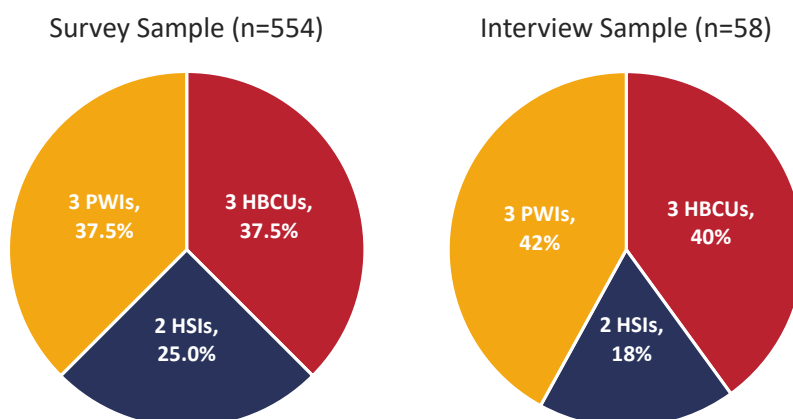
Further inhibiting the ability of faculty, career services practitioners, and campus leaders to engage all of their students in work-based learning (WBL) is the lack of data on internship programs, particularly the impacts of internships on student outcomes over time. In response, the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) launched the longitudinal College Internship Study (CIS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2018 to address these challenges and to provide campus stakeholders with rigorous yet actionable knowledge on how to improve the quality and accessibility of internship programs.

The CIS is the largest multi-institutional study of internships in the U.S., engaging 14 colleges and universities that included Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), along with Predominantly White Universities (PWI). The CIS study was informed by a multi-dimensional framework for studying and evaluating internship programs that captures the inner workings of internship programs while also attending to issues of equitable access - the Internship Scorecard.¹

The CIS wrapped up its third and final wave of data collection in the Spring of 2022. In this report, we discuss key findings from the cohort of students who participated in our online survey (n=554) and interviews (n=58) throughout the three years of the study, with a focus on trends in participation, program quality, and access to internships over time.

¹Hora, M.T., Wolfgram, M., Brown, R., Colston, J., Zhang, J., Chen, Z., & Chen, Z. (2020). *The Internship Scorecard: A new framework for evaluating college internships on the basis of purpose, quality, and equitable access. Research Brief #11*. Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Figure 1. Spring 2022 CIS participation.



We also report data on the outcomes of internship participation on students' labor market and psycho-social outcomes, and ways that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted (and disrupted) students' academic, professional, and personal plans. Finally, given growing concerns about unequal access to these valuable work-based learning (WBL) opportunities, we include analyses by race/ethnicity and MSI affiliation.

The report is organized in three parts that include data and brief analyses on seven research questions. All results should be interpreted in light of key limitations with the study that include potential bias from the self-selection of institutions and students into the study.

Overarching focus: Internship Prevalence, Quality, & Equity

#1 Participation and Access

#2 Student Experience and Program Quality

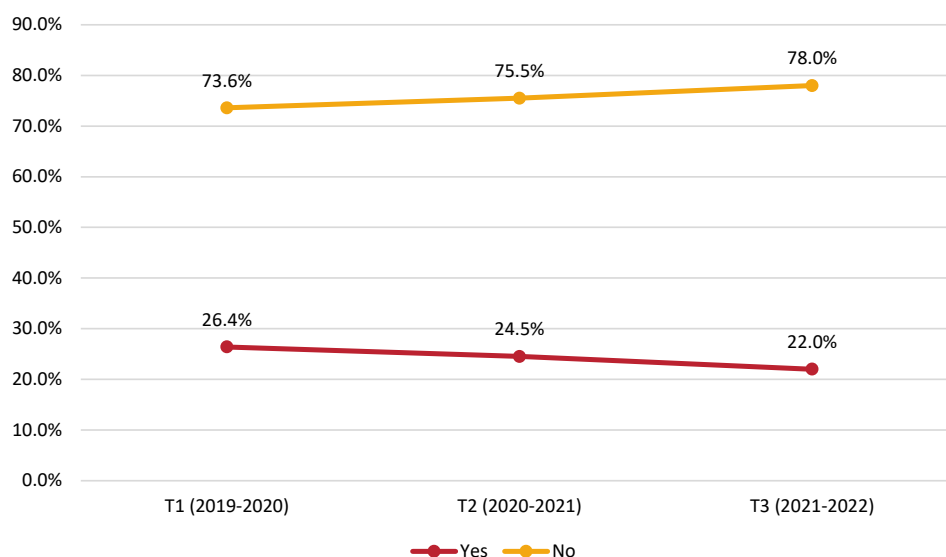
#3 Social, Emotional, and Economic Outcomes

Participation and Access

1. How many students took internships between 2018-2022, who were they, and what types of internships did they take?

National estimates indicate that about 30% of college students take an internship, and before the pandemic, our own studies of individual campuses revealed similar findings. For the longitudinal cohort of the College Internship Study (n=554), participation in internships at T1 was 26.4%, and then declined to 24.5% at T2 and 22% at T3, due in part to students' graduating over time.

Figure 2. Changes in internship participation for survey longitudinal cohort n=554).



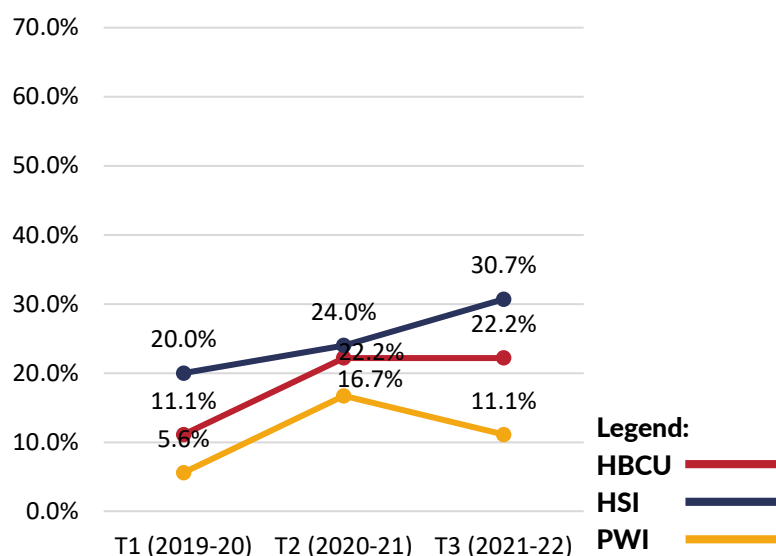
Further, data from the entire CIS sample and data from individual campuses revealed a decline in internship participation over time from 29.2% in 2018 to 17.6% in 2022, which aligns with national data showing severe disruptions to the internship labor market due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, our data indicate that internship participation by individual students declined over time during our study. While this could be a temporary effect of the pandemic and/or students self-selecting out of internships due to graduation, it suggests that a substantial number of students are not engaged in the internship labor market.

Data also indicate variations in internship participation by student racial identities and MSI status. While statistical analyses will be necessary to determine whether observed differences were due to chance or these variables, the data do indicate that Black or African American and Hispanic, Latinx, or Chican@ students' internship participation rates were lower than their White peers at T1 and T2 but not at T3. In addition, students at PWIs had higher rates of internship participation at T1 and T2 but not at T3. Finally, women had higher rates of internship participation than other gender identities, and first-generation college students had lower rates of participation than continuing-generation students at each time point.

Additionally, the data suggest that Black students' internship participation rates are the highest in HBCUs in Time 1 and 2, and in HSIs in Time 3, while Latinx students' internship participation was the highest in HSIs in all time-points. Students of Color attending MSIs generally participated in internships at higher rates than their counterparts in PWIs. Taken together, these results suggest that students' race/ethnicity and whether they attend a MSI or not – may be closely related to their internship participation.

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Figure 3. Latinx student participation in internships by MSI status (n=102).



Other key findings regarding the types of internship programs students took, with a focus on programs reported in the final wave of our study (T3) include:

- Program modality: 49.2% in-person, 28.7% remote, 22.1% hybrid.
- Compensation: 52.3% paid, 47.7% unpaid.
- Employer sector: 40.2% non-profit, 35.2% for-profit, 24.6% government.
- Top reasons for pursuing internships: 65.6% exploring career options, 58.2% developing networks, and 50.8% required to graduate.

We draw attention to the high rates of unpaid internships in our study, as the students completing unpaid internships were disproportionately female (e.g., 53.7% female versus 34.2% male), students of color, non-Business or STEM majors, and attending HSI.

2. What kept some students from taking an internship, and did these obstacles change over time?

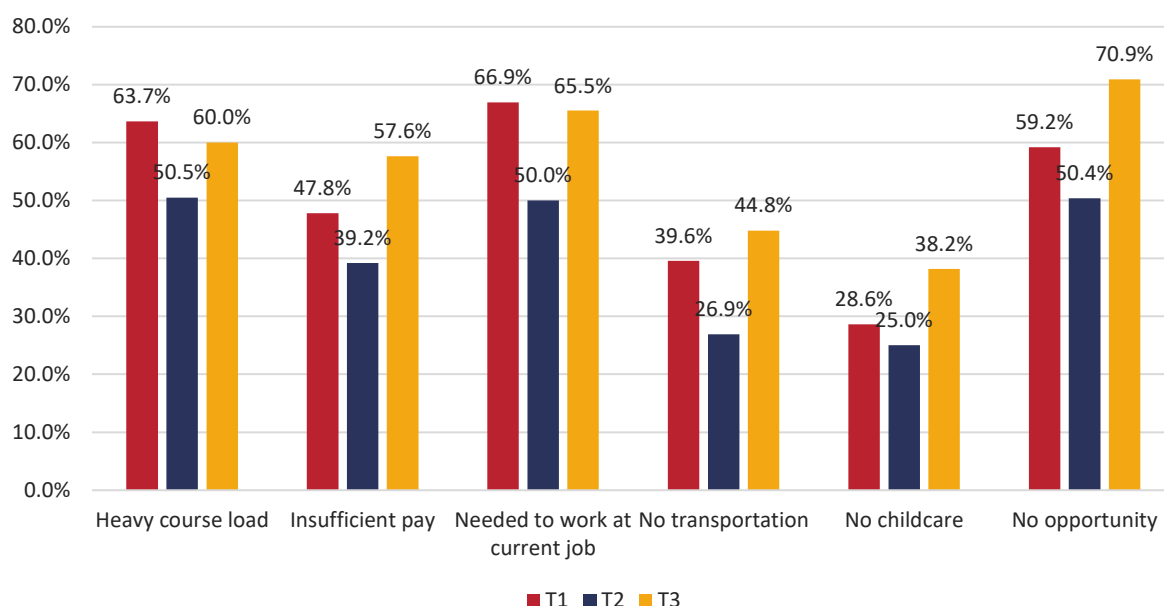
Students of Color attending MSIs generally participated in internships at higher rates than their counterparts in PWIs. Taken together, these results suggest that students' race/ethnicity and whether they attend a MSI or not may be closely related to their internship participation.

In the first three years of our study, non-interns comprised 70% of our sample, and in 2021 this percentage rose to 76% and then to 82% in 2022. The percentage of non-interns who wanted to take an internship was 64%-65% for the first three years of the study, but this percentage declined precipitously in 2021 to 46% and then 35% in 2022. While the specific reasons behind this decline are not clear, it may be due to respondents graduating and obtaining full employment, in which case they would not need (or want) an internship any longer or they self-selected out of the internship market for some reason.

But understanding why non-interns who had in fact wanted to take one were unable to do so is important, and we asked these students to indicate the key obstacles keeping them from pursuing an internship. At T3, 70.9% of non-interns reported that a lack of opportu-

nities was a barrier to internship participation, followed by 65.5% who needed to work at a current job, 60.0% whose heavy course load kept them from completing an internship, and 57.6% who felt that internships did not pay enough.

Figure 4. Reasons for not completing an internship among students who wanted to take an internship but could not (n=554).



Interviews with students revealed that the biggest obstacles to completing an internship at T3 was the prevalence of unpaid or poorly paid positions, and the lack of internships relevant to their discipline or career goals. Two quotes from students illustrate the nature of these challenges. One student described the impossibility of taking on an unpaid position:

The reason why I never really looked into an internship was because of the fact that I thought that it was going to be unpaid. And as a full time student and also working and paying bills, I was like - I'm not going to be able to afford to do an internship because of that fact. Like, I closed my eyes on a lot of stuff.

Another student highlighted the lack of internships in their field of interest.

We don't have a lot of the stuff that I'm looking for. I want to work with structural geology of the mine or something like that. So I would've accepted an internship in the geology field, specifically fieldwork, I would've moved. I would've changed area codes. I would've changed my entire life again to suit this.

Students completing unpaid internships were disproportionately female (e.g., 53.7% female versus 34.2% male), students of color, non-Business or STEM majors, and attending HSIs at Time 3 of our study.

Overarching focus: Internship Prevalence, Quality, & Equity

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and Access**

**#2 Student
Experience
and Program
Quality**

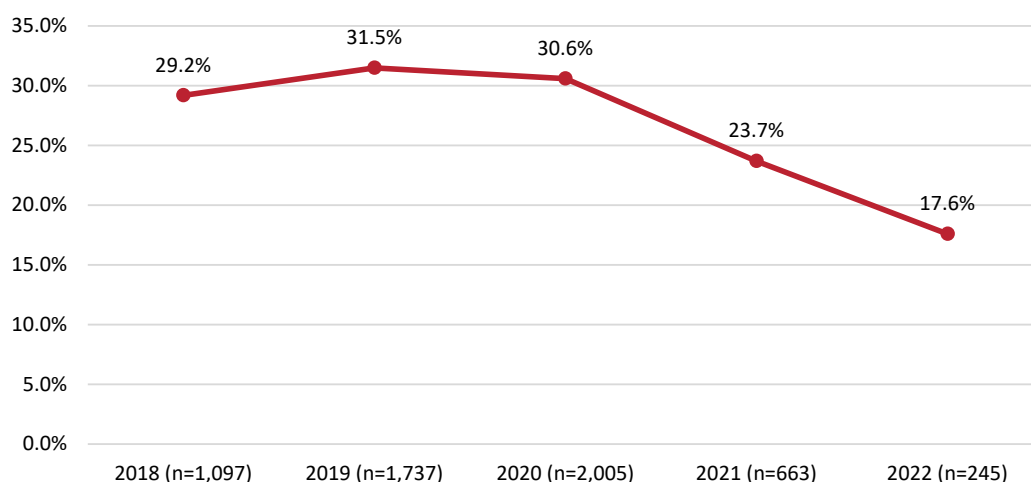
**#3 Social,
Emotional,
and Economic
Outcomes**

Student Experience and Program Quality

3. What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' academic, professional, and personal plans?

Our data suggest that the pandemic had a negative impact on the internship labor market, with participation declining from approximately 30% to 17.6% throughout our study. The chart below depicts students' internship participation from the entire CIS dataset from 2018 to 2022.

Figure 5. Cross-sectional participation rates in internships over time for entire CIS study (not longitudinal cohort).



These data suggest that student respondents' engagement in the internship labor market declined considerably after 2020. While evidence from other studies indicates that the pandemic caused a widespread cancellation of internships in 2020, lower participation rates could also be due to survey respondents graduating and entering the workforce. Further, the data indicate an increase in unpaid internships over time, which is difficult to explain but reflects a situation that could pose financial challenges for many students.

Entries into an open-ended text response item in our survey at T3 also revealed key words and short phrases that capture how the pandemic impacted students' career plans and goals.

Figure 6. Word cloud generated from open-ended text response on survey.



Interviews with students about the impacts of the pandemic at T3 also revealed the following key themes: (1) the pandemic had a general, negative impact on the internship labor market; (2) online internships were of poor quality; (3) the pandemic impacted academics; (4) the pandemic impacted personal lives; and (5) students drew upon a variety of support systems to cope with the impacts of the pandemic. Two quotes from students illustrate the nature of these issues. One described how the lack of internships led to a shift in their life plans:

Since I couldn't get my internship, it was very hard to get a job during the pandemic. I said, OK, I will take advantage of my time. I will keep studying. I will pursue a PhD.

Another student discussed how the pandemic made coursework very challenging.

I'm alright with saying that it's been very, very grueling because of COVID-19. They have made these programs accelerated, and I am mentally handicapped, so an accelerated program in translation to me means that I have to gather all the information ahead of time and get work in, get my work done before everyone else because of understanding it, and trying to deal with getting what they want done the way they want it.

While some students reported beneficial byproducts from the pandemic (e.g., spending time at home with family, saving money on commuting to campus), most discussed difficulties they were experiencing. Fortunately, several students discussed the various support services that they found most useful during this time, including emergency grants and funds at their institutions, spiritual practice, self-care, social connections, and institutional flexibility and support.

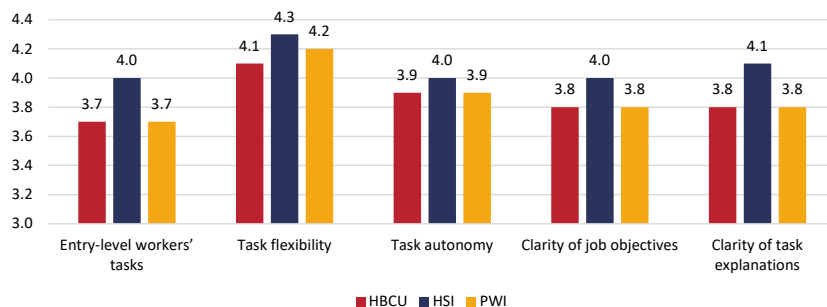
4. How did students rate key indicators of internship program quality?

In the CIS, we measured five key indicators of internship program quality related to workplace tasks among students who had completed an internship. The data show that interns overall reported above average levels across the five indicators, with the highest levels of task flexibility and lowest levels of task similarity to entry-level workers. The latter is a concerning finding, given that studies have pointed out that internships are often used as a means to relegate unimportant and non-professional clerical tasks to 'lower-cost' workers.

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While these aspects of intern tasks did not vary substantially by student race/ethnicity, student interns attending HSIs did rate each indicator slightly higher than their counterparts at HBCUs and PWIs.

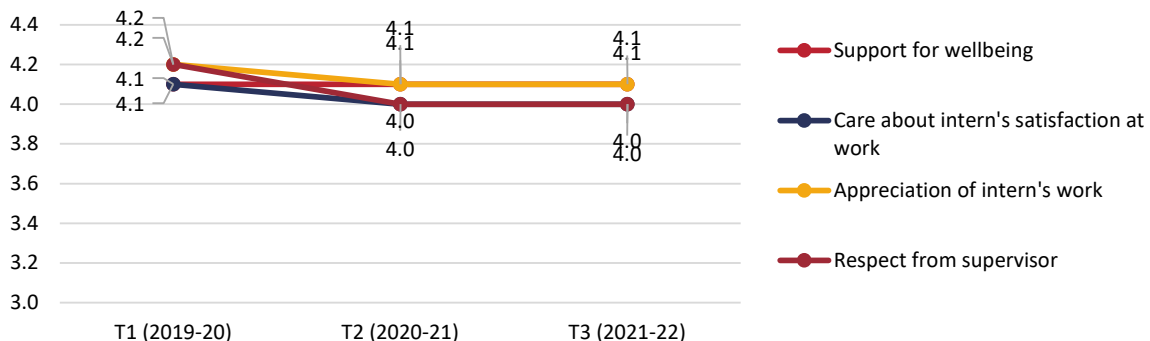
Figure 7. Student perceptions of internship task quality averaged across all time points, by MSI-status for survey longitudinal cohort (n=554).*



*Survey questions asked students to rate each item on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being "extremely" good quality.

Two additional indicators of program quality were included: supervisor support (i.e., degree of care for student well-being and satisfaction) and supervisor mentoring (i.e., provision of task feedback). The data show relatively high and stable (over time) ratings for supervisor support, with no substantial differences by race/ethnicity or MSI-status.

Figure 8. Students' perception of internship supervisor support over time (T1-T3) for survey longitudinal cohort (n=554).*

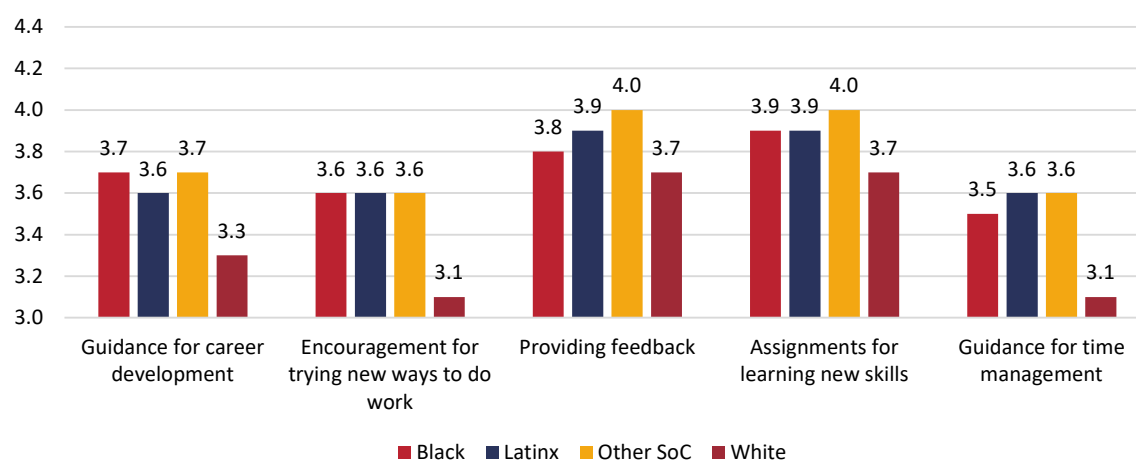


*Survey questions asked students to rate each item on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being "a great deal" of support.

For the critical quality indicator of supervision, students provided high ratings for their supervisors' providing feedback and learning new skills, but relatively low ratings for advice for time management, career development, or trying out different working styles.

On the other hand, students rated their supervisors' mentoring differently depending on the behavior, with higher ratings for providing feedback and learning new skills, and lower ratings for guidance for time management, career development, and encouragement to try new ways to do the work. Students attending PWIs reported lower ratings than students attending MSIs across all supervisor mentoring behaviors. Data suggest that White students indicated the lowest mentoring scores as compared with Black, Latinx, and other Students of Color across all five supervisor mentoring behaviors.

Figure 9. Students' perceptions of internship supervisor mentoring across time points, by race/ethnicity for survey longitudinal cohort (n=554).*



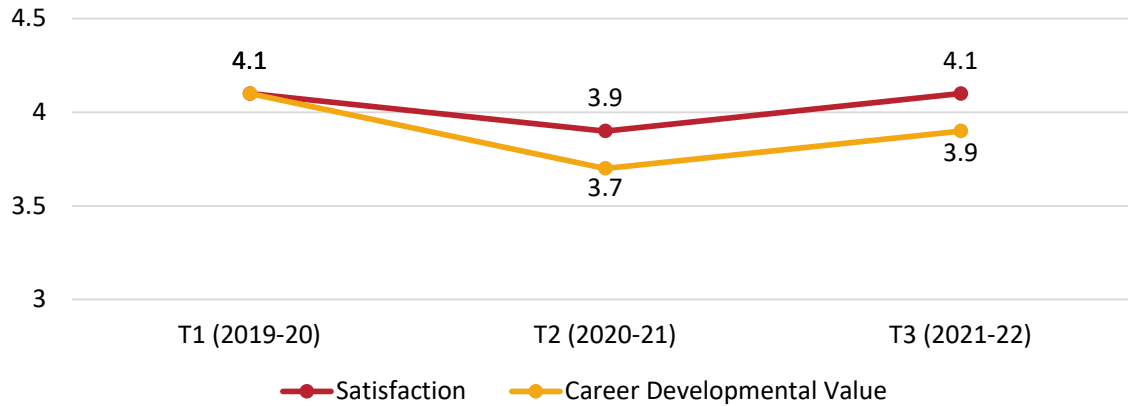
*Survey questions asked students to rate each item on a 1-5 scale, with 5 indicating "extremely" often.

5. How satisfied (or not) were students with their internship experiences, and did this change over time?

In the CIS, we collected data on basic satisfaction with the internship and also how much the experience contributed to students' career goals and future trajectories (i.e., career developmental value). Students consistently rated their internship experience as very satisfactory (e.g., 4.1) and as having relatively high career developmental value over time. However, there was a slight decrease in both of these indicators of satisfaction with the internship at Time 2. This may have been caused by internships being unexpectedly switched into remote or hybrid positions during the early period of the pandemic.

Students consistently rated their internship experiences as "very satisfactory," but some differences were observed by race/ethnicity and MSI status.

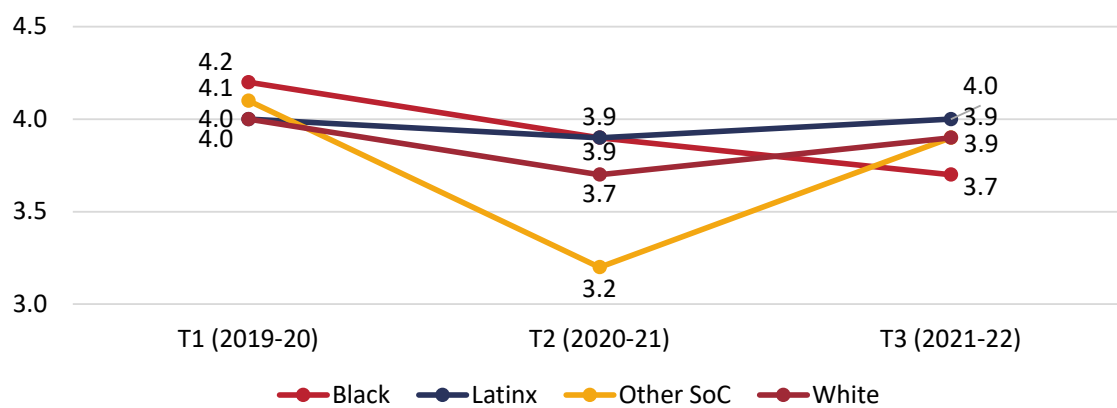
Figure 10. Changes in students' satisfaction with their internships and assessment of its contribution to their career development (T1-T3) for survey longitudinal cohort (n=554).*



*Survey questions asked students to rate each item on a 1-5 scale, with 5 indicating "extremely satisfied" (overall satisfaction) and "a great deal" of value (career developmental value).

Comparison of students' satisfaction and career development value by race/ethnicity and institution type shows that students had similar rates of internship satisfaction in Time 1 and 3, but students from various racial or ethnic groups had more variation at Time 2. Specifically, Other Students of Color and white students showed noticeably lower rates of satisfaction with their internships at T2 as compared to Black and Latinx students.

Figure 11. Changes in students' internship satisfaction, by race/ethnicity (T1-T3) for survey longitudinal cohort (n=554).*



*Survey questions asked students to rate each item on a 1-5 scale, with 5 being "extremely satisfied".

With respect to differences by MSI-status, students at HBCUs generally reported lower satisfaction as compared to students attending a HSI or PWI. These results suggest that internship satisfaction and sense of career developmental varies by students' race/ethnicity and institutional affiliation.

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Social, Emotional, and Economic Outcomes

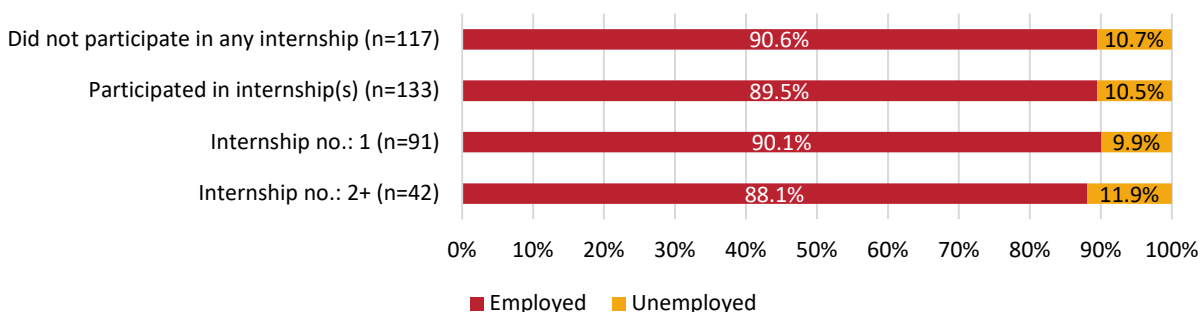
6. What were the long-term impacts of internships on student's labor market, psychosocial, and personal lives?

With respect to the impact of an internship experience on post-graduate trajectories, we found that among college graduates in our study across all institutions (n=337), students with an internship experience were almost three times more likely to enroll in graduate school rather than participating in the labor market. However, HSI students were about 67% more likely to participate in the labor market rather than enrolling in graduate programs.

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The results also indicate that there is not a noticeable difference in employment status between students who participated in internships (89.5%) and those who did not take an internship during college (89.3%).

Figure 12. Employment status (2021-2022: Time 3) by internship participation status of recent graduates (n=554).



The data also show that students who participated in at least one internship spent more time finding a job (4.4 months) compared to students who did not have any internship experience (4.0 months). However, time to first job varied by race/ethnicity, gender, and first-generation status, with male students who had an internship taking 3.7 months as compared to female students who had an internship who took 4.36 months to secure employment.

With regard to the potential impact of internship experiences leading to employment, the data indicate that only 13.4% of students with internship experiences reported that they found their current positions through their internship, as compared to online listings (27.7%), friends or family (22.7%) and employer websites (27.7%). This suggests that internships were not particularly influential in leading quickly to first jobs.

The results also show that those who participated in at least one paid internship have the highest rate of employment after graduation (44.2%). A smaller proportion of students with an unpaid internship (39.1%) were employed than students without any internship experiences (41.4%).

During our study period (T1-T3) were about three times more likely to be in the mid-high (\$50k-\$75k/yr) income group rather than the lowest income group (\$25k or less/yr), as compared to students who did not participate in any internships.

With respect to post-graduation employment pay, we found that graduates who completed at least one internship during our study period (T1-T3) were about three times more likely to be in the mid-high (\$50k-\$75k/yr) income group rather than the lowest income group (\$25k or less/yr), as compared to students who did not participate in any internships.

Regarding the impact of an internship on students' psychological resources for handling adversity or change in their careers (i.e., career adaptability), which is a particularly salient construct in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, we found that students' average career adaptability score has slightly decreased among students who participated in the survey throughout the study, regardless of internship participation. Prior research suggests that individuals who initially report high career adaptability may gradually become vulnerable and uncertain as they learn more about the world of work.

Finally, our interviews with students revealed the following key themes that captured the impact of internships on their lives:

- Internships provided technical experience and opportunities to apply classroom knowledge to the "real world."
- Internships helped students get a new job or provided credibility that advanced their career opportunities.
- Internships provided opportunities to cultivate or expand one's network.
- Internships helped to clarify career goals.

Students' average career adaptability (or psychological resources for handling adversity or change in their careers) slightly decreased for students in the study regardless of internship participation.

References

Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Study (2022). National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/b&b/>

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Our mission at CCWT is to generate evidence, educational programs, and research tools that promote the career development and wellness of students as they seek post-graduate success. In this work, we center and amplify the voices and interests of all students, especially those historically marginalized in higher education and the labor market, with the aim to facilitate institutional and societal change.

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Center for Research on College to Workforce Transitions (CCWT)

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Division of Continuing Studies

21 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53706

For more information, please contact the Center at: [https://ccwt.wisc.edu/
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