

Internships, Supervisory Styles, and Career Adaptability for College Students

Changhee Lee¹ and Mindi N. Thompson²
¹Vanderbilt University, ²University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

Career adaptability has become increasingly important in the discourse on work-based learning and college students' career development, given its potential link with lifelong vocational success. However, the impact of internships and specific supervisory styles on career adaptability remains underexplored. This study addresses the gap by exploring whether and how internships, considering qualities including autonomy, goal clarity, emotional support, and task-related mentoring, relate to interns' career adaptability gains. Using Ordinary Least Squares regressions with two-wave survey data ($N=847$), we found that internships are associated with gains in the concern dimension of career adaptability. Additionally, higher autonomy and goal clarity significantly predict overall career adaptability gains among interns. These findings offer insights for designing effective internships that maximize professional growth and adaptability for college interns.

Research questions

(A) Is internship experience associated with gains in career adaptability among college students?

(B) How do specific supervisory styles—autonomy, clarity of goals, task-related mentoring, and emotional support—relate to interns' development of career adaptability?

Significance of study

Career adaptability, a crucial psychological resource enabling professionals to thrive amidst uncertainties, has gained prominence (Savickas, 1997; Di Maggio, 2020; Nota et al., 2014).

Work-based learning (WBL) experiences, such as internships, play a vital role in shaping college students' career goals and providing real-world exposure.

Little is known about the relationship between internship experiences and the development of career adaptability, as existing studies largely focus on traditional labor market outcomes or other career developmental resources.

Conceptual framework

Career construction theory (Savickas, 2005)

Job characteristics model (Heckman & Oldham, 2005)

Data and methods

Sample: 847 college students in seven U.S. institutions

Data source: Two-wave survey data collected from 2018 to 2020

Measurement: career adaptability scale (CAAS; Savickas & Porfelli, 2012)

Analytical approach: Ordinary Least Squares regression

Model DV IV

A CAAS (T2) Internship (Y/N), CAAS (T1), demographic

B CAAS (T2) Supervisory styles, CAAS (T1), demographic

Note. T1=Time 1; T2=Time 2

Results

A. Internship experiences and career adaptability

Overall, we find no evidence that participating in internships is significantly linked to gains in career adaptability, whether aggregated or disaggregated. One exception to this is the dimension of concern in which students' internship experiences are positively related to the gains.

	CA	Concern	Control	Confidence	Curiosity
Internship experiences	0.02 (0.04)	0.12* (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)

* $p < 0.5$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

B. Supervisory styles and career adaptability

Interns who saw clear objectives and had more autonomy in their work tended to report greater gains in overall career adaptability and its subscales.

	CA	Concern	Control	Confidence	Curiosity
Autonomy	0.08* (0.03)	0.06 (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.12** (0.04)
Goal clarity	0.10* (0.04)	0.13* (0.05)	0.11* (0.04)	0.10* (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)
Emotional support	0.01 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)	0.09 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)
Task mentoring	0.03 (0.04)	0.00 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.10 (0.06)

Conclusion

These findings contribute to the literature on work-based learning by providing empirical evidence of how internship experiences and effective supervision are related to the development of students' career-related psychosocial resources.

Stakeholders should consider incorporating high-quality internship programs to facilitate college students' professional growth and adaptability.