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## Insights from the College Internship Study: Issues of program access, structure and student outcomes

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# Insights from the College Internship Study: Issues of Program Access, Structure, and Student Outcomes

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## Background

Internships are considered one of several “high-impact practices” (HIPs) that represent one of the most influential ideas shaping research, policymaking, and educational practices among colleges and universities in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kuh, 2008). However, growing evidence shows that the impacts and access to HIPs and internships are not equitable or universal. For instance, some scholars have found that obstacles to accessing HIPs exist for students, particularly for underserved college students (Finley & McNair, 2013). In the case of internships, assumptions about universal access are especially problematic, given that low-income and/or first-generation students may lack the financial and/or social capital to identify and then complete an internship (Perlin, 2012). Consequently, access to internships may be limited for many college students, resulting in a situation where internships act as a gatekeeping mechanism that inhibits social mobility.

Few empirical studies have examined the nature and extent of the barriers to

internships that college students face. To conceptualize how these different types of barriers may affect students, we draw on field theory to explore how internship opportunities are shaped by students’ acquisition of different forms of capital, which are then deployed to seek entry into new fields of the professions and/or individual firms (Martin, 2003).

## Methodology

In this mixed-methods study we address the gap in literature by reporting findings from a survey (n = 1,549) and focus group, and interview (n= 100) data from students at three comprehensive universities: one historically black college and university and one technical college in the U.S. states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. These data were analyzed using logistic regression, inductive thematic, and social network analysis techniques to answer the following questions: (1) What types of barriers keep students from participating in internships? (2) How, if at all, do these barriers vary across different student demographics? Research instruments used to answer these questions

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college and university and one technical college in the U.S. states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. These data were analyzed using logistic

featured an online survey that included questions about internship participation, obstacles to participation, demographic information, and focus group protocols that inquired about similar topics. These data were analyzed using logistic regression and hierarchical linear modeling techniques (for survey data), and inductive thematic analysis (for focus group data). Limitations to the study include the self-selected nature of the sample and the limited number of institutions represented in the dataset.

## Results

### *RQ #1: Barriers to internship participation*

For the 1,060 students who answered “no” to having participated in an internship in the past 12 months, 64% (n = 676) of them stated that they had hoped to obtain an internship but could not for a variety of reasons. This finding alone indicates that a substantive number of college students want to pursue internships but cannot, thereby underscoring the fact that access to internships themselves is a considerable problem. Among the six barriers to internships included in the survey (Figure 1), the most common reason that prevented students from taking an intern-

ship was the need to work at their current paid job (60%), followed by a heavy course load (56%), a lack of internships in their discipline or field (45%), insufficient pay (33%), lack of transportation (19%), and lack of childcare (9%).

Next, given the prospect that some students may experience more than one of these barriers at a given time, we report how individuals reported combinations of these barriers. The most common combination was the need to work at their current paid job and a heavy course load (n=68 students), followed by those who had a heavy course load, needed to work, and had few opportunities (n=42), and those who reported the above three barriers but also the obstacle of finding internships with sufficient pay (n=42). At the same time, some students did report only a single obstacle, such as the need to work (n=60) or a heavy course load (n=44).

Next, the most frequently discussed barrier to internship participation pertained to compensation—specifically, unpaid internships. Another obstacle to internship participation involved balancing the demands of their paid employment, coursework, study time,

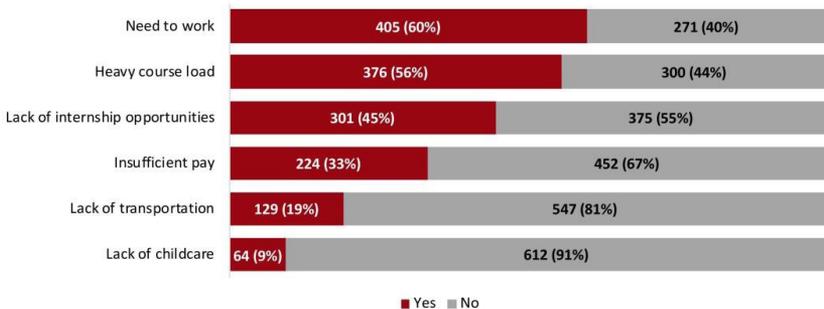


Figure 1. Type of obstacles faced by college students

and family obligations with the hours needed for an internship. As one student described, “[I] pretty much do not have enough time to give to an internship even if it’s just part-time. . . . I just don’t think there’s enough time in the day.” Students also expressed concerns about the limited availability of internships in their disciplines. Finally, another barrier to internship participation was that of geography and location, which could lead to students incurring travel and living costs for internships in expensive cities where many desirable internships are located.

### *RQ #2: Relationship of barriers to internships and student attributes*

The statistical analysis of survey data indicated that academic discipline and employment status were two significant factors influencing the obstacle related to working a part- or full-time job. Overall, students without part- or full-time jobs are less likely to report obstacles to internships including the need to work at a current job and insufficient pay. Similarly, the higher the parental income, the less likely it is that a student would report a lack of internship opportunities. In addition, compared with students in arts and humanities, business and STEM major students are less likely to report insufficient pay at internships and needing to work as obstacles to internships, indicating that a combination of financial and professional (or disciplinary) factors are at work inhibiting a student’s ability to seek and pursue an internship.

## **Discussion**

Our goal in this paper was to contribute new insights into college students’ access (or lack thereof) to one of the most widely promoted HIPs in higher education today—college internships.

One of the most unambiguous findings from our study was that the need to work prevented many students from taking an internship. While the impact of work on college students’ experience and performance may not be universally negative, our findings make clear that in addition to potential impacts to students’ academic success, work presents a substantial obstacle to students seeking and completing internships. Future research should also investigate the impacts of work on first-generation students, who were more likely to report the barrier of working at their current jobs (65%).

Finally, we argue that it is the combination of obstacles – reflecting labor markets, students’ social networks, their access to financial resources, and individual situations – that functions as a multifaceted field of constrained opportunity. Future work in this area could focus on how specific marginalized groups experience the obstacles reported in this paper, while also paying closer attention to how historical, organizational, and individual-level forces intersect to shape student experiences. Based on the evidence reported in this paper, we conclude that internships are inaccessible to a significant number of today’s college students. As a result, we argue that internships should be removed from lists of HIPs until and unless equitable access can be guaranteed or at least highly probable for *all* students attending colleges and universities in the U.S. ■

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