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How do students conceptualise the college internship experience? Towards a student-centred approach to designing and implementing internships

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ABSTRACT

At a time when colleges and universities are anxious to prove that their graduates are employable, internships are being increasingly touted as valuable 'high-impact' practices. However, how students themselves conceptualise internships is poorly understood, which inhibits the inclusion of their voices in the employability discourse and considerations of program design. In this study we use the freelisting method from cultural anthropology to analyse data from students ($n = 57$) in three US colleges, using saliency analysis, thematic analysis, and social network analysis techniques. Results indicate that the most salient terms in the cultural domain of internships were: 'experience,' 'learning,' 'paid,' and 'connections.' Students discussed these words in utilitarian terms (e.g. something to 'get' for one's resume), as important aspects of career- and self-exploration, and to highlight the importance of compensation. Differences in the complexity of student accounts were evident between students who had taken an internship and those who had not. These findings highlight how common definitions of internships reflect a homogenous and aspirational perspective that is inconsistent with student accounts. We conclude that students' insights about internships are important to consider to re-frame the employability debate to include student perspectives and experiences, to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to internship design, and to facilitate student self-reflection.

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Internship; higher education; student voice; program design

Introduction

Internships are widely touted as co-curricular activities that may enhance students' employment prospects and future earnings, while also meeting employer talent needs (Knouse and Fontenot 2008; Maertz, Stoeberl, and Marks 2014). Consequently, many governments and postsecondary institutions around the world view internships as a cornerstone to their employability policies; in some cases, making them mandatory for graduation (Klein and Weiss 2011; Silva et al. 2018). In the United States, the inclusion of internships in lists of 'high-impact' practices that contribute to student engagement and completion (Kuh 2008) has policymakers and professional associations advocating for their widespread adoption. At the same time, a growing body of empirical research is documenting the positive benefits of internships (McHugh 2017; Silva et al. 2018), leading to what could be considered 'the era of the internship' in global higher education.

However, one aspect of internships is poorly understood: how students themselves conceptualise and experience them. We know how educators and advocates define internships (e.g. National

Association of Colleges and Employers 2018b), and there is also a promising line of inquiry examining students' opinions of their quality (Alpert, Heaney, and Kuhn 2009; Cho 2006) and differences in how students and employers view program quality and efficacy (Knemeyer and Murphy 2002). But to date, no empirical research exists on how students define and conceptualise the internship experience on their own terms. There are at least three reasons why understanding students' perceptions of internships is important. First, debates about employability tend to be dominated (and thus framed) by employer and advocates' voices and interests, with little to no representation of students' interests and perspectives (Higdon 2016; Tymon 2013). Second, a student-centred approach to education necessitates increasing students involvement in the learning process itself (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006), such as engaging students in co-designing courses, pedagogical approaches, and co-curricular experiences (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011). Third, because internships are part of a critical phase in students' psychological and professional development, understanding how they are interpreting these experiences can provide valuable information to inform the creation of programs that are appropriate, positive, and effective for specific students (Hilton and Slotnick 2005; Jackson 2016; Lown et al. 2009).

Without these insights, however, current definitions and accounts of internships reflect the preconceived assumptions of researchers and advocates about program form, function, and value. In this paper, we address this problem by drawing on theory and method from cultural anthropology to document the 'emic' or the insider perspectives of students (Wolcott 1985). By adopting an ethnographic perspective, we aim to reposition the perspectives of students – from the periphery to the centre – within discussions of employability and internships (Higdon 2016; Tymon 2013). To elicit students' accounts, we use the freelisting method to document the words or phrases that are most salient to students as they consider the cultural domain of 'internships.' In this case, we gathered freelist data from students ($n = 57$) at three US colleges, and analysed the data using saliency analysis, inductive thematic analysis, and techniques from social network analysis to address the following questions: (1) What are the most frequently and psychologically salient reported terms associated with internships?, (2) What underlying themes are evident in students' descriptions of these terms?, and (3) What, if any, differences in term frequency, salience, and themes are apparent between students who have and who have not taken an internship?

Background

Research on internships is increasing across disciplinary and national boundaries, as more governments and postsecondary institutions advocate for their inclusion in students' educational programs (see Author, Author, and Author 2017; Narayanan, Olk, and Fukami 2010 for reviews). However, despite the depth and diversity of this literature, some limitations exist that inhibit the comparability and validity of the literature. Terminological problems are widely acknowledged, with the lack of a consistent and standardised definition being a major issue (NACE 2018a; Silva et al. 2018). In particular, the lack of a standardised definition may lead to potential misunderstandings among the key parties involved in internships – employers, educators, and students – regarding their form, purpose, and quality. In response to this problem, and with the express intent of advancing a consensus definition, NACE describes internships as:

An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical applications and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent. (NACE 2018a).

There are several notable things about this definition, the first of which is that despite the different interests and perspectives potentially held by employers, educators, and students, a standardised definition was developed to erase such variation.

Furthermore, this definition conceptualises internships in an idealised state, where they are unequivocally a form of 'experiential learning,' and that they uniformly facilitate students' social

capital and professional networks – two achievements that are not easy to accomplish and thus not to be taken for granted. Consequently, NACE's (2018a) definition should be viewed as more aspirational than descriptive. Besides offering a homogenous account of an experience that can in fact manifest in a wide range of possibilities, this account also obscures negative and potentially harmful aspects of internships such as worker exploitation (Chan, Pun, and Selden 2015; Perlin 2012), negative influences on students' career aspirations (Walmsley, Thomas, and Jameson 2012), and how internships may reproduce inequality (Curiale 2009). The presence and influence of definitions like these is one of the reasons why a more ethnographic and student-based account of internships is warranted.

The role of student voice: representation, instructional design, identity formation

While research on students' opinions about the quality of their internship experiences exists (Alpert, Heaney, and Kuhn 2009; Cho 2006; NACE 2018b), these studies do not delve deeply into how students construct their understandings of the experience itself. Specifically, there are three problems with the lack of insights into this phenomenon.

First, for some researchers, marginalising the experiences of students in discussions about education is a matter of the powerful exercising their influence in a hegemonic fashion, where students' voice is subjugated to the interests of actors such as employers and college administrators (Cook-Sather 2006). This is particularly the case with the employability debate, where business interests that emphasise productivity and profit via a human capital framework tend to take precedence over what students think, want, and experience (Urciuoli 2008). Such a perspective has shaped the dominant view of employability (i.e. dependent on a student's own personal initiative and skills), which ignores critical factors such as the business cycle, hiring decisions, and local economic conditions (Higdon 2016; Tomlinson 2012; Tymon 2013). Ultimately, in the eyes of some researchers, including students in these debates is not only a moral imperative but also a key to enhancing educational quality since it invites 'user' feedback and experience (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011).

Second, one of the core principles of student-centred instruction, which has gained prominence as a reform against lecture-centric teaching, is that students must become more actively engaged in the learning process (Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006). While some interpret this key idea in terms of crafting more engaging classroom activities, others focus on how students can become more involved in co-designing courses, teaching methods, and the curriculum itself, which have been positively associated with student motivation, student–teacher relationships, and instructor understanding of student learning processes (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011). Additionally, engaging students in this manner is a way for students to share important insights about strengths and weaknesses within a course or classroom, which can then be incorporated into revisions or changes to courses, lesson plans, and academic programs (Matthews, Cook-Sather, and Healey 2018).

The third and final reason for eliciting students' perspectives is that to adequately support and foster their personal and professional growth, educators need to understand how they are experiencing their entry into new professional communities. This perspective is grounded in a view of internships as a potentially transformative experience, where students are socialised into new professional cultures (Dailey 2016; Jackson 2016), and where they may begin to develop what is known as a 'pre-professional identity' (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012). In developing this new sense of self, the student draws upon information from their new workplace, which serves to inform their developing notion of who they are as a professional (Savickas et al. 2009). With information about what students perceive as important (and deleterious) factors shaping their professional development, educators can adjust how they teach and advise students (Lown et al. 2009), and also how they design and implement internship programs (Rothman 2007).

These reasons for eliciting information about students' internship experiences raise another question – how can the field best elicit their accounts about internships?

Cultural domain research in anthropology and the free-list method

When we think about how groups of people define or perceive a particular event or concept, it is useful to think in terms of culture, or the distribution of these conceptions across populations. In cultural anthropology, the distribution of concepts across a group is called a cultural domain, defined as sets of items perceived to be of the same type by group members (Borgatti 1999; Spradley 1979). In other words, a cultural domain is a shared psychological category, like ‘animals,’ ‘movie stars,’ ‘skills,’ or in the case of this paper, ‘internships.’

The degree to which people share cultural domain knowledge is an empirical question, and domains are usually structured so that there are a small number of items shared by many group members – referred to as ‘core’ items – and a larger number of items listed by one or two members – referred to as ‘peripheral’ items (Borgatti 1999). The freelist method is commonly used in anthropological field research to document these phenomena, and the technique entails asking respondents to list words or short phrases that come to mind regarding a specific concept. Free listing has been used to study a range of topics such as consumer preferences (Hough and Ferraris 2010) and beliefs about cancer (Daley 2007), but relatively few studies in education have used the method. Exceptions include analyses of faculty and students’ perceptions of innovative teaching (Jaskyte, Taylor, and Smariga 2009) and a study about medical students’ perception of what is important in their professional development (Lown et al. 2009) where the authors’ intent was to apply findings to improve courses within a medical school. It is this desire to apply research findings to address pressing problems of educational practice that motivates this study. Using the freelist technique, we aim to shed light on internships in order to improve how these programs are understood and subsequently designed and implemented in the field.

Methods

The data reported in this paper are drawn from larger mixed-methods, longitudinal study of internships at three postsecondary institutions: a comprehensive Predominantly White Institution (PWI) with an undergraduate headcount of 4,168 students (hereafter named Institution A), a technical college with 20,801 students (Institution B), and an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) with 2,038 undergraduates (Institution C). The sampling frame for the study included students in their junior and senior years (Institutions A and C), or in the second half of their degree programs (Institution B), in order to increase the prospects that a sample student had completed an internship. To focus on students’ experiences in internships and not on related programs, we excluded from the sampling frame students from programs with a required clinical practicum (e.g. teacher education) or apprenticeship programs.

The data included an online survey and then focus groups with students who self-selected into the study. The procedure for administering the survey began with a letter and cash incentive (\$5) mailed to students, followed by emails with a link to the survey. After completing the survey, students were asked if they were willing to participate in a focus group, for which attendees received a \$20 cash incentive ($n = 57$). Thus, all survey recipients ($n = 3,385$) were invited to participate, and ultimately 57 students volunteered and were able to meet the research team’s fieldwork schedule for an in-person meeting. Most groups included two to four students, though no-shows resulted in one-person interviews in some cases ($n = 7$). Information about the composition of the study sample is shown in Table 1.

Data collection

During the focus groups, all students first completed a free-list exercise, where they were asked to identify short words or phrases associated with the term ‘internship.’ Students were not directed to think about either their own or a specific type of internship, but just the term alone. A written freelist exercise was used instead of a verbal approach, in order to avoid students

Table 1. Description of study sample.

	Focus Group (n = 57)	Institution A (n = 25)	Institution B (n = 14)	Institution C (n = 18)
Student Demographics				
Age in years, mean (SD)	26.88 (7.73)	26 (3.97)	33.64 (12.38)	22.83 (1.25)
Gender				
Male (%)	17 (29.8)	10 (40)	6 (42.86)	1 (5.56)
Female (%)	39 (68.4)	14 (56)	8 (57.14)	17 (94.44)
Race				
Asian (%)	3 (5.26)	1 (4)	1 (7.14)	1 (5.56)
Black or African American (%)	18 (31.58)		1 (7.14)	17 (94.44)
Hispanic or Latino (%)	2 (3.51)	1(4)	1 (7.14)	
White or Caucasian (%)	31 (54.39)	21 (84)	10 (71.43)	
First-generation student (FGS)				
FGS (%)	21 (36.84)	10 (40)	4 (28.57)	7 (38.89)
Not FGS (%)	36 (63.16)	15 (60)	10 (71.43)	11 (61.11)
Employment Status				
Yes (%)	38 (66.67)	19 (76)	9 (64.29)	10 (55.56)
No (%)	19 (33.33)	6 (24)	5 (35.71)	8 (44.44)
Working hours, mean (SD)	14.07 (12.14)	13.08 (14.13)	16.78 (7.05)	14.1 (10.85)
Annual income, mean (SD)	\$9,933.52 (13802)	14,028 (18,609)	10, 113 (6,595)	4,116.67 (6,020.87)
Enrolment Status				
Full-time (%)	44 (77.19)	22 (88)	4 (28.57)	18 (100)
Part-time (%)	13 (22.81)	3 (12)	10 (71.43)	
GPA: 1(D+) to 10 (A), mean (SD)	8.64 (1.57)	8.6 (1.71)	8.62 (1.85)	8.72 (1.18)
Academic Program				
Arts and Humanities (%)	7 (12.28)	4 (16)	2 (14.29)	1 (5.56)
Biosciences, Agriculture, & NR (%)	11 (19.30)	3 (12)		8 (44.44)
Business (%)	7 (12.28)	4 (16)	2 (14.29)	1 (5.56)
Communications, Media, & PR (%)	6 (10.53)	5 (20)		1 (5.56)
Engineering (%)	6 (10.53)	2 (8)	4 (28.57)	
Health Professions (%)	4 (7.02)		3 (21.43)	1 (5.56)
Physical Sciences, Maths, & CS (%)	4 (7.02)	4 (16)		
Social Sciences (%)	9 (15.79)	3 (12)		6 (33.33)
Social Service Professions (%)	2 (3.51)		2 (14.29)	
Internship Status				
Required in program – Yes (%)	17 (29.82)	4 (16)	10 (71.43)	3 (16.67)
Required in program – No (%)	38 (66.67)	20 (80)	4 (28.57)	14 (77.78)
Participated in an internship (%)	32 (56.14)	13 (52)	7 (50)	12 (66.67)
Did not participate (%)	25 (43.56)	12 (48)	7 (50)	6 (33.33)

being influenced by one another and to reduce transcription errors (Quinlan 2005). After completing their freelist, students were asked to elaborate on the first term on their lists and to explain what the term meant. This question was intended to allow students to elaborate on a term in their freelist, which often produces valuable insights, and due to time constraints, only one term was discussed from the freelist exercise. Following this exercise, students were then asked several open-ended questions. For students who had taken an internship, questions were asked about their motivations for pursuing an internship, the nature of their work in the internship, and so on. Students without an internship experience were asked about obstacles to pursue internship opportunities and general concerns about internships and their future careers.

Data analysis

The data analysed for this paper were transcripts from focus groups, and the researchers conducting the analysis were doctoral students in sociology and counselling psychology who were trained in content and freelist techniques. Since respondents listed terms that could be considered closely related but were in fact phrased differently (e.g. work experience, experience, hands-on experience),

the first step in the analysis involved two researchers reviewing the raw data independently to develop lists of standardised terms (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013; Quinlan 2005). Once a list of standardised terms was determined, the researchers applied the terms to 10% of the raw data in order to test inter-rater reliability. The discrepancies that were identified through this process were discussed and then resolved by analysts, which resulted in a final list of 48 standardised terms. The researchers then replaced all of the original terms (e.g. work experience) reported by study participants with these standardised terms (e.g. experience) so that the data were comparable. We then analysed these data using Anthropac software to identify the most frequently reported and salient terms (Borgatti 1992). For these analyses, we conducted analyses for the entire sample and then for students who had taken an internship and students who had not. Saliency is a measure that reflects the average percentile rank of a particular term across all respondent lists while weighting terms by the order each respondent reported them (Smith and Borgatti 1997). Saliency is computed as:

$$S_j = \frac{r_j l}{n l}$$

$$S_j = \frac{n r_j}{n l}$$

where r_j = position of item j in the list, and n = number of items per list (see Smith and Borgatti 1997). To calculate the overall saliency index, the average s_j across all respondents is calculated.

Next, we performed a content analysis of the data, which began with keyword searches of terms with a saliency score of .175 or higher. The cut-off score of .175 was arbitrary and selected to obtain a manageable yet sizeable number of terms for further analysis. Of the eight terms that met this criterion, only six terms had sufficient textual data to analyse (i.e. complete sentences that elaborated on term meaning). Then, we employed an inductive approach to thematic analysis to identify underlying meanings of the words used in the free-list activity. This process began with open-coding process where one analyst reviewed the raw data and made margin notes about important details (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2013).

Finally, to examine the underlying structure in how respondents conceptualised internships, we created a participant-by-code matrix in which each cell indicated whether participant i reported a particular term j (1) or not (0). We then used the program Netdraw (Borgatti 2002) to create affiliation graphs of the co-occurrences of pairs of terms for each of the respondent sub-groups (e.g. students with an internship, students without an internship). Then, to evaluate the degree to which a graph was more or less complex or 'dense,' we calculated the density for each graph (Scott 2017).

Results

Conversion of raw data into standardised terms

The first step in analysing free-list data is to convert each respondent's 'raw' or original data into a standardised set of terms. This step naturally (and unfortunately) results in the loss of rich, fine-grained language from individual respondents, and so before reporting findings using the standardised list, we describe the idiosyncratic terms that were subsumed under the standardised terms. For instance, the standardised term 'experience' encompasses several terms such as 'hands-on experience,' 'work experience,' and 'new experience.' (see Table 2).

Some of these raw data reflect subtle distinctions that indicate respondents were likely conveying slightly different aspects of the terms 'experience' and 'exploration,' and these nuances are examined later in this section.

Table 2. Raw free-list data examples of standardised terms.

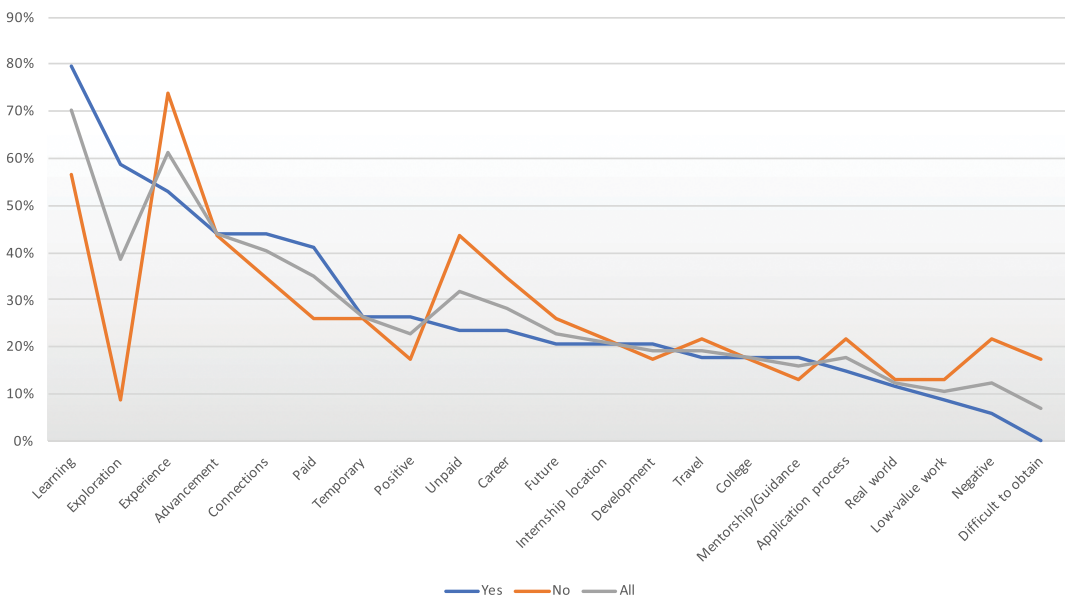
Standardised term	Raw data examples
Experience	<i>Experience, hands-on experience, work experience, new experience,</i>
Learning	<i>Learning, knowledge, educational, extra training, learning experience, repetition, difficult, challenging, teaching, shadowing, training</i>
Paid	<i>Paid, money, stipend, compensation,</i>
Connections	<i>Connections, networking, co-workers, network, meeting new people, friends, social capital, relationships, connections to future career, people</i>
Career	<i>Career, job work, labour, in your career field, career moves</i>
Advancement	<i>Advancement, possible job, foot-in-the-door, stepping stone, good for jobs, resume booster, workshops, GRE & MCAT prep, beginning</i>
Unpaid	<i>Unpaid, no compensation, little or no compensation, cheap labour</i>
Opportunity	<i>Opportunity, opportunities, chance, career opportunities</i>
Exploration	<i>Explore, exposure, new, test run, trying something new, try before you commit, trial and error, new adventures, eye-opening</i>
Temporary	<i>Temporary, short-term, short, summer, part-time, six months,</i>
Research	<i>Research</i>
Development	<i>Development, growth, inspiration, gaining skills, apprenticeship, personal development, personal growth</i>
Future	<i>Future, goals, setting/achieving goals, planning for the future, inside look at future career</i>

Frequency of standardised term reference

Next, we report the terms that *all* students in our study sample reported most frequently with respect to internships, which include ‘learning’ (reported by 66.7% of participants), ‘experience’ (61.4%), ‘advancement’ (43.9%), and ‘connections’ (40.4%). Then, we disaggregated the data and examined term frequencies for each group (see [Figure 1](#)).

For students who had taken an internship, their most frequently reported terms were ‘learning’ (73.5%), ‘exploration’ (58.5%), and ‘experience’ (52.9%), while students who had not taken an internship reported the terms ‘experience’ (73.9%), ‘learning’ (56.5%), ‘unpaid’ (43.5%) and ‘advancement’ (43.5%) most frequently during the freelist exercise.

These results indicate the importance of concepts such as learning, experience, and advancement across the study sample, which shows some consistency in the cultural domain of ‘internships’ for

**Figure 1.** Frequency of freelist responses.

this group of students. However, the variation in term frequencies, particularly with respect to compensation (i.e. paid and unpaid), and the ideas of exploration and opportunity indicate differences between groups.

Saliency analysis of standardised terms

The “saliency” score for each term represents the average percentile rank of a term across all respondent lists while weighting terms by the order each respondent reported them (Romney and d’Andrade 1964; Smith and Borgatti 1997)(see Table 3).

The most salient concepts for all students included ‘experience’ (0.479), ‘learning’ (0.41), ‘paid’ (0.256), and ‘connections’ (0.226). These suggest a shared concern about issues related to gaining workplace experience, the experiential learning aspects of internships, compensation, and developing professional connections. As with the term frequency results, some similarities and differences between the two groups of students are evident. For students who had an internship, the terms ‘experience’ (0.46), ‘learning’ (0.432), ‘paid’ (0.302), and ‘exploration’ (0.272) were most salient, while students who had not taken an internship held ‘experience’ (0.508), ‘learning’ (0.379), ‘career’ (0.273), and ‘unpaid’ (0.262) as the most salient terms. These results indicate that experience and learning are highly salient concepts across the sample, but that differences exist with respect to compensation and an emphasis on exploration and careers.

Respondent elaborations of salient terms

We then analysed students’ utterances in response to questions posed after the freelist exercise, to examine nuances of how they interpreted and discussed the most salient terms. The analysis resulted in 18 themes and here we report a selection of these themes (see Table 4).

Experience

Students in our study spoke about experience in four distinct ways, referring to experience as ‘something to get,’ as an activity involving learning new things, as a complement to academic knowledge, and as a form of career exploration.

Something to get to be competitive on the job market. The most prevalent way that students discussed the notion of ‘experience’ was as something to ‘get,’ to place on their resume. For some, the pursuit of experience was something that was recommended by others, as in the case of a student who said, ‘I heard that internships are mainly to get experience.’ For others, an internship was strategically pursued in order to ‘build up’ one’s resume and thus their competitiveness in the labour market.

Hands-on experience to complement academic knowledge. In several cases, an internship was described as an opportunity to get ‘hands-on learning experience’ that was unavailable in the classroom. Many students discussed the positive aspects of being able to apply knowledge gained during coursework to their internship work, where the daily tasks in a healthcare clinic, accountant’s office, and web development firm provided some of their first opportunities to transfer their school learning to real-world scenarios.

Experience as a form of career exploration

Finally, some students reported that their internship experiences were primarily a way for them to learn what it would be like to be in a particular career, and to determine whether or not they would enjoy that kind of work in the future. For example, one student saw his internship as ‘a way to get work experience and understand the reality of whatever career choice I’m looking at.’

Table 3. Free-list results for term ‘internship’ for students (n = 57).

All students (n = 57)			Students with internship experience (n = 32)			Students without internship experience (n = 25)		
Term	Frequency	Saliency	Term	Frequency	Saliency	Term	Frequency	Saliency
Experience	61.4	0.479	Experience	52.9	0.46	Experience	73.9	0.508
Learning	66.7	0.41	Learning	73.5	0.432	Learning	56.5	0.379
Paid	35.1	0.256	Paid	41.2	0.302	Career	34.8	0.273
Connections	40.4	0.226	Exploration	58.8	0.272	Unpaid	43.5	0.262
Career	28.1	0.218	Connections	44.1	0.27	Advancement	43.5	0.245
Advancement	43.9	0.212	Opportunity	38.2	0.254	Paid	26.1	0.188
Unpaid	31.6	0.199	Advancement	44.1	0.19	Temporary	26.1	0.18
Opportunity	26.3	0.177	Career	23.5	0.181	Connections	34.8	0.162
Exploration	38.6	0.173	Unpaid	23.5	0.156	Development	17.4	0.137
Temporary	26.3	0.143	Research	23.5	0.15	Future	26.1	0.134

Table 4. Themes for salient terms.

Experience	Learning	Career	Paid and unpaid (compensation)	Connections	Opportunity
Something to get to be competitive	Occurs via hands-on experiences	Career goals and ambitions	Resignation about unpaid internships	Using personal or family networks.	To learn and advance in career
Learning new things	Develop new understandings/ techniques	Re-starting a career	Money makes work serious	Importance of faculty connections.	Limited opportunities
Hands-on experience complements college	Learn about yourself/ future	Undecided about career	Many willing to work for free	Challenges with developing networks.	Chance to leave home
Exploring career options	Learn about professional cultures		Unpaid internships untenable for some		

Learning

Another salient term that we analysed in depth was ‘learning,’ which was discussed in four distinct ways, including the process of learning via experience at the job site, the learning of new topics and techniques, learning about oneself and one’s future, and learning as professional socialisation.

Learning occurs via hands-on experience in the field

For several students, the internship provided an opportunity to ‘learn by doing’ via hands-on experiences. As one student stated, ‘you learn everything in the classroom, but it’s never going to be anything close to real world,’ and the internship provided the chance to take what was learnt in the classroom and apply it in practice. Similarly, another student said, ‘It was nice to see some of the things that you have learned ... being put into practice.’

Learning about oneself and one’s own future

Another way that students discussed the idea of learning was in relation to learning about their own career trajectory and futures. As one student reported, the internship was, ‘less about on-the-job learning, and more just personal growing for me with work in general.’ In these cases, the learning process within an internship pertained to career exploration and personal growth, as opposed to the acquisition of new technical knowledge.

Career

Students reported the term ‘career’ in several instances, with elaborations on their goals and ambitions and the issue of re-starting a career.

Career goals and ambitions. Most references to the term ‘career’ pertained to students’ goals for their future. These statements included goals to ‘break into’ fields such as health care or information technology, which an internship was viewed as a vehicle for doing so.

Re-starting a career. Some study participants were adults who were in the midst of a career change or transition, due to layoffs and/or a realisation that they needed a career change. As a student in a medical administration program said, ‘I had to restart a career at a late age,’ which has added a level of stress about their futures and ability to pay living expenses.

Paid and unpaid

The terms ‘paid’ and ‘unpaid’ are here analysed together, under the broad construct of compensation. For these terms, students exhibited a resignation that most internships are unpaid, reported the view that compensation adds seriousness to an internship, that many students will work for free, and how financial issues made an internship untenable.

Resignation and acceptance that many internships are unpaid. For several students in our study, the fact that many internships were unpaid was simply accepted as ‘the way things were.’ Thus, some were resigned to the fact that they may have to forgo compensation in order to get valuable workplace experience, and would have been surprised (and lucky) to land one of the few positions that came with a paycheck.

Money adds a level of seriousness. Some students also mentioned that a paid internship adds a level of professionalism and seriousness to their positions, such that pay is equated with work that is valued by the organisation. In contrast, for these students, an unpaid internship conveys the sentiment (on behalf of the employer) that the work – and by extension the intern him or herself – is unimportant.

An internship is so important that some are willing to work for free. Several students in our study felt that an internship was so valuable that it was acceptable to work for free in an unpaid position. This was explained by the perceived need to gain workplace experience, such that the internship becomes a necessary addition to one’s resume in order to be competitive in the labour market. One student explained that working without pay was a common feature of the internship landscape because ‘the company knows that you want to be there ... and are paying you with experience.’

Money (or lack thereof) is a deciding factor for some. For many students in our sample, an unpaid internship was simply out of the question, due to the need to pay tuition, housing costs, daily living expenses, and so on. As one student said, ‘There’s very few [internships] I could find where they will be paid, which could be difficult for some people who are trying to work to put themselves through school.’ Additionally, finances are an issue for internships out of the students’ immediate area, which also involve housing and transportation costs.

Connections

Students also discussed connections or social networks, primarily in terms of using their personal contacts to pursue internships, the importance of faculty, and challenges with developing connections.

Using personal or family networks. Some students reported using their own pre-existing networks developed during previous jobs or their own families’ networks, to obtain information about internship openings. As one student said, ‘my Mom is a big-time influencer, she knows a lot of people, so I use her guidance’ in order to find and pursue internships.

Importance of faculty connections. Next, several students discussed how the professional connections that their faculty advisors had were extremely important for identifying opportunities such as internships. In some cases, individual faculty were seen as more useful than career services offices because faculty had direct and personal connections with potential employers.

Challenges with developing networks. Finally, a few students spoke about their lack of personal connections with professionals in their field, a situation that was often made worse by a lack of time (due to work or family obligations) to attend networking events or other situations where connections could be developed.

Opportunity

Students also spoke about the term ‘opportunity’ in three distinct ways: referring to chances that couldn’t be passed up, barriers and limitations of opportunity, and the prospect of leaving their hometown.

Opportunities to advance. Several students spoke about opportunity in terms of being presented with a chance for obtaining an opportunity to get a new job or position. As one student said, an internship ‘was an opportunity to get your foot in the door’ at a desirable organisation. For others, an internship offered opportunities to learn new things about a profession or sector, such as how a theatre company actually did its work or new techniques in biotechnology.

Limitations to opportunity. Some students also spoke about opportunity in terms of its absence due to a variety of factors such as time and geography. For students who were working full-time jobs, they felt that they lacked opportunities to pursue an internship. In other cases, especially for students at the rural university in our study, students spoke about a lack of opportunities in their small city, noting that most internships were in larger, more expensive cities.

Differences between interns and non-interns

Finally, we present the results of analyses of differences between interns and non-interns using comparative thematic analysis and affiliation graphing.

Comparative thematic analysis

A comparison of salient terms between the two groups of students resulted in differences in interpretation and meaning.

Differences in discussing experience

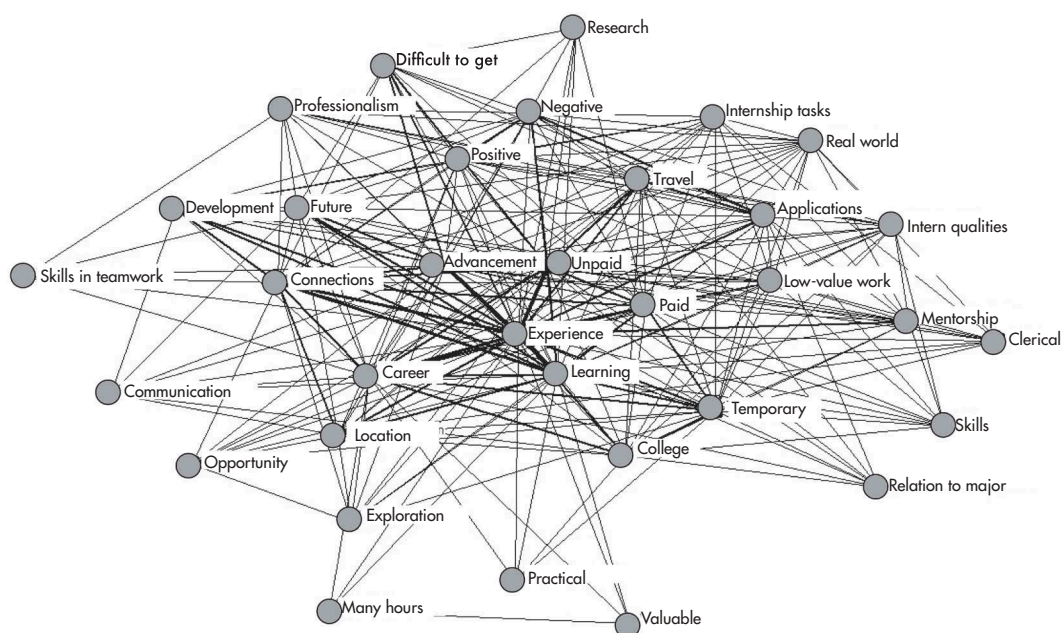
For the students who had not participated in an internship, their elaborations of the term ‘experience’ were indistinct and vague, and often included references to experience as something to ‘get.’ They also indicated that internships are ‘a good way’ to gain experience for future employment in generalised terms, but with few details regarding how, where, and in what form this experience would be gained. In contrast, the students who had taken an internship spoke of experience in more detailed terms, which naturally drew on their own personal experiences. This group also spoke of experience in terms of experiential education, where the application of academic knowledge to real-world situations was one of the primary features of experience.

Differences in discussing learning

For students who had completed an internship, learning was primarily about the opportunity to build further skills by applying their classroom knowledge to authentic professional situations. In contrast, the students who had not completed an internship spoke about learning primarily in terms of learning how to do a specific job. For example, an engineering student stated, ‘I think internships, at least in the engineering world are primarily to learn how to do your job.’ In this way, observations from non-interns contained few insights about the application of conceptual knowledge to the field of practice, or of the potential to learn about one’s own strengths and career goals.

Differences in discussing opportunity

The term ‘opportunity’ was referenced more by students who had taken an internship than those who had not, and their observations centred on how internships ‘opened doors’ and provided them with new professional opportunities. In contrast, non-interns did not frequently discuss this term.



Figures 3. Affiliation graph of term-term co-occurrences for students who had not taken an internship.

future, exploration, connections, opportunity and internship tasks and locations. These conceptions not only reflect a more detailed perspective of the internship as a site for workplace tasks, but also an emphasis on exploration and the future that is less evident with students who have not yet had an internship.

Discussion

At a time when colleges and universities around the world are anxious to prove that their graduates are indeed 'employable' (Tomlinson 2012; Urciuoli 2008), internships are being increasingly touted as an experience that can facilitate their entry into the world of work (NACE 2018a; Saniter & Siedler, 2014). But despite this advocacy and arguments that internships should be considered a 'high-impact' practice (Kuh 2008), some have argued that debates about employability and internships are flawed because they have ignored the voice and interests of the one party for whom the internship experience should be most influential – that of students (Higdon 2016).

In this paper, we address this gap in the literature and adopt a cultural perspective by eliciting emic or insider perspectives on a cultural domain – that of internships – which led to a more nuanced and multi-faceted conception of internships than is typically offered.

How students' conceptions of internships vary from standard definitions

The results from our study reveal that students conceptualised internships in more multi-faceted and critical ways than official definitions, leading us to conclude that these definitions reflect a uni-dimensional and overly rosy view that overlooks student perspectives and the importance of high-quality program design. Consider the influential definition of internships provided by NACE, which articulates what an internship is – a 'form of experiential learning' – and the benefits that a student will get from the experience (e.g. integration of classroom theory with practical application,

development of networks) (NACE 2018a). This definition captures important elements of an internship that students in our study also discussed, including learning, experience, and connections.

But we suggest that NACE's (2018a) definition advances a homogenous and aspirational perspective of internships that neither aligns with student accounts nor does it make clear that without proper attention to program design and quality, an internship can easily be an unsatisfactory or even inimical experience for a student. First, the assumption that an internship is by default a form of experiential learning is flawed, as a rich and engaging learning experience – whether in the classroom or the internship placement site – is difficult to design and enact, and is simply not synonymous with any particular site or venue of learning (McHugh 2017; Perlin 2012). Even advocates of internships as a high-impact practice recognise that much depends on how individual institutions and advisors structure and support students in their internships (Kuh and Kinzie 2018). For instance, one student in our study described his internship as poorly structured and supervised, which ultimately made it one of the worst experiences of his life. Thus, in uncritically conferring upon internships the imprimatur of 'experiential learning,' and in glossing over the prospects that without attention to program structure an internship could be the antithesis to a positive learning experience, NACE contributes to an overly optimistic conception of internships while also minimising the not inconsiderable challenges associated with instructional design and mentoring. Similarly, most accounts of internships, including the NACE (2018a) definition, do not take into account and/or address the potential influence that students' perceptions may have on their experience. For instance, many students – especially those who had not yet had an internship – viewed them as just another experience to 'get' and put onto their resume, thereby ignoring the potential learning, network building, and personal development that could also be an outcome of an internship. While there is no evidence that such a perspective would necessarily result in a superficial or unsatisfying internship, it is clear that some students are not thinking about them as immersive and challenging experiential learning opportunities, which is what they ultimately are or can be. In addition, student preoccupations with compensation, and especially the assumption by some that an internship is most likely going to be unpaid, have potential implications for their subsequent field experiences. Research shows that interns receiving pay for their work were more satisfied than unpaid interns with their experience and also more frequently indicated an intent to pursue employment with the host organisation (McHugh 2017). Consequently, pay is not only an issue of equity and fair labour practice that 'novice' interns are thinking about, but compensation also appears to play a substantial role in shaping how students conceptualise and evaluate their experience (see also Crain 2016).

But do these differences in how students and internship advocates such as NACE define and perceive the experience really matter? We argue that yes, this disjuncture does matter, and for three primary reasons .

(1) Student insights should be included in discussions about the design of internship programmes

As previously noted, much of the discussion and debate about graduate employability is remarkable for ignoring the insights of students, while the voices and interests of the business community and policymakers are prominent and influential (Higdon 2016; Tymon 2013). This absence of student voice and experience is problematic for two reasons: (1) it is unethical and indefensible to ignore and thus silence the interests of a group that has been historically marginalised and under-represented in debates about education (i.e. students)(McLeod 2011), and, (2) overlooking students' experiences and insights results in a basic lack of understanding about their views on matters ranging from what it takes to actually get a job (Higdon 2016) to which features of internships are most beneficial (e.g. orientations) and/or problematic (e.g. lack of transportation) (Alpert, Heaney, and Kuhn 2009; Cho 2006; Knemeyer and Murphy 2002). Consequently, giving students a proverbial seat at the table when internship policies are debated and decided is essential to not only re-frame the discourse

about internships but also to inform a more student-centred and user-friendly approach to their design.

(2) Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach for internships that ignores students' unique needs and situations

Perhaps the biggest limitation in the NACE (2018a) definition of internships is its omission of conditionality, where the positive effects of an internship (e.g. integration of theory and practice, make valuable professional connections) are not guaranteed but instead depend on employers and postsecondary leaders careful attention to task design, quality of supervision, and other programmatic elements that may vary considerably from case to case. At a very simple level, including mention of the importance of intentional design would signal to students, employers, and educators the need to think carefully on these issues.

What should be avoided, however, is the creation of lists of 'best practices' that would apply to all internship programs in all situations, which is not uncommon response of policymakers and institutional leaders, but instead to design experiences that meet particular students' goals, needs, and interests. As O'Neill (2010) observes, 'the beauty of internships is that they can serve different purposes for different students' (p.1). Students in our study had a variety of reasons for pursuing internships (e.g. to explore oneself, to examine career options, to make professional connections, to get a 'foot in the door'), and ideally, how a student is advised and how an internship is structured would vary depending on their unique goals and situations. Of course, in some cases (e.g. mandatory internships in allied health programs), such differentiation may not be possible, but in other situations, students will have considerable flexibility with respect to the type of internship they could pursue.

It is in these cases, we argue, that educators' approach to student 'engagement' must go beyond increasing their involvement in classroom or campus activities, and should instead involve student participation in the educational design process itself (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011). In situations where such customisation is desirable and feasible, such an approach should be taken with the design and implementation of internship programs to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches to internship design, and to tailor advising practices to students' level of familiarity with internships. This may be especially important for students new to the idea of internships, as our data indicate that they had a much less nuanced conception of the nature and value of internships. In response, advisors could educate inexperienced students about the various benefits of internships, perhaps through orientation workshops of in-class presentations to students. Without an education about internship types and benefits, students lacking prior experience may be at a disadvantage when pursuing opportunities and negotiating the nature of their daily work, and may settle for inadequate or ill-fitting opportunities.

(3) Postsecondary leaders should ensure sufficient staff are available to facilitate student self-reflection about their internship experiences

One of the key insights from student-centred perspectives on development is that learning and professional growth is a process whereby students actively construct their own identities and perceptions of opportunity (Baxter Magolda 2014). Having students actively reflect and articulate how they are constructing their own worlds, options, and sense of self would have two benefits. First, self-reflection in its own right is a crucial step in personal growth and development (Savickas et al. 2009), and is an important part of an effective internship. Second, career advisors can use these insights to tailor their counselling and advising to address students' own unique situations and goals (Rothman 2007; Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012).

However, these issues raise questions about the ability of and support systems for staff at postsecondary institutions *and* internship host organisations to adequately mentor and advise students. Ideally, colleges, universities, and employers will need to ensure that such skilled mentors

are available, such as through allocating resources to hiring and training such staff, with the ultimate goal being to facilitate the personal and professional development of *all* student interns.

Conclusions

Some limitations should be considered when evaluating the findings reported in this paper. Student participants self-selected into the study and were also incentivised via a cash payment, which introduces possible sources of bias into the dataset via potentially un-representative student characteristics and/or experiences. Students were also not asked to elaborate on all of the terms uttered during the freelist exercise, which meant that the availability of more detailed qualitative data were limited to the first terms that were elaborated upon and/or random observations of other topics in other portions of the focus group. Additionally, while no substantial variation across institutions in our data, future research should examine the degree to which students in different institutions think about and experience internship programs. Finally, for the freelist activity, students were asked to consider the term 'internships' in a general sense and not for their own experiences, making it possible that some (especially non-interns) conjured up stereotypical notions of or associations with internships from popular culture, peers or media representations.

With these caveats in mind, our findings do contribute new insights into how students conceptualise the college internship. Future research should investigate student conceptions of internships among a larger sample of students, particularly across a variety of disciplines, countries, and institution types, and also how engaging students more substantively in internship design may function in practice. Contrary to the not uncommon perception that internships provide uniformly positive experiences and outcomes to students – who ostensibly have the same goals and understandings of internships – our data demonstrate that in fact considerable variation exists in how students perceive these programs. Along with the need to democratise the dominant discourse around employability and internships, our findings indicate that how higher education professionals, policymakers, and workforce educators discuss internships should become more attentive to student voice, experience and needs.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Her research examines students' of color experiences in higher education and focuses on topics such as persistence, vocational development, social class, self-efficacy, and racial discrimination.

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