

# Closing the Doors of Opportunity: A Field Theoretic Analysis of the Prevalence and Nature of Obstacles to College Internships

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Matthew T. Hora, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Matthew Wolfgram, PhD<sup>1</sup>,  
Zi Chen, PhD<sup>2</sup>, and Changhee Lee, PhD<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

**Background:** Internships for college students can enhance their grades, skills, and employment prospects, but finding and completing an internship sometimes requires considerable resources. Consequently, before postsecondary institutions consider mandating this high-impact practice, more evidence is needed regarding the various obstacles students face as they seek an internship. **Focus of Study:** The purpose of this study was to document the prevalence and nature of obstacles to securing a college internship and how these factors interact in the lives of particular students. Field theory is used to highlight the ways that structural inequalities and forms of capital serve to facilitate or constrain access to an internship experience. **Population:** The participants in this study included students attending five postsecondary institutions—three comprehensive universities, one historically Black college and university (HBCU), and one technical college in the U.S. states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. **Research Design:** This concurrent mixed-methods study included the collection of survey ( $n = 1,549$ ) and focus group and interview ( $n = 100$ ) data from students who self-selected into the study. Given that this is a descriptive study, the aim was to document student experiences with obstacles to internships using varied sources of data. **Data Collection and Analysis:** Data were collected via an online survey (with a 26% response rate) and in-person focus groups or interviews

<sup>1</sup>University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA

<sup>2</sup>Facebook, Inc., Seattle, WA USA

## Corresponding Author:

Matthew T. Hora, Department of Liberal Arts & Applied Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 21 N. Park St., Madison, WI 53715, USA.

Email: hora@wisc.edu

at each campus. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, social network analysis, and logistic regression techniques and interpreted in ways that highlight the situated and critical role of capital and structure in shaping opportunity and behavior. **Findings:** Among the 1,060 (69%) survey respondents who reported not having had an internship, 638 indicated that they had in fact wanted to pursue an internship but could not because of the need to work, a heavy course load, insufficient positions, and inadequate pay. The role of financial, social, and cultural capital also impacted students differentially depending on their majors, socioeconomic status, race, and geographic location, highlighting how context and enduring systemic forces—and not solely the possession of capital(s)—intersect to shape students' abilities to pursue an internship. **Conclusion:** Internships are not universally accessible to all college students and instead favor students who have access to financial, social, and cultural capital while also being positioned in particular majors, geographic locations, and institutions. Before actively promoting internships for their students, colleges and universities should secure funding to support student pay and relocation costs, identify alternative forms of experiential learning for working students, and engage employers in creating more in-person and online positions for students across the disciplines.

### Keywords

internships, equity, access, higher education, work-based learning, field theory

Taking an internship was always going to be a problem for Janelle, a junior at a college in Georgia where internships had recently become required for graduation. As she explained to our research team, “I wouldn’t be able to do classes, do the internship, and work to make money—which is kind of important because I’m basically just paying for school as I can.” As we traveled across the country collecting data for a new study of college internships, we discovered that Janelle’s experience was not an isolated case. Consider that of the 1,060 students at five colleges and universities who completed our survey (reported in this article) and answered no to having taken an internship, 64% ( $n = 676$ ) stated that they had hoped to take an internship but could not for several reasons. Quite simply, an internship is not equally accessible for all college students, especially for busy working students like Janelle.

This is a considerable problem in higher education with respect to the social mobility and the equality of opportunities for *all* college students, because internships are becoming an important signal to employers that students are ready to enter the workforce or to get a “foot in the door” to that all-important first job (Silva et al., 2018). Evidence from empirical research on internships also demonstrates that an internship has positive impacts on graduates’ wages (Bolli et al., 2021), facilitates student transitions to professional workplaces (Dailey, 2016), and is even associated with improved grades (Parker et al., 2016). Although the specific mechanisms whereby an internship

leads to these outcomes are poorly understood, scholars speculate that the time spent in an internship developing new social networks and acquiring new cultural competencies unique to a profession are especially useful in enhancing graduate prospects in the labor market (McHugh, 2017). Consequently, the transformative role that an internship can play in a student's upward mobility is one reason that some have called them "door openers" to opportunity (Saniter & Siedler, 2014), making them an important new indicator of social mobility alongside traditional measures such as a college degree (Finighan & Putnam, 2016).

But the world of college internships is not without its critics. While some employers use internships as a recruitment tool and/or carefully curate high-quality learning experiences that may lead to well-paid employment, others, such as the Taiwanese electronics manufacturer Foxconn, have used student interns to work 10-hr shifts on assembly lines building iPhones and iPads (Chan et al., 2015). In addition, some argue that because many internships are poorly paid, temporary positions with few prospects of full-time employment, they are normalizing the controversial "gig" economy and job precarity for a generation of college students (Frenette, 2013; Perlin, 2012). Finally, critics of the internship market have long raised legal, ethical, and equity-related concerns about unpaid internships, particularly the dangers of students not receiving the protections and rights due to employees under federal labor law (Rothschild & Rothschild, 2020).

Perhaps the biggest concern about internships, however, is how the "field" of internship employment—conceptualized here as local, regional, and national labor markets where employers advertise short-term internships—are simply inaccessible to many students like Janelle. In an era of widespread concerns about inequitable access to educational opportunities based on students' race, geography, cultural background, and socioeconomic status (Chetty et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006), which in turn has negative long-term impacts on students' social mobility, the fact that many students struggle to find and complete an internship is troubling. Low-income students may not be able or willing to work for low (or no) wages or to relocate to an expensive city (Finley & McNair, 2013; Perlin, 2012), first-generation college students may not have access to networks or mentors who can share information about job openings (Frenette, 2013; Parks-Yancy, 2012), and students attending underresourced institutions may lack access to information and training provided by well-funded career services units (Allen et al., 2013). As a result, access to the field of internship employment is likely skewed to favor the privileged and well-resourced.

But limitations exist with the burgeoning literature on access-related concerns about college internships. First, studies adopting a neo-capital approach (Lin, 2001) in which nonfinancial resources are viewed as critical obstacles to internships sometimes adopt (consciously or not) a deficit model whereby the problem is viewed primarily in terms of the resources or attributes that a student lacks (Wolfgram et al., 2021), and not the structural, historical, and/or political forces that systematically undermine their access to educational opportunities (Reay, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). A second limitation is that obstacles to internships tend to be viewed as singular, isolated

barriers, as opposed to a host of intersecting factors that may accumulate and hinder a student's ability to find, secure, and pursue an internship (Harris & Patton, 2019; Wolfram et al., 2021). Along with research that demonstrates the role of privilege and the persistence of discrimination in hiring practices (e.g., Quillian et al., 2017; Rivera, 2012), these insights reinforce the notion that the field of internship employment is *not* an objective and neutral space where merit or hard work are the primary ingredients for success (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Finally, the absence of robust, descriptive data on the precise nature of various obstacles to internships—which are critical for any scientific inquiry but especially those that aim to effect social or educational change (Loeb et al., 2017)—is one of the biggest limitations facing the field and one that this article strives to address.

In this article, we report findings from a mixed-methods study of college internships whose data set includes survey ( $n = 1,549$ ) and focus group and interview ( $n = 100$ ) data from students at five postsecondary institutions—three comprehensive universities, one historically Black college and university (HBCU), and one technical college in the U.S. states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. Our team used thematic analysis, logistic regression, and network analysis techniques to analyze these data to answer these research questions:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What are the specific obstacles that students face when pursuing an internship?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How, if at all, do experiences with these obstacles vary by student characteristics?

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** What are the processes whereby these obstacles operate in students' lives?

To answer these questions and interpret our data, we draw on field theory from Bourdieu (1977, 1986) to explore how differential access to internships can mediate—in either a supportive or an exclusionary fashion—students' transitions between the fields of higher education and the labor market. In this study, we focus on the ways that college students' resources—especially financial, social, and cultural capital, as well as the underappreciated resource of time—facilitate (or not) their ambitions as they seek to gain access to the field of employment via an internship. In the spirit of critical perspectives aimed at informing change that can disrupt patterns of exclusion and opportunity gaps, we conclude with recommendations for how higher education can “destabilize” these fields and processes of inequitable access to internships (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011) so that these “doors to opportunity” are available for *all* students.

## Background and Context

While the growing international and interdisciplinary literature on internships is contributing to the field of higher education's understanding of their impact on student outcomes, the question of accessibility is too often overlooked. This oversight in the

research literature and in advocacy for internships in the popular press to be universally adopted across the postsecondary landscape conveys the mistaken impression that pursuing an internship is a simple matter, like registering for a course or joining a student organization. In this section, we briefly outline insights from the growing literature on barriers to internships and the field theoretic approach taken in this article to investigate these phenomena.

### *Insights From the Literature on the Obstacles to Internship Participation*

In the literature on obstacles to internships, scholars tend to focus on four different types of barriers: (1) financial, (2) social, (3) cultural, and (4) institutional.

*Financial Obstacles.* Research on the financial obstacles to internships tends to center on how unpaid or poorly paid internships limit participation to privileged students and/or force students to take on additional debt or live in unsatisfactory situations. For instance, in a study on internships in the creative industry, Shade and Jacobson (2015) interviewed women who were unpaid interns in Toronto and New York City. They found that the students would have been unable to participate in these experiences without parental support for room, board, and travel costs. In addition, many interns worked other jobs in addition to their unpaid internship to pay expenses. Furthermore, geography plays a role in students' financial deliberations; researchers in the United Kingdom found that the high cost of living in London for rent, travel, and other expenses was a major factor for students who opted to forgo an unpaid internship (Sutton Trust, 2014).

While some students view these unpaid positions as "paying their dues" (Frenette, 2013), they can have deleterious impacts, including the displacement of full-time employees and the "stringing along" of students who unrealistically hope for regular work (Jacobson & Shade, 2018). Furthermore, unpaid internships have pushed some students into unfortunate living situations, such as the United Nations intern living in a tent in downtown Geneva (Foulkes, 2015), while also raising concerns that to add an internship to their resume, low-income students may take out loans, work multiple jobs, or not take care of their own health and well-being (Curiale, 2009). These concerns and studies are particularly salient for working students, who represent a substantial number of U.S. college students (Perna, 2010) and who are simply unable to quit their jobs to take an unpaid position (DiRienzo, 2016; Elling & Elling, 2000).

*Social Obstacles.* Another factor that facilitates or thwarts access to internships is that of social or professional networks, which have long been shown to be a critical element of job acquisition (Granovetter, 1995). Social networks act as the conduit through which information, resources, and social affirmation—also known as social capital—can flow and confer advantage and prestige for well-connected students (Lin, 2001). For example, Milburn (2009) documented how internships "operate as part of an informal economy in which securing an internship all too often depends on who you know and not on what you know" (p. 99).

Furthermore, the role of social networks as a barrier to internship participation may be particularly inimical for first-generation college students, who may not have knowledge from their own social networks about the value of internships to their career development. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), first-generation students may also have lower levels of social capital from their families, who may have little experience with college and/or professional careers, leading to the prospect that these students are not encouraged to pursue experiences such as internships or particular high-status careers (Holland, 2010). It is critical to acknowledge, however, that with respect to educational access, the absence of resources cannot be solely attributed to a person's deficiencies or failings; it also invariably involves systemic and institutional forces that have historically shaped the distribution of resources (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

*Cultural Obstacles.* The next obstacle to internships addressed in the literature pertains to what Bourdieu (1986) called cultural capital, or the beliefs, knowledge, and dispositions that a person acquires from their immersion (from childhood) in particular households, cultural or ethnic groups, and environments. Importantly, cultural capital isn't solely about "high-brow" tastes and preferences, but also can encompass views and dispositions related to work, careers, and how to navigate the higher education landscape (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In the internship marketplace, cultural capital can be influential in shaping how students think about the experience itself. A study by Bathmaker et al. (2013) found that middle-class students were more successful in obtaining an internship than their working-class peers, in part because working-class students tended to focus on academics over extracurricular strategies—or what the authors described as focusing on the "old rules of the game" (p. 736), in which academic credentials are prioritized over developing professional experiences and networks. In addition, O'Connor and Bodicoat (2017) compared orientations to internship participation at an elite university and a teaching university in the United Kingdom, finding that middle-class students were knowledgeable and enthusiastic about internships, while working-class students were more likely to be critical of internships and viewed them as "slave labour." These studies underscore how habituated career-related beliefs or perceptions can affect a students' own sense of class positioning, which may lead some to self-select out of internship opportunities entirely.

*Institutional Obstacles.* The final type of obstacle to an internship refers to institutional issues related to student support services. For instance, Allen and colleagues (2013) found that elite institutions in the United Kingdom provide extensive coaching on how to access internships, including interview coaching and resume audits, whereas universities that serve working-class students lacked such services. For these institutions with fewer programs and services related to internships, students may struggle to even find out about, and then successfully pursue, available positions (Webber, 2005). Finley and McNair (2013) also examined student experiences with "high-impact practices" (which includes internships), finding that a lack of advising and time to commit to programs such as internships impeded student participation.

Altogether, studies on the obstacles that college students face when pursuing an internship indicate that a complex web of financial, social, cultural, and institutional factors can constrain students' abilities to gain access to an internship and thus the field of employment.

### *Our Approach: A Field Theoretic Perspective on Internships and Field Mobility*

The studies outlined earlier represent important contributions to the field of higher education's knowledge on internships with respect to issues of inclusion and access, but key topics remain underexplored in the literature. Besides the need for more descriptive research on the precise nature of various obstacles, data on how these barriers may overlap and intersect in the lives of individuals are essential, given our understanding that choice and opportunity are shaped and constrained by intersecting identities and structural forces, particularly for historically marginalized peoples (Harris & Patton, 2019). To address these limitations, we draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) field theoretic approach, which posits that social action and processes of stratification are governed by the interactions among three key ideas—field, capital, and habitus.

According to Bourdieu, fields are not neutral venues or spaces for social action but are best seen as a “terrain of contestation” (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) shaped by the “social logic” of actors involved in striving within the field (Martin, 2003). Fields in this sense are often compared to sports, which have their own “rules of the game” about the structure of the field itself, operational and behavioral rules, and norms governing access (or exclusion). For instance, consider how the elite English Premier League has a handful of soccer clubs (e.g., Chelsea, Liverpool) whose wealth, prestige, and tradition (as forms of capital) enable them to remain dominant by building extravagant stadiums and creating recruitment pipelines via youth academies. These academies—which, we suggest, are similar to internships in their role as a point of entry for novices from outside the field—represent a vital pathway to the field of professional soccer for many youth, which raises the questions: Who has access to these academies? Who has access to internships?

As noted earlier, different types of resources or “capital” each play a role in influencing whether a college student can find and then pursue an internship. Two additional points about capital are especially salient to the question of access to the field of employment. First, individuals do not acquire capital from just one field or source; instead, they inhabit a variety of fields (e.g., academic, familial, peer groups, political) that overlap with one another, which in turn confers different types of capital and cumulative impacts (positive or negative) on individuals and the positions available to them (Ferrare & Apple, 2015). Second, a critical aspect of capital acquisition, as well as its conversion into privilege or other forms of capital, is that of time. As Bourdieu (1986) observed about the ways that cultural capital is transmitted within the family, it is not solely the amount of capital a family possesses, but “the usable time (particularly in the form of the



mother's free time) available to it" (p. 54). In this way, time itself becomes a key resource, especially for the internalization process whereby individual habitus are formed, but also in providing opportunities for capital to be converted into opportunity.

Unfortunately, the current dynamics governing which families and students have access to the capital required to access a Premier League youth academy or an internship in a prestigious firm tend to favor those with ample financial, social, and cultural capital. Of course, talent and hard work do play a role, but structural forces such as poverty, inadequate schooling, availability of mentors, and institutional racism also shape youth's opportunities to acquire capital that can open doors to social mobility. Fortunately, sometimes fields and their internal logics are disrupted or destabilized. In research on social movements and organizational change, Fligstein and McAdam (2011) described how both exogenous (e.g., a pandemic) or endogenous (e.g., institutional reformers) pressures can shock a field and alter how positions are allocated and access granted—a difficult yet not impossible prospect.

With mounting evidence about the importance of an internship for college students' social mobility and their inaccessibility for many students, we contend that it is time to disrupt the field of internship employment. A field theoretic approach provides a valuable analytic tool to facilitate this process because it explicitly situates distinct forms of capital in relationship to one another and within specific fields, instead of artificially divorcing them from their local institutional, sociocultural, and political contexts. Consequently, as we report our findings on the prevalence and processes of internship inaccessibility, these data are interpreted as part of institutional and economic systems that should make clear to higher educational professionals that a true disruption to the inequitable internship economy cannot be affected by isolated, magic-bullet solutions, but likely will involve systemic approaches to change and student support services.

## Method

This study employs a concurrent mixed-methods design, where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analyzed simultaneously (Creswell, 2014). This approach was taken instead of other mixed-methods designs (e.g., sequential approaches) because of timing and resource constraints imposed by a multi-site study, as well as the desire to document patterns in internship access independently across data modalities. A field theoretic approach influenced our study methodology through the focus on contextualizing accounts of capital in specific fields or situations, accounting for relations among forms of capital, and through interpreting results with an eye toward disrupting inequitable institutional systems and programming.

Institutions were originally selected via professional networks to capture a diversity of institution types and student characteristics, and upon invitation from the research team, key leadership at each campus self-selected into the study. Participating institutions included (1) a private HBCU in South Carolina, (2) a predominantly White institution (PWI) technical college in Wisconsin, (3) a PWI public university in Wisconsin,



(4) a PWI public university in Wisconsin, and (5) a predominantly Black institution (PBI) university in Maryland.

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 an apprenticeship program. Given constraints in resources available for student incentives, the size of the study sample was capped at each institution at 1,250 students. Each institution provided a full list of students meeting the inclusion criteria, and a sample was drawn using stratified random sampling based on two strata—race and gender. On a few key characteristics, our study sample was not dissimilar to the characteristics of the national population of all postsecondary students, including gender, where national figures from the fall of 2019 indicate that 56.7% of students were female, and 13% were African American; the latter figure was higher in our sample because of the inclusion of a HBCU and PBI (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). We then sent a letter containing a cash incentive and a link to the online survey, following up with email reminders and a cash incentive for all completers. The survey was completed by 1,549 students, with an average response rate of 26%. An analysis of possible nonresponse bias showed that our study samples were representative of the study populations based on race and gender at the five institutions. Table 1 shows the characteristics of students who had not taken an internship but had wanted to ( $n = 638$ ), which is the cohort of students that is the focus of our analyses of survey data, as well as details about the 100 students who participated in focus groups or interviews.

After completing the survey, students were asked if they were willing to participate in a focus group, and 100 students self-selected into the qualitative portion of the study. In several cases, only one student showed up for a focus group, which made these interactions interviews. Students who had taken an internship ( $n = 52$ ) and those who had not ( $n = 48$ ) were included in the focus groups, given the focus on understanding barriers to internship participation.

### **Research Instruments**

**Survey.** All survey respondents were asked whether they had participated in an internship in the previous 12 months. The survey was developed by the study team in early 2018 and was administered via the online Qualtrics system. Although the survey included a variety of questions about the structure of internship programs, student developmental and academic outcomes, and so on, the variables reported in this article are limited to demographic characteristics and a single question about the obstacles preventing students from taking an internship. Among the 1,549 students who completed the survey, 1,060 (69%) reported not having had an internship. These students then asked if they had been interested in pursuing one, and for the 638 who answered yes, a follow-up item posed six potential obstacles with a yes/no response option: (1) course load at school was too heavy, (2) insufficient pay offered, (3) needed to work at current job, (4) lack of transportation, (5) lack of childcare, and (6) lack of

**Table 1.** Study Sample: Characteristics of Survey and Focus Group Participants.

Variable name	Survey total	MD PBI	SC HBCU	WI TC	WI Institution A	WI Institution B	Focus group
	N = 638	N = 96	N = 88	N = 148	N = 242	N = 64	N = 100
Gender							
Male (%)	251 (39.34)	42 (40)	16 (18.18)	82 (53.25)	90 (37.19)	36 (56.25)	36
Female (%)	387 (60.66)	63 (60)	72 (81.82)	72 (46.75)	152 (62.81)	28 (43.75)	63
Race							
Asian or Asian American (%)	54 (8.46)	9 (9.18)	0 (0)	18 (11.92)	23 (9.50)	6 (9.38)	6
Black or African American (%)	165 (25.86)	50 (51.02)	89 (100)	11 (7.28)	15 (6.20)	1 (1.56)	34
Hispanic or Latino (%)	58 (9.09)	9 (9.18)	0 (0)	8 (5.3)	37 (15.29)	5 (7.81)	4
White or Caucasian (%)	361 (56.58)	30 (30.61)	0 (0)	114 (75.5)	167 (69.01)	52 (81.25)	53
First-generation status							
First-generation students (%)	263 (41.29)	51 (48.11)	34 (38.64)	44 (28.39)	113 (46.69)	26 (40.62)	39
Cont-generation students (%)	374 (58.71)	55 (51.89)	54 (61.36)	111 (71.61)	129 (53.31)	38 (59.38)	61
Academic enrollment							
Full-time enrollment (%)	499 (78.21)	56 (58.33)	88 (100)	88 (56.77)	129 (53.31)	60 (93.75)	79
Part-time enrollment (%)	139 (21.79)	40 (41.67)	0 (0)	67 (43.23)	113 (46.69)	4 (6.25)	21
Internship requirement							
Required (%)	178 (27.90)	43 (48.86)	25 (28.41)	62 (46.62)	24 (9.92)	27 (42.19)	38
Not required (%)	460 (72.10)	45 (51.14)	63 (71.59)	71 (53.38)	218 (90.08)	37 (57.81)	55
Major disciplines							
Arts and Humanities (%)	70 (10.97)	3 (3.12)	7 (7.95)	23 (15.03)	28 (11.57)	11 (17.19)	10
Biosci, Agri, & NR (%)	65 (10.19)	1 (1.04)	15 (17.05)	1 (0.65)	39 (16.12)	9 (14.06)	13
Business (%)	187 (29.31)	46 (47.92)	11 (12.50)	42 (27.45)	71 (29.34)	17 (26.56)	26
Comm, Media, & PR (%)	27 (4.23)	2 (2.08)	3 (3.41)	4 (2.61)	12 (4.96)	6 (9.38)	8

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Variable name	Survey total	MD PBI	SC HBCU	WI TC	WI Institution A	WI Institution B	Focus group
Engineering (%)	54 (8.46)	0 (0)	4 (4.55)	46 (30.07)	3 (1.24)	2 (3.12)	6
Health Professions (%)	23 (3.61)	8 (8.33)	0 (0)	4 (2.61)	7 (2.89)	4 (6.25)	6
PS, Math, & CS (%)	50 (7.84)	10 (10.42)	1 (1.14)	9 (5.88)	26 (10.74)	4 (6.25)	7
Social Sciences (%)	84 (13.17)	9 (9.38)	34 (38.64)	0 (0)	35 (14.46)	6 (9.38)	16
Social Service Prof (%)	78 (12.23)	17 (17.71)	13 (14.77)	24 (15.69)	21 (8.68)	5 (7.81)	6
Employment status							
Full-time employed (%)	103 (16.38)	37 (41.57)	8 (9.09)	30 (19.35)	25 (9.92)	4 (6.45)	6
Part-time employed (%)	364 (57.87)	30 (33.71)	37 (42.05)	85 (54.84)	168 (69.42)	46 (74.19)	58
No employment (%)	162 (25.39)	24 (24.24)	43 (48.86)	43 (25.81)	50 (20.66)	12 (18.75)	34
Caregivers' income							
Less than \$24,999 (%)	120 (19.48)	19 (20.43)	35 (40.23)	26 (18.31)	37 (16.09)	5 (7.81)	18
\$25,000–\$49,999 (%)	140 (22.73)	24 (25.81)	27 (31.03)	4 (23.94)	52 (22.61)	5 (7.81)	20
\$50,000–\$74,999 (%)	128 (20.78)	23 (24.73)	13 (14.94)	26 (18.31)	49 (21.30)	19 (29.69)	17
\$75,000–\$99,999 (%)	83 (13.47)	11 (11.83)	4 (4.60)	15 (10.56)	35 (15.22)	18 (28.12)	16
\$100,000–\$124,999 (%)	63 (10.23)	6 (6.45)	4 (4.60)	14 (9.86)	34 (14.78)	6 (9.38)	5
\$125,000–\$149,999 (%)	46 (7.47)	7 (7.53)	3 (3.45)	13 (9.15)	17 (7.39)	6 (9.38)	6
\$150,000 or more (%)	36 (5.84)	3 (3.23)	1 (1.15)	14 (9.86)	6 (2.16)	5 (7.81)	9
Caregivers' income, median (IQR)	10,000 (30,000)	20,000 (30,000)	1,750 (5,000)	14,000 (19,000)	9,850 (11,700)	8,000 (9,075)	10,000 (12,000)

Note. Out of 676 respondents, 28 responses were removed from the analysis because of the small sample size: transgender or another gender identity ( $n = 5$ ), American Indian or Alaska Native ( $n = 6$ ), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 1$ ), two or more races/ethnicities ( $n = 8$ ), or other races ( $n = 15$ ). Nine major field categories here are based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (2018). MD = Maryland; PBI = predominantly Black institution; SC = South Carolina; HBCU = historically Black college and university; WI = Wisconsin; TC = technical college. Program abbreviations: Biosci, Agri, & NR = Biological Sciences, Agriculture, & Natural Resources; PS, Math, & CS = Physical Sciences, Mathematics, & Computer Science; Comm, Media, & PR = Communication, Media, & Public Relations; IQR = interquartile range, which is a measure of statistical dispersion and equal to the difference between upper and lower quartiles ( $IQR = Q3 - Q1$ ).

opportunities in their field. Next, we elicited information about students' employment status, parental caregivers' annual income, and personal annual income, as well as demographic information about age, gender, race, and first-generation status. Correlations among all predictors were reported to avoid multicollinearity in Table 2.

The proportion of cases with missing data across measures was less than 5%, and without evidence that missing data were not random, we used the pairwise deletion approach to handling missing data (Roth, 1994).

*Focus Group and/or Interview Protocol.* Focus group sessions lasted approximately 1 hr and were moderated by researchers who used a semi-structured protocol that included questions about students' background and career goals. For students who had taken an internship, questions were asked about their experiences with and obstacles to internships: "Were there any issues, events, situations, or struggles that you would consider an obstacle to having a successful internship?" Students without internship experience were asked about general perceptions about internships and obstacles: "What were or are some specific obstacles to your pursuing an internship opportunity?" Answers to the questions about obstacles and/or struggles related to internships provided the bulk of the data for qualitative analyses.

### Analytic Strategies

*Survey Data.* To understand how students' perceptions varied regarding barriers to internship participation, our analysis began with simple descriptive statistics on these variables. Then, we fitted six binary logistic regressions to examine how students' characteristics were associated with their probability of having a specific barrier as follows:

$$P(Y_b = 1) = \frac{\exp(\beta X_b)}{1 + \exp(\beta X_b)}$$

where  $Y_b$  is a dichotomous variable that takes a value of 1 if participants reported yes on the specific barrier, and 0 otherwise. In all six logistic regression models, we included independent variables that the literature had indicated were associated with internship access, such as race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, and financial resources. Thus, the models were built to account for possible influences on accessibility, as indicated by prior research, and individual positionality, as suggested by field theory. We also included the variable of internship requirement and institution as fixed effects to control for differences that could be attributed to features of institutions or programs. In our study context, the coefficients of logistic regression represent the log odds of reporting a specific barrier. However, because the coefficients of logistic regression may not be intuitively easy to comprehend, we also report the average marginal effects (Williams, 2012).

**Table 2.** Correlation Matrix.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
(1) First-generation status	1.00												
(2) Female	-.01	1.00											
(3) Parental income	-.17*	-.08	1.00										
(4) Full-time employment	.12*	.00	-.02	1.00									
(5) Part-time employment	-.04	.04	.10*	-.52*	1.00								
(6) Full-time enrollment	.02	.03	-.02	-.32*	.18*	1.00							
(7) Internship requirement	-.05	-.01	.08	.12*	-.12*	-.14*	1.00						
(8) Need to work	.09*	.08*	.06	.23*	.22*	-.09*	-.01	1.00					
(9) Heavy course load	.05	.02	.04	-.14*	.07	.14*	.02	.12*	1.00				
(10) Lack of opportunities	-.03	.08*	-.03	-.05	.01	.09*	-.01	.02	.09*	1.00			
(11) Insufficient pay	.04	.06	.06	.07	.05	-.07	.03	.32*	.24*	.20*	1.00		
(12) Lack of transportation	.00	.01	-.07	-.10*	-.11*	.10*	-.01	-.03	.21*	.20*	.17*	1.00	
(13) Lack of childcare	.05	.01	.03	.03	.00	-.05	.06	.16*	.13*	.25*	.29*	.37*	1.00

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Then, techniques from social network analysis were used to develop a participant-by-code matrix in which each cell indicated whether participant  $i$  spoke about a particular obstacle  $j$  (1) or not (0). Analysts assigned 1 to every code  $j$  cited in participant  $i$ 's interview. We then used UCINET software to transform the two-mode data matrix into a one-mode (code-by-code) matrix, which resulted in a co-occurrence matrix in which each cell corresponds to the number of instances where code  $i$  is affiliated with code  $j$  (Borgatti et al., 2002). We then used the program Netdraw to graph the co-occurrences of pairs of codes. The thickness of the line connecting a pair of codes indicates how frequently respondents reported the two codes together, with thicker lines corresponding to stronger co-occurrences (i.e., affiliations).

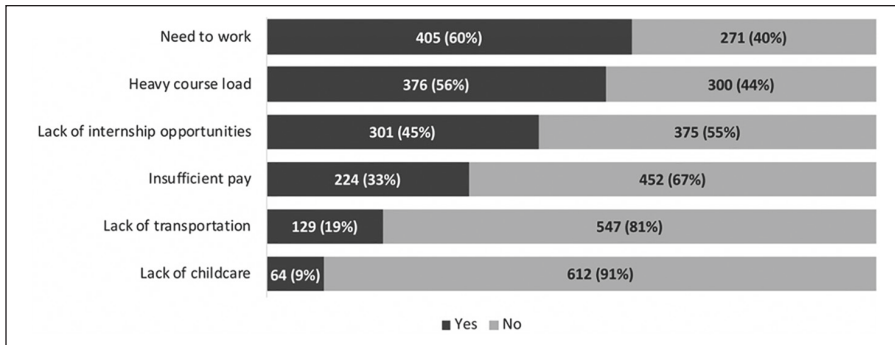
**Focus Group Data.** The qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts proceeded through a multistep process using MaxQDA software (VERBI Software, 2017). The first step involved two researchers independently segmenting three randomly selected transcripts and then meeting to compare coding results. The two researchers then segmented the entire corpus of data independently and engaged in a round of inductive, open coding of half of the transcripts, noting recurrent phrases and observations related to obstacles to participation in internships (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Throughout this open coding process, the researchers compiled analytical memos that reflected on the relationship between the codes and field theory. Based on themes derived from the analytical memos, the analysts then generated a codebook that was reviewed by the entire research team. The pair of researchers each applied this codebook to three transcripts and found 88% agreement in their application of the codebook. Throughout the subsequent coding process of the entire corpus, researchers continued to build analytical memos to integrate the data into emerging findings, which were discussed at team meetings to confirm or dispute emergent findings.

## Results

### *RQ1: What Are the Specific Obstacles That Students Face When Pursuing an Internship?*

**Survey Data.** 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 was the need to work at their current paid job (60%,  $n = 405$ ), followed by a heavy course load (56%,  $n = 376$ ), a lack of internships in their discipline or field



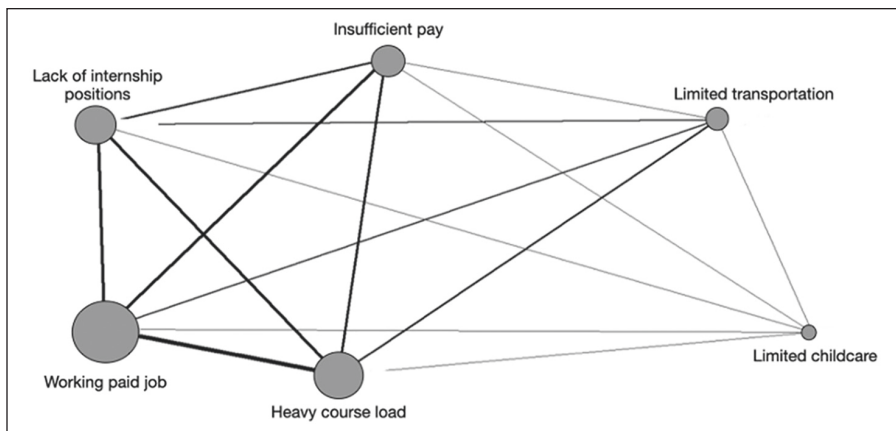
**Figure 1.** Obstacles to Internship Participation Reported by College Students

(45%,  $n = 301$ ), insufficient pay (33%, 224), limited transportation (19%, 129), and limited childcare (9%,  $n = 64$ ). Although these obstacles do not map perfectly onto the concept of capital in Bourdieu's (1986) framework, they do capture features of financial (i.e., paid job, insufficient pay) and social (i.e., lack of internships or knowledge of position openings), along with the critical resource of time (i.e., needing to work or study). Furthermore, as the qualitative data will reveal, additional types of obstacles exist that were not included in our survey (e.g., lack of information about internships); these should be addressed in future research.

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 job and a heavy course load ( $n = 235$  students), followed by those who had a heavy course load, needed to work, and had few opportunities ( $n = 176$ ), and those who reported the preceding three barriers but also the obstacle of finding internships with sufficient pay ( $n = 174$ ). At the same time, some students did report only a single obstacle, such as the need to work ( $n = 59$ ) or a heavy course load ( $n = 40$ ). To illustrate how multiple obstacles were frequently reported by students, we constructed an affiliation graph that visually depicts the relative frequency with which students reported multiple obstacles to internships (Figure 2). The thickness and darkness of lines connecting pairs of obstacles indicate the frequency with which individual students reported both obstacles as being influential, and the size of the circles indicating the frequency with which each obstacle was reported on its own. The use of social network techniques like affiliation graphing are increasingly common in research using field theoretic approaches (see Ferrare & Apple, 2015), given its ability to model nonlinear relations between and among individual positionality and/or attributes of capital.

What is notable in these data is not only that multiple obstacles overlap or co-occur in the lives of individual students but also that the need to work and a heavy course





**Figure 2.** Affiliation Graph Showing Frequency (Icon Size) and Coreporting (Line Thickness) of Obstacles

load are present in the four most frequently reported sets of barriers to internship participation.

*Focus Group Data.* Next, analyses of focus group data revealed that students described obstacles to internships associated with compensation, scheduling, availability, and geography.

*Internship Compensation.* The most frequently discussed barrier to internship participation pertained to compensation—specifically, unpaid or inadequately paid internships. Some students had avoided pursuing or applying for internships because they believed them to be mostly unpaid or because they could not find any that paid enough for them to consider leaving other employment. As Janelle, whose observation opened this article, explained,

My biggest struggle is most of them are unpaid. I am 26, getting married in a year . . . trying to do adult things, and not getting paid for several months is just not something I can afford to do right now. I'm currently working a sad minimum-wage job, but it's at an animal shelter. But I wouldn't be able to do classes, do the internship, and work to make money. Which is kind of important because I'm basically just paying for school as I can, and I've got bills, phone, paying rent, and I have a wedding to save for [laughs]. Money is unfortunately an important motivator in what I'm looking for in an internship, and very few are paid.

Although this student found some internships with stipends, she explained that they were not large enough to pay more than the gas it would take to get to and from the internship site. Several students organized their thinking into lists of financial responsibilities, and they viewed the addition of an unpaid or inadequately paid internship as untenable.

*Internship Scheduling and the Role of Time.* Another obstacle to internship participation involved balancing the demands of their paid employment, coursework, study time, 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.” This problem of scheduling isn’t solely about time constraints related to work and school, however, but also implicates financial considerations. Another issue related to scheduling was discussed by a student as the “tension” of such “back-to-back-to-back scheduling,” which caused problems with her supervisor at a tanning salon. Several students who worked full time expressed a similar concern that adding an internship to their schedule could put their regular jobs at risk. For example, one student who had been promoted to the manager position of a restaurant felt that she could not risk losing what she felt was a stable job to schedule an internship.

*Internship Availability.* Students also expressed concerns about the limited availability of internships in their disciplines. One student in a physics and applied math program explained that he had not taken an internship simply because “there aren’t any here offered for me in my field.” In contrast, a business student explained, “There’s just a lot of opportunities in the business program, [so] it’s easy for us to get multiple internships.” These observations highlight that some students may find ample opportunities in their fields, while others may be on career paths for which internships are less common and/or not traditionally offered.

*Internship Location.* Finally, another barrier to internship participation was that of geography and location, which could lead to students incurring travel, relocation, and living costs for internships in expensive cities, where many desirable internships are located. While some study participants who had internships were able to access additional resources from their families, such as free room and board from relatives living in cities such as Atlanta and New York City, others only considered internships that were close to home, where these expenses would not be an issue. For example, one student decided to decline a highly desirable summer internship placement in the mining industry because it would have entailed substantial relocation and living expenses while providing no compensation. Consequently, this student accepted another position on campus and had to forgo his “dream internship.”

### *RQ2: How, If at All, Do Experiences With These Obstacles Vary by Student Characteristics?*

Next, we turn to an examination of how these various obstacles to internship participation varied across different student characteristics. To answer this research question, we employed multivariate logistic regression and inductive thematic analysis techniques.

**Binary Logistic Regression Results.** We first examined the probability of students having specific barriers keep them from an internship after controlling for internship requirement and institution fixed effects (see Table 3).

The first model focused on the obstacle of needing to work at a paid job, and results indicated that academic major and employment status were two significant factors associated with this obstacle. For example, while other conditions are held constant, full-time working students had a 55% higher ( $\beta = 3.03$ ;  $p < .001$ ) probability of indicating having to work as an obstacle to pursuing an internship, and part-time working students had a 37% higher ( $\beta = 2.05$ ;  $p < .001$ ) probability than did students who were not employed at all. The probability of this obstacle was lower for business majors by 13% ( $\beta = -0.71$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and for engineering majors by 21% ( $\beta = -1.18$ ;  $p < .05$ ), compared with that of students majoring in arts and humanities.

In the second model, related to heavy course load keeping students from taking an internship, significant predictors included dummy variables for students' employment status and academic major. For instance, for students working full time, the probability of reporting a heavy course load was 18% lower than for students without current employment ( $\beta = -0.82$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Although little variance existed in terms of challenges relevant to the lack of internship opportunities (i.e., the third model), students' academic major was a significant predictor in the fourth model, regarding insufficient pay. The probability of business students reporting insufficient pay as an obstacle to internships was 19% lower ( $\beta = -0.93$ ;  $p < .01$ ), for engineering students it was 20% lower ( $\beta = -1.01$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and for students in physical sciences, mathematics, and computer sciences, it was 32% lower ( $\beta = -1.6$ ;  $p < .01$ ) than the probability for arts and humanities students.

In the fifth model, for the lack of transportation, employment status continued to be a significant factor, with a 12% and 21% decrease in the marginal probability of citing struggling with transportation among students employed part-time ( $\beta = -1.03$ ;  $p < .001$ ) or full-time ( $\beta = -1.71$ ;  $p < .001$ ), respectively, relative to students without a job. Interestingly, we found significant racial variations pertaining to this challenge; the probability of reporting transportation difficulties was 11% greater for Asian students ( $\beta = 0.92$ ;  $p < .05$ ), 10% greater for African American students ( $\beta = 0.84$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and 13% greater for Hispanic students ( $\beta = 1.08$ ;  $p < .05$ ) as compared with White students. Finally, the probability for African American students to report child-care as an obstacle was 8% higher ( $\beta = 1.05$ ;  $p < .05$ ) than for White students.

**Focus Group Data.** Next, we continue the analysis of how student situations and positions within the fields of life, work, and college impacted their ability to seek an internship.

**Socioeconomic Status and Family Resources.** Several students reported that because they were juggling financial and family obligations, they could not engage in unpaid or poorly paid internships. In some cases, an additional financial obligation was the need to contribute financially to their families while attending college. For example, one student worked two jobs while a full-time business student, one as a bank teller to support himself and the

**Table 3.** Results of Multivariate Logistic Regression Models to Predict Students' Obstacles to Internships.

Variable name	Need to work			Heavy course load			Lack of opportunities		
	$\beta$	(SE)	AME (SE)	$\beta$	(SE)	AME (SE)	$\beta$	(SE)	AME (SE)
Race/Ethnicity, reference group = White or Caucasian									
Asian or Asian American	-.00	(.37)	.00 (.07)	.03	(.34)	.01 (.08)	-.05	(.33)	-.01 (.08)
Black or African American	-.46	(.37)	-.08 (.07)	-.39	(.33)	-.09 (.07)	.45	(.32)	.10 (.07)
Hispanic or Latino	-.00	(.36)	-.00 (.07)	.28	(.33)	.06 (.07)	-.30	(.32)	-.07 (.07)
Gender, reference group = Male									
Female	.20	(.22)	.04 (.04)	.19	(.19)	.04 (.04)	-.16	(.18)	-.04 (.04)
First-generation status, reference group = continuing-generation students									
First-generation students	.28	(.21)	.05 (.04)	.19	(.19)	.04 (.04)	-.16	(.18)	-.04 (.04)
Caregivers' income	.05	(.06)	.01 (.01)	.01	(.05)	.00 (.01)	-.05	(.05)	-.01 (.01)
Employment status, reference group = No employment									
Part-time employment	2.05***	(.24)	.37*** (.03)	-.06	(.21)	-.01 (.05)	-.05	(.21)	-.01 (-.05)
Full-time employment	3.03***	(.37)	.55*** (.05)	-.82***	(.30)	-.18** (-.07)	-.28	(.29)	-.07 (.07)
Academic enrollment status, reference group = part-time enrollment									
Full-time enrollment	-.26	(.28)	-.05 (-.05)	.41	(.24)	.09 (.05)	.05	(.25)	.01 (.06)
Academic program, reference group = Arts and Humanities									
Program, Biosci, Agri, & NR	-.39	(.42)	-.07 (.08)	-.28	(.39)	-.06 (.09)	.22	(.37)	.05 (.09)
Program, Business	-.71*	(.35)	-.13* (.06)	-.73*	(.32)	-.16* (.07)	-.18	(.31)	-.04 (.07)
Program, Comm, Media, & PR	-.35	(.36)	-.06 (.10)	-.39	(.51)	-.09 (.11)	.20	(.48)	.05 (.11)
Program, Engineering	-1.18*	(.47)	-.21* (-.08)	-.60	(.42)	-.13 (.09)	-.25	(.43)	-.06 (.10)
Program, Health Professions	.02	(.80)	.00 (.14)	-1.11	(.61)	-.25 (.13)	-.33	(.60)	-.08 (.14)
Program, PS, Math, & CS	-.79	(.46)	-.14 (.08)	.00	(.44)	.00 (.10)	.10	(.41)	.02 (.09)
Program, social sciences	-1.10	(.42)	-.02 (.08)	-.62	(.37)	-.14 (.08)	.44	(.36)	.10 (.08)
Program, social services	-.79	(.42)	.14 (.07)	-.71	(.38)	-.16 (.08)	.27	(.36)	.06 (.08)
Instruction, reference group = WI TC									
MD institution	.47	(.38)	.08 (.07)	1.06***	(.24)	.24*** (.07)	.21	(.32)	.05 (.07)
SC HBCU	.59	(.47)	.11 (.08)	.02	(.41)	.00 (.09)	-.32	(.35)	-.08 (.09)
WI PWI-I	.11	(.30)	.02 (.05)	-.17	(.27)	-.04 (.06)	-.44	(.28)	-.10 (.06)
UW PWI-2	.13	(.35)	.02 (.06)	.95***	(.36)	.21*** (.08)	.86***	(.31)	.20*** (.07)
Internship requirement	-.08	(.24)	-.01 (.04)	.23	(.22)	.05 (.05)	.06	(.21)	.01 (.05)
Constant	-0.87	(.51)		.23	(.46)		-.17	(.45)	
Log-Likelihood Full Model	-328.4			-.385.1			-.396.6		
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.19			.07			.05		
N	607		607	607		607	607		607

(continued)

**Table 3. (continued)**

	Insufficient pay		Lack of transportation		Lack of childcare	
	$\beta$ (SE)	AME (SE)	$\beta$ (SE)	AME (SE)	$\beta$ (SE)	AME (SE)
Race/Ethnicity, reference group = White or Caucasian						
Asian or Asian American	-.42* (.38)	-.09 (.08)	.92* (.44)	.11* (.05)	-.09 (.61)	-.01 (.04)
Black or African American	-.24 (.34)	-.05 (.07)	.84* (.43)	.10* (.05)	1.05* (.46)	.08* (.03)
Hispanic or Latino	.08 (.33)	.02 (.07)	1.08* (.44)	.13* (.05)	-.25 (.62)	-.02 (.05)
Gender, reference group = Male						
Female	.10 (.20)	.02 (.04)	-.23 (.27)	-.03 (.03)	-.07 (.34)	-.01 (.02)
First-generation status, reference group = continuing-generation students						
First-generation students	.23 (.20)	.05 (.04)	-.02 (.25)	-.00 (.03)	.40 (.32)	.03 (.02)
Caregiver' income	.01 (.05)	.00 (.01)	-.06 (.07)	-.01 (.01)	-.03 (.08)	-.00 (.01)
Employment status, reference group = No employment						
Part-time employment	.52* (.24)	.10* (.05)	-.1.03*** (.27)	-.12*** (.03)	.06 (.39)	.00 (.03)
Full-time employment	.58 (.31)	.12 (.06)	-.1.71*** (.44)	-.21*** (.05)	-.12 (.50)	-.01 (.04)
Academic enrollment status, reference group = part-time enrollment						
Full-time enrollment	-.30 (.25)	-.06 (.05)	.41 (.24)	.02 (.04)	-.52 (.41)	-.04 (.03)
Academic program, reference group = Arts and Humanities						
Program, Biosci, Agri, & NR	-.35 (.39)	-.07 (.08)	-.73 (.55)	-.09 (.07)	-.07 (.77)	-.01 (.06)
Program, Business	-.93** (.32)	-.19** (.06)	-.32 (.43)	-.04 (.05)	.24 (.58)	.02 (.04)
Program, Comm, Media, & PR	-.42 (.50)	-.09 (.10)	-.92 (.70)	-.11 (.08)	-.34 (.93)	-.02 (.07)
Program, Engineering	-.1.01* (.46)	-.20* (.09)	.01 (.62)	.00 (.07)	-.57 (.96)	-.04 (.07)
Program, Health Professions	-.58 (.59)	-.12 (.12)	-.79 (.95)	-.10 (.11)	.46 (.92)	.03 (.07)
Program, PS, Math, & CS	-.1.60** (.50)	-.32** (.10)	-.76 (.62)	-.09 (.07)	.12 (.77)	.01 (.06)
Program, social sciences	-.18 (.37)	-.04 (.07)	.35 (.47)	.04 (.06)	.94 (.67)	.07 (.05)
Program, social services	-.31 (.37)	-.06 (.07)	-.17 (.49)	-.02 (.06)	.46 (.67)	.03 (.05)
Institution, reference group = WI TC						
MD institution	.96** (.34)	.19** (.07)	1.61*** (.42)	.19*** (.05)	1.05* (.52)	.08* (.04)
SC HBCU	-.29 (.45)	-.06 (.09)	.02 (.41)	.12 (.06)	-.1.72 (.90)	-.13 (.07)
WI PWI-1	.22 (.29)	.04 (.06)	-.17 (.27)	.02 (.06)	.46 (.56)	.03 (.04)
WI PWI-2	1.02** (.32)	.21** (.06)	2.70*** (.36)	.33*** (.04)	2.59*** (.47)	.19*** (.03)
Internship requirement	.03 (.23)	.01 (.05)	-.38 (.28)	-.05 (.03)	-.06 (.37)	-.00 (.03)
Constant	-.65 (.47)		-.1.53* (.65)		-.3.12*** (.85)	
Log-likelihood full model	-.356.6		-.233.2		-.155.4	
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.08		.20		.17	
N	607	607	607	607	607	607

Note: Each model is estimated using 607 observations. Thirty-one observations were removed due to missing values. AME = average marginal effects estimate; WI = Wisconsin; TC = technical college; MD = Maryland; SC = South Carolina; HBCU = historically Black college and university; PWI = predominantly White institution; Program abbreviations: Biosci, Agri, & NR = Biological Sciences, Agriculture, & Natural Resources; PS, Math, & CS = Physical Sciences, Mathematics, & Computer science; Comm, Media, & PR = Communication, Media, & Public Relations.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

other as unpaid staff at his brother's pizza restaurant, with the income from the restaurant supporting his elderly parents. This student stated simply, "I don't have the resources for an internship." In contrast, several students who participated in unpaid internships reported they could do so because their families were able to provide resources to offset the financial costs of unpaid work, such as gifts of money or loans from parents, or room and board provided by relatives who lived near the internship site.

*Age and Family Responsibilities.* Students older than the group commonly associated with "traditional" college students (i.e., 18–24 years old) also reported that their age was an obstacle to an internship. These older students tended to be financially independent and to have family-related obligations that some younger students did not have. As one student explained, "You don't necessarily have the opportunity if you're trying to do a career change [later in life] to do an internship, because you have bills, family, and all that stuff."

*First-Generation College Students and Family Expectations and Resources.* Next, first-generation college students reported that they felt that a lack of experience with higher education in their families was an obstacle. These students felt that they lacked knowledge and the social connections needed to learn about internships. One student who felt unprepared to obtain an internship explained, "I grew up in a family that . . . neither of my parents had gone to college, and one of my parents didn't even go to high school." This student received institutional support to overcome the self-doubts that arose in light of her unfamiliarity with the job-seeking process and ultimately obtained an internship. The experience was meaningful; she stated, "This internship helps build my confidence, my capabilities, my belief that success is possible."

*Place-Bound Students and Transportation Issues.* Finally, some students described being place-bound and were thus unable to travel to an internship site. Being place-bound was a particular problem for students at the HBCU in our study, which was located in a rural community with few employers. Several students at this university reported that the internships they were interested in required moving to another city, which was financially untenable. While campuses in urban areas may have more internship opportunities, several students attending institutions in large cities in our study did not have their own cars and thus limited their search for internships to positions that were near their homes, near campus, or on bus lines. However, a reliance on public transportation was complicated by the fact that students found them to be too often unreliable, time-consuming, and, in some cases, unsafe.

### ***RQ3: What Are the Processes Whereby These Obstacles Operate in Students' Lives?***

Finally, we draw on our qualitative data to report findings regarding the specific processes that govern how individual (or multiple) obstacles intersect to shape opportunity.

*Multiple Barriers Impose Intractable Time Conflicts.* Barriers to internships often interact with one another to create intractable scheduling conflicts among work, classes, study time, family responsibilities, and other commitments, such that it may be impossible to add internship hours. While some students hoped to schedule an internship over the summer, when their academic load was less onerous, students working full-time jobs found the scheduling requirements of internships to be problematic. As one student explained, “I work for the state of Maryland, and the internships presented are in the summer, 40 hours a week, which doesn’t fit with my full-time schedule.” Students with dependent children also reported scheduling challenges. Another student stated that, “Once you have kids, that’s an automatic obstacle for a lot of things because you have to consider all of the childcare and the scheduling.” These observations underscore the way that time itself is a critical (and limited) resource, perhaps as important as the forms of capital documented in prior studies on internship accessibility.

*Social and Institutional Obstacles Impede the Search Process.* Another mechanism obstructing student participation in internships is that sociocultural and institutional barriers create challenges in the internship search process. Students who had had an internship in our focus groups reported how they had found them through friends, family, or volunteer experiences—their social networks. For students who are not well connected, the process of finding an internship can be especially difficult because they may lack social connections to the professional settings needed to access internships. Students also struggled to obtain desirable internships because of the intense competition for scarce positions, and some felt disadvantaged because they were competing with students from prestigious universities. One student explained, “You’ve got to deal with the Ivy League kids, everybody else comes from these big schools . . . and we’re just a small institution, and people don’t really know who we are.”

*Obstacles Create Conditions for Students to Self-Select Out of Internships.* The cumulative impact and interconnected nature of these barriers sometimes create a situation in which students self-select *out* of an internship opportunity. Some students felt that the situation was unfair because they were too often expected to go into debt to pursue this opportunity, which ultimately made little sense. As one student explained,

With the housing and the living expenses, you can get an internship in New York City, right. But how are you going to pay for that? If I’m going to work for your company for free, I need to at least have my housing and my transportation covered. That’s the least that you could do. With some of them, they don’t provide transportation or housing. So, I was, just give up.

Observations like this were not uncommon for students who desired an internship but ultimately decided to not even pursue one; the obstacles created a situation in which they felt it unreasonable and/or impossible to pursue an opportunity that could open new doors for their future careers and social mobility.



## Discussion

Our goal in this article was to contribute new insights into college students' access (or lack thereof) to one of the most widely promoted high-impact practices in higher education today—college internships. In the remainder of this article, we highlight key findings from our study and how a field theoretic approach contributes a new way to understanding how obstacles to internships intersect in students' lives and limit access and opportunity.

It is important, however, to first recognize the limitations of our study. The first limitation pertains to the small number of institutions in the study (five), which precludes generalizations to the entire field of higher education. Such claims are also untenable given the nonrandom selection of students who self-selected into the study. Furthermore, besides our qualitative data, in which some students provided valid first-person accounts of causal relations among obstacles and their behaviors, our quantitative analyses provide associative and not causal insights into relationships among the variables in our study. Finally, our data also lack fine-grained and ethnographic accounts of behavior, which would have provided deeper insights into the nature of students' decision-making processes and experiences seeking internship opportunities.

### *New Empirical Insights Into Obstacles to Internship Participation*

The results of our study, which represent one of the first and largest mixed-methods data sets generated about obstacles to internships, shed new light on the prevalence of students who hope to pursue an internship but cannot because of a variety of obstacles. That 64% ( $n = 676$ ) of noninterns in our study had wanted to take an internship but could not is itself an alarming statistic and should raise red flags for those advocating internships as an essential (or required) component of the college experience. It is not an overstatement to say if postsecondary institutions continue to advocate or mandate internships without also simultaneously working to dismantle these barriers to participation and create new opportunities, they will be complicit in perpetuating inequality among their student bodies as scarce positions are secured by those with ample money, time, and other resources.

In particular, our finding that the need to work at a paid full- or part-time job is an obstacle to internship participation for 60% ( $n = 405$ ) of this group of would-be interns underscores the primacy of financial considerations for many college students. Given that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many college students were already struggling with their daily living expenses amid the rising prices of tuition, room, and board (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018), it is unsurprising that financial capital is an influential obstacle to students' entry into the field of internship employment. The need to earn money via a paid job or an internship that offers decent pay is simply a reality for more than 43% of full-time and 81% of part-time undergraduates who work while attending college (NCES, 2019). It is clear that figuring out how best to support working students should be a top priority with respect not only to internship access but also to student persistence, completion, and career success (Perna, 2010).

Beyond financial capital, however, other obstacles exist as students seek to enter the field of employment via a college internship—a lack of time due to a packed course schedule, insufficient positions in their fields, low pay, poor transportation, inadequate knowledge about how to find and secure an internship, and childcare responsibilities. Our findings highlight that these obstacles are rarely experienced as singular, one-off events or circumstances; instead, they accumulate and overlap in the lives of students, which is unsurprising given that students inhabit a variety of distinct fields, including academics, work, family, and community (Ferrare & Apple, 2015; Wolfgram et al., 2021). This finding is critical in highlighting how obstacles to opportunity are plural and not singular, cumulative in the lives of actual students, and, in some cases, embedded in broader systemic forces of the economy, politics, and sociocultural norms.

Furthermore, the data indicate that these obstacles are not faced equally by all students; instead, they are more likely to impact students in certain majors (i.e., arts and humanities), those from different racial backgrounds (i.e., with respect to transportation and childcare issues), those with geographic considerations related to different institutions (e.g., rural campuses with few employers, unsafe conditions in big cities), and so on. The higher rates of transportation problems reported by non-White students is particularly troubling because this obstacle implicates a complex array of issues, from the financial resources required to own a car to residing in a municipality that has adequate public transportation—issues that a field theoretic perspective argues are dependent on underlying structural and systemic forces that may lie beyond the control of individual students. The data also confirm prior research demonstrating that low-income and first-generation college students are at distinct disadvantages in gaining entry to internships, given their limited access to financial and social capital (e.g., Allen et al., 2013; O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017). Consequently, it is clear that discussions about internship accessibility and future research in this area should acknowledge and address how a variety of intersecting identities, structural forces, and life situations accumulate and become amplified in students' lives to facilitate or thwart access to internships (Núñez, 2014; Wolfgram et al., 2021).

### *Contributions of a Field Theoretic Perspective on Access to College Internships*

One of the key insights from field theory supported by the data reported in this article is that access to and influence within a given field is not a “level playing field” governed solely by merit, grit, or intelligence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Instead, the field of employment has its own rules and norms for access and inclusion, where social capital in the form of personal connections and networks (Granovetter, 1995), cultural capital as elite tastes and dispositions (Rivera, 2012), and even racial and gender identities (Quillian et al., 2017) affect how hiring decisions are made. Similarly, gaining entry to an internship that can make the difference between a student getting an interview, higher wages, or their first job is dictated by the accumulation and deployment of particular forms of capital. Consequently, we

argue that the field of higher education must first acknowledge that the playing field is not level and that internships are not freely or widely accessible to *all* college students; instead, the “local field positions, practices and meanings” (Ferrare & Apple, 2015, p. 46) of internships currently constitute one of exclusion and limited access.

Besides highlighting the nature and influence of specific (and overlapping) types of capital and how they function as obstacles to internships, a field theoretic interpretation of our data also reveals the critical role that an understudied resource—that of time itself—plays in dictating access and inclusion. In a 1986 chapter, “Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu discussed at length the fact that time is essential for both acquiring capital via education, socialization, and other experiences, and converting or deploying accumulated capital into privilege and position. For instance, acquiring and reproducing social capital in the form of relationships, networks, and friendship takes considerable time and energy, and “presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 52). Unfortunately, it takes financial capital to “purchase” free time to engage in these activities, such that one doesn’t need to continually work instead of attending networking events, parties, or internship fairs. With the finding that needing to work and/or attending to a heavy course load are the most frequently cited obstacles to internships in our study, it is clear that many students simply lack the time to pursue an internship.

Disentangling the root causes of this shortage of time will be critically important for higher education, given that it is likely that solutions to the problems outlined in this article will not be simple or addressable via single “magic bullet” initiatives; instead, solutions will necessarily implicate broader systems of how academic departments, career services units, and institutions writ large think about, design, and promote internship programs. Furthermore, a field theoretic lens forces our attention to not only programmatic issues at the campus level but also broader structural factors that create inequities in how students are provided (or not) opportunities to thrive and succeed.

### *Recommendations for Research, Policy, and Educational Practice*

As previously noted, one of the limitations in the current literature on internship accessibility is the tendency to adopt a deficit narrative regarding the capital, or types of capital, that a student lacks, such as sufficient professional networks, professional skills, or money. Although we agree with the argument that deficit narratives in education are harmful in perpetuating the notion that inequitable outcomes for low-income, first-generation, or minoritized students are solely due to their own deficiencies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), we contend that acknowledging students’ lack of certain resources (especially financial capital) is justified and even essential. With respect to funding, this acknowledgment of a deficit is doubly warranted because it should shift attention from students’ own lack of capital to the roles that institutions, faculty, and employers can and should play to create the conditions in which *all* students have

access to internships. In this case, our first recommendation for “disrupting” the field of internship employment (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011) is thus to charge these nonstudent actors to ban unpaid internships and to allocate funds to pay student interns adequate salaries while also subsidizing housing and travel costs. At the individual campus level, this could include refusing to post unpaid internship positions on official campus job boards and creating fellowships or other funding mechanisms to support student relocation costs and/or salaries.

But our main recommendation pertains to the assets and intractable life situations that a student brings to the field of internships and employment. In adopting a more an asset-based approach, we argue that the main “obstacle” identified in this study—that is, working a part- or full-time job—should be seen as an asset or situation to build on instead of as an obstacle to remove. This seems especially appropriate in cases in which the need to work and earn money is not a choice, but a necessity.

What would an asset-based approach to working students look like within the field of internships and employment? First, we recommend that institutions investigate the potential for incorporating work-integrated learning (WIL) across the curriculum as a complement to work-based learning (WBL) initiatives like internships. WIL refers to pedagogical approaches such as problem- or project-based learning based on real-world situations, undergraduate research, service learning, and the incorporation of work-based situations or anecdotes into course materials and activities. The benefits of WIL include a closer alignment between disciplinary material and authentic situations (which may facilitate learning transfer), reaching all enrolled students, as opposed to those able to pursue WBL, and ensuring quality control over all activities, which is impossible for WBL activities that take place off campus (Jackson, 2018).

Second, we suggest that the narrative around working students shift from one of a problem to solve to one of a situation to build on. Such a shift in the discourse is warranted, given research showing that working while in college may have the beneficial impact of developing cultural and social capital for Latinx students (Núñez & Sansone, 2016), and the prospect (albeit a challenging one) of making student jobs—especially those on campus—more closely tied to students’ academic and career goals (Perna, 2010). We contend that it is not work alone that should be viewed as an obstacle to learning and career advancement; instead, excessive amounts of paid work that precludes students from effectively studying, maintaining their health, or pursuing career opportunities like internships should be seen as a condition to address, improve, and potentially ameliorate so that students can devote time to these activities.

Ultimately, addressing and ameliorating the challenges to internship access will require not only more scholarship but also collaboration among the various stakeholders of the internship process to provide creative ways to engage *all* college students in these valuable opportunities. As postsecondary leaders and policy makers continue to focus on college students’ employment prospects, it will also be essential to maintain a critical and evidence-based stance that maintains a commitment to equity, fairness, and social justice so that internships cease to act as yet another vehicle for reproducing inequality.

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## Author Biographies

**Matthew T. Hora** is an associate professor of adult and higher education and the director of the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research draws on theory and method from cultural anthropology and the learning sciences to investigate the ways that cultural, structural, and cognitive factors interact to shape college students’ experiences in the classroom and in work-based learning programs. This applied research program prioritizes the generation of data to inform institutional change and educational practice, while also highlighting the ways that postsecondary institutions and employers can work to dismantle structural barriers to historically disadvantaged students’ success. He has recently published research papers in the *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, the *Journal of Negro Education*, and *Higher Education*, and several technical reports and literature reviews through CCWT.

**Matthew Wolfgram** is an anthropologist of education and an associate researcher at CCWT and the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He uses ethnography, participatory action research, and qualitative research methods to study how students experience college and careers, with a particular focus on the factors that impact the experiences and success of low-income, first-generation, immigrant, and/or minoritized college students. He has recent publications in *New Directions for Higher Education* and *Harvard Educational Review*.

**Zi Chen** is a quantitative user experience researcher at Facebook, Inc. and a previous researcher at CCWT at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She researches young people’s career development by examining how psychosocial and contextual factors influence one’s developmental outcomes. She has also investigated career identity and career adaptability using vocational psychology theories and quantitative methodology.

**Changhee Lee** was a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis and a project assistant at CCWT at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She uses large-scale data to examine how innovative practices in K–16 education shape the opportunities and outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. She has recent publications in *Journal of the Learning Sciences and Higher Education*.