

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A research report authored by
Dr. Phil Gardner,
Lead Research Advisor
to Intern Bridge.

THE DEBATE OVER UNPAID COLLEGE INTERNSHIPS

Over the past decade, academic researchers have been looking into college internships, both paid and unpaid, to improve our understanding of the constituent elements of this important and widespread national convention. From both a policy standpoint, as well as the legal ramifications of internships, clarity of the issues is both desirable and necessary. Should college administrators, teachers, law-makers, and the business sector strive to construct the strongest, fairest, most generally beneficial architecture for college internships, our knowledge of the subject and all its particulars must be informed by academic research.

In 2010, in particular, a national conversation has arisen in response to growing concerns over the fairness and legality of all college internships, with much of the attention being focused on issues of social class, ethnicity, gender differences, and other socio-economic factors affecting this activity. For law-makers, economists, journalists, academics, and others, a debate is raging in the absence of good data, and reliable information about these complicated issues.

It is the purpose of this report to contribute to our overall understanding of this important subject, especially with regard to unpaid internships as they exist in our nation today.

In a survey conducted by Intern Bridge (under the direction of Dr. Phil Gardner at Michigan State University) of college and university students throughout the country we learned a great many things: that women are more likely than men to participate in college internships; that academic majors such as Engineering, Computer Science, Agriculture and Natural resources, biological and physical sciences, and Business majors cluster into separate groupings with regard to the types of internships they engage in and with what kinds of sponsors; that our assumptions about who offers the various kinds of internships and who are the recipients, were not necessarily correct. We also gathered valuable data about ethnic breakdown, household income, the role of financial aid, the type of college attended, and grade point average — we discovered that certain fields like Communications and the Arts are more likely to attract unpaid participants. We learned that the non-profit sector remains extremely attractive to those seeking opportunities to develop skills and obtain experiences needed to be successful in the workplace.

The data also showed that, among for-profit companies, smaller firms and establishments held significantly higher levels of unpaid internships than larger companies, and that the utilities, transportation, and manufacturing sectors were less likely to provide unpaid internships while government, health, entertainment, and media sector employers offer the majority of their internships as unpaid.

Our initial findings paint a broad picture of who is likely to be in unpaid internship positions. To refine this picture, we compared those students participating in paid and unpaid internships by family income and type of organization hosting the student,

and interactions were examined by adding additional variables into the analysis. A brief look at the results shows that students from high income families were more likely to be found in paid internships with for-profit companies, compared to lower income students who received paid internships at a significantly lower rate and were more likely to have paid internships with non-profits than high income students. High income students were less likely to be in paid internships with government agencies, and among students in unpaid internships, no significant difference was found in the distribution among their host organization by income.

In our examination of gender, the distribution among paid internships approached significance for men and was significant for women. The pattern among men revealed that men from all income groups participated in non-profit paid internships at the same level. For government internships, men from families with incomes less than \$120,000 were more likely to be involved; whereas, men from families with incomes above \$120,000 were more likely to be in for-profit paid internships. Women's pattern in paid internships was more skewed. Women from lower income families were more likely to be in internships with non-profits and government than higher income women students. By in large, women from higher incomes were found in for-profit internships.

Among unpaid internships, no significant differences were found when examining patterns. About half of the men were in unpaid for-profit internships across all income groups. More men from incomes below \$40,000 and between \$80,000 and \$120,000 were involved in unpaid non-profit internships, while a much smaller number of students from low income families were engaged with government agencies. Among women less than half were in unpaid for-profit internships with women from households with \$40,000 to \$80,000 participating at a lower level. About 42% of the women were in non-profit organizations and 18% in government agencies across all income groups.

In the Conclusions and Recommendations sections of this report, comparisons and exceptions are noted for a broad spectrum of criteria, and certain evidence confirmed our assumptions. Our findings do not support the common contention that students from the wealthiest families have greater access to unpaid internships, even among most for-profit companies. We also learned that high income students appear more likely to be engaged in internships, regardless if they are paid or unpaid, with for-profit companies, and that they have very low participation in internships with non-profits organizations and government agencies. This pattern does not suggest that high income students are not civically engaged. It does suggest that when it comes to selecting an internship, high-income students prefer to work for large, for-profit companies who pay their interns.

Finally this report makes suggestions regarding changes that should be undertaken, by schools, businesses, and government to increase equity and fairness in access to internships for all students, and with regard to the economic realities of for-credit internships and the burden they place upon low-income students and families.



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