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"One Internship, Two Internships, Three Internships… More!" Exploring the Socioeconomic and Sociocultural Factors of the Multiple Internship Economy

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Matthew Wolfgram, Vivien Ahrens, and Zhixuan Wu
Wisconsin Center for Education Research
University of Wisconsin–Madison
mswolfgram@wisc.edu

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Abstract

Internships are increasingly promoted as a high-impact practice to improve students' post-graduation employment outcomes, and educators and advisors often encourage students to participate in multiple internships. Yet, there is a lack of research on the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors associated with multiple internship participation for college students. We present findings about such demographic and contextual factors of multiple internship participation—drawing on survey responses, focus groups, and one-year follow-up interviews with students at five postsecondary institutions in the United States, along with interviews with educators and advisors at those institutions and an analysis of online documents about multiple internship participation. Analyses of survey data indicate the socioeconomic privileges associated with multiple internship participation; qualitative data document a particular culture of the multiple internship economy, representing multiple internships as a progressive accumulation of value. Based on these findings, we develop a sociocultural theory of multiple internship participation as a project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation.

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Introduction to the Multiple Internship Economy

Growing research indicates positive outcomes for college students who are able to participate in internships, including employment (Nunley et al., 2016), academic achievement (Parker III et al., 2016), and psychosocial outcomes such as increased self-confidence and adaptability (Ocampo et al., 2020). Combined with the growing pressure on postsecondary institutions to cultivate students' "employability" and career outcomes (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016), participation in internships and other forms of work-based learning is becoming one of the most influential ideas shaping research, policymaking, and educational practice in higher education in the early 21st century.

The assumption that "more is better" pervades discussions and guidelines for high-impact practices (HIPs) such as internships, yet remains uninvestigated. Kuh and colleagues recommend a minimum of two HIPs across a college career, one early and one nearing conclusion; ideally, students would benefit from one HIP per year of their college career (Kuh, 2008; Gonyea et al., 2008). This logic of accumulation influences career advising on campuses and discourse online about internships. "One internship, two internships, three internships… more!" is the title of a blog by a recent college graduate and peer career advisor on the website for the Public Relations Student Society of America. The author describes internships as an "almost guaranteed way to get hands-on, relevant experience in the profession"—a venue to network, explore careers, and work on projects that can be deployed in post-graduation job interviews. "When I interview for positions after graduation, I will have a wide range of experience because the projects I completed for each employer were unique. The more internships you have, the more responsibility you will have for various projects" (Nicholson, 2010).

While many educators and employers increasingly encourage students to participate in multiple internships, researchers have only recently started to investigate whether, and under what circumstances, multiple internships are associated with additional positive student outcomes. Huber (2010) found that multiple different HIPs (including internships) had positive impacts on measures of student academic persistence and success, such as time taken to graduate and GPA at graduation. Townsley and colleagues' study at Mount Holyoke College (Townsley et al., 2017) found that students with multiple internships were more likely to be employed or to enter graduate school within six months of graduation. Silva et al. (2016) studied what they called a "thin sandwich" approach to internships—participation in multiple short internship opportunities—and found that it leads to better employment outcomes than a single, long-term internship.

These few studies in the research literature suggest that there may be added benefit to more than one internship, yet current research tends to leave unaddressed the question of barriers to multiple internship participation, and the motivations and experiences associated with students participating in multiple internships. Our data document the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors associated with the use of multiple internships to prepare for the employment market, further complicating the notion in discussions of HIPs and work-based learning that "more is better." Investigating what we call the *multiple internship economy*, we document its consequences for students, asking the research question: What socioeconomic and sociocultural factors are associated with multiple internship participation for college students? Drawing on and integrating the research literature about college internships, neoliberal conceptions of the self, and institutional gatekeeping, we propose a theory of multiple internships as a neoliberal gatekeeping navigation process.

This study analyzes student survey responses (n=1,547), interviews with educators (n=39) and focus groups (n=100), and one-year follow-up interviews (n=55) with students from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study conducted at five universities in the states of Maryland, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. Data include four comprehensive universities, one of which is a private Historically Black College/University (HBCU), and one a technical college. We also analyze a corpus of internet documents (n=14) such as websites, blogs, and articles posted online by career advisors and career entrepreneurs advocating for students to participate in multiple internships. Survey data were analyzed using chi-square and logistic regression analysis, and focus groups, interviews, and online documents were analyzed using inductive theme identification and discourse analysis techniques.

Survey results identify several socioeconomic factors associated with multiple internship participation, including employment status, institution type, and gender. Analyses of internet discourse and interviews identify several sociocultural factors. These include the importance of a set of cultural values associated with multiple internship participation, such as accumulating skills and experiences; persevering through obstacles; displaying "hustle" and a "do what it takes" attitude; and pursuing a linear, progressive, and goal-oriented conception of education and careers.

In the next section, we develop a conceptual framework focused on our argument that these socioeconomic and sociocultural factors inform the role of multiple internships *as a cultural project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation*.

A Sociocultural Theory of Multiple Internship Participation as Neoliberal Gatekeeping Navigation

The goal of our conceptual framework is to clarify and contextualize the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors associated with multiple internship participation, and to theorize the larger role of multiple internships as a cultural project adopted by participants in the current economy. To do so, we propose a conceptual theory that integrates anthropological research and theory on the culture of the neoliberal, late-capitalist economy, with sociological research on the process of

social and institutional gatekeeping. We argue that these two conceptual lenses—along with research on the barriers and experiences of internship participation—suggest a theory of multiple internships as *a cultural project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation*. Students employ multiple internships to cultivate a self that is comprised of marketable skills, experiences, and attributes; to navigate selective institutional and professional gatekeeping encounters; and access resources, employment in professional firms and organizations, and career advancement. The cultural project is conditioned in profound ways by the students' gender and social class (and potentially by race as well), both in terms of the struggles that students face to access those internships, and the nature of their internship experiences.

The Neoliberal Concept of Self as the Culture of the Multiple Internship Economy

A college degree has long been associated with the socioeconomic reproduction of privileged class advantage and social mobility. Analysis has focused on the role of higher education credentials in providing a veneer of meritocratic legitimation for middle- and upper-class preferential access to the market (Brown, 2000; Collins, 1979). With the democratization of higher education in past decades, and more students entering the employment market with similar educational profiles, college degrees have ceased to provide the competitive advantage they once did. Employers who recruit among college graduates are responding by increasingly reviewing and hiring based on evidence of desired skills or personality attributes—a re-orientation of the employment market that scholars called an "economy of experience" (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). In response to these same pressures, students increasingly work to "add value and distinction" and "marketability" to their credentials by accumulating additional "soft credentials." Credential enhancements include evidence on their resume or CV of extracurricular and leadership activities, high-impact educational practices, and work-based learning such as internships "as an important tool for projecting a narrative of individual potential, competence and skill" (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 57).

The social-political theory of neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s to become the dominant ideology in the United States (Harvey, 2007). The core of neoliberal thinking is a semiotic mapping of the logics, values, and practices of the market to other social institutions and cultural domains. While strange and radical at first, this neoliberal projection from-market-to-society progressively and fundamentally transformed culture, society, and politics in the United States, as policymakers applied free market thinking to government, education, health care, and other social institutions (Heynen & Robbins, 2005). The ideal concept of personhood of the market is a rational entrepreneur who strategizes their position within a competitive market, maximizes their productivity and value, and communicates their marketability (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

The anthropologist Gershon described a neoliberal form of agency as manifested by "those who reflexively and flexibly manage themselves as one owns and manages a business, tending to one's own qualities and traits" (Gershon, 2011, p. 542). In some higher education settings in the United States, neoliberal discourses are used to market an emergent concept of student-self, defined as a project whereby the student curates a collection of marketable, decomposable, and sortable "skills," "experiences," and other personal qualities that they can deploy in the process

of orienting and re-orienting themselves towards the employment market (Urciuoli, 2008; 2010). The strategy of accumulation of multiple internships is one such practice of entrepreneurial self-management, by which students rack up, cultivate, and deploy internships as signs of value within an increasingly competitive employment market.

Internships as a Gatekeeping Navigation Strategy

Internships play an important role in social reproduction and social mobility in the economy (Perlin, 2012). Frenette (2015) identifies a number of socioeconomic and legal factors that help account for the historic rise of the internship economy in the United States during the first decade of the 21st century, including an 11% increase of traditionally college-aged 18- to 24-year-olds and a rise in college enrollment from 36% to 42%. Such demographic trends indicate a growth of new entrants to an increasingly competitive employment market, coupled with the post-recession rise of precarious, temporary, nonstandard employment arrangements (Kalleberg, 2000). In this context, internships emerged as a market-based, employment-seeking strategy, which Frenette contrasts with the historical apprenticeship regime controlled by guilds, labor unions, and through government regulation established by the Fitzgerald Act of 1937. The growing prominence of the internship economy was buttressed by ambiguity in U.S. law regarding the employment status of interns, and by the increasing prominence of experiential learning theory in school-to-work transition policy in the United States since the 1990s. Frenette writes, "Internships now function as a sorting mechanism and credential system (at least in principle) aimed at rationalizing the transition from school to work, even in occupations that were previously excluded from work-based training schemes" (Frenette, 2015, p. 355). In the 21st century, internships have become a gatekeeping mechanism to manage access to firms and professional employment.

Gatekeeping is a social selection process involving an encounter or series of encounters to which individuals submit themselves for access to institutions and resources (Erickson, 1976). Advising or admissions encounters in college or other education programs are examples of gatekeeping where advisors, professors, and others manage student access to credentialing programs and institutional knowledge (Karen, 1990). Employment interviews are another, highly consequential example of gatekeeping (Roberts, 2013). Research documents how socially stigmatized linguistics and social dispositions—informed by race, gender, and social class positioning—affect the results of gatekeeping encounters, moderating and constraining access to resources and institutions of class mobility (Roberts, 2013).

Research on the role of internships in the employment market highlights their function as a gatekeeping mechanism. Temporary, low-cost, low-risk internships provide an extended, up-close opportunity for employers to covertly assess interns' "culture fit" (Hora, 2020) and select them for regular employment (Zhao & Liden, 2011). Research has documented how interns and employers use internships as an entry point for regular employment within firms (Rose, 2018). Further, studies in the United States found that individuals whose resumes feature an internship are more likely to be selected for an interview, suggesting that internships signal employability to potential employers more broadly (Nunley et al., 2016). Social and economic barriers to

internship access amplify the social-selection function; in particular, participation in competitive internships often requires social class-based knowledge, habits, and social networks, and extensive financial resources for travel, relocation, and to pay expenses during an internship, which may be unpaid or inadequately paid (Hora et al., 2019). Our conceptual framework posits that multiple internship participation is a cultural project of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation, signaling employability in a competitive employment market.

In the next section, we describe methods we used to investigate the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors that inform the culture and experience of the multiple internship economy.

Methods

What socioeconomic and sociocultural factors are associated with multiple internship participation for college students? To address our research question, our study employs a concurrent mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014). The survey, focus group, longitudinal follow-up interview data, and analysis of online document data provide complementary forms of quantitative and qualitative evidence. Survey results relate more to socioeconomic factors, while data from focus groups, interviews, and online discourse relate more to sociocultural factors.

Sampling Strategies and Data Collection Procedures

We selected five study sites that exemplify postsecondary institutions with different missions, student populations, and geographic locations (see Table 1). Before sampling students, two screening criteria were applied to narrow the scope of the survey. First, students in their first half of degree programs were not included in the survey, as these students are less likely to have internship experience. Second, to differentiate internships from other experiential learning programs such as clinical practicum and apprenticeship programs, students from programs featuring the latter curriculum requirements were excluded (e.g., teaching training programs requiring a practicum, apprenticeship programs in skilled trades). Finally, given the resource constraints, 1250 students were randomly selected from the screened student body as the study sample at each site, except for the private HBCU in South Carolina, where only 885 students met all screening criteria. For this college, the survey was administered to all 885 students.

Table 1. **List of institutions**

Institution	Type	State	Number Students*	Number Survey Participants	Response Rate
#1	Private HBCU	South Carolina	2000	198	23%
#2	Technical College	Wisconsin	18000	384	31%
#3	Comprehensive University	Wisconsin	13000	221	18%
#4	Comprehensive University	Wisconsin	4000	516	42%
#5	Comprehensive University	Maryland	2500	228	18%

*Number of undergraduate students or students at technical college. HBCU = Historically Black college/university.

A letter with cash incentive was sent to students inviting them to participate in the survey, followed by a series of email reminders for non-responders. Students who completed the survey received another letter with an additional cash incentive. A total of 1,547 students responded, with an average response rate of 26%; response rates of individual institutions varied from 18% to 42%. Institution #4 had the highest response rate, likely because the survey at this site was administered by a professional survey institute. Non-response bias analysis was conducted for each site based on race and gender; no bias was detected. After completing the survey, students were asked if they were willing to participate in a focus group (providing a $20 cash incentive). Participants in the focus groups included students who had taken an internship (n=52) *and* those who had not (n=48). Most of the 56 focus groups included two to four students, though no-shows resulted in one-person interviews in some cases. A group of two or three researchers traveled to the institutions to conduct those focus groups and interviews in person. Additionally, a year after completion of the focus groups, we sent an email to all students who participated in a focus group to invite them to participate in a follow-up phone interview ($40 cash incentive). We recruited 52 research participants. A follow-up survey was also conducted at the same time as part of the data collection process for a future quantitative longitudinal study. Table 2 shows the characteristics of the participating students for both the survey and the focus groups.

Table 2. **Study sample demographic, academic, and socioeconomic characteristics**

	Survey	Focus Group	Follow-up Interviews
Observations	n=1547	n=100	n=48
Demographic Characteristics			
Age in years, mean	27.45		
Gender			
Male (%)	569 (36.8%)	41 (41%)	26 (54.2%)
Female (%)	961 (62.1%)	59 (59%)	22 (45.8%)
Race			
Asian or Asian American (%)	101 (6.5%)	5 (5%)	3 (6.3%)
Black or African American (%)	341 (22%)	33 (34%)	19 (39.6%)
Hispanic or Latino (%)	110 (7.1%)	2 (2%)	1 (2.1%)
White or Caucasian (%)	929 (60.1%)	56 (56%)	21 (43.8%)
Not listed	0	4 (4%)	4 (8.3%)
First-generation status			
First-generation students (%)	618 (39.9%)		
Continuing-generation students (%)	926 (59.9%)		
Academic Characteristics			
Institution			
#1-Private HBCU (%)	198 (12.8%)	18	11
#2-Technical College (%)	384 (24.8%)	14	8
#3-Comprehensive University (%)	221 (14.3%)	19	7
#4-Comprehensive University (%)	516 (33.4%)	25	9
#5-Comprehensive University (%)	228 (14.7%)	24	13

	Survey	Focus Group	Follow-up Interviews
Academic enrollment			
Full-time enrollment (%)	1125 (77.7%)		
Part-time enrollment (%)	421 (27.2%)		
Internship requirement			
Required (%)	510 (33%)		
Not required (%)	829 (53.6%)		
Not sure (%)	208 (13.4%)		
Major disciplines			
Arts and Humanities (%)	164 (10.6%)		
Biosci, Ag, & NR (%)	168 (10.9%)		
Business (%)	462 (29.9%)		
Comm, Media, & PR (%)	65 (4.2%)		
Engineering (%)	118 (7.6%)		
Health Professions (%)	77 (5%)		
PS, Math, & CS (%)	113 (7.3%)		
Social Sciences (%)	168 (10.9%)		
Social Service Professions (%)	193 (12.5%)		
Socioeconomic Characteristics			
Employment status			
Full-time employed (%)	323 (20.9%)		
Part-time employed (%)	839 (54.2%)		
No employment (%)	365 (23.6%)		
Parental income			
Less than $24,999 and parents are deceased (%)	334 (21.6%)		
$25,000–$49,999 (%)	304 (19.7%)		
$50,000–$74,999 (%)	287 (18.6%)		
$75,000–$99,999 (%)	209 (13.5%)		
$100,000–$124,999 (%)	160 (10.3%)		
$125,000–$149,999 (%)	93 (6.0%)		
$150,000 or more (%)	118 (7.6%)		

Note: Biosci, Ag, & NR = Biological Sciences, Agriculture, and Natural Resources; PS, Math, & CS = Physical Sciences, Mathematics, and Computer science; Comm, Media, & PR = Communication, Media, and Public Relations.

Through email recruitment and snowball sampling, we recruited 38 educators and career advisors from the five research sites for an in-person or phone interview in which they discussed their work to support college internships. We also collected online documents related to the topic of multiple internships. We conducted a Google search in 2020 employing the phrase “multiple internships” and identified 14 blogs, career advice columns, and other webpages that discussed the topic of multiple internships.

Research Instruments

Survey

In the questionnaire, we defined the term "internship" using language based on previous definitions and validated by a group of career advisors and experiential learning professionals:

> An internship is a position held within an established company or organization while completing a college degree, certificate, or diploma program. It involves working at the company or organization and performing tasks similar in nature and skill-level to tasks done by entry-level employees in the organization.

We asked students whether they had participated in an internship in the past 12 months. If "yes," the student would be prompted to choose the total number of internships taken since enrollment at their current college. Of 1547 survey respondents, 1073 (69%) reported not having any internships in the past 12 months, while 474 (31%) had internships. Among these 474 students, 327 (69%) had one internship, 103 (22%) had two, 34 (7%) had three, and 10 (2%) had four or more internships. As the majority of multiple internship takers participated in two internships, students who had taken more than two internships were merged with those who participated in two internships. This group was recoded as "multiple internships." Therefore, three categories of internship experience were used in this analysis: "no internship," "one internship," and "multiple internships."

The survey also covers students' demographic, academic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For demographic background, we asked the students about their race, gender, age, sexuality, and disability status. Academic variables include enrollment status (full- or part-time), grade point average (GPA), number of years in college, and whether internship is required by the curriculum. Information regarding each student's major was provided by the colleges and re-coded in accordance with National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2020) categories. Socioeconomic background was captured by employment status, parental income, and whether the respondent was a first-generation college student. For employment status, we defined working ≥40 hours per week as full-time employment, working less than 40 hours as part-time employment, and not having a paid job as no employment. Parental income was divided into eight income brackets, and in the analysis, the brackets were re-coded by their rankings such that the lowest income bracket was coded as one and the highest as eight.

Focus Group and Follow-up Interview Protocol

Focus group sessions lasted approximately 1 hour and were moderated by one or two researchers using a semi-structured protocol that included questions about students' background, academic programs, and career goals. 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 obstacles to internship success. Students without an internship experience were asked about general perceptions about internships and their future careers; one question focused on obstacles to internship participation. The one-year follow-up phone interview protocol

included questions to document their education, career development, employment experiences in the past year, questions about any obstacles to their education and career success, if they had participated in a first or subsequent internship, and questions about their internship experiences. The answers of students who participated in multiple internships to questions about challenges, motivations, and experiences with internship participation provided the bulk of the data for qualitative analyses. Additionally, the qualitative data for this article includes educator and advisor interviews, which contained questions regarding how internship programs are organized and supported on campus, about their work, reasoning, concerns about supporting student internships, and about the messages that they communicate to students regarding internships.

Analytic Strategies

Survey Data

Survey data were analyzed using R statistical analysis software (R Core Team, 2018). The correlation between multiple internship participation status and demographic, academic, and socioeconomic factors was explored via a multinomial logistic regression model. Forty-six students did not response to at least one of the questions with categorical answers in these three types of factors, which accounts for only 3% of the sample. As a result, listwise deletion was applied and these students were removed from the model input. For numeric variables, 38 students did not report GPA and 42 students did not report parental income. The missing values were imputed by sample means respectively. The initial multinomial logic regression model had multiple internship participation status (no internship, one internship, and multiple internships) as a dependent variable and 16 independent variables including institution, enrollment status, degree type, internship requirement, number of years in college, GPA, major, age, disability status, race, gender, sexuality, parental income, employment status, and first-generation status. After construction of the model, Generalized Variance Inflation Factor (GVIF) was used to diagnose multicollinearity. Screened by a threshold of 5, degree type with GVIF value of 11.2 and GPA with GVIF value of 7.6 were not included in the final model.

Discourse Analysis

The analysis of the online documents about multiple internships collected for this study follows an approach generally described as Critical Discourse Analysis, which focuses on identifying how units of discourse—typically words, phrases, and larger linguistic structures such as narratives—are a component of larger social processes that implicate culture, ideology, and power relations (Mullet, 2018). After collecting the online data and compiling the corpus of texts, we followed an iterative process of reviewing the texts, annotating recurrent words, themes, and concepts, and identifying how the discourse features both connect to the social context of the text's production and produce an argument about the social world (Fairclough, 2001). We engaged this process of annotating, contextualizing, and interpreting multiple times, while simultaneously compiling an analytical memo that integrated our discourse analysis of the online documents with the larger research question of the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors of multiple internship participation.

Focus Group and Follow-up Interview Data

Qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts proceeded through a multi-step process, using MaxQDA software (VERBI Software, 2017). First, we segmented the transcripts into manageable units based on the topics of the semi-structured protocol. Two researchers independently segmented three randomly selected transcripts and then met to compare coding results and reconcile any disagreements. The two researchers then segmented the entire corpus of data independently. Next, the pair of researchers engaged in a round of inductive, open coding of approximately half of the transcripts, noting recurrent phrases, ideas, and observations related to obstacles inhibiting participation in an internship (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Throughout this open coding process, the researchers compiled analytical memos with themes related to barriers to internship participation. Based on themes derived from the analytical memos, the analysts generated a codebook that was reviewed and discussed among the entire research team. Then, the pair of researchers each applied this codebook to three transcripts, and found 88% agreement in their application of the codebook across the data. This process of establishing inter-rater reliability also included refining definitions of individual codes and rules for applying them to the text. The researchers then worked independently to apply the codes to the entire corpus (Campbell et al., 2013). Throughout this process, researchers continued to build analytical memos to integrate the data into emerging research findings. The emerging analysis and data were presented and discussed at research team meetings to help develop interpretations and to confirm or dispute emergent findings.

Findings

Next, we report results from analyses of the aggregate survey data, the discourse analysis of online materials, educator interviews, and focus group and follow-up interview data collected from students, to investigate socioeconomic and sociocultural factors associated with college student multiple internship participation.

Survey Data

The survey data indicate that several important demographic and socioeconomic factors are associated with multiple internship participation (see Table 3 for the model results). A student in a four-year college, not employed in a full-time job, is more likely than their peers to be able to participate in multiple internships. Interestingly, women are far more likely to participate in multiple internships then male students, suggesting that women may be more receptive to cultural messaging about multiple internships. Students with previous internship experiences are more likely to access a paid internship than students who are in their first internship.

***Table 3*. Factors related to students' internship participation by multinomial logistic regression model**

	Multiple Internships		One Internship	
	β (SE)	OR (95% CI)	β (SE)	OR (95% CI)
Constant	-2.45*** (.74)	.09 ± .07	-.397 (.51)	.67 ± .43
Race/ethnicity, reference group = White or Caucasian				
African American	-.43 (.44)	.65 ± .36	-.68** (.3)	.51 ± .23
Gender, reference group = male				
Female	.51**(.22)	1.66 ± .02	.07 (.15)	1.08 ± .27
Age	0 (.02)	1 ± .03	-.03*** (.01)	.97 ± .02
Institution, reference group = #1 (private HBCU)				
#2 (Tech College)	-2.69*** (.62)	.07 ± .05	-.05 (.38)	.96 ± .5
#3	-.95* (.5)	.39 ± 0.24	-.13 (.39)	.88 ± .47
#4	-1.38***(.47)	.25 ± .15	-.23 (.36)	.79 ± .4
#5	-1.42***(.45)	.24 ± .14	-.24 (.35)	.79 ± .39
Employment status, reference group = no employment				
Full-time employment	-1.26*** (.43)	.29 ± .16	-.64*** (.23)	.53 ± .19
Part-time employment	.21 (.23)	1.23 ± .44	-.02 (.17)	.98 ± .27

Note: (1) Due to space constraints, coefficients for the control variables and certain race groups tested insignificant are not reported. The control variables are first generation status, enrollment status, number of years in college, internship requirement, major, sexuality, parental income, and disability status. (2) Significance level, *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. (3) SE = standard deviation, OR = odds ratio, CI = Confidence interval.

Among the 1,501 students included in our final model, 465 (31%) respondents reported that they participated in internships in the past 12 months. Among the 465 students, 143 (31%) had multiple internships. Figure 1 shows the demographics of students in our survey with multiple internship experience. Among the five colleges we studied, students attending the technical college are much less likely to take multiple internships in comparison with students at four-year colleges, while their likelihood to take only one internship is about the same as for students at four-year colleges. This pattern is not surprising. Technical colleges often offer one-year or two-year programs, substantially narrowing the window for students to schedule multiple internships before graduation. This explanation is supported by the fact that every year in college increases the odds of a student taking an internship. The odds for multiple internships increase even more with every year in college (40%).

Figure 1. **Demographics of students with multiple internship experiences**

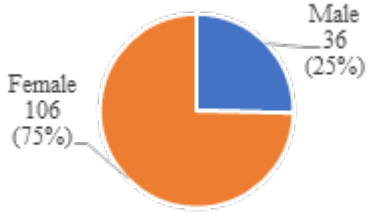

Fig. 1.a. Gender Distribution

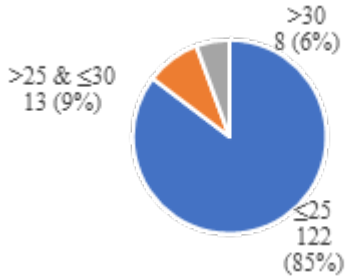

Fig. 1.b. Age Distribution

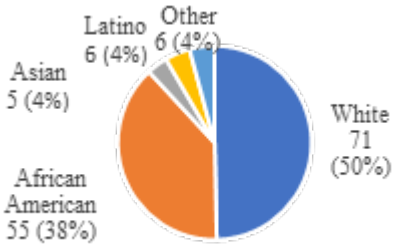

Fig. 1.c. Race Distribution

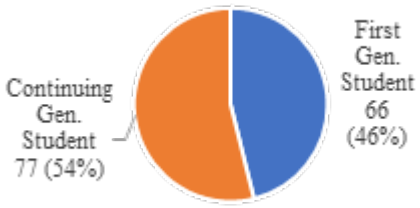

Fig. 1.d. First Gen. Status Distribution

Besides the institutional setting, students' personal characteristics also have major implications for their internship activities. Among all the demographic characteristics, age and gender are critical. In our dataset, where 345 (23%) out of 1501 students are above 30 years old, the multinomial regression model shows that older students are less likely to take internships. On average, the odds of taking no internship rather than just one internship increase by 3% with every additional year of age. Gender is another significant factor. In our survey sample, female students account for 62% of the respondents and 62% of the students that took only one internship. However, 74% of the students taking multiple internships are female. According to the logistic regression, the odds for female students to do multiple internships are 65% higher than the odds for male students.

According to our data, students working full-time jobs (≥40 hours per week) are much less likely to take internships. Their possibility of taking multiple internships is even lower. In contrast, in the multinomial regression model, after controlling for employment status and other factors, the influence of enrollment status on internship participation was not significant. It is also worth noting that neither parental income nor personal income has a clear relationship with internship participation.

Our survey data indicate that students with multiple internships are likely to access paid internships but are not necessarily more satisfied. By comparing internships taken by students with and without previous internships, it became evident that students with past internship experience are more likely to get a paid internship (chi-squared test, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$), though there is no significant salary increase compared with students who received payment in their first

internships. Internship quality indicators such as career developmental value (Beenen & Rousseau, 2010; McHugh, 2017), satisfaction level, supervisor mentoring and supervising, job autonomy, flexibility, and relatedness to academic programs do not vary significantly between students with one or multiple internships.

The survey data indicate the relatively privileged socioeconomic position of participants with multiple internships. Traditional college students—full-time students at a four-year institution—and students who can afford to forego paid employment or can afford to work only part-time, are more likely to be able to participate in multiple internships than students with work, family, or other obligations that place constraints on their time and other resources. These findings conform to research noting the social barriers to internship participation (Hora, et al., 2019), and suggests that the barriers that obstruct students from participating in an internship may persist and continue to obstruct students from participating in multiple internships.

As noted above, female students are more likely than male students to participate in multiple internships, indicating that they may be more receptive to the cultural messaging associated with multiple internships. For both male and female students, subsequent internships were more likely to be paid opportunities in comparison with their first internship. Potentially, students who are unable to secure a paid first internship—which is often competitive—may be able to leverage social connections or resume boosts from their first internship to secure subsequent paid internships. Unfortunately, while all subsequent internships are more likely to be paid, students did not report them to be more satisfying or valuable to their career development. This finding contradicts some of the messaging that represents multiple internships as a progressive accumulation of value to the interns. We address this messaging further in the next section, through a discourse analysis of online documents about multiple internships.

Qualitative Data: Online Discourse Data, Focus Groups, and Interviews

Analysis of Online Discourse Data

The online documents we collected represent participation in multiple internships as a key indication of employability. They attribute a variety of positive characteristics to the repeat intern, including accumulation of "skills" and "experiences" that will constitute a maximally marketable self. Within this cultural logic, the more signs of marketability, the better the chances of success on the employment market.

This discourse is widely promulgated by for-profit career development and recruitment companies, which provide "the right tools" and "strategies," including resume review, interview coaching, and workshops, to support individuals in their job search and career advancement. LiveCareer's blog (Hansen, n.d.a), for example, advises "You simply must do an internship (better yet: multiple internships)!" Several themes recur in these representations of multiple internships by the for-profit career development industry, constituting a culture of the multiple internship economy. Characteristics of this discourse include its optimistic emotional key, which represents the relationship between multiple internships and career success as unambiguous,

natural, and inevitable. Multiple internships are portrayed as "the key" to career success, which "drastically improves the odds of being hired soon after college" (Leach, 2020). As one career entrepreneur explains, "Multiple internships that have been optimized are the gateway to accomplishing the primary goal of going to college in the first place… successful employment;" moreover, multiple internships provide "the chance to showcase the value they can add to that respective brand daily" (Leach, 2020).

Career entrepreneurs describe the enhanced individual marketability that internships provide within an increasingly competitive employment marketplace. As stated on the Career Alley website:

> You have invested a substantial amount of money and time into your education and degree. Make sure that you continue to strive for excellence by mastering multiple internships. Doing so will make you more marketable and attractive to potential employers (Career Alley, n.d.).

Students are encouraged to use their internship to display highly desirable personality characteristics—such as the willingness to "go the extra distance," "have what it takes," and "handle the nitty-gritty," all of which translate into interns needing to "complete tasks during off-hours like evenings and weekends," often without compensation (Leretto, 2018). As another career entrepreneur argues, "an internship demonstrates initiative, work ethic, and maturity," but most of all it demonstrates "hustle." "If you have a lot of internships, you've probably got a lot of hustle. And if you've got hustle, I'm sure you can keep it going" (McManus, 2019).

Importantly, representations of the multiple internship strategy are teleological, discursively configured as a linear, progressive accumulation of more value—more skills, connections, and credibility in the market. For example, one career entrepreneur blogger (Hansen, n.d.b.) narrates the many internship experiences of marketing student Julie, who was interested in a career in the music business. The narrative is structured by a progressive teleological framework, displayed by the blog's title, "Addicted to internships: How one college student just said no to service jobs and started *building a career one internship at a time*" (emphasis ours). The blogger asks the question, "Would you have the courage to swear off typical college restaurant and retail jobs and commit yourself to career-boosting internships—even unpaid internships?" A career is represented as something that is built "one internship at a time;" a process that requires "courage" and "commit[ment]" rather than more material factors such as financial and other resources, social networks, and social and institutional support. Julie started with an unpaid radio promotions internship that was not a positive experience. "I put all the effort I had into helping out here and there—working extra hours, helping in the office, staying late before big events," but "interns were mostly discriminated against instead of taught valuable lessons."

A key feature of this type of discourse is that discriminatory, predatory, or abusive practices in the internship labor market are represented as a learning opportunity for students. "The experience did show … [Julie] the direction into which she does not want to venture," and

provided the opportunity to build her resume, explains the blogger. Julie's second internship was a marketing position for an international company, an experience she foregrounded in the process of obtaining her third internship, an unpaid position in the music industry in New York City. This internship was even more exploitative. Unpaid and unsupervised, Julie and the other interns were themselves made responsible for their co-interns' work. Because of this culture of peer monitoring, all interns were collectively evaluated based on one another's work. The narrative represents such internships, and several more that follow in Julie's story, as an accumulation of knowledge and marketability, which ultimately results in optimal career positioning.

Websites and blogs of career entrepreneurs, and other online sources, promote the cultural project of accumulating and managing personal marketability. Within this context, the strategy of obtaining multiple internships is represented as a sign of self-marketability to be deployed on the employment market—a form of neoliberal agency particular to the culture of the late-capitalist economy (Gershon, 2011). Students deploy such signs of marketability to manage the classed, gendered, and raced gatekeeping encounters that guard the professional employment market.

The next section presents evidence from educators and career advisors who participated in our study, on how they value and message the strategy of multiple internships to their students.

Interviews with Educators

The educators we interviewed at the five sites for this study describe speaking to students about internships as a key part of enhancing one's "employability" (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). This messaging reflected prominent discursive features of the career entrepreneurial discourse described above, with an additional focus on the role of internships as "providing value" to students and as an institutional outcome. As one career advisor explained, "Students are more likely to be employed if they have internship experience. And I believe that our campus values the employment rate of our students." The educators and advisors in our sample of interviews warn students that "getting good grades may not be enough," and emphasize the value of internships "to help our students gain more meaningful employment upon graduation;" to "develop the skills … so that they would be highly marketable and employable;" to "show employers that you are able to learn, able to do the job;" and to "show employers that they [interns] could be a good fit" for regular employment. This sample of language from our interviews reflects features of an employability discourse deployed by educators and advisors more generally; as one career advisor explains to his students, internships are "part of a formula that's going to distinguish you" within a competitive employment market.

A "strong suggestion to do an internship or two is a part of all those pillars I think that we recommend," says a professor of business at a four-year comprehensive university in our sample. He identified three pillars of employability as academic achievement, community engagement, and multiple internships, explaining that "[f]or a lot of corporate employers, it's not just a degree, it's having a GPA over 3.0 and those internships would be meaningful. And, then the

third part of that would be making a difference on the campus and being involved." Internships thus demonstrate to prospective employers the student's ability and commitment to work hard and learn a new job.

The educators and advisors in our sample recommend students participate in multiple internships if possible; they embed this strategy within a larger discourse of employability and of education as a neoliberal project to accumulate a marketable self. However, educators are well aware of the time, financial, and social constraints that their students face when participating in one internship, let alone several. Educators discussed concerns that some students may not be able to participate in internships. As one career advisor explains, "you don't necessarily have the opportunity if you're trying to do a career change to do an internship, because you have bills, family, and all that stuff. So that's very difficult to do." Educators worked to identify paid internships for such students, or to identify internships with flexible scheduling to accommodate complex academic, family, and work obligations. Thus, in some cases in the career advising encounter, the message of multiple internships as a self-marketing strategy confronts the socioeconomic realities of students' lives.

Focus Groups and Follow-up Interviews with Students

In our sample of 100 focus group participants and 52 one-year follow-up interviews, 24 students reported participating in multiple internships. We use qualitative data from these 24 participants to examine the sociocultural factors that influence multiple internship participation. Through coding and analysis, we identified three recurring themes, which we discuss below and link to individual student case studies.

Theme 1: Accumulation of Internships as a Sign of Employability

Students describe pursuing a strategy of accumulating multiple internships to signal employability. By including internships on their resumes or in narratives to prospective employers, they show that they can "hit the ground running," one student explains. Some students with the available time and resources may pursue more than two internships to make a compelling case for future employment. Across the institutions in this study, several academic programs tended to encourage their students to accumulate as many internships as possible, including programs in business colleges, in creative disciplines such as theater, design, communications and media, and in IT-related programs. Some students express feeling "pressure" from their professors to do multiple internships, while others embrace the culture and discourse of crafting a marketable self through multiple internships.

Our team conducted a follow-up interview with Greg, a business management student with a concentration in finance, after he graduated from college, when he had started both an MBA program and his fifth internship with a new company with prospects for full-time employment. Greg began his internship trajectory during high school (internship #1) as a paid marketing intern for a tool manufacturer. He was responsible for maintaining the online catalogue and conducting dealership surveys. He enrolled at a local technical college before transferring to university for

his undergraduate degree. He interned (#2) with the business college's outreach program, orienting transfer students and incoming freshmen. He then moved on to an unpaid for-credit internship (#3) with the university newspaper, overseeing their budget and spending. Simultaneously, he began a (#4) paid internship with a manufacturer and retailer of clothes, tracking fulfillment and operational costs for their e-commerce department. He hoped to eventually transition this internship into permanent employment, "to grow with the company. … I want to get into different positions within a company and move up the ladder." However, he was not successful in obtaining such a position, even though "it looked so promising." Greg describes discussing his multiple internship experiences in the interview for his most recent internship position (#5) at a beverage distribution company:

> I walked into that interview knowing absolutely nothing and then I walked out with a job. … I got halfway through my resume, and this is—I will attest to this to the day I die, for college students, do the free internships because I got two internships into my resume. He [the interviewer] told me to stop, he said, "Greg," I quote, he said, "Greg, stop right there. Do you want the job?"

Greg strongly advocates for taking multiple internships, even if they are unpaid, "because they definitely pay off and they [prospective employers] do look at those." For him, internships were also a way to "get ahead of the curve." He believes that his accumulation of multiple internships has taught him "a lot about my work ethic" and "perseverance" to overcome challenges—and that internships as part of a resume and narrative of experience can show employers that you are capable of doing the job.

Theme 2: Multiple Internships as a Linear Progressive Employability Strategy

In comparison with apprenticeships and clinical practicums in the United States, the internship labor market is highly unregulated (Frenette, 2015), thus there is considerable variation in the quality of internship experiences (O'Neill, 2010). Furthermore, many students may lack access to the professional social networks and knowledge needed to obtain a quality internship that is relevant to their career goals, and such internships may be especially competitive, in some cases requiring prior internships and voluntary or leadership experiences (Hora et al., 2019).

Analysis of our survey data showed that subsequent internships were more likely to be paid than first internships. Several students in our sample were able to leverage unpaid internships or other voluntary work experiences to acquire more competitive paid internships. Students who participated in multiple internships, where low-quality experiences preceded a subsequent higher quality internship experience, describe even their extremely negative experiences as part of a progressive process of accumulating more knowledge, skills, connections, and competitiveness in the employment market.

Sam is an architecture and design student. His professors strongly encouraged multiple internships, and professional networking in general, as strategies to enter the employment

market. His first internship was for a small interior design firm, “a mom and pop shop” where he was “doing other people’s busy work”—organizing shelves, printing documents, and making copies. “It was easy, but it wasn’t something that I was enjoying doing,” Sam says. He left at the end of the summer on good terms with his supervisors. He continued networking with design professionals online, wrote a blog on the design profession, and was able to use his expanded networks, experience, and knowledge to access an internship at a well-known design firm. There, he engaged with design professionals and worked to support actual design projects. Despite his dissatisfying early internship experience, through his multiple internship strategy—supplemented with additional professional and online networking—Sam accumulated credibility and connections. He was able to access a desired firm as an intern, where he gradually transitioned to regular employment as a design professional working on independent projects.

A central feature of discourse regarding multiple internships is the progressive nature of the process. No matter how meaningless, exploitative, or even hostile an internship experience might be, even bad internships accumulate value within the cultural framework of the multiple internship economy.

Kim interned at larger insurance company in a project to evaluate changes to their customer service operation. The project involved project management and team collaboration skills, but also writing and checking computer code. She struggled with what she felt were the sexist biases of her supervisors and fellow team members, and she complained that she would constantly receive what she called “highly gendered feedback.” For example, she explains, “The only feedback ... [was] ‘don’t step on anybody’s toes ... don’t be too aggressive. Communicate this way. Work on your presentation style,’ but no one ever worked on ... my technical skills, which is what I was there to learn.”

While the other interns received offers of permanent employment, Kim did not. She felt that the experience taught her a lot about the kind of office culture she wanted to work in, and despite not receiving a job offer, she was able to use the reference to obtain a second internship working on the website for a branch of the United Nations, where she is thriving.

Theme 3: Multiple Internships as a Strategy to Navigate Institutional Gatekeepers

Frequently, students accessed a firm or organization first as an intern, then negotiated the transition to regular employment. This observation aligns with prior evidence that employers use internships as the review and selection process of a hiring pipeline (Zhao & Liden, 2011) and that students access regular employment through internships (Rose, 2018). The students in our study reported using multiple internships as a strategy to navigate competitive gatekeeping encounters—such as employment interviews—not only to gain initial access to a firm, but also to reach a desired position within a firm where they were already employed.

Bill graduated from an IT support associate’s degree program at the technical college in our study. As part of his program requirements, he completed an internship as an IT support technician at a help desk. Shortly after graduating, he received employment at a call center for IT

support. He disliked this position, describing it as "not exactly a fit" where "management treated me like expendable." In order to gain further specialization, "move up the ladder" within his field, and gain access to more responsible positions, Bill enrolled in an IT cloud support program. At the same time, he took a second unpaid internship at his former internship site. There, he has now moved up to an unpaid intern management position, working 30–40 hours per week on a voluntary basis. On the side, he is applying for regular employment. Bill has used a large amount of unpaid labor at his internship site to move up to a more responsible position and "acquire more skills to put on my resume … because it shows I can do the job." This way, he hopes to transition into paid regular employment in his desired role of IT Cloud Support.

Similarly, Serena wanted to become a medical coder at the major hospital and clinics in town, but her lack of experience in the healthcare field thwarted her employment prospects. She had already graduated from a Medical Administrative Specialist Program and had repeatedly passed the needed Civil Service exam with top scores. She was invited to interview for several positions, but always was denied because of her lack of work experience in the medical field:

> They interviewed me, like, the first three times and the fourth time the interviewer called me and was like, "Hi Serena! Have you received any experience working in the health care industry?" I was like, "No, but if you hire me, I can get that." And she was like, "No, it doesn't work that way." That was six years ago. … It's like being on a treadmill. You cannot get into the health care industry if [you lack] … that background.

Serena used the strategy of multiple internships to navigate this frustrating "Catch-22" situation. She interned as a medical administrative specialist in the clinic, which provided her access to the institution and experience within the healthcare field. Thanks to her internship, Serena was offered regular employment as a Medical Program Assistant, but she still hopes to acquire a position in her desired role as a Medical Coding Specialist.

Discussion

Our goal in this paper was to contribute new insights into the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors that influence multiple internship participation among college students. Below, we highlight key findings of the study and ways that the sociocultural theory developed in this paper clarifies the role of multiple internship participation as a neoliberal gatekeeping navigation strategy. We acknowledge the limitations of our study. The small sample of five institutions precludes generalizations to higher education in the United States more generally. Such generalizations are also problematic given the nonrandom selection of students and educators, who self-selected to participate in the study. Further, our quantitative analysis provides associative and not causal insights into the relationships among variables in our study. A forthcoming analysis of a longitudinal follow-up survey will strengthen our analysis and the significance of our findings. Lastly, while the focus group and follow-up interview data are informative, the study would benefit from a fine-grained analysis of students' decision-making

and experiences with multiple internships that could be derived from a life-historical or ethnographic account of student behavior.

The Socioeconomic Contexts of Multiple Internship Participation

A growing body of literature associates internship participation with important academic, psychosocial, and employment outcomes (Nunley et al., 2016; Ocampo et al., 2020; Parker III et al., 2016). Certainly, postsecondary education institutions in the United States are under pressure to facilitate and document career outcomes for their students (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2016). Internships are often considered an important high-impact practice (HIP) that enhances employability; advocates of HIPs such as internships recommend multiple experiences across a student's academic career (Kuh, 2008; Gonyea, et al., 2008). Yet, there is still little evidence that multiple HIPs (cf. Huber, 2010), or multiple internships in particular (cf. Silva et al., 2016; cf. Townsley et al., 2017), are associated with additional positive student outcomes. Despite the limited evidence base, this article documents the messaging—one internship is good, but more is better—directed at students and others engaged in career preparation.

The cross-sectional survey results presented in this paper indicate that subsequent internships were not rated to be more satisfactory or valuable to the student's career development than first internships, although subsequent internships were more likely to be paid than first internships. Further, the survey findings suggest that participation in multiple internships requires a level of socioeconomic privilege, which may obstruct many students from participating. Participants in our sample who are full-time students at four-year institutions and who can afford to either forgo paid employment or to work only part-time are more likely to be able to participate in multiple internships than students with work, family, or other obligations that place constraints on their time and other resources. This finding about the socioeconomic privileges associated with multiple internship participation adds to research on internships in general, which describes social, financial, and institutional barriers to internship participation as systematically "closing the doors to opportunity" for some students (Hora et al., 2019).

Interestingly, the survey found that 74% of the students who took multiple internships were female. The logistic regression indicated that the odds for female students to do multiple internships are 65% higher than the odds for male students. This finding highlights an important area for future research focused on gender differences in multiple internship participation, and internship participation more generally. For example, qualitative research on how messaging about internships is gendered, and how men and women may interpret and act on such messaging differently, could be a productive area for investigation.

Contributions to a Sociocultural Theory of Multiple Internship Participation

We propose multiple internship participation as a strategy of neoliberal gatekeeping navigation, and develop a sociocultural theory of multiple internship participation, situated within anthropological research on the neoliberal concept of self as a self-curated accumulation of skills and experiences that individuals can deploy within the market (Gershon, 2011; Urciuoli,

2008; 2010); as well as within sociological research on the shift toward employability as a major discursive and policy focus in both higher education (Tomlinson, 2008) and in the employment market in the United States (Brown & Hesketh, 2004).

This study finds that multiple internship participation is represented through online discourse, and by educators and students, as a linear, progressive, accumulation of value—and that narratives of multiple internship participation tend to encompass or minimize negative, exploitative, or otherwise unsuccessful internship experiences within a more uplifting teleological narrative of student growth, progress, and development. Research on the narrative restructuring of internship experiences by students, educators, advisors, and career entrepreneurs promises to be a generative area of research, by analyzing the particular discursive features and strategies that promote the neoliberal culture of the multiple internship economy. The qualitative research presented in this paper also documents how students utilize multiple internships as a strategy to accumulate marketability and competitive advantage, in particular by displaying an employable persona characterized by persistence, strong work ethic, hustle, conscientiousness, independent self-management, and a professional demeanor. Multiple internships are thus deployed as a sign, both to navigate selective gatekeeping encounters to access firms and organizations, and to access particular employment roles with the firm. This theory highlights the role of multiple internship participation in students navigating—and employers managing—the social selection process of gatekeeping professional firms and organizations (Erickson, 1976; Roberts, 2013; Zhao & Liden, 2011).

Future research might focus on the socialization and messaging, in college and elsewhere, of the neoliberal concept of self that is central to the sociocultural theory of the multiple internship economy. In addition to the cultural production of neoliberalism, research is needed on the socioeconomic and sociocultural factors that influence and constrain students' abilities to adopt the project of multiple internship participation as a strategy to accumulate an employable self. In addition to the financial and other socioeconomic constraints faced by low-income students participating in internships (Hora et al., 2019), Frenette (2013) found that the unstructured approach to supervision in music industry internships may be particularly challenging for first-generation or other minoritized college students, who may be uninformed through their own networks about the need to seek out additional work without direction in order to display the "go getter" disposition of an ideal intern (Frenette, 2013). Thus, research is needed to explore how social classed-, raced-, and gendered-based habits, dispositions, and knowledge affect the experiences and outcomes of multiple internship participation.

Multiple Internship Participation as a Career Development Strategy

Overall, our investigation indicates a need to further interrogate the aggressive advocacy for students to participate in multiple internships. While internships may add value to students' education and career development, it may not be reasonable to expect students to participate in multiple internships to gain favorable positioning in the post-graduation employment market—especially because the quality of internships is so varied (O'Neill, 2010) and the need for

additional personal resources to participate in internships is so high (Hora et al., 2019). We suggest that educators and advisors refrain from advocating multiple internships as a career development strategy. Should future research indicate that multiple internships are reliably associated with important positive student outcomes, then all constituents of the internship process—educators, advisors, administrators, internship supervisors and mentors, policymakers, scholars, and the students themselves—must collaborate to ensure that all internships are high quality and impactful to the students, and that resources are in place to remove social and economic obstacles to multiple internship participation.

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