



The Roles of Supervisor Care and Trust and Sense of Belonging in Promoting Internship Satisfaction

ABSTRACT

This study examines how relational aspects of the internship experience, namely students' perceptions of a supervisor's care and trust and students' sense of belonging, factor into students' satisfaction with their internship experience. We found that relational aspects impacted internship satisfaction. Although students' perceptions of a supervisor's care and trust were not a significant predictor of satisfaction, their sense of belonging was significant. Further analysis pointed to opportunities to use career related skills and gain confidence to pursue future job opportunities as significant in building students' sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS

internships, sense of belonging, supervisor trust, first-generation, work-integrated learning

INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning experiences, which include internships and co-ops, “give students the opportunity to practice applying, adapting, or transferring ‘the prior’ to a workplace context while they still have support for their learning” (Moore 2023, 75). A common form of work-integrated learning in the United States is the internship, which has been identified as a high impact practice (Kuh 2008) that leads to transformative learning experiences for students. The benefits of internships as high impact experiences are well established and include success in obtaining employment upon graduation (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Inceoglu et al. 2019; Moss-Pech 2021), increases in students' career self-efficacy (Knouse and Fontenot 2008), capacity for engaging across difference (Aldas et al. 2010), and academic outcomes (Binder et al. 2015; Gavigan 2010). However, researchers found not all internships provide students with the same learning outcomes (Auerbach and Wolinsky-Nahmias 2020; Bittman and Zorn 2020; Farrow, Wetzel, and Leathem 2021; Rogers et al. 2021), thus the need for more research in order to understand the conditions that promote satisfaction and learning.

Increasingly, researchers and practitioners alike view building relationships between students, site supervisors, and faculty/staff as important to the internship experience (Nevison et al. 2018). To help students do so effectively, faculty, internship coordinators, and internship supervisors need to understand the relational conditions that lead to positive and satisfying internship experiences. In addition, like other high-impact practices, researchers have not conducted systematic examinations of these experiences with equity in mind (Zilvinskis et al. 2022). Although existing research illustrates student satisfaction with internship experiences across race and ethnicity, gender, and year in school (Hora et al. 2018), there has been less research on whether and how students' generation-status affects their internship satisfaction.

In this study, we foregrounded questions related to students' generation status and the emerging research on the importance of relationships as a condition to foster engagement in

meaningful learning experiences (Felten and Lambert 2020) in order to examine students' satisfaction with internship experiences. In addition, we sought to examine whether students' perceptions of their relationship with their supervisor as grounded in care and trust and their sense of belonging were precursors to their satisfaction with their internship experiences.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Research into what creates a satisfying internship has focused on specific disciplines, geographic areas, or dimensions of identity. Multiple studies have demonstrated that internship satisfaction is similar across race and ethnicity, gender, and year in school. Furthermore, researchers identified a variety of experiences that increase satisfaction with internships (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2009 Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018). There is limited research on students' generation status as it relates to internship satisfaction. In addition, little research exists to inform faculty and administrators about the role of relationships and community in internship satisfaction. Given the emerging research about the importance of relationships in work-integrated learning experiences (Moore 2023) and our desire to extend understanding of the conditions that promote learning in the broader contexts of internships, we sought to understand more about the extent to which students' relationships with their supervisor, particularly perceptions of care and trust, and their sense of belonging in the internship experience related to their internship satisfaction. We also strove to ensure examination of under researched populations and the internship experience. Thus, we asked the following questions:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is there a relationship between first-generation status and students' satisfaction with their internship?
2. How are students' perceptions of their supervisor's care and trust and students' sense of belonging related to their satisfaction with their internship?
3. What experiences contribute to students' sense of belonging at their internship?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To situate the study in existing literature, we reviewed research in two related areas, namely: 1) development of care and trust and students' sense of belonging, and 2) students' perceptions of internships and internship satisfaction.

Development of care and trust and students' sense of belonging

We laid groundwork for this study at Elon University's summer research seminar, *(Re)Examining the Conditions of Meaningful Learning Experiences*, which took place from 2020–2023. Researchers from across the world came together to examine various conditions that led to engaged learning, with several groups honing in on the importance of relationships in promoting engaged learning environments. Most related to our research, Felten, Forsyth and Sutherland (2023) looked specifically at how teachers build trust in a classroom environment; they introduced a conceptual framework, which has since been published, outlining the “trust moves,” or actions that instructors can take to build trust with students (1). These actions occur in four domains: cognition (teacher demonstrates “knowledge, skill, and competence” [6]), affect (teacher shows “interpersonal care and concern” [6]), identity (teacher shows sensitivity to “their own and others' identities” [6]), and values “teacher shows “they are acting on principle” [6]).

Perhaps related to feelings of care and trust, research on students' sense of belonging has emerged in the past 15 years as important for student persistence and retention. Defined by Strayhorn

(2018) as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (3), sense of belonging has emerged as a central factor in students’ satisfaction in college (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Strayhorn 2015).

Assisting students, particularly those who are marginalized on college campuses, in developing a positive sense of belonging has been linked to a host of positive outcomes (Harper and Quaye 2007; Hausmann et al. 2009; Pittman and Richmond 2007; Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014). Research has shown that a student’s sense of belonging leads to improved critical thinking, retention, student engagement, academic success, and persistence to graduation (Bentrim and Henning 2022). Given the reality that sense of belonging is closely tied to these outcomes, higher education researchers and professionals should address it more intentionally when designing academic and cocurricular initiatives.

Johnson (2022) advanced a socio-ecological perspective of the sense of belonging, urging the higher education community to move beyond the individual- (social identity) and relationship- (peer, faculty, and staff) focused perspectives to understand how institutional factors (programming, organizational features) affect students’ sense of belonging. Furthermore, he argued that students’ sense of belonging should be among the factors considered when shaping or reforming campus initiatives. In other words, instead of considering sense of belonging as the outcome, Johnson posits that it should be a factor in shaping institutional contexts. Creating a sense of belonging at an internship or other type of work experience is just as important as doing so within the college environment. Internships are students’ first glimpse at professional life after college. The internship experience is an employer’s chance to assist in helping students imagine belonging in the workplace and professionally. The feelings that are important to students at college are the same feelings students have felt their entire lives (Bentrim and Henning 2022). Feeling seen and heard and that one belongs at a place of employment should mimic similar positive outcomes in higher education (Bentrim and Henning 2022).

Student’s perceptions of internship experiences and internship satisfaction

Researchers have explored students’ perceptions of their internship experiences, discovering that students described internships as providing real-world experiences which allowed them to learn something new while exploring career options (Hora, Parrot, and Her 2020). Internships allowed participants to develop new techniques, learn about themselves and their future, provide work experience, and educate them on professional culture. These experiences were particularly helpful when students were undecided about what they want to do upon graduation or were restarting their career (Hora, Parrot, and Her 2020). Students in the STEM disciplines who completed internships felt their communication skills improved as well as their confidence (Farrow, Wetzel, and Leathem 2020). Students reported a perceived increase in knowledge, more independence, better preparation for their career, and more positive workplace relationships at internship sites (Farrow, Wetzel, and Leathem 2020).

The literature notes distinct aspects that can lead to satisfaction within a chosen internship. Supervisor mentoring and support as well as support and encouragement from co-workers were reported in the literature to have a significant impact on internship satisfaction (D’abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018). Students also identified supervisor exhibited care, respect for student’s work, and scaffolded supervision as other impacts that highly influenced satisfaction. Knowledge

acquisition related to academic field, attention to intern learning, professional growth, and academic preparedness also had positive impacts on the internship experience (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018).

Tasks that were clearly defined and important to the company or area where the intern was assigned were more satisfying to interns. Interns preferred to complete a variety of tasks with regular check-ins and feedback (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018). Autonomy was reported to have both a positive and negative impact on the internship experience. Interns who were given tasks without clarity, feedback, and/or little to no supervision were more dissatisfied than interns who were given a clear task with autonomy and feedback (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018). Finding the balance between completely unsupervised and micromanaging of an intern increases satisfaction. Other factors that influence satisfaction include work hours, positive work experience, high expectations, locations, commute, and compensation (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018).

Internship satisfaction was based on what the employer and/or supervisor brought to the experience as well as student traits and perceptions. Student characteristics and perceptions that influenced satisfaction with an internship included positive attitude, self-initiative, perceived personal benefit, ability to find a full-time job, and the perceived importance of an internship to future career success (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018).

METHOD

We adopted a quantitative survey design. We drew data from two universities in the United States. The first was a large, private, urban, Catholic, predominantly white institution (PWI) located in the Midwest with about 11,500 students. It is classified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as a large, four-year, primarily residential doctoral university with high research activity. The second was a medium, private, urban Catholic, Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) located in the South with about 7,900 students. It is classified by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education as a four-year, primarily non-residential doctoral university. We chose to distribute the survey at these institutions in order to maximize variation in geographical context while also ensuring that students had many opportunities to participate in internship experiences.

Sample

We worked with institutional research leaders at the respective institutions to generate a random sample of one-third of the sophomores, juniors, and seniors at each institution. We sent the survey to 4,688 students. A total of 304 students replied to the survey (of which 190 were from the Midwest Catholic institution and 114 were from the Southern Catholic Institution), yielding a response rate of 6%.

Overwhelmingly the sample identified as female (68%), with fewer students identifying as male (25%) or non-binary/gender queer (1%). Five percent of students opted not to answer questions about their gender. In terms of generation status, 26% were first-generation students, while 69% identified as having one or both parents who attended university and attained a bachelor's degree. Five percent of students opted not to answer questions about their generational status. In terms of

race and ethnicity, white students comprised most of the sample (60%), with Latinx students (11%), Asian students (8%), Black students (7%), multiracial students (7%), and American Indian/Native American students (1%) comprising the remaining categories. Seven percent of students opted not to answer questions about their race and ethnicity. Regarding year in school, students reported being in their second year (20%), third year (20%), fourth year (38%), or fifth year or beyond (7%). Five percent of the sample opted not to answer the question about their year in school.

Survey

We developed the survey using literature related to students' reasons for pursuing internships and their experiences in internships—including perceptions of their relationship with their supervisor, outcomes of internships, and sense of belonging. We also included questions that pertained to students' demographics (year in school, generation status, gender, race and ethnicity, and social class). Our final survey included 74 items and was administered with skip logic through Qualtrics. We depict the relevant variable scales used in our analysis below.

Internship satisfaction

Internship satisfaction was a Likert-scale item that measured the extent to which students felt satisfied with their internships experience. The scale ranged from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied.

Generation status

Although existing literature provides indications that students' demographics matter little in their satisfaction with an internship, less information exists about the role of generation status and internship satisfaction. As higher education scholars and practitioners continue to strive to better understand the experiences of first-generation students, we believed it important to examine whether their generation status made a difference in their satisfaction, thus we included a variable indicating whether the student was first generation.

Supervisor care and trust

Based on the theme of this special issue and the broader context of multi-institutional scholars with whom we were working, we created a scale of supervisor care and trust from existing literature (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hussien and La Lopa 2018). This scale aimed to measure students' beliefs about the extent to which their supervisor cared for and trusted them. We conducted a principal components analysis on the scale, which yielded a six-item scale explaining 62.39% of the variance, had factor loadings ranging from .601 to .845, and a reliability of $\alpha = .874$. Included items measured the extent to which students reported feeling respected, appreciated, cared about, experienced flexibility and freedom, and had shared goals with their supervisor.

Sense of belonging

Defined as a feeling of being accepted and welcomed into a community, researchers and practitioners are gaining awareness of the importance of students experiencing a sense of belonging in their college experience. We adapted an existing three-item scale originally developed by Haussman, Ye, Schofield, and Woods (2009) to measure students' sense of belonging in the internship context. This scale has been used widely by Strayhorn (2015; 2018 and others to predict a sense of belonging in college. A principal components analysis yielded one scale that explained 88.46% of the variance, had factor loadings ranging from .949 to .931, and a reliability of $\alpha = .934$. Included items

measured the extent to which students felt a sense of belonging at their site, felt happy to be at their internship site, and felt part of the site's community. We believed that these three items captured the extent to which students felt welcomed into their internship site.

Contributors to sense of belonging

In addition to variables indicating whether students experienced a sense of belonging (Hausman, Schofield, and Woods 2007), we wanted to know more about what may have contributed to their sense or lack of belonging. Drawing on the literature and anecdotal conversations with students, we identified variables from our survey that we believed may contribute to students belonging. Among these variables were ratings of the extent to which students' internships led to opportunities for networking, increased confidence in pursuing other career opportunities, meaningful feedback on their performance from a supervisor, and opportunities to use career related skills.

ANALYSIS

We began our analysis by examining the descriptive statistics of the survey data, checking for missing data, assessing normality and multicollinearity, examining outliers, and conducting bivariate correlations of the variables. Then, we used hierarchical multiple regression to explore the research questions. Our first analysis, which addressed the first research question: "Is there a relationship between first-generation status and student satisfaction with their internship," examined the effect of students' generation status on their internship satisfaction. Then, we entered a second block, which included the sense of belonging scale and the supervisor care and trust scale, to answer the second question: "How is a supervisor's care and trust and a student's sense of belonging related to a student's satisfaction with their internship?" Finally, because sense of belonging was significant to students' satisfaction with their internship, we examined what variables correlated with a sense of belonging to answer our third question: "What experiences contribute to a student's sense of belonging?"

RESULTS

Is there a relationship between first-generation status and student satisfaction with their internship?

The null hypothesis of our first model, which included the first-generation variable, was that there would be no difference in internship satisfaction between first- and continuing-generation students. Indeed, the model was not significant, nor was the dummy-coded variable for first-generation status, as it explained less than one percent of the variation in students' internship satisfaction, $f(1, 92) = .01, p = .934$. We failed to reject the null hypothesis that there was no difference in internship satisfaction between first-generation and continuing-generation students. See Table 1, block one for further details.

Table 1. Regression analysis of first-generation status, supervisor care, and sense of belonging associated with students' satisfaction with their internships

Variable	Block one				Block two			
	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.
(constant)	4.44	.19			.88	.40		
First-generation status	.02	.22	.01		.14	.14	.07	
Supervis. care/trust					.02	.02	.11	
Sense of belonging					.23	.03	.70	**
R ²			.01				.59	
R ² Δ							.60	**

* $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$

How is a supervisor's care and trust and students' sense of belonging related to students' satisfaction with their internship?

The null hypothesis of the second block of the model was that there would be no relationship between students' internship satisfaction, their perceptions of having a caring and trusting supervisor, and their sense of belonging at their internship site. However, the addition of the scales for perceptions of supervisor care and trust and sense of belonging resulted in a significant change to the model, with the r-square change ($R^2\Delta$) = .60, $F\Delta(2, 90) = 67.01$, $p < .001$, which led us to partially reject our null hypothesis. The only significant variable in the second model was sense of belonging ($\beta = .70$), which indicates that students' sense of belonging at their internship site was related to their internship satisfaction (see Table 1, block two for additional detail). The final model, which examined the relationship between internship satisfaction, generation status, perceptions of supervisor care and trust, and sense of belonging accounted for 60% of the variation in internship satisfaction, $F(3, 90) = 44.68$, $p < .001$, with sense of belonging being the only variable to have a significant effect on students' internship satisfaction.

What experiences contribute to students' sense of belonging in their internship?

Because sense of belonging had a large and significant effect on students' internship satisfaction, we used correlation analysis to examine our data for clues as to what might help to foster students' sense of belonging. After identifying variables that were moderately to highly ($< .5$) correlated with sense of belonging—namely receiving frequent performance feedback from a supervisor, having the opportunity to use their professional skills, expanding their professional network, and gaining confidence to pursue other career opportunities—we conducted a multiple regression analysis to examine the strength of the relationship between the variables and sense of belonging. The model accounted for 43% of the variation in students' sense of belonging, $F(4, 79) = 15.12$, $p < .001$. Significant predictors of sense of belonging included opportunities to use career related skills, including communication, teamwork, problem solving, and leadership ($\beta = .34$) and gaining confidence to pursue future job opportunities ($\beta = .28$). See Table 2 for full numerical results.

Table 2. Regression analysis of factors related to students' internship experience associated with students' sense of belonging

Variable	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	5.04	2.04		*
Receive feedback	.16	.40	.05	
Career related skills	.28	.12	.34	*
Expand network	-.84	.84	-.10	
Confidence for future jobs	.78	.35	.28	*
R ²			.43	**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

LIMITATIONS

Although we believe our findings are important to unpacking the conditions that promote students' satisfaction with their internship experiences, there are limitations to our study. Like many studies in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic (Krieger et al. 2023), our response rate was lower than desired and the number of Latinx and male students was not representative of our institutional contexts. Despite our rigorous data collection plan, we may have coverage error in our sampling.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Is there a relationship between first-generation status and student satisfaction with their internship?

Current research illustrates that disparities remain in participation rates of first- and continuing-generation students in getting internships (Hora et al. 2019; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023). However, once students secure an internship, our study illustrates that satisfaction rates remain similar across the two demographic groups, a finding that is consistent with other demographics (Hora et al. 2019; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023).

How is a supervisor's care and trust and students' sense of belonging related to students' satisfaction with their internship?

Given the emerging evidence suggesting trust is important in fostering engaged learning (Moore 2023), we were surprised that there was not a stronger relationship between trust and care from a supervisor and students' satisfaction with their internship experience. Since internships and other work-integrated learning experiences often provide meaningful relationships and many opportunities to build trust with others, we wondered whether the supervisor relationship was less important in this context than building relationships with other interns, workers more broadly, and others with whom the student is working, which is already supported in the literature (D'abate, Youndt, and Wenzel 2017; Gupta, Burns, and Schiferl 2010; Hora et al. 2018; Hora et al. 2021; Hora et al. 2023; Hussien and La Lopa 2018). For example, extending the findings to student teaching, which is another work-integrated learning experience, students often center the relationships they build with the children they are teaching more than with their supervising teacher. On the other hand, the non-significant result may also be explained by our framing of supervisor care and trust. Had we framed the construct like that advanced by Felten, Forsyth, and Sutherland (2023) we would have focused more on the supervisor's "trust moves," namely, cognition, affect, identity, and values, as opposed to how the supervisor made the intern feel.

We were not surprised that students' sense of belonging was related to their internship satisfaction. Our results help to advance understanding about the importance of creating a sense of

belonging within the internship context. Perhaps unsurprising, since sense of belonging has already been found to contribute to students' ability to connect with others, execute help seeking behavior, and persist to graduation (Harper and Quaye 2007; Hausmann et al. 2009; Pittman and Richmond 2007; Stebleton, Soria, and Huesman 2014), our findings extend the importance of sense of belonging to broader learning contexts outside of the university, as internships sites often cross borders into students' social lives and work/career. Human beings naturally want to belong (Bentrim and Henning 2022). The need to belong extends beyond the university to one's future career. Students want to feel that they fit in and belong in their chosen field. Internship and work-experience are ways for students to determine their sense of belonging for their future careers (Bentrim and Henning 2022).

What experiences contribute to students' sense of belonging in their internships?

Our research points to elements in the internship space and work integrated space that may be critical in creating a sense of belonging. Aligned with calls from researchers to understand sense of belonging from a socio-ecological perspective (Johnson 2022), our research calls for internship supervisors, coordinators, and others charged with developing work-integrated learning to ensure that students are provided with meaningful opportunities to utilize and hone their professional skills while also gaining confidence for their future job prospects. Additional research is needed to know what other factors contribute to students' sense of belonging, particularly in the context of internships and other contexts outside the university where higher education administrators have less control. The results of this study also have practical implications for faculty, internship coordinators and supervisors, and work-integration and internship sites. First, internship coordinators should work with sites and supervisors to ensure they are attentive to and knowledgeable about the importance of nurturing a sense of belonging for their interns. Co-creating onboarding plans that enable interns to become part of the community will go a long way to help integrate the intern into the community, advancing their satisfaction. In addition, faculty and internship coordinators can work with internship supervisors to ensure that students are tasked with meaningful work that helps to advance their professional skills. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019), and significant in our analysis, were skills students most often report using in their internship (communication, leadership, problem solving, and teamwork) that in turn enhance their sense of belonging.

Some examples of tasks supervisors might assign to help students bring these skills to their internship sites and to hone them further include: being responsible for posting social media content (communication), engaging with clients or customers and responding to issues that arise (leadership; problem solving), developing or enacting data systems for goods or information delivery (leadership, problem solving, teamwork), assisting with conference or event planning (leadership, problem solving, teamwork, communication), and/or attending meetings and providing feedback (communication; problem solving). Finally, faculty, internship coordinators and supervisors, and internship sites should be mindful of providing confidence-building opportunities that encourage students to pursue future job opportunities. Activities might include helping students reflect on their experiences and how they relate to their future livelihood. In addition, it would be helpful to assist students in thinking about how they might discuss their internship work in interviews or on a resume. Internship supervisors also might think about how their sites could provide opportunities for students to gain a broader understanding of other functions that exist in their context, in case students want to explore other types of work in the field.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study begins to establish the importance of a sense of belonging to the internship context, researchers should continue to extend the work to other work-integrated learning experiences. In addition, more research is needed to understand what factors contribute to students' sense of belonging in these contexts. The next step might be to conduct qualitative work with students related to their internship experiences to hone in on what helps students develop a sense of belonging in their internships and how it connects to internship satisfaction.

As postsecondary institutions continue to create and scale conditions for meaningful learning, extending these conditions to broader contexts is important to fully realizing their benefits. This study provides evidence that when students feel a connection with their internship site, it deepens their satisfaction with their experience. Further, the study offers guidance on the experiences that help students to cultivate that sense of connection.

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ETHICS

Research was approved through the Marquette University and University of the Incarnate Word ethical review processes.

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