



NEWS - STUDENT VOICE

A Need to Succeed: What Students Want and Get from Internships

Students evaluate internships and experiential learning opportunities, including virtual roles that the pandemic made more widely available, and how stronger partnerships and other efforts would help.

By Melissa Ezarik - September 23, 2022



Violet Schuttler, a graduate of Franklin Pierce University, in rural New Hampshire, has a good story to tell about how the first of her three internships—the only off-campus one—came about.

When respondents to the latest Student Voice survey were asked to identify how they heard about or got their most recent internship, the campus career center, a professor or a job search website emerged as students' most common answers, at 14 percent each. Indeed, Schuttler's second and third experiences, involving production work on a NHPBS station show and video editing for a political caucus, were found via a professor mentor.

And her first internship? In the fall of 2019—when Schuttler dreamed of breaking into the fashion industry—the owner of Surrell Accessories was dining out at a nearby pizzeria, where Schuttler worked. As her shift ended and she was leaving the parking lot, an unfortunate—yet ultimately fortunate—thing happened. “I backed up into his car,” she explains. When he handed her a business card, she saw he led a fashion-related company and remarked, “‘That’s so cool.’ He basically offered me the internship right there.”

Later, Schuttler had to convince herself that it truly had happened. “Did I really hit someone’s car and now I’m getting an internship? Where else am I going to get this opportunity in rural New Hampshire?” Accepting the offer wound up allowing her to swim as a big fish in a small pond, because soon after she started, the person handling e-commerce and Surrell’s digital presence left. “It kind of left everything in my hands,” says Schuttler, who continued working at Surrell part-time during school. After graduating from Franklin Pierce in 2021 with a digital media design degree, Surrell became her first full-time employer as well.

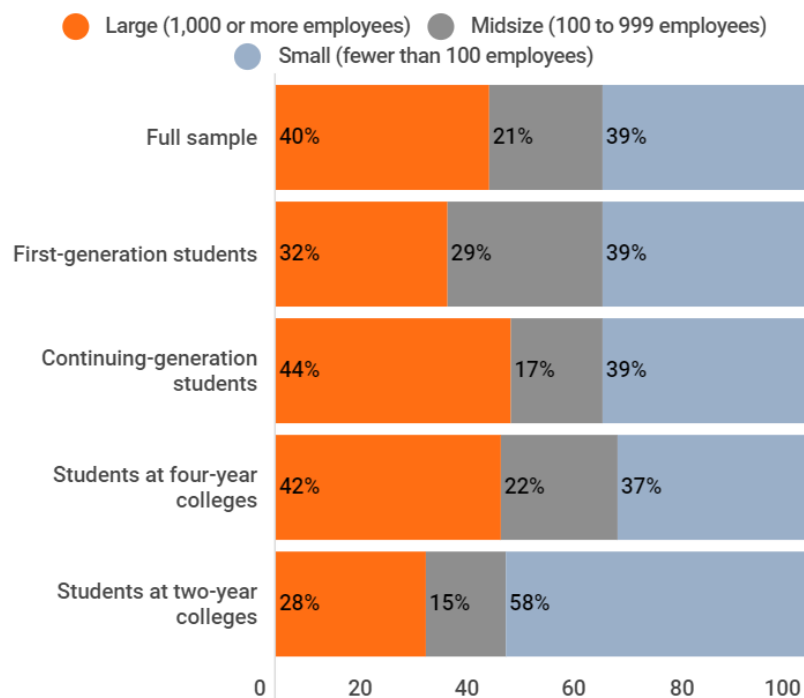
Now Schuttler is back at Franklin Pierce, pursuing her M.B.A. while working as an assistant video producer for the university's Fitzwater Center for Communication and reporting to Director Kristen Nevious—the very professor who had helped Schuttler find two internships in a more conventional way.

While virtual and hybrid-format internships existed before COVID-19, the pandemic has made formerly unconventional opportunities more of a norm. For example, a student on the East Coast “can be doing a virtual internship with a company on the West Coast, getting an experience you could not have had if it wasn't for this medium,” says Kelley Bishop, associate provost for career services at George Washington University.

When Bishop and colleagues saw virtual internships emerging, they had concerns. “Is the student settling for less?” they would ask. Virtual internships tend to be project focused, with limited personal interactions in the organization and often missing those “serendipitous conversations in the workplace,” he says, adding that any expectations of getting back to normal post-COVID aren't happening. “Your full-time job when you leave college may be virtual from the start, and that may be what works for you. It's a brave new world, and we're all feeling our way through it.”

Company Size

What size company or organization students interned at most recently



For students, that can mean trying out multiple formats to build skills, experience and perspective. Among the 2,116 college students and spring 2022 grads responding to the latest Student Voice survey on internships and experiential learning, 1,287 have had at least one of these experiences: 59 percent an in-person internship, 54 percent either a virtual or hybrid internship, and 25 percent some sort of experiential learning outside the classroom as part of a course.

Conducted by *Inside Higher Ed* and *College Pulse* from Aug. 14 to 17 with support from Kaplan, the survey reveals that some demographic groups, including first-generation college students, are less likely to have had these opportunities, less likely to earn money and/or college credit when they have the experiences, and less

likely to praise their institution for internship-related efforts. Some better-news highlights include that:

- Sixty percent of those who had internships were completing them this summer, including 43 percent of recent grads, an indication of current opportunity availability.
- The vast majority of students see value in internships, with 85 percent saying that people pursuing their type of career need at least one such experience.
- The most important desired internship outcome, selected by 22 percent of students, is to develop specific skills needed for a career. The next top response is growing knowledge in an area of passion, with women twice as likely as men to identify it as most important.
- Fifty-nine percent of students would give their college an A or B for efforts to help in finding internships, and 57 percent would assign an A or B to their college for helping to support student success in these experiences. Nearly two-thirds of students with experiential learning opportunities

say they were very helpful in preparing them for a future job, which for community college students (n=366) jumps to 86 percent.

The survey also explores actions students want colleges to take related to finding and succeeding in internships. For the former, students place the most value on stronger partnerships with companies to offer internships, with third-party organizations that help in finding internships and with companies to develop pathways to hire former interns. Most valued on the latter is financial assistance for students who can't afford to take on unpaid internships, guidance on networking and workshops on succeeding in virtual and in-person opportunities.

Where the Internships Are

Students find internships in a variety of ways, as professors teaching classes in which such experiences are embedded know well. At Wheaton College in Massachusetts, for example, which touts its [Compass curriculum](#) and the [Wheaton Edge](#) program for connecting academic interests to career success, sophomores complete a real-world experience such as an experiential course, which can include completing an internship as part of the course, and all students are guaranteed access to internship funding.

For a fall course Karen McCormack has taught, students understand at registration time in the spring that they must secure an internship by the first week of classes. "Some students sign up for the course and may have already been in contact with an organization, and others reach out to career services staff or faculty, or family members, and start making connections," says McCormack, a professor of sociology and the associate provost for academic administration and faculty affairs.

"The start-up costs are high, in terms of time," she says of the need for faculty members to teach such courses, which rely on external partners. "But once you have done this a bunch of times, it becomes much easier." In her administrator role, she sees herself as a connector, helping people in academic departments, alumni or those leading offices on campus, for example, to see possibilities for collaborating. It helps, she adds, when internships and experiential learning fit into the institution's strategic plan, as it does at Wheaton.

The career center at Denison University, in Ohio, provides opportunities for students to collaborate on problem solving for companies through the [Denison Edge](#) facility, located 30 minutes from campus in downtown Columbus. Through in-person, virtual and hybrid programs, the extension office helps liberal arts students at the university, graduates and even neighboring colleges' students to acquire career-specific skills and experience. "We want students to launch, and we want it to be in the areas they find of value," says Eric Lloyd, executive director of Denison Edge. "The sooner they launch, the sooner they can make an impact." For a recent project, a team of 14 students from Denison and three nearby institutions whose academic interests ranged from art history and photography to global commerce, data analytics and computer science worked with the city on an affordable housing initiative. "The city presented stats, resources and challenges, and students did research over six weeks," Lloyd explains. Working from the Denison Edge facility but also engaging with community and city leaders, plus various mentors and coaches, the students provided recommendations that the city is now reviewing.

About four in 10 Student Voice survey respondents say they heard about their most recent internship directly from a department or individual at their institution, with other possibilities being a friend, family member or job search or networking website.

Tracey E. Dowling and Li P. Pon, colleagues at Florida State University—which made engagement in an internship or other type of experiential learning a graduation requirement in 2019—believe more students surveyed may actually have gotten their internship in part due to the career center. "They will say they got it through networking, but it was via a career center event or program," says Dowling, program director for experiential learning.

Pon, who is senior assistant director of that program, has always encouraged students to seek multiple internships. "It's low commitment, a short period of time," she says. In her experience, including having

previously served as internship coordinator at Tallahassee Community College, mandates are necessary to get many students engaged. “First-generation and some continuing-generation students really only get motivated when it’s something that’s required,” she says, although at most institutions “ultimately internships are an elective.”

First-generation students, particularly those at community colleges, are less likely to have had any internship or to have had an in-person internship, compared to continuing-generation students or first-gen peers at four-year colleges. In addition, the full sample of community college students is more likely to have interned, at least most recently, at a small company—58 percent compared to 37 percent of those at four-year institutions. Virtual opportunities may be closing that gap, though. Dowling has found, for example, that large multinational employers with long-standing internship programs now understand “they’re getting a more diverse pool by having virtual options.”

Company size and internship type aside, many colleges are taking on greater roles in connecting students to opportunities. “It’s the responsibility of a higher ed institution to ensure that students get an internship,” says Tanja Hinterstoisser, assistant vice president for career design and employer outreach at Champlain College, in Vermont, which requires a four-year career-readiness education program with milestones that must be completed each year.

While some institutions will basically just help with a résumé, “the search piece and the interview prep are all crucial components to the satisfaction and success of an internship experience,” she says. One way Champlain has expanded the realm of possibilities has been embedding internships in study abroad programs. “Other places offer it but focus more on living abroad rather than working abroad. We combine those,” she says. Another action involves converting work-study and other student jobs on campus to internships. At Champlain, that can mean a full-semester internship, or a project that becomes a micro-internship, based on the supervisor’s input, Hinterstoisser says.

As part of the four-year [FlightPath](#) program at Hartwick College, in New York, sophomores are required to attend a success summit that teaches networking and interviewing skills while assisting in career exploration, and then students travel to major cities, visit businesses and tour alumni workplaces to make connections at a Hawk Career Hop. “It’s all about skills development,” says Peter Bennett, director of career development. “You’ll be hired based on that and your passion, whether you show up.” During their junior year, all students are matched with an on- or off-campus work experience, which can include an internship, research or a fellowship, or student teaching.

Experiences and Outcomes

Colleges are increasingly taking more responsibility for ensuring students get something tangible from internship experiences. Nearly six in 10 Student Voice respondents got paid for their most recent internship, with science majors most likely to collect a paycheck—63 percent compared to half of social sciences majors and half of arts/humanities majors.

Gender differences exist as well, with 75 percent of men getting paid compared to 63 percent of women. At Wheaton, where women make up two-thirds of enrollment, internship pay is more equitable, perhaps because of deliberate efforts that included analysis of who is choosing to advance from 100- to 200-level courses in STEM majors, and who is encouraged to continue, says McCormack. Maybe the gap from the survey relates to men pursuing fields where internships are more likely to pay.

Nearly one in five respondents earned neither money nor college credit. That picture is even more bleak for first-generation students at public institutions or community colleges. McCormack says this might be due to pressure students feel to get experience, no matter how. Or with virtual experiences, maybe they think the costs of accepting an unpaid internship are lower. “It’s really critical that students do get paid,” says Bishop from George Washington. “A decade ago, many industries didn’t pay just because they didn’t have to. A lot more government agencies are now paying, for example. That’s necessary to get the breadth of talent.”

Dowling and Pon find themselves doing “a lot of myth-busting with employers,” Dowling says. “Employers think the student has to earn academic credit *or* get paid. You can earn credit *and* get paid. Really!” Florida State partners are shown data on paid and unpaid experiences based on job function and reminded that even offering a stipend will diversify the candidate pool. Another tactic is to suggest discussing, with corporate legal counsel, liabilities involved if an unpaid intern got injured on the job.

Reflecting on their time on the job for the Student Voice survey, students who had virtual experiences (n=385) generally struggled more than those who had in-person or hybrid ones (n=905). Virtual internship veterans are less likely to say they could network with professionals who might assist in a future job search (29 percent compared to 38 percent), more likely to say the experience made them think about pursuing a different type of career (32 percent versus 26 percent) and more likely to find it difficult to tell if they want to pursue that kind of work (25 percent versus 12 percent).

Difficulty in knowing if the work in a virtual internship is a good fit was also assessed in an [August 2021 Student Voice survey](#), when one-third agreed it was. “There’s no substitute for in person,” says Bennett. “It really does provide a full view into a company, into a culture, into the people, into the energy.” But in year two of the pandemic, he sees “some upping of the game—treating interns as a cohort, providing happy hours for them, trying to make it as close to in person as possible.” Still, he’ll find himself needing to remind students to be professional during virtual interactions. “You may not physically be there, [but] judgments are being made, observations are being made.”

Lloyd from Denison has also seen virtual internship improvements. “Companies realize that part of their future could center around remote work, so they have to create a great experience,” he says. The amount of effort placed on offering quality virtual internships often depends on how the company engages in remote work as an employer, he adds.

A Student Voice respondent from a private university in Georgia wrote that a virtual internship experience became simply self-learning. “It just doesn’t prepare you for real-world experiences like the office environment, commuting, living independently [and having] face-to-face collaborative team meetings.” Dowling has found that “when students are unhappy, a lot of it has to do with preconceived expectations for how the internship should be supported and how the learning should go.” Conversations will revolve around the kind of environment the individual needs for success.

“The shining stars in the virtual internship opportunity arena,” she notes, are companies that can ask remote employees how to better ensure connections are being made. As for becoming full-time remote employees after graduation, one in four survey respondents would be extremely interested—a finding that’s nearly identical for those who have had virtual internships.

Looking at the present, between 60 and 70 percent of respondents identified five key outcomes for internships (out of a list of 19): developing specific skills needed for my career, developing general workplace skills (chosen by 83 percent of first-generation community college students), growing knowledge in a subject area I’m passionate about, gaining knowledge about how the industry works, and having a professional experience to include on a résumé.

Only half selected earning money as a desired internship outcome. “This generation clearly recognizes and is thirsty for developing skills that will be helpful as they move through their career,” says Bennett. “There’s an optimism. They might not be as focused on landing that job right away versus their parents; they’re picking up skills for the long view.”

While completing internships at Franklin Pierce, Schuttler found herself focused on getting used to the work environment and considering her best-fit company type. “If you have an internship experience that kind of makes you realize, ‘This isn’t what I want to do,’ you can figure out what you do want to do, what your values are,” she says.

At Champlain, “we encourage every student to use the internship as an experimentation time,” says Hinterstoisser, adding that interest in work type tends to come before organization type. And because students are being prepared from the first semester of college to think about potential internships, “there is already a maturity piece in the decision-making process.”

Internship Support Assessment and Objectives

The Student Voice survey asked how well colleges help students find and succeed in internships. One in five say their institutions would earn an A on the internship-search front, with nearly four in 10 grading that effort a B. Grades on the success front are similar, with just slightly fewer students giving a B.

At many institutions, opportunities for learning outside the classroom are continually evolving.

An example is the micro-internship. As Bishop explains, George Washington just began experimenting with these, as a way to “whet the appetite” for a particular type of work or help a student with more focused goals experience a related field or practice a particular skill set. The option, available via a [Parker Dewey organization platform](#), offers a way to gain paid professional experience while taking classes, during a break or within a few spare hours.

On the flip side of the internship spectrum might be the formal programs run by Fortune 500 companies, which typically end in a job offer but are hypercompetitive to win, Bishop says. Such opportunities may require coaching on applying but also perspective to ease student worries when the job is virtual, Dowling says. Students with older technology or unstable internet might not even apply. “If you’re doing a Deloitte internship, they’re going to send you a computer and make sure you have Wi-Fi,” she will say. And students might need reassurance that they would be a competitive candidate.

Other students may need to talk through desired large corporation opportunities to determine they’re not in alignment with their interests, explains Pon of Florida State. Bringing in past interns to discuss an amazing experience with a small company (that, for example, allowed a support pet or provided free lunch) has helped students get jazzed about other possibilities. “Suddenly all students are asking about that company,” she says. Specific supports and programs identified in the Student Voice survey include stronger partnerships with outside organizations and companies, as well as guidance on networking, goal setting and succeeding in in-person and virtual internships.

Students who don’t have a reliable way of commuting by car or public transportation to an internship (n=591) are nearly 20 percentage points more likely to want their college to provide a way to get to an internship site than the full sample. “It’s up to us from a career center standpoint to have conversations and leverage resources to get students there” when location is an issue, says Lloyd from Denison. First-generation community college students, meanwhile, tend to want more types of supports than the full sample or than first-gen students at four-year institutions.

Expanding internship opportunities and outcomes in various ways boils down to preparing students for next steps. “Our president keeps talking about Champlain helping students be ready: ready for work, ready for life, ready to make a difference,” says Hinterstoisser. Every higher ed institution, she adds, should be “getting students ready to enter the world of work, but also with the life skills to be successful, resilient, financially savvy [and able to] maneuver a turbulent job market. Those are gifts an institution could give to students.”

Coming soon to Student Voice: a community college system chancellor reflects on internship experiences for this student population, plus more on transportation and other supports needed to ensure more students can pursue and learn from internships and other experiential learning opportunities.