

5 Enhancing Employability: Internship Opportunities and Outcomes for International Students

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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive labor market, the popularity of internships as a way to foster career readiness among college students is a growing imperative within higher education. However, there exist barriers to internship participation among international students, due to a misalignment between students' needs and the career services offered to them. This qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with fifteen international students to explore access to internship opportunities and outcomes of their internship participation at a U.S. higher education institution, drawing upon intersectionality theory in higher education to examine the interview data. Findings show that career services, visa regulations, and students' internship opportunities influence their employability. The chapter concludes with policy recommendations that better serve international students' career paths.

Keywords: employability, labor market, international students, internships, higher education immigration policies, visa regulations

Introduction

The demand for highly skilled workers in the U.S. has risen, which has increased the demand for undergraduate and graduate degrees, even though the cost of education is at its highest in 40 years (Perna, 2010; Perna and Jones, 2013). U.S. higher education institutions rely on international students to infuse their tuition dollars into the economy as a means to generate revenue. During the 2019-2020 academic year international students contributed a total of \$38.7 billion to the U.S. economy (IIE, 2021). Institutions of higher education also recognize that if they want to attract top quality students to their programs, they must market their degree programs as leading to a promising career. From the perspective of international students, when they choose to enroll in degree programs abroad, their primary reason for doing so is to secure a rewarding career upon graduation (Gopal, 2016a; Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Much like the expectations of domestic students, they assume that their U.S. education will provide them with the skills,

resources, learning experiences, and networks that will increase their employability (Brown, 2004; Carnevale, Smith, Melton, and Price, 2015; Carnevale and Strohl, 2013). Successfully transitioning to the labor market is critical for students to earn stable income, provide for their families, and repay student debt in their home country.

Given that international students have the added advantage of their international experience, intercultural competence, and often speak more than one language, they believe that these cumulative strengths will give them the upper hand with employers (Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016). Internships are widely considered beneficial co-curricular opportunities that help students acquire real-world professional experience and become better prepared for their transition to the workforce. However, many international students fall under a catch-22 predicament of trying to gain work experience, but visa regulations limit their ability to work (Collum, 2019; Migration Policy Institute, 2020). When they do find opportunities, they are few and far between. As a result, students commonly perceive that they are getting less support from their institution (Gopal, 2016a; Gopal, 2016b; Veerasamy and Ammigan, 2021). O'Malley (2021) states that many international students feel that while they are paying more for their education, they receive less support services and return on their investment as more resources are allocated to domestic students.

International students need guidance exploring internship opportunities, accessing pre-completion work authorization, and mapping out their career trajectory under strict visa regulations. In navigating these realities, university career centers play a key role in preparing students to enter the workforce. Career services staff provide one-on-one and group sessions, orientations, workshops, career advice, and networking sessions that link local employers with students (Kisch, 2014). They work closely with international student services staff, who manage students' visa compliance and employment authorization such as curricular practical training (CPT) and pre- and post- optional practical training (OPT) programs, which permit students to work off campus (Kisch, 2014). However, much of international students' efforts revolve around complying with visa regulations. Many students believe that their institution could do more to promote their career related needs. Current research generally focuses on the internship experiences of domestic students (Kuh, 2008; Moss-Pech, 2021), the financial benefits of international students (Kisch, 2014; Shulte and Choudaha, 2014), or the lack of resources devoted to international students in general (Gopal and Streitwieser, 2016; Morgan Poteet and Gomez, 2015). Very little attention has been paid to the intersectionality of international students' experience in accessing experiential work opportunities

(Ruhanen, Robinson, and Breakey, 2013; Tremblay 2012; Yasmeeen and Gabriel, 2002). This qualitative study investigates the outcomes of internship participation among international students at one U.S. higher education institution drawing upon intersectionality theory in higher education and addresses the following research question: What are the experiences of international master's students in accessing internship opportunities and their outcomes of internship participation?

Literature Review

Access to higher education in the U.S. is framed as the key to social mobility, economic mobility, and financial prosperity (Curiale, 2009). For international students, earning a degree is an important stepping-stone to a successful career. The internship experience has become an important co-curricular element of earning a degree, and a cutting edge curriculum provides an advantage to an already competitive labor market. This has led to growing pressure on higher education institutions to cultivate students' "employability" (Brown, 2004; Tomlinson, 2017), and experiential learning opportunities have become a means to enhance student success. This acumen for innovation is one of the factors that often draws international students to the U.S. to pursue their education, believing that there will be a return on investment on their effort (Ruhanen et al., 2013). Considering the large population of international students that enroll in higher education institutions in the U.S. (Migration Policy Institute, 2020), it is necessary to explore the factors impacting their access to experiential learning opportunities.

Employability

Getting an education and the notion of employability were once thought to be two separate goals. In recent years, the labor market has since become more competitive, leading to the demand by employers for students to already have "experience", and the ability to "hit the ground running" (Gribble, Rahimi, and Blackmore, 2017). This has caused an increased demand by students to engage in 'real world' work experience during their degree program to develop the skills needed by employers (Gribble et al., 2017). According to a longitudinal study of college internships, graduates reported shorter search times after completing one or more internships (Chen, Wolfgram, Gopal, Rodriguez, Dueños, and Colston, and Hora, 2021). Higher education institutions recognize the value for students to be able to create networks within their field for future employment (McMurray and Niens, 2012; Gribble et al., 2017) and have begun to devise programs to increase the employability

of their students (Helyer and Lee, 2014). While a body of literature exists surrounding internship study and underrepresented students, scholarship is slowly gaining traction around international student research and their employment outcomes (Berquist, Hall, Morris-Lange, Shields, Stern, and Tran, 2017; Gopal, 2006b; Migration Policy Institute, 2020; Shen and Herr, 2004). The literature often points to the priority of aligning co-curricular programs to experiential learning opportunities, but many international students struggle to secure internship placements (Berquist et al., 2017; Gribble et al., 2017; Shen and Herr, 2004).

Internships and Domestic Students

Domestic students undertaking internships report promising impacts on their academic pursuits, which are widely discussed in the literature (Chen et al., 2021; Curiale, 2010; Hora, Chen, Parrot, Her, 2020; Kuh, 2008). Research presented in the field outlines the importance of internship study and the benefits it has on both students and employers (Chen et al., 2021; Kuh, 2008); the professional experience and networks that enable domestic students to apply their classroom knowledge to on-the-job situations (Curiale, 2010; Moss-Pech, 2021); and the fact that employers have a steady influx of student employees (Chen et al., 2021; Kuh, 2008; Moss-Pech, 2021). Other researchers have focused on the dramatic increase of internships and domestic students' academic and career success (Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, and Pascarella, 2016; Kuh, 2008). In a longitudinal study by Kilgo et al. (2015), high-impact practices such as internships had positive effects on student success. However, there are very few studies discussing high impact practices through internships among international students who account for a growing share of all U.S. higher education institutions (Migration Policy Institute, 2020; Poteet and Gomez, 2015; Ruhanen et al., 2013; Yasmeen and Gabrielle, 2002).

Inequities of Internships

A considerable amount of the literature expresses the importance of internships as an extension of classroom learning, but evidence suggests that internship programs are not available to all students and many constraints exist for international students around compensation and mentorship (Kuh, 2008; Perlin, 2012; Ruhanen et al., 2013). Curiale (2009) and Perlin (2012) point out that unpaid internships lead to lower salaries after graduation and involve more clerical duties, while paid student interns have higher salaries and spend more time working on professional tasks. McHugh (2017) and Hora, Chen, Perrot, and

Her (2020) argue that unpaid internships disenfranchise low-income, first-generation, and minority college students – including international students – because it strains their financial well-being. For international students, internship inequities manifest around gaining the necessary work authorization. For instance, international students must be approved for CPT or OPT work authorization by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and abide by the specific regulations set forth by each program. Needless to say, unpaid internships are a complicated space for international students. If they undertake an unpaid internship and it does not fall under the Department of Labor (DOL) laws or the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and it is determined that the internship should have been paid employment, the student will have violated their immigration status and risk being deported—whereas this risk is not applicable to domestic students (Department of Labor, 2018). These work restrictions add a complicated dimension that often constrain international students’ ability to gain work experience and/or generate an income.

Visa Regulations

Much of the literature points to the benefits of recruiting international students, but once they arrive at their host institution, they are frequently reminded of their visa restrictions and the ways in which they need to comply with their F-1 student status through the Student Exchange and Visitor (SEVIS) program such as continual enrollment as a full time student during the duration of their studies and not exceeding more than twenty hours per week of on campus work (Poteet and Gomez, 2015; Gopal, 2016). Additionally, international students – and interns in general – are vulnerable because under the FLSA, interns are not considered employees. Therefore, how their employer classifies students’ employment status is crucial to their labor rights (Department of Labor, 2018; Henders, 2013; Moskal, 2017). Other issues described in the literature are around post graduation employment and work authorization as there is the widespread perception among employers that the process of hiring international students is too risky, expensive, and complicated (Blackmore et al., 2014; Gopal, 2016). Employers are also deterred from employing international students post graduation due to the cost, complexity, backlog, and uncertainty of H1-B visa processing times (Gribble et al., 2017; Moskal, 2017).

Internship Benefits and Outcomes

The benefits of internships are often discussed in the literature on work-based learning, although students’ labor market outcomes of internship

participation are mixed. Perlin (2012) points out that on the one hand, the context of the internship matters in terms of the extent to which students can benefit in their post graduation job search, because they provide students with valuable social connections. On the other hand, they do not contribute to practical learning. Such dichotomies in the scholarship challenge the idea that internships are always a promising endeavor. Numerous studies have focused on other aspects of internship participation, including influencing students' career decisions (Perna, 2010; Perlin, 2012); work ethic (Kilgo et al. 2015); perceptions of their employment traits (Chen et al., 2021); and studies that document positive outcomes for students (Hora et al., 2017). However, only a handful of scholars discuss the effects of internships on students, except for Ocampo and colleague's (2020) study on the impact of internship participation on students' level of career adaptability among 173 undergraduate students in the field of hotel and restaurant management in China. Moreover, although a lot of attention has been given to internship outcomes among Black and Hispanic students, there is insufficient research on the internship experiences of international students. This is surprising considering there is a high demand among international students to obtain work experience in order to get a leg up in today's competitive labor market (Ruhanen, Robinson, and Breakey, 2013); and more importantly, it is projected that "due to the increasing presence of international students" across the nation, they will play a significant role in the growth of the U.S. economy over the next 15 years" (Migration Policy Institute, 2020, p. 3).

Conceptual Framework: Intersectionality Theory

To account for the experiences of international students requires a framework that explores the ways in which power, nationalism, and other inequities constrain international students. Intersectionality theory is an ideal lens in which to examine their experiences as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how international students' temporary visa status intersects with their access to internship opportunities and employment (Poteet and Gomez, 2015). Intersectionality theory is a conceptual lens that emerged from feminist legal theory and critical race studies (Crenshaw, 1991). Its analytical focus relies on the complex nature of the human experience, with attention to the social factors, identities, and ideologies that shape peoples' experiences (Nuñez, 2014; Wolfgram, Vivona, and Akram, 2020).

Intersectionality has been used as a theory, concept, framework, methodology, perspective, and political strategy (Wolfgram et al., 2020; Hora, Wolfgram, Huerta, Lee, Gopal, 2022). Collins and Chepp

(2013) describe intersectionality as the culmination of several ideas and practices “that maintain that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and similar phenomena cannot be analytically understood in isolation from one another” and “these constructs signal an intersecting constellation of power relationships that produce unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups positioned within them” (Collins and Chepp, 2013, p. 59-60). An intersectionality analysis is particularly sensitive to how an individual’s specific social positioning can portray them as being disadvantaged or privileged (Crenshaw, 1991; Wolfgram et al., 2020).

Many studies have employed intersectionality as a way to correct issues in education research that “situate students’ identity and lived experience along a one-dimensional continuum, which not only is harmful to this population, but can stifle higher education researchers’ understanding and accuracy of problems that exist within this field of study” (Museus and Griffin, 2011, p. 5). It is equally important to situate experiences within a larger system of oppression to disrupt deficit thinking that pervades aspects of education research (Nunez, 2014; Wolfgram et al., 2020; Hora et al., 2022) . The increase in student mobility complicates ways of how one’s visa status poses barriers to their academic success and exclusion from internship opportunities and other labor opportunities (Poteet and Gomez, 2015). Therefore, an intersectionality lens is drawn upon to unpack international students’ experiences.

Research Method

Study Site

State University (SU) is a pseudonym for the research site, which is an urban university located on the Eastern part of the U.S. SU serves large numbers of diverse international students, which is why this site was chosen for the research study. It has an overall student population of approximately 27,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The student body is predominantly White (46%), international (33%), Asian (10%), Black or African American (8%), followed by Hispanic or Latin (3%). Over 50 countries of international students are represented at SU, with the majority of the international students coming from China, India, and South Korea. The male-female breakdown is 60% women and 40% men. The largest age group of international students is in the 18-25 age range (30%); however, students 30 years and over consist of 26% of the population. The most popular degrees at SU among international students are computer science, economics, statistics, business administration, and engineering.

Participants

Recruitment announcements were sent through SU's international office and across campus departments. A total of fifteen international students from China, India, Iran, Africa, and the Caribbean self selected to participate in this study. Of these participants, seven are female and eight are male. The students were enrolled in various disciplines including business, biochemistry, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, Math, and Biology Science. The criteria for participation in the study included: (1) being a second year international master's student nearing graduation; (2) completion of an internship, either paid or unpaid; (3) approval to undertake curricular practical training (CPT); and (4) approval for optional practical training (OPT).

Method

The researcher used a qualitative methodology to explore access to internship opportunities and outcomes of international students' internship participation. This IRB approved study involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen international masters students. The interview length ranged from 120-180 minutes in duration, which were recorded, transcribed, and member checked by participants for accuracy. The interview protocol included questions about students' background, perceptions of their internships, and career goals. All of the students in the study had undertaken an internship. An inductive and deductive analysis was conducted of the interview data to identify patterns and themes (Creswell, 2002; Creswell, 2003). This involved a line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts noting instances of students' experience that related to the literature and to the conceptual framework (Creswell, 2003). MAXQDA was used to explore the codes across the interview transcripts. Moving back and forth between the transcripts and codes, the findings emerged during this iterative process. In presenting the results, students' experiences are situated at the heart of the analyses with the hope of informing career service professionals and other campus support services to develop more access to internship opportunities.

Findings

Career Services

Several international students reported that the level of service provided to them could be improved. They explained that many of the advisors in the career services office were not knowledgeable about internship opportunities and referred them back to their academic department or

Table 1 Demographic Information

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Major</i>
Hafiz	M	India	Mechanical Engineering
Mark	M	China	Mechanical Engineering
Sophie	F	China	Math and Statistics
Shen	M	China	Computer Science
Rivika	F	India	Business
Isabelle	F	Iran	Chemical Engineering
Julia	F	Africa	Biochemistry
Manuel	M	Caribbean	Biology Science
Joy	F	Caribbean	Biology Science
Ravi	M	India	Math and Statistics
Nathan	M	India	Electrical Engineering
Tarik	M	Iran	Business
Roshan	M	Iran	Chemical Engineering
Sheryl	F	Africa	Computer Science
Rosa	F	Iran	Electrical Engineering

to do a “Google search”. For example, Sheryl explained that she needed support finding an internship in computer science:

I am in the last year of my program. I wanted to explore my options for internships because I know I will be more competitive when I graduate if I have one. I made an appointment with career services to plan ahead. When I asked what companies hire international students the advisor said to do a Google search for employers, and handed me a list of companies who hired interns in the past. I spent hours researching the list, and only two organizations offered internships to international students.

Sheryl felt “frustrated” that she was not offered more assistance and asked a fellow international student for help.

Similarly, Isabelle felt discouraged by her search: “I traveled across the city to attend an employer recruiting event recommended by the career center. It turns out that I wasted my time. They don’t hire international students for federal jobs”. Manuel recounted a similar

experience: “There is a system called ‘Handshake’ and I was told to look for internships on this site. But many of the jobs are expired. The career services staff do not update the system regularly”. Rosa attended a few career services workshops, but she said she mainly relies on her network of friends for guidance and pointed out, “I have Iranian friends who graduated from the electrical engineering program last year. I feel comfortable asking them for help because they know more than the career staff. They are not international students so how can they help me?” Hafiz had a similar response and explained, “We have weaker networks compared to domestic students and we have to rely on our social networks for other means of career searches”.

Visa Regulations

When asked to describe their experience applying for internships, a few students talked about complex visa regulations. They explained that they have to gain approval from their international student office before applying for CPT and OPT programs. Isabelle said, “applying for CPT and OPT requires working with both the career services office and the international student office. Students can get paid employment experience, but it has to directly relate to the degree program”. Hafiz noted, “I had to get a letter from my employer to do the CPT program. But, if you are not offered a job, you can’t do CPT. I got lucky”. He went on to explain, “international students can work more than 20 hours per week. But if you work full time, you won’t be eligible for OPT which is what everyone waits for”. Rosa indicated that most international students wait to be eligible for OPT “but you have to be at the end of your program and graduating. The international office has to authorize it. The application fee is very expensive. And, there is no guarantee you will be approved”.

Students also expressed much anxiety even before looking for an internship. Joy recounted that, “You need to strategize or you’re dead in the water. They don’t tell you this. Some types of industries are more likely to sponsor than others and you have to design your career around this reality”. Nathan explained, “I worked hard to find an internship related to my degree. Work authorization is strict. These limitations force international students to focus their academic path to specific careers, especially if they want to stay in the U.S. after graduation”. He added that,

For people in STEM, it’s easier than other disciplines. A lot of international students choose to go into certain fields so that they can get the internship and get sponsorship after they graduate. It’s a lot of anxiety and uncertainty that U.S. students don’t have to deal with.

Tarik expressed much concern about finding an internship after his paperwork took too long to process: “You have to apply six months in advance to get the OPT and I lost my internship because they couldn’t wait. The employer still needs the work to get done. You know?”

Employability

When international students were asked about the outcome of participating in an internship, they reported many benefits such as the opportunity to apply what they learned in the classroom to “real world hands-on experience”. Quite a few students explained that getting on the job training in their field gave them confidence and they felt good about their future career. Manuel said,

I was lucky to get exposure to research and development in my organization. I had conducted similar work in the lab on campus. I also worked with a great team and was assigned an internship mentor. I really enjoyed the work and being able to get industry experience.

Similarly, Rivika shared, “Being in a new country, it’s important to be able to apply what I learned in my business program in an actual business setting and learn new skills”. Other students appreciated the opportunity to develop soft skills including cultural competency, teamwork, and communications skills within a professional setting.

International students also discussed the importance of being exposed to the U.S. work culture and getting a sense of where they would “best fit” in terms of career goals. Other students felt that their internship provided a positive stepping-stone to transition to the workforce. Joy explained that she had difficulty finding an internship, but once she did, she felt “lucky” that it was directly in her field of biology sciences. Other international students thought their internship was “useful in getting their foot in the door”, “being able to network with others in their field”, and “transitioning to a permanent position”. Sophie stated,

I am pleased with my employer. Many of the people who started in my organization were once interns and have moved up in the company to more prestigious positions. I am able to leverage my experience from my courses and I’m learning a lot.

Some international students described their work as being a nice balance of autonomy and mentorship. For instance, Nathan stated that his supervisor checked in with him once per week to discuss progress.

Discussion

This qualitative study used in-depth interviews to examine the experiences of international master's students in accessing internship opportunities and their outcomes of internship participation with an intersectionality lens. This work advances the international education field and understanding concerning the outcomes of internship participation among international students by: (1) providing clarity on the influence of career services as students' search for internships; (2) exploring the impact of visa regulations on students ability to acquire internship experiences; (3) connecting intersectionality with international students' experiences; and (4) challenging deficit thinking when describing international students' needs in accessing work experience due to their temporary status in the U.S.

Internship experiences can provide students with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and business acumen that employers are looking for in their field. It is also an opportunity to showcase students' 'fit' with the employer, and in many cases are the pathways into that field (e.g., journalism, policy, government, etc.) (Busteed and Auter, 2017; Chen et al., 2021; Collum, 2019). Students are also able to demonstrate their acquisition of experience outside of the classroom. The findings of this study show that internships in general have a positive impact on international master's students' ability to gain work experience in their chosen field and could provide them with the 'competitive edge' they need to successfully transition to the workforce after graduation. Hora et al. (2022) point out that internships – and institutions of higher education – are not race-neutral spaces. They are politicized sites and can be exclusionary to those who are racialized and from other countries. As highlighted through an intersectional perspective, the problem of accessing support from career services is not just an issue of misunderstanding international students' needs or reticence. It is a matter of power dynamics that affect students' educational outcomes. For example, when international students approach career services and they are directed to problem solve their own internship searches, institutional power dynamics and ideologies about international students are at play, which perpetuate the marginalization of these students. Institutional structures are set up in such a way that positions them as needing to help themselves (Collins and Chepp, 2013), whereby they are framed as disadvantaged or needy due to their social positioning and temporary status. This creates and perpetuates inequities in accessing internships, which domestic students have a distinct advantage over them. Additionally, structural forces and regulations within the university cannot be readily solved as they are influenced by U.S. federal

policies that are set within a larger political system that greatly impact international students in general (Weible and Cairney, 2021).

International students are treated as a separate group from domestic students due to their temporary status, which results in exclusionary practices. Compared to domestic students, international students are not simply able to find an internship. They are more dependent on the resources of the institution, particularly their authorization to work. When international students are not able to access resources, they must counterbalance these effects. Additionally, international students are continuously monitored and regulated through a lengthy application process to simply obtain an internship. Thus, they are perpetually intertwined at the intersection of their citizenship and immigration status and juxtaposed between being disadvantaged according to their country of origin and racial identity. Intersectionality theory is useful in unpacking the “broader social dynamics” that create inequalities “on the basis of the multiple identities they hold”, “rather than the economic, social, and political practices that perpetuate these inequities” (Nunez, 2014, p. 88).

Intersectionality captures the complexities of international students’ experiences, how structural forces and policies within institutions of higher education serve to exclude certain populations from opportunities. For example, many international students were not able to access quality services from career advisors causing a breakdown in the job search process, career plan decisions, accessing professional networks, and career resources. Through an intersectionality lens, it is clear that the landscape of internships is one of exclusion and gatekeeping for international students. If the field of higher education is sincere about welcoming international students, this will require an evaluation of student services programming to reflect the realities of its diverse student body.

Conclusion

The transition from college to the working world is increasing in importance, and the value of internships is key for international students in a fluid labor market. However, institutions of higher education must create stronger student support services, policy structures, and resources that foster international students’ employability. For example, career services staff must work more effectively with international student services to promote transparency of career development needs as well as engage in training and best practices to better support international students. There should also be a concerted effort within universities in

general to make synonymous the relationship between higher education and the labor market—for *all* students. This research relied on in depth information from international students to capture their experiences in accessing work-based opportunities. Therefore, this study is not intended to be generalizable, but rather to convey the ongoing multi-layered challenges and mediocrity that international students often face in seeking internship opportunities during their academic degree program and their post-graduation employability. Although limited by its focus to one U.S. institution, the findings from this study merit consideration and serve as a jumping off point for practitioners tasked with promoting student success among international students. Given that international students are a highly talented population, investing in their career development will surely be of benefit to the future economic growth of the U.S.

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