

CHAPTER 17

Conclusion

Much has changed since the mid-20th century when political scientists began to publish about the few internship programs in existence. The study of internships has developed from personal musings supported by anecdotes into the empirical testing of refutable hypotheses. No longer niche programs that serve a few aspiring public servants, internships have become a standard component of the undergraduate political science major, considered essential by many (Anderson 2014; Jensen and Hunt 2007; Kuh 2008; Mariani and Klinkner 2009; Moore 2013). But much has remained the same: academic internships continue to be a means for students to learn our discipline, with faculty mentors and site supervisors playing crucial roles in facilitating that learning, and interns often using their experiences to jumpstart a career in public service. The preceding chapters have explored these changes and continuities in detail, and they help move the discipline towards identifying a set of best practices in internships that is informed by empirical evidence and expert observation and analysis.

Rather than simply reiterating the contribution of each chapter, in this conclusion we dwell briefly on the overall lessons that they impart and then turn our attention to areas of action for the discipline. We close by suggesting future areas of research that move us beyond the architecture of academic internship programs to the outcomes they produce for stakeholders— faculty, site supervisors, and above all, students.

TOWARDS BEST PRACTICES: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Each of the chapters in this volume makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of political science internships. However, some important points emerge at once from several different chapters. First, internships are not simply a means to apply what has been learned in the classroom, nor are they merely a platform for practicing non-academic job skills. Fundamentally, internships involve learning from experience: interns learn some political science, and they learn about themselves. This process takes place in the classroom as well; the difference lies in the medium through which the learning occurs. In the case of internships, learning requires conscious, active experience in an applied setting and then critical reflection on it (Kolb 1984); the process involves reconsidering one's experiences and ideas in light of new information, and then reconciling differences.

Mentoring is crucial for fostering learning. Academic interns should be mentored by a faculty member who will help them stay focused on what they are learning and help them relate their experiences to relevant political science literature. Propositions from that literature can not only be applied to the experience, but tested against it. No doubt some students would do that on their own, just as some might grasp rational choice theory from independent reading; but mentorship helps assure that every intern learns at levels appropriate for academic credit, both in terms of quality and quantity.

At the heart of experiential learning is reflection, meaning that interns think about what they have learned and how that knowledge relates to the discipline. Ideally, it involves a three-way interaction among student intern, faculty mentor, and site supervisor. Reflection should be ongoing throughout the

internship, and can be incorporated as assigned journal entries and written self-evaluations, for instance.

Reflection will be aided by evaluative feedback from the mentor from beginning to end of the internship. Without feedback, some interns may drift from a focus on academic learning to the technical details of the workplace; continual interaction, whether through in-person discussion or as comments and questions on interns' journal entries, can keep them on track.

Researchers have found that students learn more effectively when they work toward specific learning goals (Butler and Winne 1995). In classroom-based courses, these goals are commonly set by the instructor and listed in the syllabus. In internships, students set learning goals in accordance with the nature of their worksite. Moreover, since interns tend to know little about the work they will be doing until they begin, it may be more appropriate for the intern and mentor to work them out, with assistance from the intern's supervisor, a week or two into the internship. Learning contracts, examples of which are included in the Supplemental Internship Resources section, can help make these goals specific. Here again, a primary role of the instructor is to assure that the goals pertain to learning political science, not just learning how to do a particular job.

To succeed, students must invest themselves in their internship experience. Normally, such investment flows from the interns' excitement at working at a semi-professional level, with others as members of a team, but above all, as a valued contributor to the operation—as a person who is made to feel what they are doing has genuine worth. This responsibility lies mainly with site supervisors who are entrusted with creating a meaningful work agenda and welcoming interns into their organization to the greatest possible extent. On occasion, faculty may need to help students recognize the educational value of their internship experiences.

In addition to mentoring interns, faculty who direct internship programs need the backing of their own departments in the form of agreement about program standards and objectives, against which progress should be regularly measured, assessed, and furthered through improvements over time. Support is also required administratively and could take the form of a centralized campus internship office, as Chávez Metoyer has described. If no such center exists, faculty should try to form a dependable intra-campus network consisting of those who can assist with specialized tasks or address unforeseen issues: student affairs, career services, admissions, public relations, marketing, financial aid, alumni affairs, legal counsel, and advancement, along with deans, provosts, and presidents. Individuals in these offices will be glad to hear and share interns' stories in order to further the university's goals and mission, which may be served by attracting prospective students, improving retention rates, creating stronger relations with external communities, and contributing to the positive feelings of alumni about their time at the institution.

Beyond campus, intern supervisors are also important stakeholders in an internship program. In addition to hosting interns and playing the role of educators (and sometimes mentors), supervisors may enjoy coming to campus to speak to potential future interns. They should also know that their contributions to the education of student interns are valued. Optimally, supervisors should be offered training by universities so that they are familiar with university protocols, have access to information about best practices, and can establish a foundation for mutual understanding with faculty, administrators, and students.

In theory the sum of these parts should be a high-quality internship, but as COVID-19 reminded us, unanticipated developments can derail even the best-laid plans. Furthermore, the nature of work varies from placement to placement, and some internships are simply more engaging or intriguing than others.¹ Faculty should keep in mind that internships have the *potential* to bring about positive academic outcomes for students, including those from marginalized or historically underrepresented groups, and that *intentionality and deliberate effort* on everyone's part are essential to create rigorous, successful experiences. It is not enough to *just do* an internship; *how* it is done matters greatly.

High-quality internships facilitate growth across a range of liberal arts competencies (see NACE 2021)—not just basic employability skills—that are associated with better jobs long-term (Carnevale and Smith 2018; Kuh 2013; Fisher 2019). Quality internships can help pave field-specific occupational pathways that branch into graduate school or an entry-level job; they foster the kinds of connections that are important in public affairs settings where relationships have currency and can be leveraged for career success. Crucially, they help raise the prospects of career success for disadvantaged students—those who are considered low-income, first-generation, with historically marginalized racial or ethnic

backgrounds, among others. As Carnevale and Smith (2018) demonstrate empirically, “the true dividing line between higher- and low-income students may be more in the characteristics of their work than the amount of work that they do,” and they show that higher-income students are more likely to complete field-relevant internships that give them relative advantages when they seek jobs as graduating seniors (17). Addressing these inequities through more accessible, high-quality academic internships can help level the playing field.

A final takeaway is the need for program sustainability. Many political science internships have been developed by a single individual, often with little support at the beginning. It is often up to them to ensure that the program will continue in their absence. Elements that can help institutionalize a program include the campus-wide and community networks discussed earlier; a database of potential placements that includes contact information and descriptions of the internship; a catalog description and dedicated course number for the internship class; a collection of written forms; and ideally, a manual for future program directors.

ACCESS TO INTERNSHIPS: THE CASE FOR PAYING INTERNS

Equitable access requires that internships be paid. Students who have sufficient resources to pursue their studies full-time and to take time off for an unpaid position constitute only a small portion of the total undergraduate student body. Most find time to do an internship only by reducing the time devoted either to study or work, and, as Yamada argues, they shouldn’t have to surrender the protections of labor law when they work as interns.

Ideally, an internship should carry academic credit equivalent to what would be earned for a course requiring a similar amount of work. In this scenario, the student could then take one less classroom course to meet requirements for the political science major. In a different scenario, students might also be given the option of doing an internship for zero units so that it appears on their official records but they are not required to pay extra fees or tuition. Even with these options, the hours-on-task for a classroom course typically include 100 minutes of reading, writing, and study for every 50 minutes in the classroom. Economic pressure can sometimes lead students to scrimp on their study time in order to make ends meet, but they cannot shirk their internship hours. As the chapter by Mallinson demonstrates, the lack of pay for interns’ work renders these opportunities less available to students from historically disadvantaged groups. Perlin (2012) makes the same point strongly.

In his book, *Intern Nation*, Perlin (2012) proposes that professional governing bodies demand that interns be paid, as the American Institute of Architects, the Association of Art Museum Directors, and other professional associations have done (Sutton 2019), and argues that the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) be reinterpreted to cover all internships under its minimum wage provisions. Although these changes would go far in making internships more accessible, they would erect new financial barriers for small, underfunded non-profit organizations that typically rely on unpaid labor by interns and volunteers to achieve their ends. Even if nonprofits were able to extract an exemption from FLSA rules, issues relating to equitable and fair access would remain.

The interaction of access and affordability also affects students wishing to intern outside their home city, for example in their state capital, Washington DC, or in another country. Aspiring interns often face prohibitive travel, living, housing, and program fees that may not be covered by financial aid. To avoid reinforcing the same advantages for some who enjoy the freedom to explore in-person options away from home, as well as gain valuable knowledge, skills, and experiences that give them a leg up over their peers, the goal of equity requires that there be financial support for interns who need it; today, such support is largely unavailable. Funding for programs or individuals could be supplied by academic institutions, government, or by charitable funds set up for the purpose, as described by Mallinson, but steady revenue streams are unlikely to flow as long as internships are treated as volunteer positions that lack an educational core or as purely vocational training exercises.

Virtual internships are expanding access in some important respects by enabling far more students to engage with organizations that were once out of their geographic reach—and opportunities continue to improve as internship providers institutionalize their remote programs post-COVID-19. However, as Cabrera Rasmussen and Van Vechten point out, being online carries its own set of challenges, includ-

ing potential technological barriers such as intermittent connectivity or unreliable equipment, lack of readiness to work in isolation for long stretches of time, and lack of dedicated workspaces that are free of unrelenting distractions. Universities are uniquely positioned to address some of these needs by taking concrete steps that could include offering dedicated internship-work spaces on campus with trusted digital connections and communication devices that are available to those who cannot afford them.

Departments, colleges, and universities could also team up to close other gaps that sometimes prevent students from reaching their potential. A smaller percentage of students will do internships for academic credit than the majority who will find internships on their own, and to maximize the potential educational outcomes for the latter, essential materials (such as the ones located in the Supplemental Internship Resources section of this text or in campus career centers) should be shared with students widely. Campuses could also establish “professional dress closets” where students can obtain professional clothing, or could organize a sponsored shopping excursion for students who are searching for a professional outfit. Disparities, even ones based on self-presentation, can affect how “professional” interns are perceived (Williams et al. 2020).

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT FOR INTERNSHIPS

The chapter by Gentry describes wide variation in institutional support provided for internship programs. In the best case, a faculty member is paid for supervising interns at the same rate as any other course and is assisted by a campus internship center or career services office. In far too many other cases, faculty are expected to supervise interns with no compensation at all. Aside from being exploitative, this practice impairs the educational quality of internships by stretching faculty members well beyond what would be considered reasonable, and as research shows, replicates the same biases that lead to largely invisible, “extra” responsibilities being assumed by more vulnerable faculty (junior, untenured, persons of color, women; see Flaherty 2019; Joseph and Hirschfeld 2011; June 2015; Reid 2021; Whitaker 2017).²

As several chapters have demonstrated, if an internship is to be more than a part-time job, it must help the intern learn about political science. But such learning is not automatic; it requires mentoring and assistance from the instructor at all stages: placement selection; monitoring through student journaling and reflections, class discussions about readings and experiences, and written reports; and periodic evaluations and prompt feedback. An unpaid instructor simply does not have the time to do all these things, and may have to fall back on sending the intern into the field to report back briefly at the end of the semester. Since students are charged tuition for credited internships, there is no justification for not paying internship instructors. Fairer compensation could include fractional, cumulative credit awarded for internship supervision, and also recognition of internship-related work in the tenure and promotion process.

The discipline has produced limited survey data describing faculty compensation for internships, and as Mallinson and Sciabarra and Gentry explain, we lack a comprehensive picture about the resources that are generally available for internships, in contrast to other characteristics of universities. Such a compilation would contribute significantly to rationalizing the compensation scales and to achieving better alignment of individual effort, pay, and educational mission.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN INTERNSHIPS

Most of the chapters in this book are based on evidence and observations about in-person internships that have involved faculty and/or staff and student interaction, are completed after one (or perhaps two, and on rare occasion, multiple) semesters, and are not compulsory.³ Several authors have referenced newer forms of internships that might become more prevalent in the future, and it is worth considering whether and how these opportunities might change the way students gain access to or encounter experiential learning. In addition to virtual or remote positions (addressed in Chapter 15), gig internships, mini-internships, and specialized placements for first and second-year students, including those enrolled in community colleges, could expand internship opportunities beyond their current boundaries.

Gig Internships. In the early 20th century, jazz musicians began to use the word “gig” to refer to one-time or temporary performance contracts. Today, the “gig economy” captures the work of free-lancers who lack traditional labor law protections and employee benefits but have more control over their

own working conditions or hours (Kondo and Singer 2010; DeRuyter and Brown 2019). “Precarious labor” is sometimes used to describe this class of workers, a group that could include adjunct faculty who, like musicians, tend to “perform” in multiple venues under a limited contract and receive few if any benefits. To navigate the ever-expanding, globalized gig economy, students need to acquire practical knowledge that enables them to perform well across several sectors or in more than one position within an organization or industry. They need to know how to find available jobs; how to move from one position to another; and how to make themselves available for those looking to hire.

Many jobs in politics naturally fit the definition of “gig.” For instance, campaign positions fall into this category unless they are filled by permanent, professional consultants who might be campaign managers, field organizers, fundraisers, media relations managers, or pollsters. By design, gig internships enable students to explore multiple sites and employment opportunities in quick succession. They could also be project-based positions whereby students work on parts of a project at one internship location and then work on different parts at another site. Alternatively, following the model developed by the CORO Foundation for public affairs fellows, interns might be assigned a series of projects in a city and be required to work with specific agencies or officials for a specified period of time on separate projects.⁴

Opportunities such as these would allow students to explore several positions within an issue area, or different sites dedicated to the same policy problem, such as working with a homeless shelter, then a local politician, and then a local homeless advocacy group to gain different perspectives about the same policy area through different lenses. Students who are drawn to campaigning would be assigned to work in different divisions of a campaign, gaining skills that are useful across a campaign team, enabling them to make greater connections between theory and practice, and also increasing their odds of gaining employment post-graduation. An internship that exposes students to various aspects of an industry can help uncover areas of interest that they later might pursue in greater depth.

Micro-Internships. Micro-internships are those in which students work intensively on discrete projects for a short duration, such as a solid week, and the emphasis is on exposure rather than development or mastery. According to an organization that promotes them, “Micro-Internships are short-term, paid, professional assignments that are similar to those given to new hires or interns. Unlike traditional internships, micro-Internships can take place year-round, typically range from 5 to 40 hours of work, and projects are due between one week and one month after kick-off.” (Parker Dewey 2020). Projects are assigned from a single location and require far fewer hours than a traditional internship. It remains to be seen whether micro-internships can yield the same academic and career-related gains that have been measured in semester-long internships, but we surmise that short but impactful opportunities could be more advantageous to students who are early in their college career, who can spare little time for interning, or want to explore different opportunities (Wingard 2019). For example, a student might be asked to research specific city policies about an issue and compile a report, or create public outreach messaging for a local agency. Although the purpose of these experiences would be to expose the student to a narrow aspect of an organization’s operations, if incorporated into a course or a series of courses, then they could be used to advance certain skills, such as policy research and oral presentations, in real-world settings.

Internships for First- and Second-Year Students. Extending for-credit internship opportunities to include first- and second-year undergraduates also represents a path for making them more accessible and inclusive. Some institutions only allow students who have attained junior standing to enroll in an internship course, and articulation agreements do not allow internship credit to transfer from community colleges—a barrier for community college students (see Chapter 9 by Sciabarra and Gentry). This practice seems to stem from concerns about the educational value of internships; after all, experiential learning is not standardized across political science, giving faculty at four-year institutions reasons to remain skeptical of their curricular worth and unwilling to award credit for “just working.” In addition, internship credit at four-year institutions is sometimes reserved for junior- and senior-level undergraduates who have acquired foundational knowledge: they are better equipped, the argument goes, with the kinds of time management, writing, research, analytical, and interpersonal skills that will transfer well to a work setting. In this line of argument, advanced students are better prepared to situate their internship in the field, and better able to balance the demands of working both outside and inside the university.

The incorporation of service-learning is a counterfactual to these arguments. Often designed as experiential components of classroom-based courses, but sometimes as freestanding activities, ser-

vice-learning is often available to first-year students. While service-learning is often considered to be completely different from internships, it may be more productive to think of both as points along an experiential learning spectrum. It is worth remembering that Robert Sigmon, often considered to be the father of service-learning, began his program as what was basically an internship in the North Carolina state legislature (1970).

Given the overall potential benefits of interning for all students, but especially historically under-represented groups, rules that deny internships to all first- and second-year students appear to be arbitrary. Faculty should be able to assess students individually for their maturity and fitness as interns, and because many students pursue multiple not-for-credit internships both before and after doing one for academic credit (Berg 2014), the reasons for reserving internships for juniors and seniors are potentially more harmful than helpful. Schools should also consider how introductory-level internships might differ from more advanced ones. When restrictions are based on limited faculty resources (i.e., to limit the number of interns to a manageable number), then more creative alternatives—such as elective internship courses—rather than more restrictive rules, should be pursued. At this point in time, the evidence supports removing limitations that lead students to rule out doing multiple internships.

MOVING TOWARDS BEST PRACTICES THROUGH RESEARCH

Qualitative and quantitative evidence overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that internships create educational opportunities unlike those found in a classroom but with measurable academic and personal gains that are similar to what traditional learning settings produce. Experiential learning enables students to operationalize concepts through practice, or apply their know-how to “real-world” settings, and thus build competencies that will advance their academic and career goals.

Because there is so much variation in the types of internships and work that students engage in (arguably, no two internships are exactly alike), it is often easier to focus on the inputs—program design, faculty roles—as this book does, than the outcomes, in order to characterize best practices in internships. Yet even when standard elements such as mentoring, contracts, midterm evaluations, ongoing reflections, or public presentations of interns’ work are in place, student outcomes will be influenced by myriad intervening factors, some stemming from the students’ personality or life situation, others from the site or site supervisor, and still others from the larger environment. Health status, compatibility among coworkers, reliable equipment—complexities such as these make clear that a qualitative approach to understanding how internships work is sometimes preferable to reducing an experience to quantifiable data. Not surprisingly, much of what has been established about reliable and efficacious internship practices is derived from surveys, interviews, and program assessments.

With the help of large-n, multivariate measures, we will gain greater purchase on many aspects of internships that remain undetermined or not well understood. There is ample room for researchers to test the effects of specific internship practices on students’ learning, academic progress, and career paths, and to investigate how newer modes of interning compare to “traditional” in-person forms.⁵ Importantly, our discipline would benefit from understanding whether and how internships obtained and conducted independently (or not for credit) yield different outcomes compared to those obtained with assistance from campus staff or faculty, or to those monitored carefully by their site supervisors and faculty mentors, or to those requiring any number and type of assignments (in particular reflections or research projects that are often connected to a class). Assessing the effects of political science internships could include a comparison of post-degree job placement rates for internship participants and nonparticipants, or longitudinal studies.

Given the demonstrated ability of internships as a high-impact practice to enhance the knowledge, abilities, and skills of all students, future research should also examine the conditions under which students from historically disadvantaged groups build competencies in public affairs internships and connect these to academic and career outcomes. Mixed-methods studies are well-suited to this purpose. The evidence these efforts generate could well be used to justify investments in program expansions and adequate pay for those who support internships as a form of experiential learning.

CONCLUSION: REFOCUSING INTERNSHIPS ON LEARNING

Political science credit is awarded for political science learning. This is as true for experiential courses as for those in the classroom. At a minimum, all forms of experiential learning should involve self-reflection by the student, feedback by the supervisor, and mentoring by the instructor. Including these fundamental components can help assure that academic quality is maintained as the tremendous potential of new internship modes develops and spreads. By design, rigorous internships demand significant inputs, and further empirical assessments of outcomes are in order. With the right kinds of evidence, we can set standards for quality internships, meet the demands for them by students and potential internship employers, and justify their inclusion in curricular planning that serves students and graduates well into the future.

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ENDNOTES

1. Of course, student interests and abilities also help determine the kinds of work they find engaging.
2. Reid (2021) writes that invisible labor involves student-initiated mentorship, in which faculty attend to their students' emotional needs by providing "hands-on attention" to "serve as role models, mentors, and even surrogate parents" (June 2015), especially with respect to diversity and inclusion matters (Flaherty 2019). Reid states: "This time-consuming work often is overlooked and undervalued because it is considered unnecessary and voluntary" (2021, n.p). This type of taxing work can also be associated with mentoring interns, adding many hours to an internship supervisor's week, and ultimately, leading to imbalances in faculty workload.
3. Klein and Weiss (2011) find that mandatory internships do not generate the same positive effects as they do for students who choose to do internships.
4. For more about the CORO Fellowship, see: <http://www.corofellowship.org/>.
5. For example, examining "mini-internships" could help us understand how number of hours spent on the job influences knowledge and skill development.