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Original Research

Equitable Access to For-Credit and Paid Internships

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Cite as: Choe-Smith, C.U., Repa, M.J., Jackson, J., Moylan, J.A., Torres, T., Franco, N.R., & Mora, N. (2025). Equitable Access to For-Credit and Paid Internships. *Metropolitan Universities*, 36(1), 49-72. DOI: 10.18060/28676

Guest Editor: Laurie Van Egeren, Ph.D. **Associate Guest Editors:** Andrew Carlson, Ph.D., Paula O'Loughlin, Ph.D., and Deidra Peaslee, Ed.D. **Editor:** Patrick M. Green, Ed.D.

Abstract

This article shares a working group's self-study and report on equitable access to for-credit and paid internships at a large public university. Academic internships or other forms of field experience are high-impact practices that offer many potential benefits for students, including real-life applications of theoretical knowledge, pre-professional training and socialization, career exploration, and, in some cases, career opportunities after graduation. The opportunities for academic internships, however, may not be distributed equally particularly for Black, Latinx, and other minoritized students. In this study, we apply an equity-minded framework to examine available campus data on the state of internships and other paid employment across our university and the potential barriers to access and participation. Based on the evidence presented in this study, we offer several recommendations for our campus that also may inform similar student success initiatives at other similarly situated institutions.

Keywords: academic internships, paid internships, equity-minded frameworks, high-impact practices, career services

Funding Acknowledgement

This research was made possible, in part, by funding from the CSU Student Success Network. The authors would like to extend special thanks to Catherine Ward and Jenni Murphy for their continuous support and helpful insights.

Introduction

Academic internships or other forms of career-related employment opportunities offer many potential benefits for college students, including real-life applications of theoretical knowledge, pre-professional training and socialization, career exploration, and, in some cases, career opportunities. Academic internships are high-impact practices, which correlate positively with higher grades, persistence rates, and graduation rates (Zilvinskis et al., 2022; Kuh, 2008; Finley & McNair, 2013). Paid internships, in particular, correlate with better outcomes in terms of career opportunities after graduation (Zilvinskis et al., 2020; NACE, 2023). The benefits of academic internships, however, are not distributed equitably. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data shows that significantly fewer African-American and Latinx students take part in internships and field experience, specifically, 40% African-American students and 41% Latinx students, as compared to 46% Asian students and 51% White students (Kuh et al., 2017, p. 12). Other groups, including women and certain Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander students, also may not experience an equitable share of internship opportunities (Zilvinskis et al., 2020, pp. 513-514; NACE 2023). Our campus data also suggests racial and ethnic disparities for African American and Latinx students, along with other groups, and these considerations motivated this exploration into potential equity gaps in for-credit and paid internships at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS).

As part of a system-wide Middle Leadership Academy (MLA), a group of administrators, faculty, and staff at CSUS applied collaborative and equity-minded frameworks to examine the state of for-credit and paid internships on our campus -- what opportunities are offered and who is taking advantage of these opportunities -- and the specific barriers that may apply to our student population. The collaborative process included opportunities for inter-campus consultations within the system and additional intra-campus consultation with a home team of experts. In this study, we apply Estela Bensimon's and Tara Yosso's equity-minded frameworks to examine the state of for-credit and paid internships, and, based on the evidence presented in this study, we offer recommendations for our campus that also could be revised and tailored for other institutional contexts. CSUS is a large, urban university that is federally designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI). CSUS has also been recognized by the state as a Black-Serving Institution. Our study and recommendations may be helpful to other similar institutions seeking to improve equitable access to internships.

Literature on Equity-Minded Frameworks

In addressing equity gaps in higher education, scholars across disciplines have developed useful equity-minded frameworks (McNair et al., 2020; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), including those that apply to high-impact practices (Finley et al., 2022; Hora et al., 2021). In particular, Bensimon

and Yosso are often cited for their equity-minded and asset-based approaches. Bensimon and Malcom-Piqueux defend an asset-based approach because deficit-minded approaches have been ineffective in serving minoritized students. Deficit-minded schemas assume that inequities are unfortunate but unavoidable phenomena caused by deficiencies that lie with students, their families, and their communities (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). An equity-minded framework provides an alternative way of understanding equity gaps that focuses on the broader social and institutional context.

Malcom-Piqueux and Bensimon (2017) offer five core principles in their equity-minded approach:

1. Race-consciousness: recognizes racial inequalities in education and names the racial/ethnic groups involved, without using euphemisms such as "diverse students."
2. Systemically aware: understands present inequities as related to structural inequalities and past denials of educational and economic opportunity to certain racial/ethnic groups.
3. Institutionally focused: instead of attributing inequities in outcomes to student deficits, this approach interprets equity gaps as signaling problems with current practices and the need for the institution to take responsibility to address the problems.
4. Evidence-based: relies on disaggregated quantitative data and qualitative lines of inquiry to examine existing practices and inequities and propose appropriate improvements for institutional change.
5. Action-oriented: motivates and equips equity-minded practitioners to take action toward closing educational equity gaps.

Along the same lines, Yosso (2005) cites research that shows that deficit thinking permeates US society and its educational institutions and specifically offers an alternative interpretation of cultural wealth through a critical race theory lens, which involves a shift away from student deficits and toward student assets and what they bring to their classrooms and campuses. An asset-based approach views students of color as possessing community cultural wealth, which is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts needed to survive and resist different forms of oppression. Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth consists of six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (2005). For example, navigational capital refers to the skills of maneuvering through social institutions, including structures permeated by racial inequality, and aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77, 80).

As described below, others have applied equity-minded frameworks to high-impact practices such as internships (Hora et al., 2021). One key insight is that the field of employment, of which internships provide an entry point, is not a level playing field governed merely by merit or grit, but one that has its own norms for access and inclusion where hiring decisions are affected by

existing social networks of privilege and predispositions, including those related to racial and ethnic identities.

Methods

Our study included taking an inventory of for-credit and paid internship opportunities on campus, examining the available institutional data on internships, and using a mixed-methods approach to surveying students to identify barriers to access and participation.

Our inventory of for-credit and paid internships began by identifying the main centers on campus responsible for overseeing certain types or aspects of internships, such as partnership development. Our team comprises directors and staff from the Career Center, the Community Engagement Center, the California Intern Network, and other centers or programs on campus. Each team member provided details on what internships are available, the processes for accessing internships, and any data-collection efforts. Our team also distributed a survey to academic departments with well-developed internship programs to collect data on their internship opportunities, processes involved, and data collection efforts.

For our deeper dive into our institutional data, we requested 10 years (Fall 2013-Fall 2023) of data on for-credit internship participation from our Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (OIREP). We analyzed the data by observing trends or patterns in participation by racial or ethnic groups over the ten-year period by comparing the group's percentage participation in internships against the group's percentage of the total student population. We then compared data across the different racial or ethnic groups. We also examined what percentage of students from each racial or ethnic group participated in internships in particular semesters. After our descriptive analysis, we conducted a logical regression model to evaluate the statistical significance of our findings.

In order to include student perspectives on barriers to internships, we developed and distributed two student surveys relying on quantitative and qualitative methods. As mentioned below, the Career Center initially distributed a survey to students using their services; however, only 26 students responded to the survey. Two members of our team later developed and distributed a more comprehensive survey with quantitative and qualitative questions on barriers to internships. This survey was distributed to students using services at our various centers and units, including multiple academic departments. This survey had 236 student respondents. We primarily relied on a thematic analysis of the responses to the qualitative questions. This method involves reviewing student responses, identifying a set of commonly occurring codes, combining the codes into possible themes, and reviewing the themes against the data to ensure that it accurately represents the student responses.

Results

Campus: Context: Inventory of Internships

Academic internships and other career-focused employment opportunities are offered throughout the campus through various academic programs and centers. Consistent with our institutional focus, we began our study by offering an inventory of these different internship sources and relevant information about how these academic programs and centers support faculty or students with for-credit or paid internship opportunities.

Community Engagement Center

The Community Engagement Center (CEC) primarily supports faculty and staff who offer academic internships to students for academic course credit by a) helping to establish an agreement with potential community partners or academic internship sites, b) helping faculty design academic internship courses, and c) offering other training and resources as needed. Specifically, the CEC offers video training modules, an online platform known as CECconnect for student orientations and tracking student placements in academic internships, Faculty Learning Communities, and an Academic Internship Toolkit. The following description is provided in the toolkit:

> An Academic Internship is an on or off-campus activity designed to serve educational purposes by offering experience in business, non-profit, or government settings for academic credit. An Academic Internship is a stand-alone course that formally integrates the student's academic study with practical experience in a cooperating organization. Academic internships can be paid or unpaid, and for every one unit of academic credit received, students are expected to work 45 hours.

CSUS policy requires a site agreement between the university and all academic internship sites. This can be a challenging and bureaucratic process for faculty and community partners, so the CEC facilitates this process to increase access to new internships. The CEC maintains a list of approved community partner sites with whom the university has a site agreement, which is an important resource for faculty and students.

Colleges and Departments

Academic internships generally are offered and administered by academic departments or colleges and typically through a designated academic internship coordinator. Some programs require an academic internship or other field experience, while others do not. There are other differences and commonalities across academic programs, as described below.

Commonalities. The campus policy on academic internships dictates what is common across departments. The academic programs must have a site agreement between the university and the academic internship site. The academic programs must provide a student orientation, including a student learning agreement and other relevant forms. The academic program, either on its own or through the CEC, also must conduct annual reviews.

Differences. What is different across academic programs depends on certain variables, including the nature of the discipline and the department's size and capacity to offer academic internships. Some disciplines on pace with market trends, such as Engineering and Computer Science (ECS), have the benefit of offering students paid employment opportunities, some of which are also academic internships. On the other hand, disciplines that do not have clearly defined career pathways, such as English and Philosophy, may face greater challenges in offering academic internship opportunities (Bay, 2006; Choe-Smith, 2022). Few academic programs, such as ECS, have a dedicated staff person or faculty member to establish community partnerships and coordinate an academic internship program.

Career Center

The Career Center provides career counseling and online resources for internships and job searches for students looking for employment during and after college. The career management platform Handshake lists tens of thousands of paid opportunities and events for students and alums. Some opportunities offer academic credit for paid employment that match educational goals with career-integrated learning experiences. These postings are labeled as "approved for academic credit" if they have also been vetted through the community partner site agreement process, as described above.

Employer networking opportunities, career events, and job fairs offer students and alums even broader opportunities to meet with prospective employers. Over 500 employers attend Career Center events, programs, and networking activities annually, each searching specifically for CSUS students and recent alums who have a reputation for academic preparedness, strong work ethic, and professionalism.

California Intern Network

The California Intern Network is a fully self-funded service of CSUS and a division of University Enterprises, Inc. (UEI), offering undergraduate and graduate students paid, part-time employment opportunities that align with their field of study. The Intern Network, through partnerships with public and private universities and colleges, strives to provide paid internships to college students while also helping its employer-clients meet their workforce development

needs. Students are recruited intentionally to work in a learning or training capacity, with the duties and responsibilities of their position enhancing their educational experience. The internship opportunities available through the Intern Network have specific parameters for working hours and days, sometimes set by law or the program.

Other Campus Affiliated Internship Opportunities

CSUS offers other academic internships or career-related paid employment opportunities for students. Ongoing paid opportunities include the Capital Fellows Programs, College Corps, and paid micro-internship opportunities. Additional funding sources and programs, many of which are aimed at enhancing equity and access, that have been or can be used for internships, are the Gaining Access to Internships Fund, Sacramento's K-16 Collaborative, California's Learning Aligned Employment Program, Jumpstart AmeriCorps, a summer paid internship program called the IMPACT Fellows Program, the Federal Work Study Program, and the federally-funded Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions' and Hispanic Serving Institutions' HSI STEM projects.

Campus Data and Analysis on For-Credit Internships

As we continued our institutionally focused and evidence-based approach, we took a deeper dive into our campus-wide data on academic internships, primarily available through the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning [OIREP]. Some campus-wide data on paid employment, which is also classified as internships, is available through the Career Center. CSUS currently does not have a centralized way of collecting data on all internships.

OIREP provided data on internship course enrollment for the last ten years, which includes enrollment data in for-credit internship courses, disaggregated by the following racial or ethnic categories: Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and White. The data also includes international students, who often are in for-credit and paid internships to maintain their student visa work authorization.

We began with a descriptive semester-by-semester analysis of the data. We compared the percentage of a group's participation in internships to the percentage of the group in total student enrollment. OIREP's course enrollment data suggested some underrepresentation by Black (African American) and Latinx (Hispanic/Latino) students. By "underrepresented," we mean that the percentage of the group in internships is lower than the percentage of the group in total student enrollment. By "overrepresented," we mean that the percentage of the group in internships is higher than the percentage of the group in total student enrollment. Compare enrollment and participation in Table 1, for example.

TABLE 1. Enrollment and internship participation by race/ethnicity fall 2023

Race/Ethnicity	Total Enrollment (%)	Internships Participation (%)	Difference (%)
Black	6.60	4.50	-2.10
Latinx	38.50	38.30	-0.20
White	21.60	25.90	4.30
Asian	21.10	13.60	-7.50
Pacific Islander	1.00	0.70	-0.30
Native American	0.30	0.50	0.20
International	1.70	7.00	5.00
2 or More/Unknown	9.20	9.90	0.70

Latinx students are frequently underrepresented in internships, specifically, in 16 of the last 21 academic semesters. In Fall 2023, Latinx students were 38.3% of internships (IN) and 38.5% of the total student enrollment (TSE). Though this is a relatively small difference in this one semester, during most semesters in which Latinx students are underrepresented, the difference is by about one and a half percentage points (average difference of 1.46%). Notably, the four times that Latinx students were overrepresented in internships occurred in recent spring semesters (2019, 2020, 2022, 2023). Because of this trend upwards, it may be difficult to determine the effectiveness of any interventions aimed at improving Latinx student access and participation in internships.

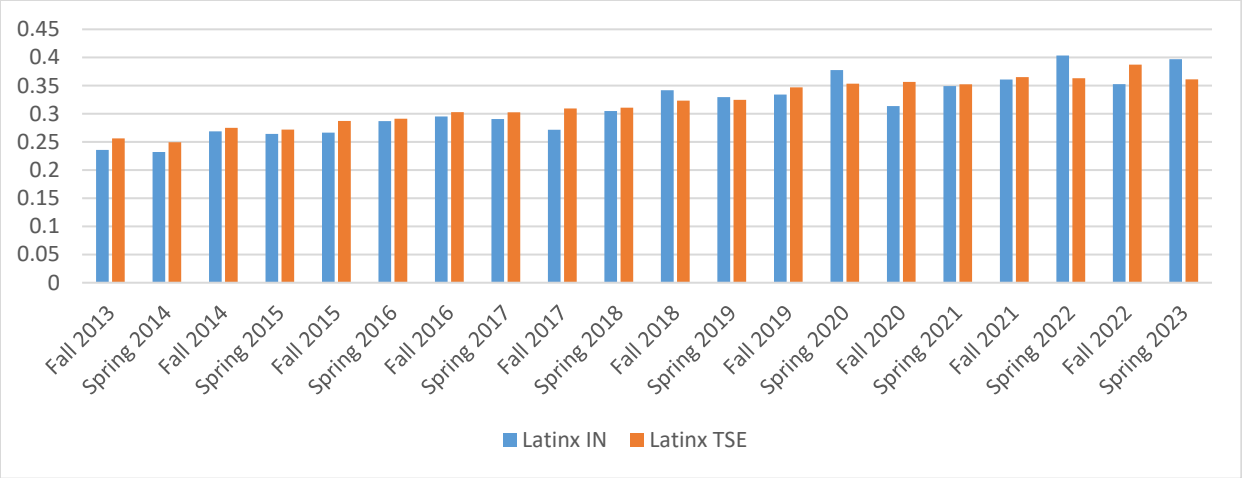

FIGURE 1. Latinx students in internships and total student population.

According to the course enrollment data, while Black students are sometimes overrepresented in internships, they were underrepresented in six of the last 21 academic semesters. When Black students are underrepresented in internships, the difference is on average less than a percentage point (average difference of .93%), with Fall 2023 [see Table 1] showing the largest difference of 2.1%.

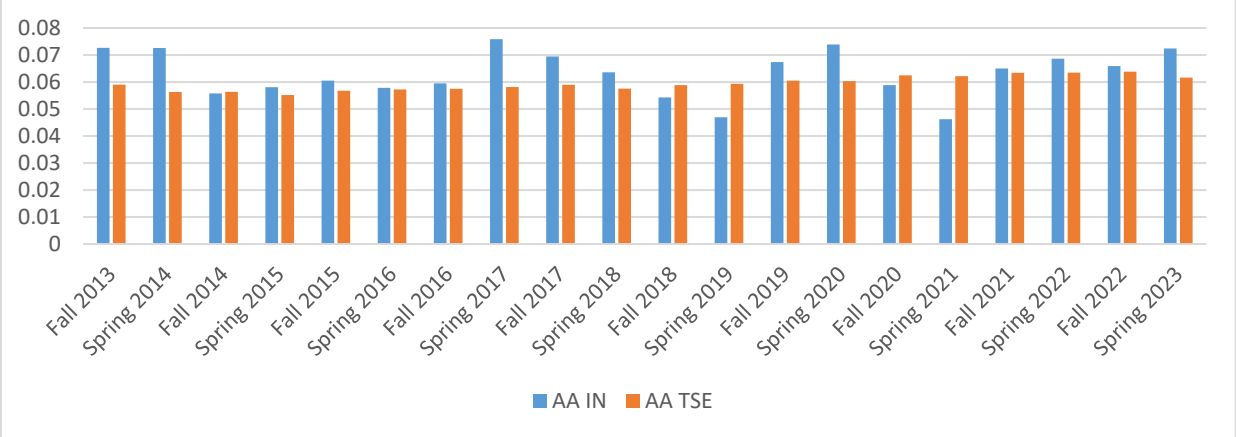

FIGURE 2. African American students in internships and total student population

It may seem that Black students are more often overrepresented than underrepresented in internships, but it is important to note that Black students are substantially underrepresented at CSUS generally. Even in a semester when Black students are overrepresented in internships, for example, in Spring 2023, they were 7.2% of those in internships, 6.2% of the total student population, but, from a systemically aware perspective, it is important to note that Black residents more broadly were 12.6% of the total population of Sacramento. While CSUS draws from students from across the region, state, and beyond, it is important to keep in mind the need for institutional support not just to increase access and participation in internships, but also to

increase enrollment in college. This is beyond the scope of our project, but this observation provides more context when assessing where the equity gaps are.

Asian students are often underrepresented in for-credit internships, specifically, in all 21 of the last 21 academic semesters. This is surprising given that national data on participation trends indicate high levels of participation by this group. During most semesters in which Asian students are underrepresented, the difference is as much as 6-7% with an average difference of 4.3%.

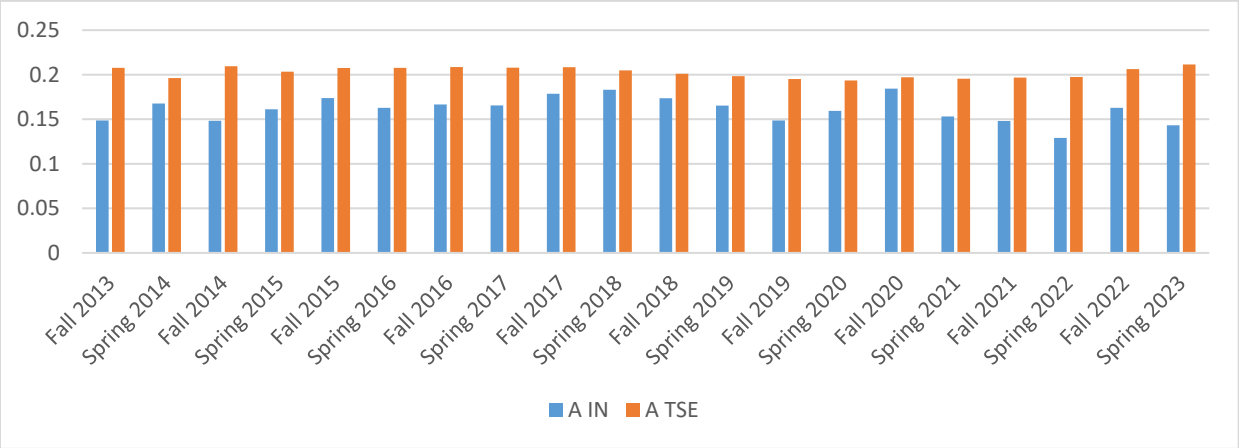

FIGURE 3. Asian students in internships and total student population

The descriptive data are inconclusive for Native American and Pacific Islander students due to the small sample sizes. The data nevertheless suggests some underrepresentation in some semesters, for example, for Pacific Islander students in 13 of the last 21 academic semesters. This descriptive data suggests that AANAPISI students at CSUS are among the most underrepresented students in for-credit internships, with the largest average difference over the last ten years. For context, Sacramento has a large population of Asian American groups who are more recent immigrants or otherwise socially or economically disadvantaged, including Hmong, Filipino, and Cambodian.

Importantly, the course enrollment data show low rates of participation in internships for *all* student groups. The data above reflect a group's representation in internships compared to their representation in total student enrollment (e.g., 25.9 % (114 of 441)) of White students in internships compared to 21.6% (5,978 of 27,640) of that group in total student enrollment in Fall 2023). When we look at the percentage of students based on race/ethnicity who participated in internships each semester, we find very low percentages (1-10%) of students, including Black, Asian, White, and Latinx students, who were enrolled in internships for credit.

Metropolitan Universities | DOI 10.18060/28676 | August 25, 2025

TABLE 2. Percentage of each racial/ethnic group in internships in fall 2023.

Race/Ethnicity	Total Student Enrollment % (n)	Academic Internship % (n)
Black	6.55% (1,811)	1.10% (20)
Native American	0.26% (71)	4.23% (3)
Asian	21.15% (5,845)	1.03% (60)
Latinx	38.51% (10,644)	1.59% (169)
Pacific Islander	0.98% (271)	0.74% (2)
White	21.63% (5,978)	1.91% (114)
International	1.70% (470)	6.60% (31)

While these descriptive statistics assist in providing some evidence of potential patterns in the internship participation of students by race and ethnicity, we wanted to evaluate whether these differences are statistically meaningful. We therefore ran a logistic regression model on the OIREP data from 2013 to 2024 to look at the likelihood of internship participation by the race/ethnic identity of students. Positive values indicate an increased likelihood of internship participation for an identity group, while negative values indicate a decreased likelihood of internship participation for an identity group. The excluded category is based on students whose race/ethnicity was unknown or not provided to the campus. We also controlled for First-Generation Status, as many of our students at CSUS are first-generation college students, and we believe this has an important impact on their likely access to opportunities. As we can see in Table 3 below, not all the perceived over- or under-representation in the descriptive statistics is supported in the logistic regression analysis, where only some of the groups resulted in statistically significant results.

TABLE 3. Relationship between race/ethnicity and internship participation.

Variable	Internship Participation Coefficient (SE)
First-Generation Status	0.023(0.018)
African American or Black	**-0.265***(0.049)**
American Indian	0.146(0.133)
Asian	-0.048(0.039)

Latinx/Chicanx or Hispanic	**-0.205***(0.038)**
Pacific Islander	-0.070(0.092)
Multi-Ethnic	-0.069(0.047)
White	**0.083**(0.037)**
Constant	-1.641(0.035)

Observations = 122,576
Note. Statistical significance is indicated by $p < .10$ (*), $p < .05$ (**), and $p < .01$ (***). Coefficients are unstandardized with standard errors in parentheses.

The descriptive findings above in Table 1 showing disparities for Black students as well as Latinx students are supported in our logistic regression model in Table 3. Students from these groups are less likely than their fellow students to participate in internships, and these results are statistically significant. While Asian and Pacific Islander students also resulted in a negative coefficient, suggesting they were less likely to participate in internships than some other groups, these results were not statistically significant for either group. Despite the suggestion in the semester-to-semester data that White students were at times underrepresented, we can see in Table 3 that White students are more likely than other students to participate in internships and that this result is statistically significant. Thus, the above model gives us a clearer picture of the more generalizable patterns around internship participation. Importantly, as has been suggested by past research, Black and Latinx students continue to face greater barriers to access than their White student counterparts.

In summary, analysis of our institutional data supports nationwide statistics that Latinx and Black students are generally underrepresented in internships, in that they are less likely than their peers to participate in internships. Moreover, based on our institutional data, participation in for-credit internships is quite low for all racial and ethnic groups.

Campus Data on Paid Internships

Because the above data represent only academic or for-credit internships, we also found it helpful to evaluate data on other paid employment through the Career Center. The university currently does not have a requirement for students to report internships or paid employment if not taken for credit. However, the Career Center, through its platform Handshake, tracks student participation in unpaid internships, paid internships, and other paid employment opportunities, many of which are relevant to their field of study.

According to data available on Handshake, during the 2022-2023 academic year, 98,210 jobs were posted on the platform, 17.42% of which were identified as internships. The Career Center was also able to generate data on specific paid internship programs, as follows:

- IMPACT Fellows: 17 students; a summer award of $3,000 each
- Federal Work Study (FWS) Experimental Program: 350 students; average award of $2,250 each per semester
- College Corps: 115 students; $7,000 living allowance each for 450 hours of service
- GAIN Scholarship: 75 students; an average award of $1,000 to offset internship costs

One of our key findings regarding paid internships is that we need improved tracking and assessment mechanisms to collect data that is disaggregated by whether the internship is paid or unpaid, funding sources, student demographics, and other relevant variables. Some of the data above, for example, overlaps with our institutional data on for-credit internships. However, these nuances are not tracked by the institution, making it more difficult to identify and address patterns related to access.

While our deeper dive into our institutional data does not include all for-credit and paid internship opportunities available throughout our colleges and centers on campus, it offers a broad picture of the current state of what is available and, for academic or for-credit internships, who is taking advantage of these opportunities.

Results: Barriers to Equitable Access and Participation

Given that evidence from our campus suggests underrepresentation by certain racial and ethnic groups, in this section, we consider common barriers to equitable access to internships. In continuing to apply an equity-minded framework in this section, our observations are not only evidence-based but also systematically aware and institution-focused. We are mindful of race/ethnicity and the relationships of power, privilege, and inequality that may be in play as students begin to explore academic internships and other career-related paid employment, as well as the sometimes unfamiliar and complex processes involved.

Our MLA team collected data on student experiences with internships, particularly their perspectives on barriers to internships. The Career Center prepared and distributed an internship survey in April 2024. As part of a separate but related research project, two of our members, including one of our home team experts, conducted a more comprehensive student internship survey in March 2025. We discuss the results of the Career Center 2024 survey below and preview some of the relevant results from our comprehensive 2025 survey.

The Career Center's internship survey included quantitative and qualitative questions, including an open-ended question asking students what they perceived as barriers to finding an internship,

especially for low-income and underrepresented minorities. Twenty-one of 26 students provided comments in response to this question. The comments suggested several reoccurring themes of what students perceived as barriers to finding internships.

Some of the comments echoed the common barriers to internships: institutional barriers (33% of respondents) to accessing services, knowing where to start, and navigating the various processes involved; financial barriers (19%); social barriers (19%); discipline-based challenges (19%); and practical barriers (14%) such as transportation and childcare. Notably, several respondents (33%) reported that they felt unprepared or unqualified for an interview or an internship. We characterize these comments as "psychological barriers," which may be more common among first-generation or minoritized students. Students may not even start the process of looking for an internship because they assume that internships are for those with better grades, connections, or more experience. Another recurring theme for our student population was accessibility barriers for those who are disabled or experience mental illness. According to one student, they are not hired because employers just see "the cane or the scooter." Three respondents mentioned accessibility as a barrier to finding an internship.

The internship survey offers a small sampling of students' perspectives on access to internships. As mentioned above, and described in greater detail elsewhere, two members of our team also prepared a comprehensive student internship survey completed by 236 students. When asked to identify the barriers to internships experienced by the respondents (166 students responded to this question), the most common responses were: scheduling barriers (59% of respondents); financial barriers such as needing to work or a lack of paid opportunities (55%); institutional barriers related to accessing services or navigating the processes involved (51%); social barriers such as a lack of social or professional networks (49%); discipline-based barriers; and practical barriers such as a lack of transportation, childcare, or accessibility for students with disabilities (33%).

Based on our inventory of campus internships, our campus data, our 2024 student survey, our 2025 student survey, and the literature, we have identified the following barriers to equitable access to internships for our student population.

1. Institutional barriers: challenges in accessing services, navigating the processes involved, and not knowing where to start.
2. Psychological barriers: feeling unqualified or unprepared. Some students expressed the belief that they would not be qualified for an internship experience.
3. Scheduling barriers: student workload given existing commitments, including full- or part-time work. Many students responded that they were unable to find time in their schedules because of their classes, employment, and/or caregiving responsibilities.

4. Financial barriers: lack of paid opportunities. Because most internships were unpaid, many students responded that they were unable to give up paid work for an unpaid internship.
5. Discipline-based barriers: availability of internships for certain disciplines or chosen professions. Several students responded that they were unable to find internships in their major, such as philosophy, anthropology, and psychology. Some students also observed that some opportunities were only available for juniors or seniors.
6. Practical barriers: practical concerns such as transportation to/from community partner sites, accessibility for people with disabilities, childcare, etc. Often, in combination with the previously mentioned barriers, some students also mentioned specific practical limitations, such as a lack of transportation to and from an off-campus internship site.
7. Social barriers: lack of social and/or professional networks. A few students responded that a lack of connections or professional networks in the relevant field or geographical location prevented them from participating in an internship.

As we anticipate expanding internship opportunities for all students, we can identify the following additional barriers or challenges:

8. Additional workload for staff (Community Engagement Center, Career Center, academic programs, contracts and procurement, risk management) to support community partnerships and internships. Whether developing policies and procedures for the campus, offering training and consultation for faculty, providing outreach and support to students and to community partners and employers, staff in multiple units across campus will experience additional workload as the number of internships increases.
9. Additional workload for faculty to create and maintain internship opportunities. When an internship is required for the degree and/or for a certification, credential, license, or accreditation, departments are more likely to integrate internship supervision into faculty workload. When internships are electives, there is typically not the same consideration for how internship supervision is shared among faculty.
10. Inadequate tracking and assessment mechanisms of all internships and the need to collect data that is disaggregated by whether the internship is paid or unpaid, funding sources, student demographics, and whether it is limited to specific academic disciplines. This institutional barrier can make it difficult to address other barriers.

Discussion

The findings helped to address what for-credit and paid internship opportunities are available to students, and to the extent data is available, which groups of students are taking advantage of the internship opportunities. The findings also identified the barriers students experience in accessing or participating in for-credit and paid internships. Based on our findings, it is important to note two categories of barriers not typically included in past research. First, as mentioned

above, we included "psychological barriers" because many students in both surveys answered that they felt unqualified. For example, students reported "feeling unqualified for internship work" (2024 survey) and "[o]ne of the main reasons for not having been a part of an internship this far is because I feel like I am not qualified enough to take on a real job" (2025 survey).

The students' responses to an open-ended question in the 2025 survey provide greater insight into this psychological barrier. While some students responded that they did not feel qualified, many of them explained that this was based on their prior experiences. For example, one student wrote, "I have applied to a variety of on campus job and internship relating to my major yet I seem to be unqualified or rejected for every single one of them. It has discouraged me from applying all together and I am not sure what to do as an internship would be extremely helpful in the long run." Another student explained, "I have applied for numerous Internships on campus. I have been given one preliminary interview, and have never made it past that point. I'm just not being selected."

From an equity-minded approach, we can draw an important distinction between students not feeling qualified because of something about the students (such as assuming they lack the right credentials or connections) and not feeling qualified due to not getting callbacks or not receiving offers for too few available opportunities. This is a crucial distinction because, if students do not feel qualified because there is an enormous mismatch between the number of available opportunities and the number of qualified students to fill them, granted some mismatch is common and to be expected, this suggests that the deficiency is not in them, but in a system that sets them up for failure.

Like financial barriers (see Hora et al., 2021, pp. 204-205), psychological barriers at first glance may seem more consistent with a deficit narrative; however, they point to students' real experiences, which is both something to be acknowledged and something to examine further. Psychological barriers draw attention to two important realities: one in which minoritized students experience a social institution that is not quite designed for them, with real limitations or a lack of available opportunities; and another in which they possess aspirational and navigational capital and remain resilient despite the circumstances. As suggested in the 2025 survey responses, students' perception of not being qualified is based on their lived experiences. However, it may be unjustified because the problem lies not with our students, but with systems that are grossly inadequate in offering enough opportunities for the qualified students who need them.

Second, our list of barriers includes "institutional barriers," which refer to challenges in accessing services, navigating the processes involved, and not knowing where to start. While less commonly identified as a barrier to internships, others have described how an institution's services or programs for students related to internships can impact access and participation,

focusing on factors such as a lack of advising, heavy courseloads, and a lack of internship opportunities in particular disciplines (Hora, Wolfgram, & Chen, 2019). In our 2025 survey, we specifically included institutional barriers as an option, which was one of the most frequently selected options in combination with other barriers. By adding institutional barriers as an option in our survey, we were able to gather important data on student experiences and constructive feedback on our own institutional services and programs. Our study of internships at CSUS suggests that, while there are numerous programs and services related to internships on campus, students still struggle to access these services or navigate the processes.

The list above and subsequent discussion are not intended to be exhaustive. Both the list of barriers above and the recommendations below were developed by our team in consultation with other campuses and a home team of experts to provide some generalizable findings that apply beyond our own campus. The information here is intended as a starting point for further input and conversation, toward a more comprehensive understanding of internships, both the challenges and the opportunities.

Recommendations for Equitable Access to Internships

In this section, we present several recommendations for our university and other similarly situated institutions. This section also puts into practice Bensimon's equity-minded principles and Yosso's concept of community cultural wealth. We recognize the barriers above signal systematic problems that require institutionally-focused solutions and, therefore, the recommendations below are distinctively institutionally focused and action-oriented.

As described above, CSUS offers hundreds of internship opportunities through its various centers and academic departments and enrolls over 27,000 undergraduate students each year. There are many other institutions with similar characteristics, whether public or private, based on their institutional size, student demographics, and decentralized centers and programs that offer internship opportunities. For other institutions that are interested in improving equitable access to internships, our study and recommendations may provide insights and suggestions that can be tailored to their needs and circumstances.

Based on examples from the literature and the barriers to internships identified in the previous section, we recommend the following solutions to improve access to internships for all students, especially our Black and Latinx students.

1. Student-Ready Internship Hub. Centralized go-to source online for students to navigate all available internships.
2. Student-Centered Information Campaign. Internship information campaign to students with student-focused infographic(s) and related resources.

Our recommendations are informed by similar strategies offered by O'Shea et al. (2022) to improve access and scale student participation in internships at Florida State University, another large research university with a diverse student body. In 2019, the Faculty Senate at FSU voted to add a university-wide experiential learning graduation requirement because of the value of experiential learning to advance student success and post-graduation outcomes. FSU's implementation strategies including four integrated pillars (pp. 191-196): overcoming student information and mentorship barriers and increasing awareness of opportunities (e.g., outreach, advising, developing pathways); integrating more experiential learning into the curriculum so students encounter it along the way to graduation; developing and scaling low-cost models of experiential learning and expanding financial assistance (on-campus internships, remote experiences, employer partnerships, e.g. shadow programs, and federal work-study); and improving tracking, evaluation, and student reflection and professional development (connecting students to opportunities and institutional accountability). Similar to the FSU example, to address in part "institutional barriers," we recommend a centralized online platform with listings for internships and related opportunities. We also recommend a coordinated student information campaign to raise awareness, making available the online platform, and assisting with navigating the processes involved for preparing competitive internship applications.

3. Support for Faculty and Staff. Incentivize, train, and support faculty and staff to offer internship/career-related experiential learning opportunities.

This recommendation is based on feedback from faculty and staff at our institution and discussion in the literature (see Retallick & Steiner, 2009; Durack, 2013; Satariano & Rogers, 1979). Faculty and staff play a key role in making internships available to all students. Developing and maintaining internship opportunities involves time-consuming labor, including partnership development, contract services, risk management, course or program development, ongoing coordination, supervision, and mentoring. We recognize the significant costs and other challenges involved; nevertheless, we believe that incentivizing faculty and staff, whether through additional pay, release time, cohort support, and/or commendation, may be the single most effective action in securing an increase in opportunities for students.

4. Enhanced Community Partnerships. Collaborate with community partners and potential employers to provide training on equity-minded practices. Develop more partnerships, particularly paid opportunities and flexible formats. Explore other funding opportunities to provide living allowances for students who work with non-profit organizations.
5. Integrated Work-Related Experiential Learning. Integrate more work-related experiential learning opportunities in the curriculum, including innovative ways to allow students to employ their cultural capital.

These recommendations are informed by Hora's College Internship Study (2022), which offered multiple ways to "democratize access" to internships for all students, including integrating alternative forms of experiential education into academic courses and projects, and working with employers and others to increase accessible, paid opportunities (pp. 119-120). Expanding paid or

for-credit internship opportunities for all students, particularly at institutions that serve racially diverse student populations, will make more opportunities available to minoritized students. Integrating other work-related experiential learning into the curriculum serves dual purposes: (1) well-designed work-related experiential learning opportunities that involve one-time activities or short-term projects, may provide a beneficial alternative to internships, and (2) integrating these opportunities throughout the curriculum may provide students with more opportunities to explore career options and gain valuable experience (O'Shea, et al., 2022; Fung, 2017). When developing community partnerships or collaborating with existing community partners to provide internship or other work-related experiential learning opportunities, career centers or other staff can provide training on equity-mindedness and/or seek employers that share an institution's equity goals (Hora, 2022; Spaulding et al., 2023). These experiential learning opportunities can also be designed to recognize or maximize the cultural capital of minoritized students, who are often already gaining valuable experience through their current employment (Hora et al., 2021).

6. Effective Tracking and Assessment. Develop improved tracking mechanisms (e.g., a university-wide course coding system). Improve regular and ongoing assessment of students and community partners to ensure mutual benefit and reciprocity.
7. Additional Data Collection. Collect longitudinal data on paid versus unpaid, current percentage of students in internships, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and post-internship student success and employment data. Tracking trends across time, when integrated with regular assessment data, can yield important insights for continuous quality and equity improvements.

Our last two recommendations concern the important role of tracking and assessment in better understanding the current state of internship offerings and who is taking advantage of them, as well as in supporting future decisions and actions to expand internship opportunities. One of the specific ways that we and other similarly situated institutions can improve their data-collecting practices is by gathering disaggregated data based on demographics for all paid and for-credit internships.

Through collaboration with relevant campus and community partners, the goal is to tailor and revise strategies to improve equitable access to high-quality internships that are relevant to students.

Conclusion

In this article, we provided a broad overview of what internship opportunities are offered at CSUS and, as to academic internships, who is taking advantage of these opportunities. We also discussed the barriers to access and participation, as well as possible solutions or

recommendations for addressing these barriers. The information provided in this study—selected literature review, data, inventory, identified barriers, and preliminary recommendations—is intended to contribute to the university's broader efforts to improve access to internships while maintaining its commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice.

CSUS's2023-2028 strategic plan includes activity #18 on internships: "Ensure that 80% of undergraduate students participate in a paid or credit internship prior to graduation by Fall 2028 by supporting integration of all campus internship efforts." We can assume from the information provided above that the objective of ensuring that 80% of our undergraduate student population participates in an internship opportunity is staggeringly bold, important, and, to some extent, aspirational. We hope that the information provided here, particularly the preliminary recommendations, will help to make incremental progress toward this strategic goal. Also, although we have focused on access and participation by Black and Latinx students, our data collection has shown that all student groups are underrepresented in internships to some extent. We believe our recommendations can improve access and participation not only for Black and Latinx students but also for all students by enhancing their college experience and expanding their opportunities after graduation. Our self-study also may be instructive for others, and the above recommendations can be tailored to apply to other similarly situated colleges and universities seeking to improve equitable access to internships.

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