The Internship Divide, *Revisited:*
Why Paid Internships Help Careers

The summer of 2020 saw many students’ internships get cancelled and recent graduates’ job offers rescinded. Amidst pressing concerns about when and how to safely re-open schools, higher education professionals should not lose sight of how a tightening job market will shape student internships. We know that during the Great Recession, unpaid internships became more prevalent than paid ones, which exacerbated an unequal intern economy, notably in the arts.

SNAAP’s 2015 special report *The Internship Divide* highlighted important differences between paid and unpaid internships in the arts. The report found that arts alumni who complete a paid internship are significantly more likely to find a job quickly after graduation, work in a job that closely matches their field of study, and report higher levels of current job satisfaction. Conversely, an unpaid internship in the arts is...
less likely to provide these types of career boosts (a finding consistent across non-arts fields). To better understand how internships impact the educational and career pathways of arts alumni, in 2015-2017 SNAAP fielded a module with questions about these student experiences.

The results suggest at least two key explanations for why paid internships are more beneficial than unpaid ones: differences in mentorship and assigned responsibilities.

As part of the SNAAP internship module, over 3,500 arts alumni answered a series of questions about their “most significant” internship experience (how they found the internship, whether they were paid, how many hours they worked, etc.). One of these questions asked: How closely do you feel you were mentored by staff during the internship? Overall, arts graduates seem relatively satisfied with the mentorship they received: 84% (paid) and 75% (unpaid) of respondents said they were “very” or “somewhat” closely mentored by staff (see Figure 1). However, paid interns appear more likely to report feeling “very closely” mentored whereas unpaid interns are more likely to feel “not at all” mentored. Logistic regression analysis controlling for major, school, and socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender) further confirms this pattern: paid interns are 49% more likely than unpaid interns to report close (“very” or “somewhat”) mentoring by staff.

Figure 1. How closely intern felt mentored by staff
SNAAP 2015-2017 internship module: undergraduate and graduate alumni (N = 3,633)

The internship module also asked: To what extent did your internship include activities involving creative input or judgment? While prior research suggests that internships tend to include at least some low-level work such as clerical duties, most SNAAP alumni reported that their experiences involved creative input or judgement (see Figure 2). Controlling for educational and socio-demographic variables, though, paid interns are 68% more
likely to report that their work as interns “very much” or “somewhat” involved creative input or judgement.

Figure 2. Internship included activities involving creative input or judgment
SNAAP 2015-2017 internship module: undergraduate and graduate alumni (N = 3,633)

Paid internships may lead to more positive career outcomes because these experiences are more likely to involve substantive work assignments carried out under close supervision. As educational experiences for newcomers to develop skills, learn about a field, test out career interests, and build a professional network, these results help explain why internships are crucial for early careers, but not evenly so. With the recent rise of online internships, arts schools must remain especially vigilant about the types of internship opportunities available to students, who has access to them, and how they are supervised. Interns are always at risk of feeling isolated during internships, but remote or online internships might exacerbate the mentorship and work assignment differences between paid and unpaid internships, which will have consequences for inequalities in the arts. After all, the 2015 SNAAP report not only suggested that paid internships positively impact careers more than unpaid ones, it also found that women are disproportionally likely to do unpaid internships and first-generation college students are less likely to intern at all.

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