



PLANNING THEIR ENTRY INTO THE WORKFORCE:

Exploring students' perceptions and expectations for internships and other experiential work strategies

2019

Strategic Insights Series





**A path for every student.
A plan for every future.™**

“An internship is the single most important credential for recent college graduates to have on their résumé.”

BACKGROUND

Internships are among the most common exploratory work opportunities available throughout the United States, with well over one million positions filled each year. Spanning industries, scope, duration, and structure, internships enable individuals to explore career interests on a trial basis, gain experience in a chosen field, learn the demands of a given industry, and ultimately come a few steps closer to determining what it is they will do for their career in the long-term.

But amid these opportunities there are several areas that call for improvement. By and large, and in sharp contrast with apprenticeships, internships are “effectively unregulated².” This is problematic in the context of employers placing heavy weight on internship experience as they decide who to employ. A 2013 survey of employers by Chronicle of Higher Education and Marketplace found internship experience as the single most important factor in hiring, far outweighing applicants’ academic records³.

The 2018 National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE] Internship & Co-op Survey Report indicated that for a second consecutive year, employers projected increases in intern hiring⁴. Many of these interns will ultimately feed the employee pipeline within their organizations, with 46 percent of interns ultimately accepting full-time positions as well as having significantly higher one-year and five-year retention rates at those organizations. Even among interns without internal experience, those who had interned at another organization still had higher retention rates than those without any internship experience.

These findings beg the question: are these high retention rates due, in part, to internships enabling employees to explore their interests in a short-duration, experimental setting, thus gaining a better understanding of their skills, preferences, and work styles in a way that those without internship experience may not have? Understanding this question is one of American Student Assistance’s essential goals as we continue to explore the value of internship programs as an essential component of the larger world of career exploration.

This report seeks to address this question through a joint consideration of some of ASA’s recent primary research with college students, employers, and parents of middle school and high school students. The remainder of the report considers key findings from each of these populations and concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Internships and other experiential work opportunities are fundamental to the workforce at large and to individual professional development. These temporary work arrangements provide students a structured opportunity to gain relevant workplace skills, clarify their interests, and gain valuable human capital as they signal to employers that they are ready for the world of work. Internships are likewise valuable to employers, both in terms of cultivating their future workforce as well as gaining assistance with temporary projects or entry-level work at low cost and low risk. As internship offerings continue to grow, it is essential to understand these benefits and to explore areas for expansion and support of these types of work training opportunities for those seeking experience in a given career field.

This report explores these and other benefits of internships through a joint consideration of the college student perspective, the Generation Z parent perspective, and the employer perspective. Questions addressed within this report include:

College students: How many college students intern? What are some of the differences in approaches to post-college planning between those with and without internship experience? What are some of the concerns related to access to internship opportunities?

Employers: What types of organizations offer internship opportunities? What are the most common barriers to offering internships? To what extent do employers value internships in hiring considerations?

Parents: How do parents feel about their students pursuing internship opportunities as a part of their pre-career training? Are parents aware of different types of experiential work opportunities available to their middle school- and high school-aged children?

In conjunction with our research, American Student Assistance® (ASA) additionally offers some action opportunities and policy recommendations. These solutions include:

- 1. Encourage additional government investment in internships as a practical workforce development strategy;**
- 2. Make internships more broadly available and accessible to students;**
- 3. Decrease the financial and administrative burden of internships on employers.**





THE (COLLEGE) STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

ASA® designed and administered a survey to a nationally representative sample of 1,529 young adults currently enrolled in college. The survey explored their educational journeys, how they feel about the decisions they made back in high school, and their outlook about the future. Several of the findings from this “College Lookback” survey relate directly to internships, experiential work strategies, and career preparation and experimentation more broadly.

Less than half of college students report that they believe their high school did a good job of preparing them for employment⁵, suggesting the importance of additional work-related training before students conclude their education. This gap in preparation is especially noteworthy among young women, with only 36 percent endorsing the statement, “My high school did a good job of preparing me for employment,” in comparison to 50 percent of young men.

We asked college students to rank in which order they did each of the following: chose their college, chose their major, and chose their career path. Overwhelmingly, our surveyed **students report that they selected their college (44 percent) or major (33 percent) first, prior to considering their intended career path (23 percent).** While fewer than a quarter of students consider potential career paths as a first step, these students were more likely than the others to have a plan for their future.

The high proportion of students feeling unprepared for employment post-high school, in conjunction with the high proportion of students who chose their college and/or major prior to a career path, reveals an acute need for career exploration opportunities earlier in the education journey. One such opportunity exists in the form of **internships**.

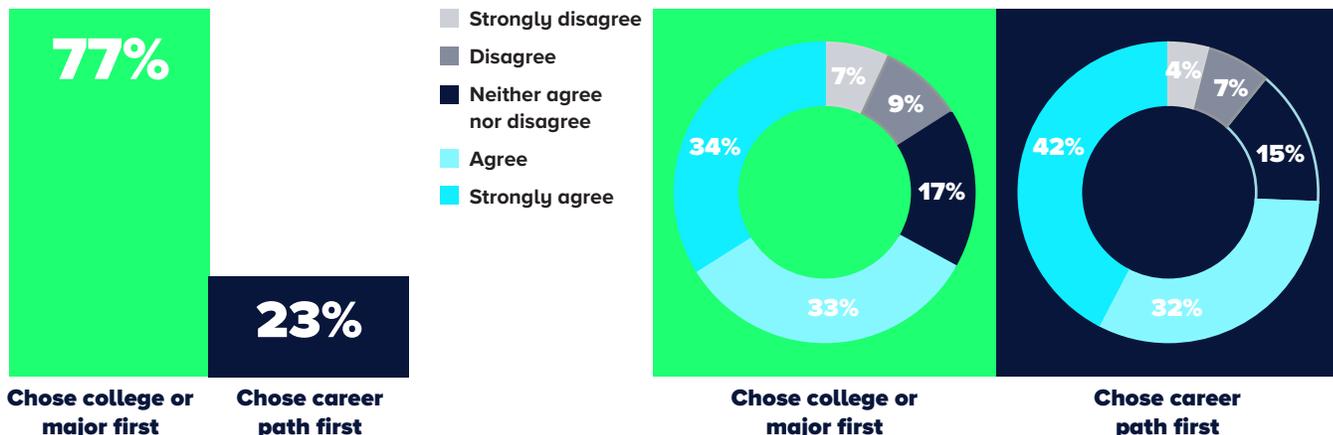
Work and internships in college

The key distinguishing feature between work and internships is longevity; work is typically a longer-term arrangement whereas internships are generally temporary by design. In this way internships are more exploratory by definition, enabling individuals to have a “trial run” at a career of interest.

Most students (67 percent) surveyed indicate that they currently or previously worked a job or internship while attending college. Most of these students are working paid jobs, with about half (47 percent) citing the provision of an income they need or want as a primary reason for holding that job.

Fewer students – just 8 percent – shared that they were currently interning, with most of these (5 percent total) working paid internships and the remaining 3 percent working unpaid internships.

“I have a plan for my life after school”





A much larger number of respondents, 35 percent, had held an internship in the past, suggesting that students who embark on internships typically do so outside of the school year (e.g., in the summer). Importantly, because these surveyed individuals were enrolled in college at the time of the survey, these numbers are likely to be systematically deflated as students who have not yet interned may do so before they finish school. To this point, 38 percent of students report being “very likely” and 36 percent “somewhat likely” to seek out an internship before they conclude their education, for a grand total of **83 percent of surveyed students who either have internship experience or who are likely to pursue an internship in the future.**

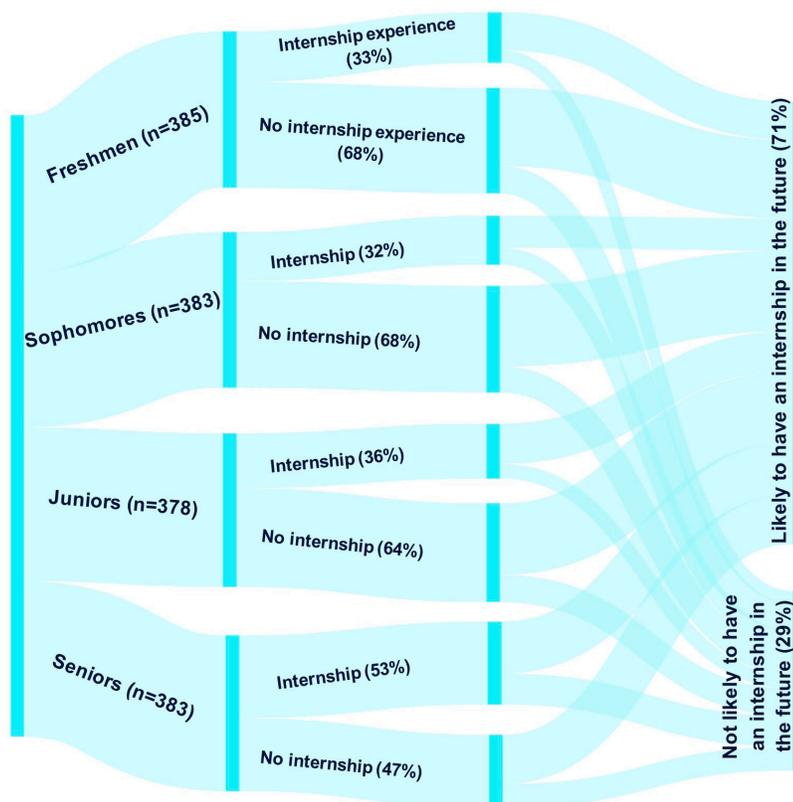
Of those currently interning in college, most indicate that they are doing so because the internship is in a field they are interested in pursuing after college (49 percent). Other popular reasons for pursuing an internship include that it provides a needed or wanted income (31 percent), that it allows for the best hours that do not conflict with their studies (23 percent), and that it was recommended by either a faculty member/advisor (22 percent) or a college career advisor (20 percent).

Young men in our sample are more likely to have interned than young women, in a 14-point split. **57 percent of those with internship experience are male compared to 43 percent female.**

Of the students who indicate they are currently interning, 44 percent are underclassmen (freshmen and sophomores) and 56 percent are upperclassmen (juniors and seniors). A larger divide is evident among those who have interned in the past, with a split of 29 percent underclassmen versus 41 percent upperclassmen, with this latter group driven largely by seniors.

Those who had internship experience were three times more likely than those without internship experience to have a post-college plan.

The Sankey diagram presents differences in current and previous internship experience by class year alongside which segments of these groups are “somewhat” or “very” likely to intern in the future versus those who are “not at all” or “not very” likely to consider internships.





Differences between interns and non-interns

When asked about their intended post-college plans, few students selected “I don’t know / I haven’t considered post college” but among those who did, most lacked internship experience. In fact, students who have internship experience are three times more likely than those without internship experience to have a post-college plan. While it is unclear whether it is the internship that drives post-college plans or vice versa, both reinforce the idea that this speaks to the higher clarity about one’s future felt by those with internship experiences, though whether this is due to the internship itself versus an overarching clarity that may inform both interning and future planning remains unclear.

Some major differences between the interning and non-interning students appear in the following table. In general, **those with internship experiences skewed male, were more satisfied with their post-HS planning, and had higher confidence in their future career and in their preparation.** These students were less worried about their educational and career futures overall, with the exception of being concerned about getting accepted to graduate school. Here, those who had interned were more likely to note school as a potential future path, expressing concerns about admission at a higher rate. Rather than indicating higher levels of concern, however, this trend may be, in part, a function of those with internship experience being more likely to consider graduate school at higher rates than non-interns (35 percent versus 31 percent).

	Currently/previously interned	Never interned
Gender³	57% Male 43% Female	45% Male 55% Female
Satisfaction: post-HS educational planning (% extremely satisfied) ³	57%	42%
Confidence: know the job/career options best for future goals (% somewhat/strongly agree) ²	68%	61%
Confidence: HS did a good job preparing for college (% somewhat/strongly agree) ³	61%	46%
Confidence: HS did a good job preparing for career (% somewhat/strongly agree) ³	53%	36%
Average grades in HS ³	59% A/A-	45% A/A-
Parents as influencer in ed/career development ²	38%	46%
Concern: earning an income I could live on ²	36%	44%
Concern: getting into a graduate school of my choice ³	27%	19%
Concern: not knowing what I want to do as a career ²	15%	21%
Concern: being able to afford education/loans ²	34%	42%
Priority: having a job that impresses family and friends (% somewhat/very important) ³	61%	49%

$p < .01^2 / p < .001^3$





A notable difference also emerges in the recognition of parents as influencers. Students who have never interned are more likely to identify their parents as key influencers in their college and career preparation, indicating that many of these students do indeed have career-related supports in their lives. This differential suggests a few additional possibilities:

- Students who are interning may be more independent by nature, which could explain both their higher rates of applying to experiential learning opportunities such as internships, as well as their lower likelihood to identify their parents as influencers.
- Certain students may be using internships to gain mentorship and exploration opportunities that they lacked at home.
- Students who are interning are more certain in what they want to do for their career (15 percent list this as a concern compared to 21 percent of non-interns). Increased certainty may partially explain their lower rates of identifying parental influence in that more of what “influences” their career development is internal.

Access to internships

Some of the identified differences speak to potential inequities in access to internships. First, non-interns express lower confidence in their high school preparation. Second, their greater concern with money, both in terms of their future earnings and their ability to afford their education, implies the presence of structural barriers in the lives of those without internship experience. These students may not be aware of internship opportunities, may not view internships as a means of gaining preparation for their educational and career pursuits, may not have the network to access available internships, and may not be able to pursue an internship opportunity unless it comes with the promise of a fair wage.

Of the students currently interning, one-third (31 percent) are doing so because of the income that internships provide. As previously mentioned, only 3 percent of current interns are working an unpaid internship, but the financial component is clearly salient for a large proportion of students. Combined with an overall greater concern about finances and differential feelings of preparation and planning in a broader context than interning alone, the ways in which internship experiences can be helpful for students is inherently reduced due to these pre-existing differences.

The central focus here is not whether students are interning, but whether all students have access to this type of experience in the first place, and whether they are able to glean as much from that experience. Our College Lookback data indicates that internships may be partially reflective of underlying privileges and opportunities that are differentially afforded to certain types of students.

ACTION OPPORTUNITY

Colleges: Promote the availability of paid internship experiences and share them widely with students, especially those who may not be aware of these opportunities. Explore the feasibility of student stipends for unpaid internships, following the model of institutions such as Washington University in St. Louis⁶, Georgetown University⁷, and Boston College⁸.

Businesses: Consider that half of students who are working while in school do so because of the income provided. Many of these students are systematically and chronically unable to accept an unpaid work experience. Explore opportunities to offer payment to your employees commensurate with their experience, and work with post-secondary institutions to ensure your opportunities are available to all students.





THE EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE

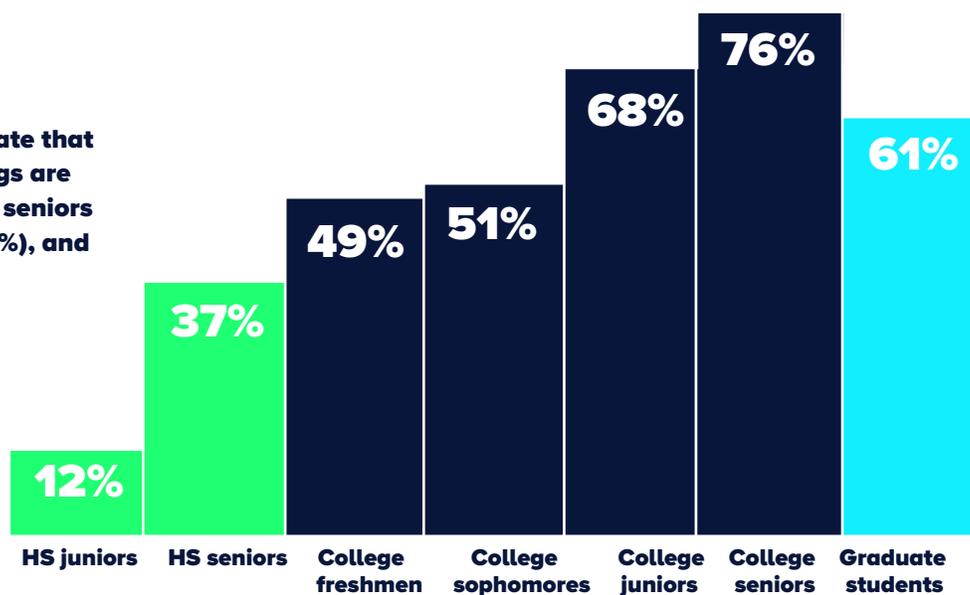
In late 2018, ASA surveyed HR professionals seeking insights into the internship experience and trends in internship program structure. Respondents represented 498 companies across the country, with some oversampling in Massachusetts, where ASA is based⁹.

Not surprisingly, we found that larger companies are significantly more likely than smaller companies to offer an internship program. **Companies with fewer than 50 employees are as likely as not to offer an internship program, whereas almost nine in 10 larger companies offer an internship program.** Almost half (44 percent) of the smaller companies currently without interns express an interest in starting an internship program in the future.

Among companies of all sizes, the top reason for not offering an internship program is not having work well-suited for interns. Of the 56 companies without internship programs and without plans to start up a program in the future, 35 (63 percent) express this as a key reason why they would not support an internship program.

Determining the work best suited to interns is a common challenge even among companies with internship programs: 38 percent of small companies, 46 percent of medium-sized companies, and 48 percent of large companies share that this is “somewhat” or “very” challenging.

HR decision-makers indicate that current internship offerings are most common for college seniors (76%), college juniors (68%), and graduate students (61%).



Number of employees	Has internship program	Does NOT have internship program
Less than 50	49%	51%
50-499	86%	14%
500 or more	89%	11%

Internship offerings are most common for undergraduate students, with 90 percent of our respondents reporting that they have internship openings for students enrolled in any of the four years in college. More than a third of the companies, 38 percent, additionally or alternatively provide internship opportunities for those as young as their junior year of high school. These high school opportunities span a variety of responsibilities and tasks, including project management, analytic problem solving, communications and logistics, administrative and clerical, event planning and assistance, scheduling, and research and data entry. Further, most of these high school interning opportunities are paid (55 percent) and an additional 41 percent offer course credit, suggesting that students younger than the traditional internship age should have many experiential learning opportunities available to them that provide some form of compensation.





On the whole, **internship programs and opportunities are growing**. More than half – 53 percent – of the surveyed companies report that they anticipate “some-what” or “greatly” increasing the size of their internship program within the next five years, speaking to the larger trend of growing experiential learning opportunities for students. And as students have increased access to internship opportunities, their prospects in the labor market will likely improve correspondingly. Indeed, 85 percent of surveyed HR managers note that past internship experience constitutes relevant work experience when considering applicants for full-time work, which speaks to the importance of internships in the larger career preparation universe.

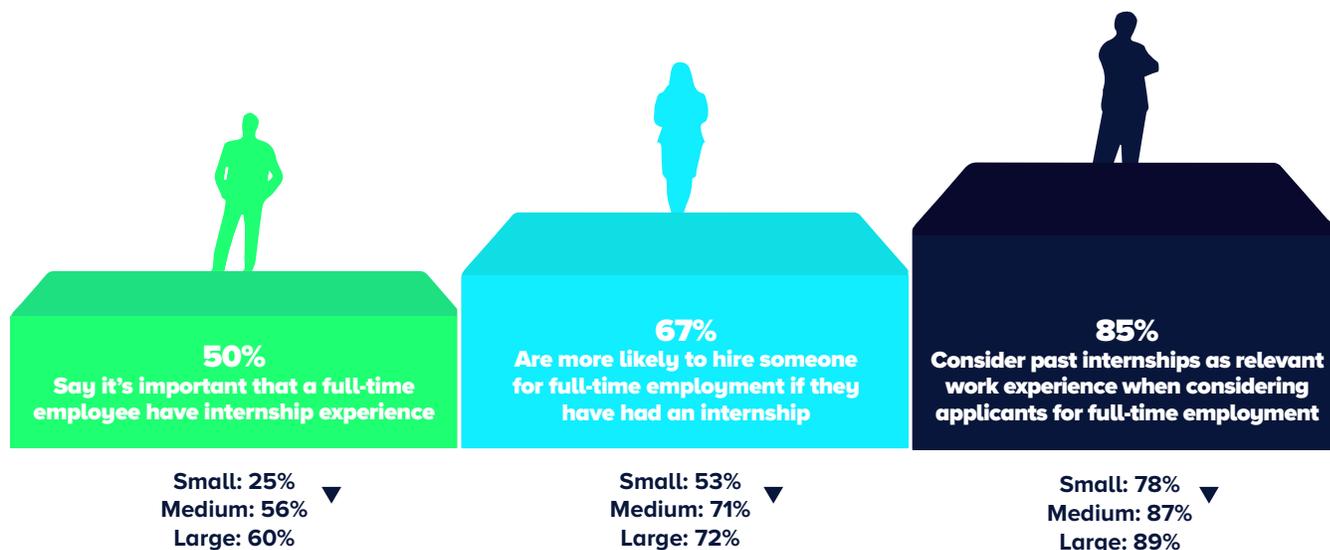
In addition, 67 percent of respondents report being more likely to hire someone for full-time employment if they had previous internship experience, and half of respondents indicate the importance of a full-time employee having internship experience.

In addition to improving interns’ future prospects in the full-time labor market in general, a completed internship also serves as a gateway to future employment within the same organization. Three in four (75 percent) firms with internship programs report offering full-time employment to at least a tenth of their intern workforce, with one in four offering employment to 75 percent or more of their interns.

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ACTION OPPORTUNITY

Partner with high schools and promote internship opportunities available to students who are not yet in college or who may not choose to pursue college. Ensure experiential learning in the form of interning is available to younger students as a means of exploring career paths and gaining valuable experience.



▼ = Significantly greater/less than other groups at 95% confidence level





With regard to these findings, a major hurdle emerges. As long as internships continue to be weighted heavily in the job application process, it is essential to ensure that students have equity in access to these programs. Without equity of opportunity, certain students will be systematically overlooked as they apply for more permanent work later in their lives.

Our surveyed employers cite several reasons for supporting an internship program, with a desire to give back to the academic community emerging as the most commonly mentioned (73 percent). Beyond this, most reference the value that internships bring to their organizations, including stocking their employment pipeline with entry-level position candidates (62 percent), filling a business need for ongoing workload capacity (59 percent), filling a business need for special project(s) (51 percent), and increasing staff at a more affordable cost (51 percent).

These results suggest a perception among companies that internships serve several purposes and provide a wide array of benefits both to the organization itself as well as to the larger workforce and academic community. These and other benefits are not going unnoticed by organizations lacking internship programs: of the 53 respondents without internship infrastructure, 72 percent report being “somewhat” or “very” likely to start up a program in the future.

But the desire to start up an internship program is only the first step. Organizations without internship programs articulate a series of challenges that have thus far prevented them from creating and sustaining such a program. Beyond the challenge of finding quality interns discussed previously, close to half (47 percent) of HR managers at these firms also feel funding a program would be difficult. Another third (34 percent) express concerns over maintaining internal support for such a program.

At the moment, there seems to be a lot of competition for internship opportunities. Most companies (55 percent) report offering an internship to less than a quarter of applicants that they receive, allowing, for the most part, a degree of selectivity in the application process. Myriad factors may explain this selectivity on the employer side, including a widespread perception that finding qualified interns is difficult. Two-thirds (63 percent) of companies with internship programs, regardless of company size, indicate that finding qualified interns is “somewhat” or “very” challenging. This finding is echoed among those not currently offering internship programs today: about half (48 percent) believe that determining the best recruitment process for finding quality interns would be a key challenge for their firm.

How many interns does your company have working for you at any given time?

Number of Employees	1-5 interns	6-10 interns	11-20 interns	20+ interns
Less than 50	92%	8%	0%	0%
50-499	33%	42%	20%	5%
500 or more	11%	35%	25%	30%





THE PARENT PERSPECTIVE

In early 2019, ASA surveyed a national sample of 2,054 parents of students in middle school or high school. The survey primarily centered on parent attitudes and values concerning future planning, seeking clarity on parents’ own aspirations, plans, and behaviors as well as those of their children. As a part of this survey, parents were asked a series of questions about internships as well as experiential work and career development opportunities currently available to their children. Accordingly, insights from this survey highlight how parents – a key influencer for most students in ASA’s target age range – value internships and related career exploration experiences both while their students are still at home, as well as in the future as they become more independent in their training and eventual career attainment.

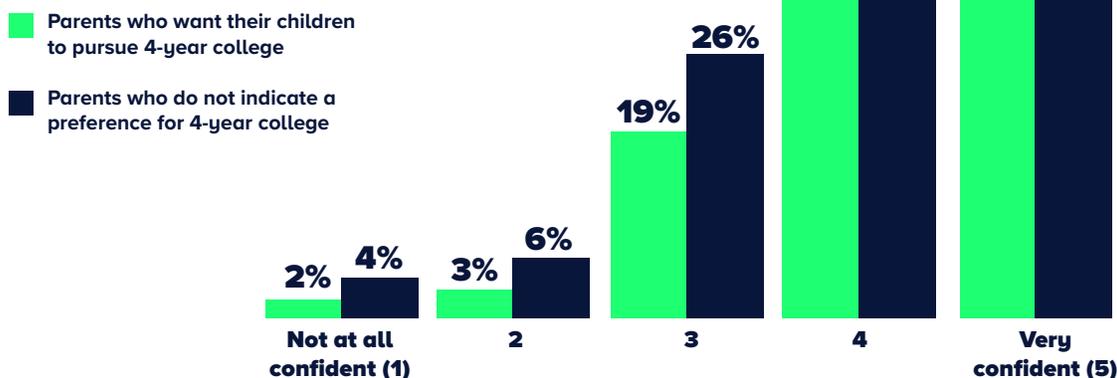
Parents of high schoolers understand the importance of internships, with 93 percent of parents reporting moderate to high confidence that internships are a great way for their children to gain experience in their chosen field. Parents’ endorsement of this statement is largely consistent between those whose preference for their child is a four-year college education and those whose preference was another path (e.g., two-year college, military, vocational/technical training, joining the family business). While parents of college-bound students are more likely to be “very confident,” the overall consistency among parents suggests that **internships can be valuable for all types of students, whether they are college-bound or otherwise.**

93% of parents reported moderate to high confidence that internships are a great way for their children to gain experience in their chosen field.

With regard to experiential learning more broadly, 64 percent of parents report this type of opportunity is available to their middle school- and high school-aged children, with 82 percent of this group indicating that their child has already participated or will consider participating in the future.

Among the 28 percent who are unaware if such a program exists in their area, the clear majority of parents – 83 percent – express being “somewhat” or “very” likely to take advantage of experiential learning programs for their child(ren) if they are available. This finding is unsurprising in the context of parents’ stated confidence in internships as a way to gain experience in a given career field, and additionally highlights the value in having these programs available for students younger than college age.

Confidence that internships are a good way to gain experience in a field.



CONCLUSION

Considered in conjunction with recent research and policy efforts surrounding internships, ASA's primary research with students, HR professionals, and parents provides important insights concerning the modern internship experience and its purported role in students' preparation for the world of work.

Students with internship experience are more confident in their future planning, which speaks to the importance of temporary and exploratory work within the larger universe of career exploration and development. In response to this and other trends, employers are planning to expand their internship offerings at the same time that they are decreasingly likely to offer unpaid opportunities. This projected expansion of internships is a step in the right direction, meeting the strong demand among both students and parents for these types of opportunities.

Our research offers promise to learners of diverse ages and interests, with some opportunities available to students in high school and to individuals looking to hone a variety of skill sets from the administrative to the experiential. This finding is encouraging as the meaning of internships continues to expand beyond the confines of an office-based 9-to-5 job. As these opportunities grow, however, several important considerations emerge as to how policy may change at the state and federal level to implement the internship experience:

State & Federal Policy Recommendations

[\[See ASA's recent issue brief on Internship Challenges and Policy Recommendations for additional details \[www.asa.org/internshipolicy\]\(http://www.asa.org/internshipolicy\)\]](#)

1. Create financial incentives for employers to expand internship opportunities (e.g., corporate income tax credit, grant funding, state-wide internship fund to support paid opportunities).
2. Establish state-wide internship coordination systems to help employers with various administrative burdens and to help students with information access and application support.
3. Encourage greater private sector investment through public-private partnerships and/or foundations and for-profit company funding support in high-need sectors.
4. Eliminate the exemption that allows for unpaid government internships.
5. Ensure all states have established guidelines for providing academic credit in high school for internship work experience, and change graduation requirements where necessary.

Internships fulfill several important purposes in the 21st century workforce. They provide a means for students to discover and hone their professional skills and interests. They help expand and sustain employment pipelines across industries. They function as a critical indicator of individual work experience and preparation. And perhaps most importantly, they help students know themselves, know their options, and make informed decisions to achieve their education and career goals. It is crucial that these opportunities are available to all individuals embarking upon their career journeys.

1. Maguire Associates, "The Employment Mismatch" survey.
2. Reeves, R. V. (2017). *Dream Hoarders*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.
3. Fischer, K. (2013). *The Employment Mismatch*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Employment-Mismatch/137625#id=internships>.
4. National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2018). *2018 Internship & Co-op Survey Report*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nacweb.org/uploadedfiles/files/2018/publication/executive-summary/2018-nace-internship-and-co-op-survey-executive-summary.pdf>.
5. College Lookback Study
6. <https://careercenter.wustl.edu/items/stipends/>
7. <https://careercenter.georgetown.edu/jobs-internships/unpaid-internship-resources/>
8. <https://www.bc.edu/offices/careers/services/careerevents/eagle-intern-fellowship.html>
9. Companies from Massachusetts comprised 20 percent of the sample (97 companies).



Ongoing Insights

Future topics and reports will take a deeper dive into many of these key themes as they relate to the issues, challenges and realities that face middle school and high school students today as they plan for education and career choices after high school.

Additional reports will include topics such as:

Influencers, mentors and advisors to Generation Z: Who are the most common influencers to middle school and high school students when it comes to future planning? Who is the most significant?

The gender split: How do male and female students differ when it comes to their education decisions and future planning?

Internships & work strategies: How do middle school and high school students perceive and plan to use internships and other work strategies today? How do current college students feel about their effectiveness?

Career preferences among Generation Z: How do students select their preferences for careers and how does this relate to post-HS planning?

Stress and other emotions toward future planning: What are the drivers and impact of stress, anxiety and fear for students with respect to thinking about their future?

Alternatives to traditional education paths: How do middle, high school and college students and their parents perceive alternative education and employment paths?

Living in the present vs. planning for the future: How do these mindsets impact current middle and high school students and those already in college?

Gen Z student segments: How do students generally differentiate from one another in terms of their perceptions of school, their outlook on the future, and their emotions when it comes to planning?

Preferences for resources & programming: How students, parents and school counselors perceive various resources geared toward future planning?

The parent vs. student mindset: How do parents and students compare and contrast with respect to future planning?

Extracurriculars and pathways to futures: What role do sports and other extracurricular activities contribute to post-HS education and career planning?

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