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The Gap Between Students and Opportunities

Introduction

According to a 2025 survey done by the U.S. The Chamber of Commerce surveyed 500 hiring managers nationwide, “84% of hiring managers say most high school graduates are not prepared for the workforce, and 80% believe today’s graduates are less prepared than previous generations” (News Report). While the classroom gives students the academic foundation they need for college, today’s rapidly evolving, technology-driven world has led employers to increasingly value technical skills developed through real-world experiences and critical thinking (News Report). The National Association of College and Employers (NACE) states that career readiness is “a foundation” for workplace success and employers use internships and other experiential education to develop talent. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) explains that work-based learning helps students explore career paths in real-world settings and build skills for the growing economy, adapting alongside technology.

This is especially important in high school, when students are exploring interests and discovering what they want to do in the future through extracurriculars and classes. IES claims that work centered learning is useful because high school students have a variety of career options and experiences help explore careers before making a choice. The NCES reports that families, teachers, counselors, mentors, and other role models significantly influence students’

educational and career decisions, highlighting that students who lack these resources are often at a disadvantage.

Student Survey Findings

To better understand how local high school students perceive internships and experiential learning, our group distributed a survey across several high schools in Alameda County. A total of 60 students responded, varying from eight different schools within six Bay Area cities.

Based on survey response, 47.6% of the respondents were juniors, followed by sophomores at 26.7%, seniors at 21.7%, and freshmen at 5.0%. Respondents from the form were primarily located in Fremont, with additional responses from areas such as Union City, Pleasanton, Alameda, and Newark. Despite 90% of the student respondents reporting having applied for an internship before, students rated their awareness of internship opportunities at an average of only 2.93 out of 5. This suggests that the majority of students are actively looking for internships, however due to limited resources or places to start, are unable to find such opportunities. This finding supports previous research from the IES, which notes that schools continue to improve on work-based learning opportunities because students often struggle to find programs.

What are Internships and Experiential Learning?

An internship is a short-term experience in a professional setting that connects classroom knowledge with application (NACE). The U.S Department of Education's CTE defines internships as paid or unpaid opportunities that provide students with hands-on experience while helping them develop professional skills and build industry networks. Furthermore, the IES

expands on this idea by explaining that internships immerse students in career exploration activities such as job shadowing, mock interviews, and apprenticeships, directly enabling the youth to learn from experienced professionals and gain a deeper understanding of the workplace.

Experiential learning is the broader idea behind internships and opportunities. David Kolb, the Chairman and founder of the Experience Based Learning System (EBLS), defines experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”, describing it as a cycle that includes concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation. Based on Kolb’s Experiential learning theory, students learn most effectively when they not only read or listen to information but also actively applying what they have learned. Hence, his theory suggests that the most applicable form of knowledge is developed through experience, which internships provide, making experiential learning essential for future generations to develop valuable workplace skills.

Academic Benefits of Internships

Internships can improve academic outcomes because they help students connect classroom concepts to actual situations. The Center for Research on College-Workforce transitions (CCWT) internship study says students identify academic outcomes from internship participation, including improved grades and high motivation to succeed. The same report also explains that internship experiences help students learn at the internship site, achieve real-world experience, and align their work with completion or academic goals.

Research from the CCWT follow-up also shows that internships can strengthen students’ confidence and career adaptability. In the Northeastern Illinois University study CCWT reports that internship participation may give students increased psychological skills and resources to

manage career planning which will benefit them over time. This matters academically because students who understand how schooling connects to their future careers are often more engaged and committed to their courses.

Career Development and Workforce Readiness

Internships are one of the most efficient ways to build workforce readiness. NACE's career readiness framework lists eight skills required: career, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology. NACE also says career readiness prepares students for success in the workplace and career management.

These skills are developed through real responsibility in the real-world. In an internship, a student needs to communicate with supervisors, manage deadlines, collaborate with others, and act professionally. IES says work-based learning gives students real-world opportunities in a career of interest and helps them gain important skills that will set them up for the future. That makes internships a way to both learn and connect with employment.

Career Exploration and Networking

High school is a very important time for career exploration because many students do not yet know what fields fit their strengths of interests. IES says work-based learning helps high school students explore potential career paths in work settings, and its CTE recourse states that internships help students explore career paths while building professional networks.

The Alameda County survey finds that students are interested in a wild variety of fields. The most popular area was Engineering and Technology, followed by Medicine and Healthcare, Law and Government, Business, and Education. This demonstrates that many students are

exploring diverse pathways and fields. Limiting internships to specific fields reduces students' chances to explore other career fields.

Mentorship is one of the biggest benefits of internships and experiential learning. NCES says mentors positively influence student's education and career decisions. NACE also says career and self-development includes networking to build relationships within and outside an organization. Internships connect students to adults that can guide them and help them navigate future opportunities. Networking serves as an important skill that will help students throughout all of their future journeys going into their career and internships give them a brief overview of how the process looks like.

Research also shows that mentor support matters inside internships. CCWT's follow-up study finds that supervisor mentoring increases for students and that the quality of mentoring affects whether internships become important. This shows that great guidance will be a very important factor during an internship.

Barriers Preventing Students From Accessing Opportunities

Even though internships are valuable, many students cannot access them equally. IES empowerment brief finds that students already may be working outside of school to support their families, may have other family responsibilities, and may face transportation and scheduling difficulties. This results in students lacking internships opportunities to explore career paths that they can potentially pursue in the future.

CCWT's study finds that students who were interested in internships but did not participate reported that the most important barriers were a perceived lack of internship opportunities and the need to work at their current job. The next most common barrier was

insufficient pay and heavy course load, with transportation and childcare affecting some students.

The findings of the Alameda County Survey align with research on internship accessibility. The most commonly reported barrier was not knowing where to find internships (28 students). Other major barriers included a lack of transportation (22), not meeting internship requirements (22), not feeling qualified (22), complicated application processes (18), not having enough time (18), and family responsibilities (13).

Existing Solutions and their limitations

Schools, counseling offices, nonprofit organizations, and company websites all provide insight on how to access internships, but the system is scattered. IES describes work-based learning as a process that includes career awareness, exploration, and more immersive preparation experiences like internships and apprenticeships. The problem is that students often have to search across many separate places to find these opportunities, and the process is not always clear or coordinated.

This explains why many students still struggle to find opportunities even when programs exist, as students rely on mentors, families, teachers, counselors, and other internal connections for career support, which puts students without those resources at a disadvantage. As observed in the Alameda County survey, students primarily learned about opportunities through friends (36), family (30), and social media (29) rather than formal school resources. This suggests that internship information is currently distributed through informal networks instead of a centralized system, making students without strong personal connections less likely to discover opportunities.

Why an Internship Opportunity Hub Is Needed

A centralized Internship Opportunity Hub would directly address these access problems. A hub could bring internships, research programs, job shadowing, volunteer positions, leadership programs, youth advisory boards, and government opportunities into one searchable place. A hub would also make access more equitable. If opportunities were centralized and communicated clearly, students would not need the same level of insider knowledge or personal connections to find them. That would benefit students, employers, schools, and the local workforce as a whole.

The Alameda County Survey shows huge support for a centralized internship platform. Fifty-seven of the sixty respondents said they would use an Internship Opportunity Hub. Students requested features like Application links, internships listings organized by career field, application guides, resume assistance, and deadlines.

Recommendations

To make internships more accessible, schools should promote opportunities earlier and more consistently. Because 28 respondents reported not knowing where to find internships, schools should increase outreach and partner with local organizations to advertise opportunities throughout the school year. Local governments, businesses, and nonprofits should expand partnerships so more opportunities are open to high school students. More internships should be paid whenever possible, because lack of pay is a barrier for students who already need to work.

Conclusion

Overall, both the research and the Alameda County student survey show that internships have many benefits. They help students improve academically, build professional skills, explore careers, and prepare for future jobs. However, the survey also showed that many students still

have trouble finding these opportunities. Even though 90% of students surveyed had applied for internships, their average awareness of available opportunities was only 2.93 out of 5. At the same time, 95% of students supported creating a centralized Internship Opportunity Hub. This shows that the main problem is not a lack of interest or motivation, but a lack of clear and accessible information. By creating a single place where students can find internships and other career opportunities, more students will have an opportunity to get real-world experience and build our next generation of leaders.

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