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ON CONFIDENCE AND POST-GRADUATION OUTCOMES IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION**

Jaime L. Grillo

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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF INTERNSHIPS ON  
CONFIDENCE AND POST-GRADUATION OUTCOMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Jaime L. Grillo

Submitted Date: September 29, 2022

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Dr. Catherine DiMartino

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF INTERNSHIPS ON CONFIDENCE AND POST-GRADUATION OUTCOMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Jaime L. Grillo

Internships as a form of experiential learning have been consistently considered a “high impact educational experience” because of the value that it provides students during their college careers (O’Neill, 2010, p. 7). Administrators and faculty professionals in colleges and universities are in positions to encourage student engagement by creating experiential learning opportunities for students that will aid them in navigating their academic major and intended career trajectory. This study focused on how a stronger emphasis on internships could influence confidence among college students, as well as play a part in their decision-making process when considering post-graduation plans. The researcher explored the various engagement means and opportunities that college students utilized in off-campus settings. The researcher conducted a qualitative study using a narrative methodology and narrowed the focus to a population of students who have participated in internship opportunities. The study was conducted at a private institution, and the researcher interviewed eight participants. The interviews were semi-structured, and three rounds of interviews took place for each participant. The participants consisted of five female and three male undergraduate students with varying academic majors. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to select all participants. Findings revealed that student engagement through internships will

continue to be important to the higher education landscape because it shapes students' experience and influences their confidence, while also allowing students to experience a professional environment and make sense of their post-graduation outcomes. Future research could build upon this study by exploring how remote internships are influencing how students make sense of the workplace and whether these internships influence their confidence or post-graduation outcomes.

*Keywords:* experiential learning, internships, higher education, post-graduation outcomes, confidence, engagement

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this accomplishment to those who have supported me throughout this journey. First and foremost, my family and friends. I would not be here without you. I set out on this doctoral journey unsure of where it may lead; I was nervous and excited. The motivation, support, and encouragement you provided to me throughout instilled in me the drive I needed to never give up. Thank you for the phone calls, texts, regular check-ins, and welcomed distractions. I truly appreciate your patience, understanding, and endless encouragement. I would also like to thank my dog, Manley, for going on countless walks per day during high-stress times.

Finally, last but certainly not least, this dissertation is dedicated to my students: past, present, and future. Thank you for influencing me to be the best professional I can be. I love what I do, and that is because I get to work with incredible students every day. Thank you for the constant motivation to do more and go after my goals. Most of all, thank you for sharing your successes with me. I share my success with all of you.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

It is more important than ever for students to participate in internships in their field of interest so they can be competitive in today's job market. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2019) Internship & Co-Op Study stated that the average full-time employment offer rate for students who complete internships was 70.4% (p. 11). Internships have been consistently considered a high impact educational experience because of the value experiential learning provides students during their college careers (O'Neill, 2010). Internships have been credited with helping students apply what they are learning in the classroom to new situations and to help them improve their skills and knowledge in their field (O'Neill, 2010). Administrators and faculty professionals on college campuses can aid in this development by focusing on building relationships with employer partners to create opportunities for students that will complement their transition to the workplace or graduate school.

Historically, there was a positive impact on internship experiences and graduates' employment (Hergert, 2009). It was found that students find great value in their internship experiences, and this is particularly true when there is a direct connection to the ultimate career goal. Internships play a crucial role in helping to make the connections between students' traditional coursework and the workplace, allowing students to apply what they are learning in the classroom into practice. For example, students who are business majors and focusing on finance or accounting have opportunities to intern on Wall Street, or within local, regional, national or global banking institutions to gain experience and a better understanding of the industry. Additionally, students finding great value in their internship experiences will allow for

them to be more inclined to learn their trade and commit to being successful (Hergert, 2009).

The 2019 Graduate Student Survey (GSS), an institution-specific survey tool created for graduating seniors was administered by the Office of Institutional Research to all graduating seniors at the university in which the research was conducted. The GSS was created in an effort to capture information that will aid the university in collecting data related to internship completion rates and post-graduation outcomes. Utilizing the NACE standards of measurement as a means for analyzing data and comparing to national trends, the intention of the GSS is to be a reliable tool that keeps institutions abreast of how their graduating seniors compare to their peers nationally when it comes to post-graduation outcomes and career plans. The 2019 GSS survey found that 63% of the class of 2019 reported they completed an internship before they graduated, compared to 60% nationally. According to NACE (2019), student outcomes and whether or not students are gainfully employed within 6 months of graduating, suggests that internships have become a prerequisite for students entering the workforce after graduation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of students who engaged in internships as a type of experiential learning and how they made sense of these opportunities. The researcher explored what was driving the students and the perceived value of their experience. Student engagement through internships is important to the higher education landscape because it shapes the student experience and confidence, while also assisting with the exploration of post-graduation outcomes, which consistently remain a priority on college campuses. This study examined how students made sense of

their internship experience and their perceived value by exploring students' behaviors, their development throughout the experience, and how they used this as an exploratory means to better understand their career interests. The researcher explored the post-graduation outcomes of students participating in internship experiences outside of the campus setting. Additionally, the researcher sought to find whether higher education institutions should invest in consistent integration of internships experiences through coursework and outside the classroom, as the inclusion of internships can significantly reduce graduation unemployment rates (Silva et al., 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for the study is Karl Weick's sensemaking. Sensemaking is focused on the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. Weick intended to shift the focus from decision-making toward the processes that constitute the meaning of decisions that are enacted in behavior (Weick et al., 2005). Weick identified seven characteristics that set sensemaking apart from other explanatory processes such as understanding, interpretation, and attribution (Weick, 1995). He explained that sensemaking is understood as: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 14). Weick used these characteristics as a guideline for inquiry into making sense of sensemaking, how it works, and where it could fail. As the researcher explored the students' perceptions of the effects of internships, it allowed for further exploration of how they gave meaning to their collective experiences and the role these experiences had in their post-graduation outcomes.

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study was to further explore the students' perception of internships off campus and their confidence which they developed through these experiences, as it relates to post-graduation outcomes. The researcher focused on students' perception of what aspects of the internship experience they found valuable. This is important because it could provide the university with rationale behind why internships are an important part of the student experience. Prior research focused on internship requirements across varying industries and academic majors while still questioning the students' perception. This study highlighted the importance of the students' perceptions and consistency, as well as existing data which indicated a positive correlation between students who complete internships and their transition to their post-graduation outcomes.

Research helped improve practice in higher education institutions for a variety of reasons. The intent of the research was to inform higher education leaders and internship program managers on what they could do to make the student experience the best it could be, as the students' perception of the value was voiced through this research. The researcher addressed a gap in research by exploring specifically how students made sense of their experiential learning experiences as they pertained to their post-graduation outcomes and career plans versus how the university identified the value.

From a campus-wide perspective, it is important to understand the students' perception and how it aligns with the structure of internship programs when refining practices on campus going forward. As the number of students who complete internship opportunities grows, the outcomes related to post-graduation plans will be indicative of



the impact internships are having. This realization should garner attention from administrators and faculty professionals on campus to create a consistent process and expand internship requirements across academic curriculum. Having realized the value and direct impact of internships on student' experience and confidence, administrators will show improved decision-making on campus by considering the students' perception and how they made sense of the experience. This will give administrators a clearer understanding of how internships are influencing students' confidence and post-graduation outcomes. Additionally, this will allow administrators and faculty professionals to find clarity on what the university has in terms of resources and requirements, as well as areas in which the university needs to improve.

### **Research Design and Questions**

The researcher used a narrative methodology for this study. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2004), a major criterion of narrative methodology is continuity: the notion of how experiences grow out of other experiences, and how experiences lead to further experiences (p. 2). Narrative inquiry gives us a method to think in a more detailed and informative way about the general construct of continuity in individuals' lives (p. 3). The researcher used multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews as the primary means of data collection. Using these methodologies allowed for the researcher to move back and forth between the personal and the social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present, and future. For this study, the researcher interviewed eight participants and sought to develop a stronger understanding of how they made sense of student engagement and internships in real-time interactions. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) described continuous inquiry through interviews as a way to show how particular

events and unique occasions—an encounter here, a development there—can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go (p. 6).

This study took place during spring 2022 at a private, religious institution in a large metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the United States. Throughout the study, the researcher continued to focus on the students’ perceptions of their internship experiences and how they made sense of these opportunities as related to their post-graduation outcomes.

This study explored the students’ perceptions of the effects of internships on confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How do college students make sense of internships as part of their academic experience?
2. How do students perceive internships influencing their sensemaking around their future careers?
3. What factors influence college students’ decision-making to identify and participate in internship opportunities?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following are key terms that the researcher used for this study:

#### *Experiential Learning:*

The process of learning through experience; more specifically, “learning through reflection on doing” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

*Furthering Education:*

The status of students who have fully matriculated into an academic program beyond their bachelor's degree (NACE, 2018).

*Internship:*

The position of a student or trainee who works in an organization, in order to gain work experience or satisfy requirements for a qualification (NACE, 2018).

*Post-Graduation Outcomes:*

Data referred to by institutions for assessing how well prepared graduates are for the world of work (NACE, 2018).

*Student Involvement:*

The amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience on a college campus (Astin, 1984).

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research reviewed in this section comes from literature in education and peer-reviewed journals. This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework relevant to the study, sensemaking. This literature review highlights three key themes which emerged and selection criteria. This chapter will conclude with a background of internships, detailing each theme, and a summary of what the literature review and research findings revealed, and how the researcher identified this study will fill a gap in research.

### **Theoretical Framework: Sensemaking**

This study applied a sensemaking framework to examine the role of internships as a type of experiential learning in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. Weick intended to shift the focus from decision-making toward the processes that constitute the meaning of decisions that are enacted in behavior (Weick et al., 2005). Weick (1995) used the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences as part of the sensemaking framework. He identified seven characteristics that set sensemaking apart from other explanatory processes such as understanding, interpretation, and attribution (Weick, 1995). Weick used these characteristics as a guideline for inquiry into making sense of sensemaking, how it works, and where it could fail.

Weick (1995) described sensemaking as a process of perceiving, believing, interpreting, explaining, predicting, and acting, both individually and collectively. The first of the seven properties, *grounded in identity construction*, is described by Weick as the notion of self being constantly redefined by how we act and how we interpret our

environment. In this principle, sensemaking is an iterative process that continually redesigns our image of ourselves. Second, Weick described the principle *retrospective* as continually looking back at our experiences to make sense of what took place then, in the context of what we know and perceive now. The third principle that Weick described is *enactive of sensible environments*. This is the active principle of sensemaking, how we construct our realities. He explained that people and organizations produce or construct the environment they face: “They act and in doing so create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face” (Weick, 1995, p. 31). *Social* is the next principle that is described; sensemaking is a social activity because what one person does is contingent on others. Weick explained that narrative, discourse, and conversation are the primary media of sensemaking, and organizations are sensemaking systems that contain a network of shared meanings. *Ongoing*, the fifth principle, is focused on sensemaking as being constant and never stopping: “You are always in the middle of sensemaking and your map is constantly updating” (Weick, 1995, p. 32). The sixth principle of sensemaking is *focused on and by extracted cues*. Weick explained that people make sense from familiar points of reference, or simple seeds which trigger a larger sense of what may be happening. Finally, the seventh principle of sensemaking is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*. Weick suggested that sensemaking is misleading in some ways because to employ the sensemaking framework, one is seeking out plausibility; therefore, the individual can potentially eliminate or distort certain information, making the findings less about accuracy. Accuracy is less important than plausibility because the world is not static. Weick explained that sensemaking is about accounts that are socially acceptable, pragmatic, and credible, rather than accurate.

Sensemaking has been used in studies related to higher education and post-graduation outcomes over the years. Campbell (2016) studied the meaningfulness of internships through a sensemaking lens. This study focused on undergraduate students and the necessity of internships for competitiveness in the workplace, as well as the criteria and experience that constitute an internship. This study used sensemaking as a theoretical framework to better understand the varying themes of how student interns made sense of their experiences. Sensemaking as a framework provides a suitable way for student interns to comprehend, talk about, and feel, as well as give meaning to their experiences because this framework allows researchers to analyze the communication process with the goal of understanding their lived experiences (Weick, 1995).

A study by Walmsley et al. (2006) explored how surprises and sensemaking are important elements not only of the adjustment process when entering new work environments but also of the learning experiences that placements provide. This study emphasized that the concept of sensemaking is named well because it literally means “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) pointed out that there are differences between sensemaking and interpretation. Interpretation implies that something is there, a text in the world is waiting to be discovered, whereas sensemaking is less about discovery and more about invention. A sensemaking theoretical framework is logical when it comes to educational research and qualitative data collection. As Walmsley et al. stated, the interview and data collection processes are undoubtedly sensemaking events for the participants. The sensemaking framework fits this study because the researcher was seeking the students’ perspective and to gain an understanding of their perception of how they made sense of certain experiences. The researcher analyzed the stories being

shared by each student in a sequential manner and explored how the students are giving meaning to the events and if these events shape their worlds differently.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***Selection Criteria***

While evaluating related literature, it was important to identify diverse articles that supported both past literature and the identified gap in research. The selection criteria included articles that were both qualitative and quantitative in design. The researcher chose articles that were published within the last 12 years, and if the articles did not specify internships they were excluded. The databases used for the search were Google Scholar and ProQuest. The search terms were specific to the research and included *experiential learning, experience, engagement, academic internships, post-graduation, graduation, higher education engagement, and internships*. The research articles were documented using a matrix designed on Microsoft Excel and the following information was captured: title, journal, year published, participants, design, and findings.

The review of related literature revealed three themes: (a) perceptions of internships, (b) internships' applicability to career, and (c) influential relationships. The researcher began this literature review with a background of internships which sought to understand the role of internships in students' confidence and post-graduation outcomes.

### ***Background of Internships***

Prior research showed a positive impact of internships as a type of experiential learning on confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education (Hergert, 2009). According to NACE (2019), each year, U.S. organizations employ up to an estimated two million college students as interns, and higher education institutions should

invest in an integration of internships, as the inclusion of internships can significantly reduce graduation unemployment rates (NACE, 2019). A study by Hergert (2009) concluded that students find great value in their internship experiences, and this is particularly true when there is a direct connection to their ultimate career goal. The value of internships is a strong focus and considered an important factor in the overall student experience. As value is considered, research has also found that students have greater interest levels and motivation to complete internships as they connect to the workplace, as increased interest will allow them to be more inclined to learn and commit to being successful (Hergert, 2009). Internships as a type of experiential learning play a crucial role in helping to make the connections between students' traditional coursework and the workplace, which allows students to apply what they learned in the classroom to practice.

### ***Perceptions of Internships***

Students perceived the value of internships differently as it related to their post-graduation outcomes (Binder et al., 2015; Capek et al., 2017; Milem & Berger, 1997). Students have been completing internships since the 1960s at varying levels, and the purpose of a study by Binder et al. (2015) was to investigate the relationship between internship experience and demographic background of the students. The sample consisted of 4,024 undergraduate students from a U.K. institution who completed internships between 2001 and 2009. The average age of participants was 19.4, 52.7% were female, and 81.5% were of a White ethnic background. A longitudinal study was conducted where students had to agree to degree mapping during their college experience, and data were obtained from the central administration office of the university. The findings indicated that internships were determined to be powerful career boosters, and there are



positive associations between internships and career-relevant variables for both advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Internships are a way for students to gain an advantage while seeking employment, especially for those employers who require work experience in their intended field of interest. As discussed in a study by Capek et al. (2017), internships are an important part of students' education: they allowed for the integration of skills and for networking with professionals in their field, and they contributed to the development of the students' résumé. Capek et al. utilized two surveys: one was distributed to undergraduate students enrolled in the leisure, youth and human services, and social work programs, and the other was distributed to a listserv of non-profit organizations in a midwestern area of the United States. There were 52 students and 32 non-profit organizations that completed the survey. The purpose of the study by Capek et al. was to analyze the students' experiences and outcomes of paid versus unpaid internships. It was found that "unpaid internships are tied to academic performance, while paid internships are more related to professional skill development" (Crain, 2016). Literature exists about the legality of unpaid internships, but it is difficult to find research discussing the difference in value when a student is being paid. Capek et al. focused on the importance of considering the relationship of paying interns to other aspects besides being paid for the experience, such as the wellbeing of the student, the ability to develop healthy working habits, and financial stability. According to Beard and Morton (1999), while students are willing to take on unpaid internships, it was found that when students are paid they rate their experience more highly and have reduced stress levels, and all parties show a deeper level of commitment. Qualtrics was used to create the survey and

descriptive statistics were taken to report the findings. Findings revealed that 73.6% of students would rather have an unpaid internship that is more desirable and of higher quality than a paid internship of lesser quality. The findings of the nonprofit organizations survey indicated that 67% did not pay their interns.

In a study by Milem and Berger (1997), researchers used longitudinal data to test a conceptual model of student persistence that integrates behavioral constructs from Astin's work to further specify aspects of Tinto's model. The data were collected three times throughout the academic year: August, October, and March. The survey was sent to 1,547 first-year students; the first survey had an 86.2% response rate, the second had a 79.9% response rate, and the final outreach had a 68.5% response rate. The data from all three collection points were matched and merged into one data set, resulting in 718 individuals or 46.4%. Of this sample, 51% were female and 84% were White. Astin (1984) suggested five basic postulates in his theory: (a) involvement means the investment of physical and psychological energy in different "objects" that range in the degree of their specificity; (b) involvement occurs along a continuum, with different students investing different amounts of energy in various objects at various times; (c) involvement includes qualitative and quantitative components; (d) the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement; and (e) the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement (p. 298). In comparison, Tinto (1993) supported the critical role of student involvement in positive educational outcomes for college students and emphasized the need to better understand the relationship between student involvement in learning and the impact that involvement

had on student persistence. Milem and Berger collected data as part of a longitudinal study of first-year persistence. Results indicated that background characteristics exerted a significant influence on initial level of commitment to the university and overall perception of involvement. An additional finding was that income and academic achievement level were highly predictive of involvement in traditional social activities. Milem and Berger also found that early involvement with faculty appeared to have a significant impact on student involvement and persistence.

Similarly, Kolb and Kolb (2005) found the importance of evaluating learning spaces and students' learning styles in higher education, as understanding these elements can help to enhance experiential learning. Kolb and Kolb defined learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experiences (p. 41). Kolb and Kolb conducted a longitudinal study of 1,286 MBA students and 216 art education students, at the beginning of their freshman and junior years. Findings revealed that there was significant movement among students, indicating growth and development toward a more active role in their own learning as a result of the empowering, active structure of the learning environment (p. 204). Kolb and Kolb stated that the enhancement of experiential learning in higher education can be achieved through the creation of learning spaces that promote growth-producing experiences for learners.

The importance of how students perceived their internships as a type of experiential learning and the role this has in their confidence and post-graduation outcomes became evident while reviewing past research. How students made sense of

these experiences and the internships' applicability to their intended career path are additional themes that has emerged through the exploration of past research.

### ***Internships' Applicability to Career***

An important reason why students complete internships as a type of experiential learning is to investigate their career interests and how what they are learning in the classroom could apply to their career (Hergert, 2009; Rothman & Sisman, 2016). The purpose of a study by Rothman and Sisman (2016) was to look at the impact of an internship experience on business students' career intentions in regard to pursuing a career path in the same job function or industry as their internship. The sample consisted of 198 students who completed an internship, 122 of whom were female, with the entire sample ranging from 20–23 years old. A qualitative content analysis methodology was used, as students were asked to respond to a prompt: “discuss the impact of the internship on your career consideration” by writing a half page or less. The findings of the content analysis indicated that 54% of interns confirmed that their expectation was to continue a career path within the same job function as their internship, and the experience reinforced the students' initial interest. Data revealed that 45% of students did not pursue employment within the same industry of their internship experience, and half of those students indicated that the knowledge they gained from their internship experience put them in a position to better identify an industry of interest. Considering the varying populations of students who completed internship experiences, evaluating the perceived value and how students made sense of the internship was important to the present study.

Similarly, Hergert (2009) sought to determine what factors account for the most valuable internship experience. According to Hergert internships are an increasingly

popular element of higher education and provide many potential benefits to students. The study consisted of 114 undergraduate and graduate business students. Approximately 75% of the sample were undergraduates. A survey was the instrument used, and the data were collected and organized into the following groups: demographics, format/pedagogy, and career orientation. The first stage of analysis was to correlate the descriptive variables with the perceived value of the internships. In order to better understand the relationships between these variables, the data were combined into a multivariate regression model. The results showed a strong statistical correlation between the perceived value of the internship and the students' demographic profile, the structure of the internship, and the connection to the students' career plans.

Schnoes et al. (2018) explored how structured training and hands-on experience through internships for doctoral students in the life sciences influenced career decision making. The study consisted of 217 PhD students from University of California San Francisco and University of California Davis, who are participating in the Graduate Student Internships for Career Exploration (GSICE) program at their respective universities. This study used surveys and individual interview data. The data were reviewed by all members involved in the study. The data were reviewed for frequencies of various responses and other data patterns to arrive at key observations with intent to apply inferential statistical testing for significant differences. The programs at each school had comparable results with regard to participation, internship completion rates, and overall outcomes. A key finding revealed that students perceived the GSICE program to provide some career development skills, but more significantly increased students' confidence in career exploration and decision making.

As students consider post-graduation outcomes, they often associate this with their academic curriculum and experiences both on and off campus. An internship where students can directly apply what is learned in the classroom to the workplace allows for clarity on whether or not this intended career path is a good fit. In addition to the internship's applicability to career, the relationships that are fostered through these experiences could be deemed influential, which leads us to our next theme.

### ***Influential Relationships and Internships***

Research showed that when a student connects an opportunity to an influential person in their life, the experience is more meaningful (Holyoak, 2012). The purpose of a study by Holyoak (2012) was to report on the experiences of interns and their supervisors and consider how people learn during their internship experiences. The sample consisted of six interns and six supervisors. The internships and supervisors came from a range of disciplines. A deductive thematic analysis was used, and all participants were interviewed 6 to 8 months after the internship was complete, and upon completion of the interview the interviews were transcribed. The findings indicated that extreme types of experience in internships are illustrated by four cases derived from the interviews: optimal conditions for development, intern non-development, supervisor frustration, and mutual dissatisfaction.

Permzadian and Credé (2016) conducted a study to further explore the effectiveness of first-year seminars based on first-year grades and 1-year retention rates. In order to encourage internship participation, persistence from year to year was integral. Permzadian and Credé explained that first-year seminar courses are a widely utilized retention tool, as they are specifically designed to equip new students with the

knowledge, skills, and abilities that are necessary to successfully meet the different transitional and developmental challenges that they face in the first year of college (p. 278). The participants included students who were enrolled in the first-year seminar class during their first semester on campus, in a face-to-face delivery method. Findings revealed that the effectiveness of first-year seminars is substantially moderated by first-year seminar characteristics (type of seminar), institutional characteristics (2-year or 4-year institution), and study characteristics (design). According to Permzadian and Credé, the average first-year seminar has only a very small positive effect on the first-year GPA and only a slightly stronger positive effect on the 1-year retention rate of participating students.

In a study by Saeed and Zyngier (2012), the researchers sought to gain further understanding of how student motivation and engagement are linked and to analyze the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on students' different engagement types. Considering students' thought processes and engagement levels before they enter college, during a key time of development in their lives was important to include in this study. The sample consisted of 24 fifth and sixth grade students between the ages of 11 and 13 with matched characteristics. The students were selected from a socially, economically, ethnically, and educationally diverse range. A narrative approach was used. Using ontology and social constructivist epistemology, the researchers searched for multiple realities and meanings that were developed from the result of the interaction of the participating students within their world of school (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012, p. 257). Findings revealed that students who had both types of motivation showed different types of engagement in their learning. According to Saeed and Zyngier, researchers focused on

motivation and engagement have made an important contribution to the field of education by highlighting the importance of motivation and engagement in the learning process. They also pointed out ways in which students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and engagement can influence their learning outcomes.

### **Summary**

This literature review revealed that students who completed internships and then continued in the same industry perceived and made sense of internships as valuable and generally positive experiences. This perception came when students who completed internships off campus applied their academic learnings directly to their work. Experience that students obtained during their college years affected their decision-making process when it came to post-graduation outcomes. This literature review revealed that internships allowed students opportunities to learn by doing, and in some cases, they assisted students with finding clarity on their intended career path. An internship experience was valuable for students to learn what they dislike, and to learn what they like. This literature review highlighted that influential relationships built on campus or off are positive influences, as internships are a type of experiential learning. When a student connected an opportunity to an influential person in their life, the experience was more meaningful. Collectively, internships for college students are positive experiences that influence confidence and post-graduation outcomes.

Further research will help improve practice in higher education institutions related to experiential learning and engagement for a variety of reasons. The intent of this study was to inform higher education administrators and faculty professionals about what campuses could do to make the student experience the best it can be by enlightening how



students made sense of these experiences. Through prioritizing the students' voices to achieve this goal, this study fills a gap in already existing research. The researcher reviewed past research related to internships as a type of experiential learning, and this study fills a gap by exploring how students made sense of these experiences and their perceptions as they pertain to the students' confidence and post-graduation outcomes.

From a campus-wide perspective, developing best practices for the internship process and having a structure in place for students to primarily utilize internships as a type of experiential learning to improve their confidence, help them explore career paths, and practice skills learned in the academic setting will help students make more educated and informed choices as they navigate post-graduation plans. As the number of students who complete internships grows, the post-graduation outcomes related to employment will be more indicative of the impact of internships and will garner attention from administrators. Showing the value and direct impact of internships on the student experience will improve decision-making on campus for administrators who are in positions to encourage participation in internships.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology and procedures for data collection for this study. As discussed in previous chapters, it is more important than ever for students to complete internships in their field of study so they will be competitive in today's job market. Internships have been credited with helping students apply what they are learning in the classroom to new situations in the workplace, while allowing them to improve their skills and knowledge in their intended field (O'Neill, 2010). The theoretical framework of Weick's (1995) sensemaking, and the seven properties that guided this framework, provided a foundation for the findings. This chapter will focus on the methodology that guided this study.

### **Research Design**

I used a narrative inquiry methodology for this study to demonstrate the role of internships in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. Narrative inquiry focuses on weaving together a variety of facts and situations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Conducting multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews, I had an opportunity to hear the participants' lived experiences over time and build on these conversations to understand how they made sense of these experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) wrote about two dimensions following Dewey's notion of interaction. Dewey's foundational place in thinking about narrative inquiry is three dimensional; *personal* and *social* (interaction); *past*, *present*, and *future* (continuity); combined with the notion of *place* (situation) (p. 50). Using these sets of terms, narrative inquiry focuses on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and it recognizes that the

personal and social occur in specific places or sequences of places (p. 50). Clandinin and Connelly (2004) broke these three dimensions down into two and referred to them as four directions of narrative inquiry: *inward* and *outward*, *backward* and *forward*. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) went on to say:

By inward, we mean toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean toward the existential conditions, that is, the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality—past, present, and future. We wrote that to *experience an experience*—that is, to do research into an experience—is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing this way (p. 50).

To effectively accomplish narrative inquiry, I asked questions through semi-structured interviews, coded the data multiple times, analyzed and created codes, and wrote up findings addressing both personal and social issues by looking at not only at the current event but to the participants' past and future.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored the role of internships as a type of experiential learning in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education and was driven by the following research questions:

1. How do college students make sense of internships as part of their academic experience?
2. How do students perceive internships influencing their sensemaking around their future careers?

3. What factors influence college students' decision-making to identify and participate in internship opportunities?

## **Methods and Procedures**

### ***Setting and Participants***

I used both purposive and convenience sampling to select a university to serve as the setting and the participants for a qualitative, narrative study that examined the role of internships in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposive sampling is used when a researcher relies on his or her own judgement when choosing members of population to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was also used to identify participants for this study. Creswell and Poth described convenience sampling as utilizing participants who are easily accessible to the researcher. The university was specifically chosen given its proximity to New York City and the diverse demographic of the student body. The 150-year-old private university offers over 100 academic majors and consists of over 14,000 undergraduate students. An on-campus administered 2019 GSS found that over 63% of the student body complete internships before they graduate. The university boasts their commitment to its mission and provides students with opportunities to engage both inside and outside of the classroom.

I purposively selected eight students who were members of the graduating class of 2022. To collect my participants, I obtained permission from the executive director of career services to canvas students who were members of the class of 2022 and who completed internships. I did so by providing the career advisors a recruitment email. The advisors sent the email, which directed the student responses directly to me, as the

researcher. The eight participants all completed at least one internship during their time on campus. The participants represented diversity in race and gender, there were three male participants and five female participants. Of the participants, two of them enrolled in internships to receive academic credit and six of them elected to participate in an internship at their own will. All participants completed internships in an off-campus setting. Each student participated in three rounds of semi-structured interviews virtually through Cisco WebEx. Before the interviews commenced, each participant confirmed that they understood the distributed protocol and signed a consent to participate. I shaped each round of interviews based in different time periods: the first focused on how the students made sense of the time leading up to obtaining and securing an internship experience; the second round focused on the time during the internship experience; and finally, the third round focused on the end of the experience and a reflection on how this experience shaped their post-graduation outcomes and career plans.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

I used a narrative methodology for the study, as this study explored real-life, lived experiences of college students' engagement through internships. I used three rounds of semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. As Saldaña (2003) explained, a focus on narrative theory offers insight into how a story can be organized and presented, as well as the ability to acknowledge the significance of narrative inquiry and analysis to document the human experience and provide nuanced examination of the stories that constitute individual lives. I believed that a narrative methodology was appropriate to examine the college students' overall perspective and how they made sense of student engagement through their stories. As discussed by Clandinin and Connelly

(2004), in narrative inquiry, people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories; people are seen as composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives (p. 43).

For this study, I interviewed eight participants and developed a stronger understanding of how they made sense of their internship experiences in real-time interactions. In a narrative study, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2004), we ask questions and inquire about the past, the present, and the future by drawing on remembered stories and experiences from earlier times as well as current times, creating plotlines for our futures (p. 60). Given that focus, three rounds of semi-structured interviews throughout the course of an experience allowed for open, direct questions that were then used to draw out detailed stories and narratives (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I conducted three rounds of interviews over a 6-week period; the interviews were focused on a time period before (first round of interviews), during (second round of interviews), and toward the end of the experience (third round of interviews). I spaced out each round of interviews by 2 weeks, which allowed for data analysis, transcription, and adjusting of the protocol as appropriate. The first interview began with questions about the students' past and the path they took to obtain the internship experience. The second round of interviews explored the present and the overall experience, how students made sense of this experience and their level of preparedness. Finally, the third round of interviews concluded the data collection with questions focused on the future and how the internship experience played a role in the students' post-graduation outcomes and career plans. Interview protocols can be found in Appendices D, E, and F. Table 1

outlines the timeline and objective of the protocol questions and how they address the research questions.

Table 1 represents three rounds of interviews, the theme around the questions being asked, the timeline of when the interviews took place, and the connection to the research questions.

**Table 1**

*Interview Timeline and Connection to Research Questions*

Interview Session	Theme of Interview Questions	Timeline of Interviews	Connection to Research Questions
Interview Session I	The beginning. Questions focused on the beginning stage of the experiential learning experience. Discussed the time leading up to securing the internship and the first week or two.	Week 1	Q1: How do college students make sense of internships as part of their academic experience? Q3: What factors influence college students' decision-making to identify and participate in internship opportunities?
Interview Session II	The experience. Questions related to the practical internship experience, how students are making sense of their internships, if they are applying related coursework to their field, their preparedness and finding clarity on their post-graduation plans.	Week 3	Q2: How do college students perceive internships influencing their sensemaking round their future careers?
Interview Session III	The conclusion. Questions asked around the students' experience on site and the perceived value of what students thought the experience was going to be like, versus the reality of what it was.	Week 5	Q2: How do college students perceive internships influencing their sensemaking round their future careers?

### *Trustworthiness of Design*

Understanding the importance of reliability, validity, and credibility, I looked at various tactics suggested by Miles et al. (2014) to confirm that the findings were meaningful. I understood the potential for bias in the study because of my past connectedness to this campus. I was committed to reducing bias and avoiding its effects on research by doing the following:

1. I created a start list of codes and reviewed them with colleagues. Colleagues unassociated with the study were able to guide suggestions and feedback on the initial start list of codes. I continuously updated the start list after three complete rounds of coding using Dedoose software.
2. I made a clear distinction between my role as the researcher versus my previous full-time administrative role on campus.

It was important for me to avoid having the research site affect any interpretation of the data. To avoid such, I spoke with colleagues who were unassociated with the research study about some findings to hear their interpretations and understandings.

I understood the importance of varying perspectives and a sample that is representative of more than one student group; therefore, I included students of varying academic majors, some of whom had required internships as part of their academic curriculum, and others who elected to complete internships on their own. This allowed for the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the findings. I employed triangulation by interviewing students who had different experiences and reasons for obtaining internships by using data collected through multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews, at varying points throughout the students' experience. Triangulation was

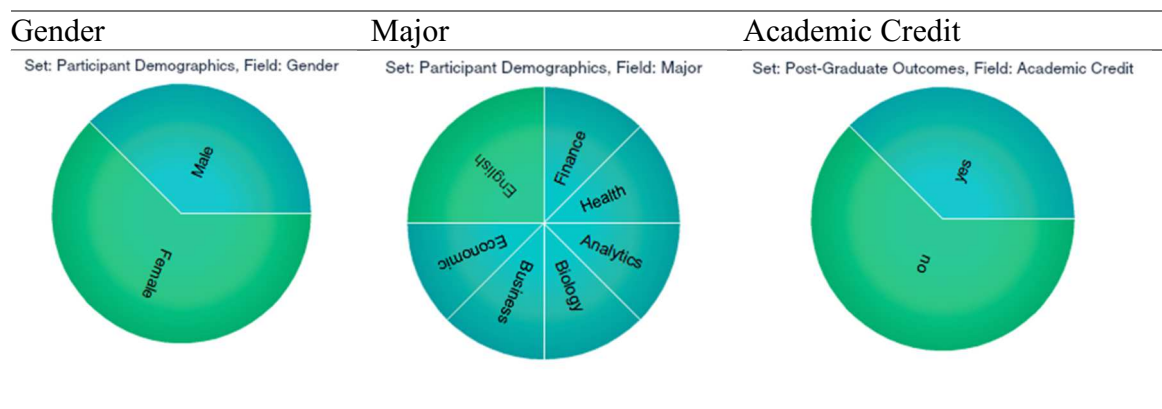


important because some of the participants had similar backgrounds and academic majors. As Miles et al. (2014) stated, “the aim is to pick triangulation sources that have different foci and different strengths, so that they can complement each other” (p. 229). Interviewing students with different academic majors with varying requirements allowed for diverse perspectives and reasoning for completing an internship experience. Students who were required could have approached internships differently than those who were not, and this perspective was important to include and varied among participants. The students’ perception at different points throughout their experience also allowed for triangulation. To strengthen the research, all data were uploaded to Dedoose Software, and codes and descriptors were created and assigned to each transcript. Figure 1:

*Demographics for Triangulation* shows matrices created in Dedoose to strengthen the reliability and validity of the study.

**Figure 1**

*Demographics for Triangulation*



Finally, because of the researcher’s closeness to the study, it was important to weigh the evidence. As stated by Miles et al. (2014), “the circumstances of the data collection may have strengthened (or weakened) the quality of the data” (p. 230). He

went on to say, “data quality may be stronger due to a field worker’s validation efforts” (p. 230). Weighing the evidence was important to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study and avoid skepticism. Narrative analysis requires participants’ experiences be constructed through the storytelling of their lived experiences in partnership and collaboration with this researcher. Creswell and Miller (2000) explained that to maintain reliability, a narrative study should “focus on the individual, collect stories about a significant issue, develop a chronology, tell a story, and embed reflexivity” (p. 361).

The following methods, presented in Table 2: *Strategies for Establishing Reliability, Validity, and Credibility*, were utilized.

**Table 2**

*Strategies for Establishing Reliability, Validity, and Credibility*

Strategy	Description
Triangulation	Collect data through three semi-structured interviews for each participant. Include students with more than one type of academic major and with variety in internship requirement, paid vs. unpaid, and required vs. elective.
Researcher Reflexivity	Examine personal, academic, and professional experiences and acknowledge the bias the researcher brings to the study.
Member Checking	Provide a raw recorded audio transcript of the interview sessions to each participant for review of accuracy upon request.
Weighing the Evidence	Validate research to strengthen data by using multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews.
Thick, Rich Descriptions	Enter interview transcriptions into Dedoose software. Describe setting and participants in rich detail.

*Note.* Strategies adapted from Polkinghorne, 2007; Johnson, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Creswell & Miller, 2000.

In addition to weighing the evidence and triangulating data, self-reflection and researcher reflexivity were integral in this narrative analysis. Maintaining a high level of self-awareness allowed for separation and clear distinction between my personal self and my role as the researcher when interpreting data and controlling biases during data analysis. I provided, upon request, a raw recorded audio transcript of the interview session as well as entered interview transcriptions into Dedoose software, which also aided in establishing reliability, validity, and credibility.

### ***Research Ethics***

For the purposes of this study, I completed all consent forms with participants in advance of the data collection process. Through this process, I also introduced each participant to the study, informing them that participation was completely voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. I ensured participants that consent forms were reflective of the likelihood of all interviews and interactions taking place through Cisco WebEx. Each participant received the consent form through email as a .PDF document and was asked to print, sign, and scan the document back to me in advance of the first interview. If the consent forms could not be printed or signed due to printer access issues, the participants sent an email to me clearly stating their consent and understanding, which I then printed and attached to the consent form. As noted in the consent forms, the identity of the participants was fully protected. The consent form can be referenced in Appendix A. In advance of the interviews, the researcher provided each participant with the list of questions that would be asked. Due to the selection of a convenient, purposive sample and having some familiarity with the participants academic backgrounds, I took this time

to explain my previous administrative role on campus and clearly differentiated between that and the researcher role to reduce potential bias.

The interviews all took place through Cisco WebEx. The interviews were conducted in my private office with a sign on the door that read “Interview in Progress,” to avoid any interruption of conversation. In order to participate in any electronic correspondence or communication, all participants were required to use secure .edu email accounts.

All ethical considerations were taken into account when handling the data. The three rounds of semi-structured interviews were recorded using the application Otter.ai, on my secure, password-protected iPhone XR and then transcribed and saved on a secure, duo-authenticated Microsoft OneDrive location. The data were uploaded to the analyzing software program Dedoose, which allowed for me to access, code, and analyze the data as needed. To access the information in Dedoose, I set up an account with a secure username and password to maintain a strong level of security. With no risks and all the potential to gain, these measures ensured not only the success of the study but the compliance of its participants (Miles et al., 2014).

### ***Data Analysis Approach***

The research questions that guided the study were best answered through qualitative analysis, as the goal of the research was to explore and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In a qualitative study, researchers can study things in their natural settings, while trying to gain an understanding, or interpret, phenomena and what this means to people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As indicated by Creswell and Poth (2018), I investigated and collected

rich data through a qualitative approach that included multiple sources of information, and developed themes and subthemes from these reports.

For this study, I selected a narrative analysis methodology that was aligned with the purpose of the research. I utilized a narrative design, as I sought to explore real-life, lived experiences of college students' engagement through internships as a type of experiential learning and the effect this could have had on graduation, employment, and post-graduation outcomes. As described by Clandinin and Connelly (2004), narrative inquiry is composed around a particular wonder, a research puzzle. This is usually called a research question, or research problem. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) went on to say,

This language and wording tends to misrepresent what we believe is at work with narrative inquirers. Problems carry with them qualities of clear definability and the expectation of solutions, but narrative inquiry is more about search, a “re-search”, a searching again. Narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of continual reformulation of an inquiry rather than it does a sense of problem definition or solution (p. 124).

The narrative analysis uncovered the stories and perceptions of how college students who participated in internships as a type of experiential learning made sense of these experiences and the role these internships played in confidence and post-graduation outcomes. Miles et al. (2014) cautioned researchers that the data collected can never be considered objective data. The data would only be deemed to be our interpretation of what we had experienced.

As I collected data, I analyzed it simultaneously. According to Miles et al. (2014), researchers should analyze data as they gather it to “rule out the possibility of collecting

new data to fill in gaps or to test new hypotheses that emerge during analysis” (p. 70). Upon completing the three rounds of semi-structured interviews on Cisco WebEx, I uploaded the transcriptions using the iOS application Otter.ai to transcribe all of the interviews. I then copied all of the transcriptions to a Microsoft Word document and cleaned the data for accuracy by cross checking each interview with the recording, multiple times and as needed. I saved each document in a secure file in a duo-authenticated Microsoft OneDrive file.

Upon completion of transcribing, I reread every interview and developed a start list for coding. I created a start list of codes, which came directly from the review of the literature and the theoretical frameworks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After reading each interview transcription once, line by line and page by page, the documents were uploaded into Dedoose, an analysis software program that was utilized to maintain all codes and documents in one location. I included the start list of codes in the Dedoose upload for further analysis of the findings. Dedoose provided a memo feature that allowed me to write down thoughts and reactions, capture revelations and excerpts, and explore any questions that the data raised (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I coded each document three times and at initial review, applied a descriptive coding approach by creating words or short phrases for a specific section of the data. Descriptive coding provided contextual information for the study and allowed for minimal interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This method was most appropriate to apply to this study for the first round of coding. The second round of analysis consisted of thematic analysis coding where categorizing and looking for patterns across the data began. The third and final round of codes was generated from looking for patterns within the data. Miles et al. (2014) stated

that “Pattern codes can emerge from repeatedly observed behaviors, actions, norms, routines, and relationships; local meanings and explanations; commonsense explanations and more conceptual ones; inferential clusters and ‘metaphorical’ ones; and single-case and cross-case observations” (p. 91). I employed Miles and Huberman’s (1994) counting as a data analysis approach. According to Miles and Huberman, counting can enable researchers to develop a summary of the entire data set that can then be scrutinized to discern patterns in the data (p. 10). With each round of coding, I reflected on the past coding cycle and organized my thinking in a way that coding was effective throughout each round of analysis. The overarching themes and subsequent subthemes were created by employing the outcomes of the counting, and reflecting on the interviews and students’ voices. The number of codes and co-code occurrences was analyzed to confirm and strengthen the findings and overarching themes and subthemes.

### ***Researcher Role***

As a campus administrator for 15 years, my progressive roles and exposure to students aided me as a researcher in asking meaningful questions and having a strong understanding of the higher education landscape. From academic and career advisor, and adjunct faculty member, to director of career and professional development, my variety of titles and years of experience supported my efforts as a researcher and will continue to do so. For this study, since I am a former administrator on campus, it was important when selecting participants that I clearly distinguish between my previous role as an administrator and current role as a researcher. I made clear to participants my intent to and the importance of keeping these two roles separate. It was important for me to disclose my previous connection to the university as a former full-time administrator for

5 years, having worked in a leadership role on campus and with students daily, as well as having attended high-profile events and programs which allowed for a great deal of exposure to the student body. I was also part of a team of administrators who administered the aforementioned GSS and participated in data collection. Due to this involvement in administering the survey, and access to the questions, response rates, and data collection procedures, it was important for me to maintain the distinction of my role as the researcher. As an adjunct faculty member within one of the colleges at this university, teaching a core course which is a requirement for the academic curriculum, I am exposed to students through a different lens. Finally, in addition to having a presence on campus, formerly as an administrator and currently as an adjunct faculty member, at the time of this study I was also a doctoral candidate at the university, which provided exposure to faculty and colleagues alike.

The perception of a researcher's positionality may vary among the participants. Banks (1998) described four types of roles that researchers take on and the impact of how the participants of their study perceive them. It is important that the researcher understand that their lived experiences both personally and professionally influence the positionality and the ways in which they conduct their research and with whom. Banks (1998) stated, "the biographical journeys of researchers greatly influence their values, their research questions, and the knowledge they construct" (p. 4) and often, the constructed knowledge mirrors the life experiences and their values. For the purposes of the study, the researcher played a combination of two of the roles: indigenous insider and external insider. I identified as an indigenous insider given the idea that a person in this position can be "perceived by significant others and opinion leaders within the community as a legitimate



member of the community who has a perspective and the knowledge that will promote the well-being of the community, enhance its power” (Banks, 1998). When considering the external insider positionality, I recognized that my role could give an external perspective, but due to my current beliefs aligning more closely with the participants and the given community, I had more of an insider positionality.

Given my previous visibility at the university, it is important to distinguish some of the strengths this brought to the study, as well as some of the risks that could have come with the visibility. Conducting research with a familiar participant, as well as the participant answering questions being asked by a familiar individual, could add an increased level of comfort. My role and ability to build trusting relationships with students, given their understanding of this student population and demographic, allowed for me to connect to the students in a way in which they felt their contributions to the conversations were valued. My institutional knowledge allowed for, especially in a semi-structured interview, the ability to add information and shape questions and comments differently in ways that could be helpful to the participant, should the opportunity arise.

Given my position, there were also risks associated with conducting research at a university where I previously worked as a full-time administrator. Being too embedded in the campus environment, and too familiar, may have posed the risk of not being able to reduce bias. Additionally, my connectedness to the topic and passion for this student population could have also impacted my ability to reduce bias. Given my previous role as an administrator and current role as an adjunct faculty member, students who participated in the study, who could have interacted with me previously in some way, may have had a difficult time adjusting and distinguishing between the role of the researcher and the role

of administrator or adjunct faculty member, which may have impacted the way the participants answered questions and could have influenced the reasons for which they participated in the study. Having addressed the strengths and potential risks, the purposive, convenience sample of participants did not result in any students who knew me in my previous administrator or current adjunct roles on campus. The eight participants who participated in the study were enrolled in majors that I had not previously interacted with on campus, and given the year of being away from campus, enough separation was created for me to not experience any interaction with the purposive, convenient student sample.

For the purpose of this study, I was considering whether or not to use the university in which I once worked to conduct research, as well as the strengths and risks that come along with conducting research in such a setting. I specifically chose to conduct the study at the university in which I had built relationships with a clear understanding of the potential risks, as well as the importance of clearly distinguishing my varying roles, past and present. The decision to conduct research at this university was explained to each student participant, outlining how my role as the researcher would not impact in any way the work and conversations that were being conducted outside of this study. Among driving forces behind my decision were my relationships on campus, the understanding of the student demographic, and familiarity with the campus resources; these are all highlighted as strengths of this study. As Gleason (2018) discussed, it is important to alter one's actions as needed to ensure the success of the study and obtain the necessary data. The hope was that students understood the clear distinction and that my bias was able to be reduced.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter described an overview of the narrative analysis methodology used in the qualitative study and how the data included three rounds of semi-structured interviews of all participants to explore the role of internships as a type of experiential learning in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. This chapter also included details about the methods and procedures, setting, participants, trustworthiness, data collection procedure, and approach, as well as my role as the researcher role and ethical considerations.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This narrative study explored the role of internships as a type of experiential learning in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education from students' perspective. Throughout the findings, the students' voices revealed the power of internships and the power of learning in a professional environment, gaining hands-on experience, and the influence that these experiences had on confidence and post-graduation outcomes. A key theme and instrumental finding from this study was the power of students' confidence and how students used internships to not only explore the workplace but also build their confidence as they transitioned to their post-graduation plans.

The researcher used a qualitative approach, and there were eight participants in this study. Three rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main data collection method over 6 to 8 weeks; each round of interviews focused on a period of time: before, during, and toward the end of the internship experience. Three overarching themes emerged from this study: (a) environment, (b) confidence, and (c) engagement. Throughout the findings, students' voices were utilized to convey their experiences and how they made sense of their internships through real-time interactions. Using data analysis software to analyze the findings through the students' voices was a driving force in the researcher's ability to identify themes and subthemes.

**Table 3***Overarching Themes and Sub-themes*

Overarching Theme	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2	Sub-theme 3
Environment	Internships	Applicability	Exploration
Confidence	Skills and Development	Growth and Advancement	
Engagement	Relationships and Collaboration	Balance	Internships

**Participants**

As seen in Table 4, the participants consisted of three males and five females; two of the participants received academic credit for their internships. Table 4 outlines the diversity of the academic majors, internship organizations, and post-graduation outcomes of the participants.

**Table 4***Participant Demographics and Post-Graduation Outcomes*

Participant	Gender	Major	Academic Credit	Internship Organization	Post-Graduation Outcome
Alex	Male	Business Analytics	No	Synchrony Financial	Full-time employment
Mary	Female	Biology	No	Queens Center Hospital	Graduate/Medical School
Dion	Male	Management	Yes	Sand Valley Golf Course	Full-time employment
Kate	Female	Economics	Yes	Egoli Media LTD	Graduate School
Tara	Female	English	No	Springfield Museums	Graduate School
Carol	Female	Health and Human Services	No	Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital	Full-time employment
Jay	Male	Finance	No	Broadridge Financial	Full-time employment
Carly	Female	English	No	Fair Share Housing Center	Gap Year/Graduate School

In the following sections, the participants will be introduced, as the students' voices were the driving force behind the findings. The following participants engaged and participated in this study.

***Alex***

Alex is a male student from Connecticut, who majored in business analytics. Alex came into college intending to work in actuarial science. After changing his major three

times and through internships and conversations with faculty and internship supervisors he realized he realized his personality was a better fit for a client-facing role; therefore, he changed his major to business analytics. Alex's dynamic personality fostered his heavy involvement on campus through student organizations and conducting campus tours for incoming and prospective students.

***Mary***

A female student who was born and raised in New York City, Mary was a biology major who had intentions of attending medical school. Mary always knew her career would be geared toward science, and her strengths were always in the STEM field. When COVID-19 forced her internship to the infectious disease unit, she learned of her passion and narrowed her focus to that.

***Dion***

A male business management major from Queens, New York, Dion was never really sold on the idea of a college education. Dion had dreams of becoming a professional golfer, and he used his internships to explore golf course management in the Midwest region of the United States to expose himself to some of the best players and coaches in the game. Dion's ability to build relationships and leverage any opportunity that came his way began early in his life. After transferring to three different universities, Dion found his home at [REDACTED].

***Kate***

An international female student from Manchester, England, Kate was a member of the women's varsity soccer team and an economics major. Entering college as an undecided major, Kate quickly recognized the importance of internships as a means to

narrow down her intended career path. Her ability to engage in the workplace and beyond was instrumental in her success both on and off campus. Kate's experience was unique in that she balanced many priorities between her athletics and academic careers, allowing her to hone integral transferrable skills such as time management and communication.

***Tara***

A female English major from Massachusetts, Tara came to college with the intention of working in media and communications in New York City. After an internship in a museum setting, interacting with not only the communications team but also curators, historians, and various professionals, she recognized her passion for and the importance of being in a diverse workplace. Tara's internships gave her clarity on her desire to work in an environment that fosters collaboration among peers.

***Carol***

A female from Queens, New York, who majored in Health and Human Services, Carol always knew she wanted to work in the healthcare industry. She considered becoming a registered nurse, but after experiencing the frontline patient interactions at her internship site, she recognized her desire to work in healthcare administration, ensuring patients are getting the best service possible from the minute they enter the facility. Carol's passion became evident when she was tasked with being the first face that patients see; she thrives on this interaction and truly believes this shaped her overall experience.

***Jay***

A male who majored in finance and a New York City native, Jay was focused from the start of his college career. With encouragement from his teachers and family, he



began his networking during his last few years of high school and was focused on the field of finance from the start. After his first summer interning with his current employer, Jay remained with them throughout his college experience and transitioned to a full-time employee upon graduating. Jay's transition to full-time employment was seamless and all part of his original plan.

### ***Carly***

A female from Maryland, who majored in English, Carly came to college undecided on a career path. With intentions of going to law school after taking a gap year, she initially declared a criminal justice major, but after further consideration decided to switch to English and really hone her writing skills. Carly was pleased with her liberal arts education and appreciated the diversity of skills she developed throughout her time on campus. Carly realized that she was passionate and felt fulfilled by working for non-profit organizations.

## **Results and Findings**

### ***Theme 1: Environment***

The overarching theme environment was categorized into three subthemes to best outline the findings. The subthemes that encompass the overarching theme environment include (a) internships, (b) applicability, and (c) exploration.

**Internships.** Internships, as a type of experiential learning, was a primary focus of this study and emerged as a common thread throughout the researcher's findings. Internships developed into subthemes for two overarching themes: environment and engagement. Of the participants, six out of eight of the students' voices widely spoke to the importance of the internship environment, being on-site versus in a remote setting,

and interacting in real time and with professionals as being integral to how they made sense of their experiences. Across all participants, the internship environment was discussed favorably as an opportunity to enhance their learning outside of the academic setting. Tara and Carly referenced the educational aspect of the environment. Carly stated: “I value education a lot. I think education comes in many different shapes and sizes,” and she went on to say,

Sometimes learning doesn't have to be in the classroom; it can be in life in general or in an internship experience that you learn the most. So, I think having the privilege to have the opportunity to do an internship, like the one that I did, and learn outside the classroom was very important to me and my development.

Internships are an obvious avenue for exploration and skill development, but a strong majority of the students' voices also revealed the importance of the atmosphere and physical environment. Tara also discussed the physical environment and how that confirmed her desire to pursue her specific industry:

My museum internship was really when I decided I wanted to do museum work. Being in that space physically, and in that environment, was when I was 100% certain, and it didn't take very long to figure that out after starting. Being able to collaborate with all the different curators and the educators and the administration in a team environment, I think is like the single biggest contributor to why I want to pursue museum work.

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented internships, and many forms of work and social interaction, from being in-person, forcing remote learning, in both academic and internship settings. Five of the students made occasional reference to

working remotely, and resounding preference was an in-person environment. Kate, who experienced both in-person and remote internships, found value in both; however, she preferred an environment that allowed for more social interaction, creating the opportunity to make sense of the work being done on site. She went on to say,

It's a lot more of a rewarding experience when you're able to contribute to the work being done on site. It's like collecting little wins. It makes it a nice environment and something to be proud of when you are side by side with your peers. You feel like you're actually a part of it and more than an intern.

As a majority of the students discussed their desire and preference to physically be in the environment to explore their intended career path and collaborate with peers, Dion discussed this as being integral for him to get a "true feel" for what it's like to be on site and be exposed to more facets of his industry. As a budding golf professional, he made a choice to leave his hometown of Queens, New York, to complete a summer internship in Wyoming. Further, Dion was working in an industry where remote work was not an option. He stated,

It was just more about the experience and the exposure than anything else. That was, that's kind of my mentality and the way I looked at why I did the internship at Sand Valley Golf Club in Wyoming, across the country from my family. I wanted to feel the true environment of a PGA course and be exposed to cultures from another region. That's so important to grow as a professional, and I could leverage those relationships now.

Carol spoke to the importance of the physical internship environment as an influence on her experience, similarly to Dion. Carol stated, "I liked my internship, it was just a good

environment.” She then went on to say, “I hear from classmates that they go to places and don’t really learn, or if they are remote they feel a disconnect, but this was a good environment, especially in person.” Carol continued to discuss how working directly with a team was influential: “I learned so much and my team was so great and so willing to help me understand as well as collaborate on projects so I could take on more.” Further, she referenced her commute to New York City:

I don't mind going to the city at all either, I thought that would be a lot from Queens every day, but it's fun and there's a lot of good people to speak to and that I am learning from, which could not have happened remotely.

The revelations of the internship environment through the students’ voices affirms the importance of such, and influences how students make sense of these opportunities. How the students applied, or made sense of what they were learning as it related to the workplace will be discussed as a second subtheme, applicability.

**Applicability.** Applicability, how students apply what they are learning in the classroom to the workplace, was examined throughout many conversations with the participants and emerged as a subtheme in the findings. All the students’ voices, and how they made sense of what they learned in the classroom, revealed that education and skills come in many shapes and sizes. Alex, a business school student who was heavily involved in experiential learning both on and off campus, discussed an “80-20 split,” and went on to say, “most people I have talked to, I would say, call it about an 80-20 split.” He added, “you’re going to take with you about 20% of what you learn from the classroom, but like 80% is going to be on-the-job training.” Alex further discussed the applicability of what he learned in the classroom by stating,

A lot of classroom stuff, yeah, it's equations and hard skills to learn, like formulas and all, but in the real world, you're going to have to develop skills on the fly beyond that and you're going to have to do other things that might be really super specific for the company or organization you work for. You go in with the foundation information from classes and learn more as you go.

Jay, like Alex, a student in the business school student, where technical skills and applied learning are a focus in the classroom, shared similar sentiments: "A lot of what you learn in the classroom is going to be applied from repetition, right? Like, the formulas and you know, Excel skills and those things all tend to apply directly." Continuing, he shared,

The problem with the classroom that I've seen is that, you know, it's cookie cutter examples, right? So, it's kind of straightforward with no pressure in the classroom, but when you're applying it at an internship, in the heat of the moment, it's a whole different scenario. It's great to have a solid foundation of the skills, but you have to learn by doing under pressure.

Viewing applicability from the perspective of students with majors in liberal arts and sciences, as well as from the perspective of students with majors in business, the diverse skills that were developed in the classroom were prevalent in the researchers' findings and emerged through the students' voices. Carly discussed her initial uncertainty of what her degree would allow her to pursue as a career, "At first, I was a little nervous about what I could do with my English degree. I quickly realized I could do so much and apply so much of what I am learning to the field." She went on to say, "I feel like in any major you can do so much with what you take from the classroom. I think it's all just about the work that you put in and the passion that you have, that is very important." Similarly,

Tara, an English major, intentionally declared a liberal arts degree for the transferrable skills that come with it. She explained, “my English classes helped me with my communications both written and spoken, and my overall editing skills that I used for all of my internships—they will be important regardless of what my career is.” Dion approached applicability from the classroom to the workplace in a broader sense. He used his classroom experiences as an opportunity to practice skills that he knew would be applicable and highly desirable in the workplace:

I think it’s very important to have takeaways from class and understand why you are in them. I think this is the best place to practice your communication skills and ask the hard questions is in the classroom, with no judgement and to a faculty member. Now, more than ever, people don’t realize that talking and communicating is something that employers look for more than anything else, even over skills. You can teach someone the job, but it’s really hard to teach someone how to communicate.

Applicability from the classroom to the workplace was important to all the students and played a part in how they made sense of their experiences, as it aided in their discovery and career exploration processes. Of the participants, six out of eight referenced applicability more frequently and as a prevalent part of their experience. Exploration, as a final subtheme related to the overall environment, will be discussed next.

**Exploration.** It is not uncommon for internships, as a type of experiential learning, to be used a means of exploration for students as they navigate their intended field of study or career path. Whether exploring the environment in which one is working, or the actual career and skills one is developing through this experience,

exploration emerged as a subtheme, and was consistently discussed by all students as an aid in how they made sense of their internship opportunities. The exploration process allowed students to gain a further understanding of and insight on what they like and dislike about their intended career paths. Alex, who completed multiple internships and changed majors twice, explained,

Even in my internship that I did not love, I learned so much about what I like, what I don't like, what I value in a major, and how to make the best decision on what to do next and classes to take. I also learned how to make the best out of a manager you don't get along with too well, and really just how to work in an environment that was not 100% what you expected and how to make it still a positive experience.

Findings revealed through all participants' voices that it is just as important for students to explore and make sense of what they like about the internship experience, as it is what they dislike, and this is often not known until it is explored through experiential learning. Similarly, Kate went on to say, "I feel like until you are actually exposed to a working lifestyle and working environment, you never really know what you may be good at or want to do in the long term and that's why internships are important." Tara used her internships to narrow down an intended career path, even though early on in her college process she made the decision that she would be furthering her education:

With my internships, I knew they would give me a good idea of what exact field I wanted to go into. I changed my major in college a few times before landing on English, and I came in as undecided so I wasn't particularly sure of what career path I was going to go down, but I was sure that I wanted to further education.

The students' voices explained further that internship opportunities are a way to make sense of what path they intend to take as it relates to their careers. The importance of having the opportunity to explore various options for liberal arts majors, to aid in their self-awareness and confidence, was discussed by Carly:

When it came to internships it can even be something like, I have this opportunity, and it's really great, but I actually realized that I really don't want to do what I'm doing right now. I want to do this or that. I think that's the important part, with internships there's just a lot of self-awareness and confidence that is developed when it comes to these kinds of experiences. You learn a lot about yourself and a lot about other opportunities there are out there.

Regardless of academic major and curriculum, for a strong majority of students, internships opened their eyes to both the positives and negatives associated with their experience, which influenced their self-awareness and confidence in future decisions.

The theme of environment was evident across all students' voices and reflected how they made sense of their internship experiences. With the influence of the environment discussed widely, it is important to mention that being faced with the COVID-19 pandemic at a pivotal time in their undergraduate college experience, there was an added challenge to the career exploration process. All students in this study experienced at least one internship in person; some students in this study experienced both in-person and remote internships at varying times. Of the participants, five out of eight revealed that an in-person learning environment was more favorable than a remote experience, given the opportunity to better network with individuals in the workplace and to get a feel for the work environment. Students revealed that by working in an in-person



environment, their confidence was influenced. Confidence, an overarching theme and prevalent thread throughout this study's findings, will be discussed next.

### ***Theme 2: Confidence***

The second overarching theme, confidence, was categorized into two subthemes which outlined the findings in greater depth and captured the students' voices through storytelling and lived experiences in real time. The two subthemes that aligned with the overarching theme confidence include (a) skills and development and (b) growth and advancement.

**Skills and Development.** Confidence was a common theme and thread throughout the researcher's findings, and was woven into many of the conversations across all participants. Of the participants, five out of eight of their voices strongly conveyed how they gained confidence in their abilities through skills and development, aiding in how they made sense of their internship experiences. Alex discussed his skill and confidence development beyond the confines of the classroom environment: "I don't think it's the college experience and coursework that single handedly prepares you for the workplace. The confidence piece comes by doing, and that's how you develop most, when you're in the moment." Learning by doing, and being outside of the classroom environment was a way for students to develop their skills, and their professional acumen. The participants who relied heavily on skills and professional development to explore their intended career path and post-graduation plans tended to have majors within the business- or professional studies-related majors. Jay, whose internship experiences resulted in a full-time post-graduation position, explained,

I continuously asked questions and learned things in my internship experiences. I took on more responsibility and was like a sponge. This development helped my confidence, and it paid off: I am staying on full time. I was essentially doing stuff as if I was a full-time employee and developing skills, knowing that this is where I wanted to be long term.

Skills and development, for exploration purposes, was also prevalent in the responses of three student participants, who had broad academic majors in the liberal arts and sciences. Tara and Carol shared similar thoughts. Tara explained,

I think especially if you're in a more broad major, or you don't know 100% of what you want to do, being in an internship environment, especially in person, is very, very helpful for figuring out what path to take and to develop the skills and confidence you need. That won't necessarily come in the classroom or on campus.

The diversity of skills that were developed through internship experiences was not always obvious to the students. Many transferrable skills developed through internship experiences emerged through the students' voices. Mary stated, "I realized that regardless of where my internship was, I still gained a lot of insight and experience from the internship itself," and she went on to say,

Now that I am applying to med school and learning the requirements, it turns out that I did need the patient contact hours, so I am glad I got that through my internship. Communication skills and stuff like that were all developed through my internship and are skills that will take me to the next level.

In addition to discussing the development of transferrable skills, Kate provided some insight on development around her uncertainty and expectations as to what the

internship experience may entail. She was pleasantly surprised to find that the exposure to the work environment during her internship aided in further developing her confidence. The internship experience also aided in her understanding of where her strengths lie and how she can utilize the skills she has developed in her career. Kate explained,

I honestly figured I'd just kind of be like that person that was in the office that did the things nobody wanted to do—tasks that had zero consequences to it—but my experience was definitely the polar opposite. Which is great, it was a pleasant surprise because I actually learned the skills that I needed to develop right on the spot, which helped my confidence tremendously.

As the researcher further examined their findings, there was a significant revelation from all participants that social interaction, the ability to ask questions and ask for help when needed, and collaboration in the workplace were all types of skills and development that internship experiences offered. Being exposed to these types of interactions in the workplace assisted with and developed the students' confidence. Alex explained,

I think in my internships I developed most by learning to ask for help. I didn't even realize that was a skill. I think a lot of times as an intern, you go in and think, "I need to know what I'm doing," "I have to be good at what I do," "I want to make sure that I make a good impression." However, I know that I made some of the biggest mistakes when I didn't ask for help, and that's where I developed the most.

Additionally, honing the skills and ability to ask for help coincided with the importance of developing the ability to collaborate with peers in the workplace. Group

work was a desirable skill, and collectively, all student participants experienced group work in the classroom setting. Mastering the ability to work in a group stood out throughout the researcher's findings as essential in the workplace. Group work was not always favorable or well-liked, but the participants deemed it a fundamental practice in beginning one's career. Alex pointed out,

I hated group projects more than anything in school. I thought they were horrible and were originally not good for my confidence. I don't like working with random people. However, in the workforce I quickly learned that you get assigned random people. So as annoying as it is as a student, in a lot of ways it grew my confidence on campus and turns out was very beneficial to work. I learned how to adjust to different people and styles.

Kate, a former student-athlete who had a tremendous amount of experience working as part of a team, in her athletics experience but not in the workplace, discussed how collaboration in her internship aided in her ability to identify what specifically she wanted to pursue and confirmed where her strengths lie:

I found that with both of my internships, I thrived best when it involved kind of working in groups and social interactions, and I really enjoyed being on sales pitches and kind of talking through it with my team and the client. So, I think that is definitely an avenue that I want to explore.

Similarly, Tara boasted about her exposure to diverse colleagues, and the varying roles within the museum environment. Tara credits this exposure to aiding in her exploration process and to building her confidence around her future career path:

I think the cool thing about a museum is that there's so many different people that work within it, whether you're a researcher or curator or you're [a] director or you're more of administration, or an educator, and then there were other interns there to speak with as well. So, depending on what their interests were, I was able to learn about what they were doing and why they were doing it and ask them questions. This really helped me become more confident in my career path and next steps.

Skills and development as related to the participants' confidence were evident throughout the researchers' findings. Confidence came in many forms; the next subtheme that will be discussed is Growth and Advancement, which emerged in conversation as a contributor to developing confidence.

**Growth and Advancement.** When considering an internship, a common goal, in addition to career exploration and skills development, is the ability to grow and advance within the role and obtaining a full-time post-graduation offer. Five of the students' voices revealed various ways in which they grew from their internship experiences, whether the result was full-time employment or not. The exploratory process of the internship allowed for the participants to garner their confidence in their next steps. Dion was the only student who took a strong stance on why he completed an internship. Never being completely sold on a college education, he approached everything he did with the big career picture in mind. Even though he was in an internship that he did not think was the best fit for him, he took full advantage of the opportunity to grow his skills and advance his career:

I think it was just an education for me overall; even though I wasn't necessarily getting exactly what I wanted or expected from this experience, it doesn't mean it was wasted. There's always going to be something that you learn from experiences. It was a great use of my time, and it was very beneficial for my advancement in the game of golf, and it helped me get the job that I got now. I have no regrets.

As previously discussed, internships and experiential learning opportunities provide an opportunity for students to explore what they like and what they dislike. Collectively, the students' voices conveyed how they made sense of these experiences as way to grow and advance. Carly stated,

When I was looking for internships, I really just wanted to be in a space where I could just expand my mind and I could just learn everything and soak up as much as I possibly can. I really think that this internship was an opportunity to do just that, so I'm very thankful for that. I grew throughout and feel confident going into my future.

Similarly, Mary discussed growing within her role as an intern, and she explained that exposure to an unfamiliar field, which resulted in her identifying her passion, solidified her intended career path upon completion of medical school. She explained, "I cherished my internship experience because of the exposure I gained, with my placement it was a field that I realized I am interested in for the future." Recognizing that she was in a unique position due to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mary continued to say, "I realized that not many people, especially interns, have the chance of being in the infectious disease department at a major hospital during a pandemic. It's not a very

popular or a desired place to be.” Mary credits this internship as being the one that, through exploration and experience, narrowed her focus to find her passion. She explained,

I feel like when I was placed in it [infectious disease control], I didn’t even know what it entailed, and then I learned and grew in the role. This internship really helped me gain some insight and realize how passionate I was about it.

Growth and advancement during internships was important to a majority of the participants’ overall experience. Jay, who leveraged his internship to obtain full-time employment, explained, “my main objective as I progressed through each internship was to add more responsibility to my plate, meet more people, grow my skills and develop my professionalism.” Skills development and collaborative opportunities allowed students to grow and advance, but also working under pressure within the work environment provided opportunity to grow and advance. Carol stated,

For me, during my internship I felt like it was good to have more pressure on me to get things done. I wanted to learn how it truly is at work. When I started in my professional life as an intern, I had worked other places and the expectation to get things done well was what I expected it to be. The way I look at it, it was good for future practice to feel that pressure because then when I get promoted, I will be used to handling the pressure and my expectations are realistic.

The students’ voices resounded that confidence was a key factor in their internship experiences relating to the exploratory process and post-graduation outcomes. As a common theme throughout the findings, confidence emerged as a characteristic that the students associate with their careers and was woven throughout the conversations. In

addition to the environment and confidence, the final theme that will be discussed is student engagement.

### ***Theme 3: Engagement***

Engagement, both on and off campus, was the final overarching theme. This theme was categorized into three subthemes: (a) Relationships and Collaboration, (b) Balance, and (c) Internships.

**Relationships and Collaboration.** Across the board, all eight students' voices conveyed the importance of relationship building and collaboration throughout their internships. Relationships on campus with faculty and peers, as well as relationships with professionals, including alumni at their internships, were prevalent. As the participants discussed their experiences and how they made sense of the relationships and collaborative work environments, they consistently related these concepts to their influence on their post-graduation plans, opportunity within their desired career path, and their overall confidence. Attending college within a certain proximity of a major city, with a strong alumni base, was a perk for many students. Alex explained his experience and thought process around relationships:

One of the great things about [REDACTED] that I really liked . . . was being able to leverage . . . the alumni network. I mean, there's a huge, huge amount of alumni that are living and breathing in the New York City area, which is, like, crazy to me. And that's a big difference compared to other schools and ultimately resulted in my job.

Similarly to Alex, Jay attributed much of his post-graduation success to the alumni who were working at his internship, how he related to these alumni, and ultimately how these



interactions and collaborations aided in his comfort and confidence. Although he briefly mentioned his faculty relationships, the professional network that he developed within his internship were more fruitful. He explained,

I think my on-campus relationships were great, but I will tell you the alumni base helped a lot. There were a lot of alumni who worked at Broadridge, and I was able to interact with them daily, and even collaborate on projects. It eased my mind a lot and it was so cool to just be like, “oh hey you went to [REDACTED], too”! Those types of relationships will be long lasting, regardless of where I work.

Kate echoed much of what was said by the other participants and deemed relationships as “essential” to the overall process. The findings revealed that relationships and collaboration happen in various ways. In addition to relationships with alumni, participants also spoke about the importance of building relationships with colleagues and supervisors within their internship sites. Carly, who challenged herself to tackle the non-profit industry, a completely new territory for her, worked hard on building relationships and gaining a deeper understanding of the functions of each department. She shared similar sentiments as Mary; both Carly and Mary came from liberal arts backgrounds and will be furthering their education post-graduation. Mary, whose intention is to attend medical school and work in a hospital environment, discussed about how she developed and maintained relationships with her supervisors. She stated,

I formed a really good bond with my internship supervisor, and I still go to the hospital to this day to stay connected with her. She has helped me beyond my internship in so many ways professionally as I think about medical school and my options. I wish I made more bonds with the physicians themselves, but they are

less accessible to interns. Some of them know me from close interactions with their patients, but otherwise I focused on building relationships with my supervisors.

Dion also recognized the importance of building and maintaining relationships, as he is a future golf club management professional. Given his desire to work in such a niche industry, Dion recognized that networking would be integral to aiding him in achieving his career goals. Dion explained,

I maintained a professional relationship with all of my supervisors. But also, I'm very selective with the people that I choose to have long-lasting relationships with. I'll be on the course networking, be friendly with everyone, get to know a ton about them, but in a lot of cases they won't be anything more than that in terms of a professional relationship. Golf is about networking and communicating well; when I manage a course, I want it to be a collaborative, interactive environment.

Not only did the types of relationships vary among professionals and interns, but the reasons for which participants built relationships was also different. In some cases, the student participants explained that their primary reason to build relationships was to network and seek out opportunities to further pursue their career paths; however, in some cases, the findings revealed that relationship building and collaboration in the workplace is also important to students because of the opportunities it provided to learn more. Carol explained,

I just think that the internship environment is just great all around, from the work I was doing to the people. That was my favorite part, being there and able to

Speak to anyone and ask questions to professionals. Everyone was willing to help and get to know me. It's a real benefit to the internship overall. If you work hard and do your best, then you grow your best.

As previously mentioned, relationship building and collaboration are not limited to the workplace. Tara, an English major, found value in the relationships that she built with her faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom setting. She discussed the collaborative efforts she made with her peers. Regarding relationships and collaboration, Tara stated,

I think talking to professors inside and outside of class that I had similar research interests with was really, really helpful. I was just very interested in what they had to say about certain topics. I also really found it important to talk to and work with other English majors as well, and people within the English department.

Building those relationships was really helpful for me to see the kind of classes they were taking and what they were doing with their degrees.

The students' voices clearly conveyed the importance of relationship building and collaboration, as well as the many variations in how to do so. Creating and maintaining professional relationships with faculty, alumni, peers, and industry professionals aided in developing students' confidence and furthered their ability to navigate intended career paths and post-graduation plans. While the demands of a full-time undergraduate student are prevalent, the participants also discussed how they balanced their competing priorities.

**Balance.** Engagement across college campuses is a large part of the overall student experience, and there are many forms of engagement in which students could partake. Whether students are engaging off campus or on campus, the ability to balance

all competing priorities is an important skill to hone. Across all participants, they consistently mentioned the ability to balance everything effectively as integral to their success on campus. Carly and Mary recognized the importance of balance, and how much hard work it would take to maintain balance. Carly stated, “I recommend internships, it’s going to be a lot of work though, I’m not going to lie; it’s going to take a lot of time.” She continued, “you have to manage your schedule really well and keep close track of everything you have to do.” Carly recognized the value that being able to balance everything added to her experience: “It was all worth it. The hard work and management of it all. It’s all worth the experience you gain.” Time management and balance are important skills to prepare students for the workplace and to make them better students, as Alex stated:

I think that all the experiences I had on campus and my internships really helped me as a student, especially being so involved, you’re managing multiple things at once. You have to have good time management skills. If you don’t, I don’t think you’re going to be that good of a student or worker. There’s a lot that goes on for students every day, and you have to learn to balance it all.

The students’ voices convey the importance of being able to balance everything they are seeking to accomplish during their college careers; however, only a few students’ voices revealed the strategy they used to successfully balance their priorities. Carol recognized that her senior year demands, coursework, and internships forced her to strategize how to balance everything. She explained,

I had to figure out how to balance everything. I did so by really using my weekly planner but actually making a point to do it daily because it served as my

motivation as well. For extra activities outside of school and work, I try and change it up a bit, but also make sure that I prioritize what I need to prioritize every night before my next day starts. I try and be social and get things done.

Doing this every night so I know what to expect the next day was very helpful.

Tara's strategy was similar, as she also utilized a daily planner to manage all her tasks and responsibilities. She explained, "to fit it all in, with classes and internships, it took a lot of planning, writing in planners, a lot of reminders on my phone, keeping separate notebooks for everything I was doing, really just keeping everything very compartmentalized." With balance come time management and organizational skills. Staying organized while balancing several responsibilities came to light as a critical skill through the students' voices and experiences. Dion, who traveled away from home and completed his internship over the summer while taking online classes, was adamant about the importance of his organizational skills. Dion stated,

Being in an internship, living away from home and taking online classes was a lot at once. The whole thing was very fast paced, you just have to learn to do more, you have to multitask, and you have to make sure you're organized. Organization is key, especially for the management of it all, it is so important. Getting acclimated to what you have going on as soon as possible is key, at the end of the day.

Balancing coursework and experiential learning experiences, combined with potential outside obligations, was overwhelming to students. Kate, a student-athlete, learned to balance it all, while she was a full-time student-athlete at a Division I institution. Kate explained,

With the long days and everything—practice, class, and interning—I think it was tough keeping up with the work ethic that was expected of me. At my internship, it was tough because they were on it at this company, they wanted things done quickly. I had to step back and look at the big picture, and it came down to me managing my time and telling myself, “OK, stay focused, concentrate for the full time you’re working,” because it was a lot and I was exhausted. It was a very intense internship, but it was good. I wouldn’t change it.

Balance is an integral skill to develop and maintain during one’s college career, and this was conveyed by the students’ voices. In addition to relationship building and collaboration and balance, the final subtheme that will be discussed is internships as they pertain to engagement.

**Internships.** Students’ perception of internships, as a type of experiential learning, was a primary focus of this research study. The findings revealed that internships were consistently discussed by participants throughout the interview and data collection process. The researcher felt it was important to convey internships as a subtheme multiple times as it was related to two themes: environment and engagement. Engagement developed into an overarching theme, and Carly discussed the difference in value between engaging through a student organization or club on campus and engaging through an internship. Carly stated,

Internships are different ways to learn than clubs. You have the chance to figure out, “OK, this is my purpose, this is my passion. This is something that I can see myself doing for some time, and it’s not going to stress me out. It’s going to make me happy.” I think that’s most important moment and thing you’ll learn as an

undergrad. I think everyone should have the opportunity to have an internship because you won't learn this through other engagement.

Similarly, Jay discussed the uniqueness of internships as a form of engagement, given the educational value they provide and the skills development they offer. Other forms of engagement on college campuses do not provide that type of learning. Jay stated, "internships are definitely a good way to recognize and apply the skills you're learning in the classroom and get a feel for what you're good at." He explained that in the finance industry the skills he learned in an internship setting helped him select certain courses to take to put him a better position for success. He continued, "I would say to do internships early on because it's going to help you in your later semesters because now you know what specific skills you need and what classes you need to take to develop those skills."

The students' voices conveyed the importance of internships as a type of engagement as it relates to the exploratory and career navigation process. Kate described how internships were dually purposed for her, as a means to explore what she wanted to pursue and what her professional strengths were, as well as a way to network and meet industry professionals to create opportunities. Like Kate, Dion and Carol shared their sentiments supporting the importance of internships as a type of engagement. Kate explained,

At the end of the day, internships give you connections for future jobs, which obviously are really, really helpful. However, I think internships also help you to figure out what you want to do. With an internship, you're actually able to dip your toe in and can kind of have a better idea what you want to do in the future, or

not and what you're good at. This helped me because just engaging as an athlete and joining clubs would not have given me this.

Mary echoed these sentiments, as she boasted about the many reasons why she would recommend internships as a means for engagement during one's college career. She went on to say,

Internships are great because of what you gain back from it, even if you're not getting paid or if you're not getting academic credit, the skills and the knowledge you acquire, they're very applicable, they're transferable and everyone needs that. I also think it's so important to do internships and feel the environment of the workplace because that's really where you get to see if you enjoy what you're doing at the end of the day.

Across the three overarching themes, environment, confidence, and engagement, the students' voices conveyed their perception of internships as a type of experiential learning. The students' voices revealed how they identified the value of internships, and that was expressed through the findings as subthemes. To conclude, Chapter 5 will present a discussion of the findings as related to the three identified research questions.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the students' perceptions of the effects that internships have on confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. The findings conveyed three overarching themes—environment, confidence, and engagement—that emerged through a series of three semi-structured interviews with each of the eight participants.

This study was driven by the following research questions:



1. How do college students make sense of internships as part of their academic experience?
2. How do students perceive internships influencing their sensemaking around their future careers?
3. What factors influence college students' decision-making to identify and participate in internship opportunities?

The first research question revolved around how college students made sense of internships as part of their academic experience. Findings were consistent among participants: most referenced the internship environment being influential in their ability to further develop skills outside of the classroom experience. The professional setting was an opportunity for participants to put their skills they had acquired in the classroom and on campus into practice, in a real-life environment. This allowed for participants, as they navigated a new space, to think about and apply what they had learned, as well as develop further as professionals in preparation for their post-graduation plans.

Participants also referred to the exploration process during each internship and the applicability of their coursework as it relates to the academic experience. Findings showed that participants used internships as a means of exploration to identify the applicability of their coursework to the workplace, as well as to develop and practice skills they would need to be successful in their careers. The findings conveyed that the exploration process across all participants was integral to their ability to find clarity on post-graduation plans.

Analysis of the data found that while most participants identified and relied upon applicable skills they learned in the classroom, there was one outlier who attributed only

a small percentage of his skills development to the classroom, and much of what he learned to the workplace and the overall internship environment. This participant discussed an “80-20 split,” in which he described that 80% of what he learned was during his internship, and 20% consisted of skills that he developed in the classroom or on campus. Most participants said that many of the skills they developed in the classroom were transferrable skills that may apply to varying fields; for example, in class, they had developed the ability to balance competing priorities and communicate in an effective, efficient manner. The internship environment, exploration process, and the participants’ skills development are all ways in which college students made sense of internships as a part of their academic experience.

The second research question focused on how students perceived internships and whether these experiences influenced how they made sense of their future careers. The findings were consistent across all participants throughout the researcher’s interviews and the data analysis process. The findings revealed that participants viewed internships as a way to explore their future careers, develop their skills, and gain confidence going into their post-graduation plans. The researcher found that confidence was a constant thread that emerged as an overarching theme, and a common phrase that was utilized by participants frequently. Confidence was woven into many conversations between the researcher and the participants, and was referred to from several perspectives and for several reasons. How students perceived internships varied among participants; however, they all discussed their own personal confidence levels being influential and aiding in how they made sense of their future careers and post-graduation plans. The findings conveyed that when students were comfortable in an environment, successfully

completing projects and assigned tasks, and collaborating with colleagues while building relationships, they were more confident in themselves, their abilities to perform the job duties well, and their internship experience as a whole.

Confidence was also referenced regarding skills development, applicability of coursework to the workplace, and the exploration of intended future careers, all of which internships provide. Findings revealed that the participants' overall perception of internships was that they were meant for the participants to explore intended or potential career paths. Participants used internships to figure out their specific likes and dislikes in a workplace, as well as to gain more clarity on the skills needed to be successful in their intended industry. Findings revealed that throughout the internship process, the participants realized that internship experiences influence how they made sense of their future careers and instilled confidence and clarity on pursuing their post-graduation outcomes.

The final research question revolved around what factors influenced the students' decision-making around identifying and participating in internship opportunities. The findings revealed that the reasons for participating in internships varied among participants. For many of the participants, internships were considered an opportunity to explore their career interests and to find clarity on their likes, dislikes, and skills. The participants who were enrolled in majors in the liberal arts field expressed uncertainty in their intended career paths and post-graduation plans early on due to the broad range of skills being developed. The three participants who were enrolled in liberal arts majors chose to utilize internships to explore their career possibilities. The transferrable skills that liberal arts majors developed allowed for a wide range of options in terms of post-

graduation outcomes. Given that there is less emphasis on internships in the liberal arts and sciences environment, the findings revealed that all three liberal arts majors chose to further their education and enroll in a more focused graduate studies program after using internships to home in on their intended career path.

Continuing with the final research question, participants who were enrolled in business majors and had clarity on their intended post-graduation plans were mainly influenced by conversations with alumni, faculty, and their student peers to participate in internships and use this as an opportunity to apply the technical skills they learned in the classroom. The encouragement of internships and experiential learning in the business school environment was an impetus behind why business students tended to participate in internships while on campus. Internships were a means of exploration and direct application of skills for students. The research findings revealed that participants enrolled in the business school discussed their relationships with alumni, faculty, and peers as being influential in the navigation of their college experiences and intended career paths. Attending events while on campus and interacting with likeminded peers and alumni were cited as factors that contributed to the participants' desire to partake in internships throughout their undergraduate education. The participants stated that applying what they were learning in the classroom to the workplace was a contributing factor to their decision-making process and why they participated in internships. Of the participants, three out of four who were enrolled in the business school will pursue full-time employment as their post-graduation plan as a result of their internship experience. Across all findings, there was little to no variance and collectively, participants discussed the contributing factors to their decision to complete an internship being the influential

relationships, ability to apply skills, and opportunity to explore their potential interests. Through the findings, there was one outlier, Dion, who said the sole factor contributing to his desire to complete an internship was to advance within his intended industry. He equated his experience outside of the classroom as the primary reason he obtained his internships, and now post-graduation employment. Unlike the majority of the participants, this participant discussed the importance of transferrable skills and relationships; however, he did not consider these to be integral to his post-graduation outcome.

In conclusion, the findings revealed that the role of internships as a type of experiential learning in confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education from students' perspective revolved around three overarching themes and several subthemes. Participants attributed much of their perception of internships to the overall environment, and the ability to learn on-site with professionals; confidence, and how influential their internship experiences were on building their confidence and assisting them with finding clarity on their post-graduation plans; and engagement, and the importance of engaging outside of the classroom to build relationships and develop essential transferrable skills. The findings have identified viable implications as well as recommendations for future practice and research which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This narrative study of eight undergraduate college students from the graduating class of 2022 examined students' perceptions of the effects of internships on confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. This study aimed to address three research questions. The first research question sought to understand how college students made sense of internships as part of their academic experience. The second research question examined how college students perceived the influence that internships had on how they made sense of their future careers. Finally, the third research question explored what factors influenced college students' decision to identify and participate in internships.

Given the reliance on quantitative studies, the 2019 GSS survey found that 63% of the class of 2019 at the study site reported that they completed an internship before they graduated, compared to 60% nationally. Additionally, O'Neill (2010) explained that internships have been credited with helping students apply what they are learning in the classroom to new situations and allowed students to receive feedback to help improve their skills and knowledge in their field. This study divulged findings that evolved consistently through the students' voices. The findings were favorable to in-person internships and the effects that physically being present in the internship environment had on the experience and on the students' overall confidence. Students' perceptions were purposefully targeted in this study to create a more robust picture of the value that internships bring to the higher education landscape, as related to confidence and post-graduation outcomes. Students are at the forefront of internship experiences; hence, their viewpoints must be accounted for.

As Chapter 3 discussed, the data collected for this study consisted of multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews with each participant through three different periods of time over the course of their internship. Three themes emerged from the data that were analyzed and deconstructed: (a) environment, (b) confidence, and (c) engagement. The environment theme involved the students' perception of being in the physical internship location and how that enhanced the exploration process as well as the ability to apply skills they had learned in the classroom to the workplace. The theme of confidence was constant throughout the findings. Confidence became a continuous thread and the most frequently used term throughout conversations with student participants. This theme aided in the students' realization of skill development and growth and advancement opportunities that internships provided, and it influenced their overall confidence and post-graduation outcomes. Finally, the third theme involved internships as a type of engagement and how students made sense of these experiences, the relationships that were built on and off campus, and how they balanced competing priorities. This chapter will discuss major findings from the data and will connect the findings to implications of findings for policy; relationships to prior research and the theoretical framework; limitations of the study; and recommendations for future practice and future research.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study highlight the importance of internships, as perceived by the students, in their confidence and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. As stated in Chapter 2, prior research focused on internship experiences across varying industries and academic majors while still questioning how students perceived these experiences. This study highlighted the importance of the students' perception and

consistency, as well as existing data which indicated a positive correlation between students' completion of internships and their successful transition to post-graduation plans. The 2019 NACE Internship & Co-Op Study stated that the average full-time employment offer rate for students who complete internships was 70.4% (p. 11).

Internships have been credited with helping students apply what they are learning in their classrooms to new situations and allow students to receive feedback to help them improve their skills and knowledge in their field, as well as find clarity on their intended career paths (O'Neill, 2010).

The intent of this study was to highlight the students' voices to inform higher education leaders and internship program managers on what they could do to make the student experience the best it could be. From a campus-wide perspective, it is important to understand the students' perception and how it aligns with the structure of internship programs when refining practices on campus going forward. As the number of students who complete internships grows, the outcomes related to post-graduation plans will be indicative of the impact internships are having. This revelation should garner attention from administrators and faculty professionals on campus to create and implement a consistent process and expand internship requirements across academic programs. By considering the students' perception, how they made sense of the internship, and whether it influenced their post-graduation outcomes, administrators and faculty members will be empowered to make informed decisions and find clarity on how the current resources and policies align with and foster student success. This is also an opportunity for universities to explore areas in which more policy could be created, and in which change could be made to improve the overall student experience.



## **Relationship to Prior Research**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the researcher identified diverse articles, of both qualitative and quantitative nature, that supported prior related literature and the identified gap in research. Many of the findings coincide with what most of the research base tells us: internships are a way for students to explore their career paths and find clarity on their post-graduation plans.

Prior research has shown a positive impact of internships as a type of experiential learning on students' post-graduation outcomes, career exploration, and skills development. The findings of this study support prior literature and add the effects the internship environment have on students, as well as the influence these experiences have on students' confidence (Hergert, 2009). The findings of this study also supported prior literature by exploring the impact of the students' skills development and ability to build professional relationships throughout their internship experiences (Binder et al., 2015).

The findings of this study shed light on the impact that internships have on students' confidence. All participants credited their internship experience with being influential and helping them develop their confidence in the workplace, in terms of their ability to perform as well as the way in which they interacted with peers. Dion, a business management major, boasted about the confidence that his internship and experiential learning experiences provided for him. He stated, "If I gained anything [from this internship] it's confidence. Being in the moment and having acted on the spot, learning as I go helped me develop the skills I need, and to be comfortable carrying myself like a professional." Similarly, Kate cited that much of her confidence came from her in-person internship experiences. Kate explained, "I loved my internship when I had to attend in

person, I learned so much from being in the room with my peers and working on projects together, or even just independently.” She went on to say, “just being there to ask questions on the spot and make sure I was on the right track helped my confidence so much. It was like I was reassured that I knew what I was doing.” Confidence, as an overarching theme in this study, adds to and complements prior research by supporting the effects that internships have on post-graduation outcomes.

The findings of this study supported prior research which highlighted the importance of internships for skills development and relationship building (Binder et al, 2015). Carly, an English major with an intent to attend graduate school post-graduation, explained the purpose of her internships being for career exploration. She stated, “I was an intern at a non-profit and was exposed to so many departments. I am grateful this experience allowed me to figure out what I like and what I was good at.” She went on to say, “I was not sure going in where my skills would lead me, but it turns out I enjoyed writing and look forward to that being part of my job in the future.” Like Carly, Tara interned in an environment where she was exposed to many facets of the museum industry and she went on to say, “Working in a museum I had no idea all that it entailed,” continuing, “This really opened my eyes to something I want to do and to be part of my career, I really was able to grow my communication skills by writing and speaking to my coworkers.” The findings support skills development as a contributor to relationship building, confidence, and greater interest levels in the overall experience. A study by Hergert (2009) found that students find great value in their internship experiences, and this is particularly true when there is a direct connection to their ultimate career goal. Research has also found that students have greater interest levels and motivation to

complete internships as they connect to the workplace, as students' interests will allow for them to be more inclined to learn and commit to being successful (Hergert, 2009). Consistently, the findings supported the impetus behind why students participated in internships was to explore their career options and build their skills and confidence in preparation for the post-graduation plans.

There are several aligned similarities between the findings and prior research. It is important to note that the prior research was collected through diverse articles that were published over the last 12 years, nationally and internationally. The participants of these studies ranged from first-year, undecided students through doctoral candidates for whose degrees experiential learning experiences were required. The findings of this study were based on a sample of eight class of 2022 undergraduate students with varying majors, who participated in at least one internship during their time on campus. It would be interesting if future research could explore multiple universities using this methodology, as resources and academic curriculum requirements vary from school to school, and among states.

Ultimately, this study supports existing literature. The motivations for most participants in this study to participate in internships closely align with those that have been identified in prior research. As the higher education landscape is constantly evolving and with remote internship and work environments as a realistic option for some students, it is important to continue ongoing research on this topic and to keep up to date with the evolving times and trends in this area of study.

## **Relationship to Theoretical Framework**

The findings align well with the theoretical framework that was used to guide this study. The researcher trusts that Weick's sensemaking framework was most suitable for this study. Sensemaking is focused on the process by which people give meaning to their collective experiences. For the purposes of this study, sensemaking, as the guiding lens allowed the interpretation of the findings to be a way for participants to comprehend, identify feelings around, and talk about their experience while the researcher analyzed the interactions with the goal of understanding their lived experiences (Weick, 1995). The impetus behind sensemaking, according to Weick, was that he intended to shift the focus from decision-making toward the processes that constitute the meaning of decisions that are enacted in behavior (Weick et al., 2005).

As the findings were analyzed, the sensemaking framework fit this study because the researcher was seeking the students' perspective and to gain an understanding of their perception of how they were making sense of certain experiences. All of Weick's seven principles of sensemaking aligned closely with the findings of this study. The first principle, *identity*, was most prominent and was evident throughout the students' exploration process, as they sought clarity on their post-graduation outcomes through internship experiences and further developed their confidence. Second, given the narrative methodology, and collecting data over a distinct period of time and evaluating what the students noticed at different points in the experience, the sensemaking principles of *retrospection* and *ongoing* were supported. *Enact* and *social*, as sensemaking principles, were present throughout the findings, as students continuously discussed their engagement with their peers, supervisors, and faculty, and in the dialogues and narratives

they shared throughout their internship experiences. *Extracted cues* became evident as the students began to draw connections between their internship experiences and post-graduation outcomes, as influential in their decision-making process. Finally, *plausibility over accuracy* was evident because accuracy in career exploration is not always possible; therefore, fluidity and exploration are more plausible. The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in research by exploring students' perception, and sensemaking allowed for a full understanding of how the students were making sense of their experiences. The researcher analyzed the stories being shared by each student in a sequential manner, allowing exploration into the students' perceptions of how they gave meaning to their collective experiences and the role that internships, as a type of experiential learning, had in their post-graduation outcomes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations to this study were the time frame during which the study took place, which lacked longevity, and the small number of participants. The data collection for this narrative study took place during the spring semester of the 2021–2022 academic year, from approximately March to May. Given a semester-long internship, most participants began their experiences in January. The researcher could have increased the number of student participants and spread out the interviews to strengthen the data by starting earlier, allowing the data to be reflective of the entire narrative experience, rather than just a snapshot. The interviews took place during the beginning, middle, and toward the end of the internship experience, and were conducted every two weeks; however, more time and a longer study could have allowed for more time between interview rounds, giving the researcher more of a holistic perspective from the participants.

This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which should be discussed as a limitation. The research and data collection process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many higher education institutions were still functioning in hybrid or remote environments with limited in-person instruction or interaction. This resulted in all data collection being conducted remotely, including interviews. Secure and stable internet connection and the ability to record sessions for transcription and analysis purposes added a challenge. Access to in-person interviews was not available, which would have allowed the researcher to observe on-site interactions of participants and, as a result, strengthen the triangulation of the data. The findings of this study may be limited to the effects of the pandemic. All participants used in this study participated in at least one internship on site, although experiences may have been influenced and dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic and varying restrictions in the workplace because this is what they were familiar with.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

The findings from this study contribute to the existing literature related to the value of internships in higher education. Students, administrators, and faculty could utilize the findings of this study to establish a solid foundation to inform and guide the next generation of college students, faculty, and administrators. The findings provide college campuses with the tools needed to support students' desire for and increase the participation in internships across the student body. They highlight the institutional responsibility to encourage internships and experiential learning, while also creating more equitable access to these opportunities. Funding streams for students to participate in unpaid internships, consistency in policy around paid versus unpaid internships, and

incentivizing students to participate in internships as a means for exploration and to aid in finding clarity on career paths are just some of the ways in which this study could inform future practice. This study differentiates itself from existing literature by focusing on the students' perceptions of the effects of internships on confidence and post-graduation outcomes, and therefore it can inform future practice.

The findings of this study shed light on three overarching themes: environment, confidence, and engagement. The findings identified environment as the first theme, highlighting the importance of the student being physically located in the internship environment to gain on-site experience, apply what they have learned in the classroom, and further explore their intended careers. Given the changing landscape of the workplace, and remote internship options becoming more prevalent, future practitioners could inform students of the benefit of being on-site in a hands-on learning environment. Remote internships could also be an option for students, as they increase access and equity by allowing students to not have to be physically present, and therefore able to complete these internships from their homes, or on campus. Remote internships could influence students gaining experience globally, crossing borders and time zones, and allowing for experiences that would otherwise not be possible. The second theme that was revealed is confidence. The students' perception of their internship experience was continuously brought back to their confidence level, and the ability to develop skills, grow, and advance within their intended fields. The findings exposed that confidence comes by doing, and future practice should encourage internships to aid in building confidence and finding clarity on post-graduation plans.

Lastly, engagement was the final overarching theme revealed in the findings. Engagement was perceived as a way to gain experience outside of the classroom, through internships, while learning to balance competing priorities, build relationships both on and off campus, and learn how to collaborate with peers. Internships, as a type of experiential learning, are just one form of engagement in which students partake. Engagement through internships could be encouraged and become a consistent practice on college campuses for all students, as the findings revealed how these experiences aid in the exploration process and assist students with finding clarity on their post-graduation plans. To support the findings, a strong recommendation would be for higher education institutions to create a required 1–3 credit course that focuses specifically on career development and professional competencies. The primary objective of this course would be that students will develop a resume, draft a cover letter, begin networking with industry professionals, and practice their interview skills and job search strategies. Through this coursework, students will also develop their LinkedIn profiles and become educated on job search techniques and the proper way to initiate outreach to employers, alumni, and other professionals. Given that these resources on campus are offered to all students, and completely optional, a required course as such will bolster students' confidence going into their post-graduation plan, as well as put them in a better position to be successful.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study could be built upon in several ways. Future studies could investigate the role that internships have in confidence and post-graduation plans for a more focused population—for example, graduate-level students. In prior research, Kolb and Kolb



(2005) described significant movement among students, indicating growth and development playing a more active role in their own learning because of the empowering and an active structure of the learning environment (p. 204). Future research could investigate graduate students' perceptions of the role and importance of obtaining internships and the value these experiences have for their intended careers. Other groups of students this study could investigate as a primary sample of participants could be first-generation college students or student-athletes. This study could be scaled regionally or nationally by adding specificity to the participant criteria could allow future research to build upon this study by focusing on a specific demographic who may have different considerations and circumstances when they arrive on college campuses. Maintaining consistent criteria for participation and conducting this research on campuses in close proximity to major cities, and of similar demographics, while utilizing a specific group of participants could allow for scaling this study effectively.

Future studies could investigate the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on students' internship experiences, their ability to obtain internships, and their willingness to participate. Prior research has discussed internship experiences as in-person and hands-on learning experiences; future research could explore the notion of remote internships and the role these have in confidence and post-graduation outcomes. Future research could also examine more deeply the technology being used and implemented in higher education settings, and the adaptability of internship programs to create engaging virtual environments to provide students with the skills development, relationship building, and exploratory experience they seek. Finally, future research could explore internships as a type of experiential learning, through a longitudinal study, investigating students over the

course of their entire undergraduate career, throughout multiple forms of engagement both on and off campus.

## **Conclusion**

After multiple rounds of interviews, listening to the students' stories, and transcribing all documents, the researcher identified several conclusions from the student perspective: (a) the internship environment is essential to students' exploration process and confidence; (b) confidence is gained by physically being in the workplace: applying skills, interacting with peers, and developing skills; and (c) engagement outside of the classroom provides students with an opportunity to explore their post-graduation plans and find clarity on their intended career paths. It was determined that student perceptions offered valuable insight on the dynamics of internships and the role they play in confidence and post-graduation outcomes.

When it comes to internships, students benefit most from the experience as it pertains directly to their post-graduation plans. It is essential that campuses build a supportive system of resources for students that fosters their ability to learn, progress, grow, and explore through internships. The main role of internships today is to provide an opportunity for students to gain experience in a workplace environment that nurtures their ability to apply skills which they gained in the classroom, develop relationships with peers, and find clarity on their post-graduation plans. The engagement and exploratory elements of internships reinforces the importance of these experiences for students. With ambiguity around internship sites, and with hybrid and remote options being available to students, it is essential for campuses to create a system for consistent communication and expectations among students, campus administration, faculty, and employers. In a rapidly

evolving educational environment, it is necessary to continue understanding the depth of internship offerings while keeping in mind the importance of these experiences and the role such opportunities have in students' confidence and post-graduation outcomes.

## APPENDIX A CONSENT FORM

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about the role of internships as a type of experiential learning on student retention, employment and post-graduation outcomes. This study will be conducted by Jaime L. Grillo, Director of Career and Professional Development at the [REDACTED]. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Take part in multiple rounds (three) of semi-structured interviews focusing on your perception of internships at three distinct points; leading up to the experience, during the experience and at the end of the experience.

Your interviews will be audio recorded using a Voice Memos iPhone application and stored in a secure Microsoft 365, OneDrive location that is password protected. You may review these audios and request that all or any portion of the tapes be destroyed. Interviews will take place in-person, or virtually via WebEx or Zoom and in accordance with the New York State COVID-19 Guidelines.

Participation in this study will involve up to 2 hours of your time. Approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire and the remaining time for the in-person interviews. There will be time between the interviews to allow for adjustments, if needed and reflection.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Federal regulations require that all subjects be informed of the availability of medical treatment or financial compensation in the event of physical injury resulting from participation in the research. [REDACTED] cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board ([REDACTED]).

Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research may help the investigator understand more about the role of internships as a type of experiential learning on graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by keeping all audio recordings and transcribed files in a secure, password protected Microsoft 365 OneDrive file. All transcribed files will use pseudonyms as participant descriptors as names will be changed. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children or to others.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. For interviews, questionnaires or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect your grades or academic standing or result in loss of resources to which you are otherwise entitled.

If there is anything about this study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Jaime L. Grillo at [REDACTED], [REDACTED].edu or Dr. Catherine DiMartino, at [REDACTED].edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED], Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair, [REDACTED].edu, [REDACTED] or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, [REDACTED].edu, [REDACTED].

\_\_\_\_ Yes, I give the investigator permission to use my participation and recordings from our interview in her dissertation, presentations or future publications.

\_\_\_\_ I would prefer not to participate.

**Agreement to Participate**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject's Signature Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX B IRB CERTIFICATION**



## APPENDIX C INITIAL START LIST OF CODES WITH DEFINITIONS

**Relationships:** individuals that participants felt connected to

**Engagement:** experience outside of the classroom

**On-Campus:** experience that took place on campus and outside the classroom

**Off-Campus:** experience that took place off-campus

**Graduate School:** participant is attending or planning on attending graduate school

**Resources:** campus provided services that students utilize outside of the classroom

**Industry Related:** experience is directly related to intended industry

**Travel:** participant traveled to campus from outside NYC metropolitan area

**Family Support:** participant mentions family, loved ones who provide support in decision making

**Future:** participant mentions future plans and goals

**Connection to Campus:** participant refers to a unique connection to campus, could be relationship or mission

**Hobbies:** participant discusses hobbies outside of experiences and classroom

**Money:** participant references finances as it relates to their experiences or reasons for experiences

## APPENDIX D INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1



Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about how internships as a type of experiential learning play a role in graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. Through interviews with current college students, the research is seeking to understand the students' perception of their internships through experiential learning both on and off campus and how they make sense of these experiences.

For the purpose of this study, we are defining experiential learning as skills, knowledge, and experiences that are acquired outside of the traditional academic classroom setting, which includes internships. In our first round interview, I am interested in hearing about any internships that you had on campus or off campus, the time leading up to securing the internship and how you made sense of these experiences and the contribution to your overall student experience.

Thank you for letting me interview you about your experiences.

1. Please start by telling me a little bit about yourself.
2. When considering your college options, how much did post-graduation employment plans play into your decision-making?
3. Did access to internships play into your college decision-making?
4. Before attending college, how did you make sense of internships?
5. What criteria did you use when considering an academic major?
6. Can you please expand on the nature in which you engaged with peers outside of the classroom while an undergraduate student?
7. Please share with me an internship experience that you had in an off-campus setting and looking back, what that experience means to you now.
8. Prior to this experience, do you feel that you were adequately prepared to perform intern duties in the workplace?
9. Describe to me the steps you took to obtain this experience.
10. Thinking about the experience(s) you just described, do you feel they influenced your overall student experience?
11. Tell me about some of the feelings you had leading into this experience?
12. Considering the administrators and faculty on campus, do you feel there were any influential relationships developed that influenced your decision to complete an internship?



13. If you could make a wish list of resources to enrich your experience on campus, what would be on the list?
14. How did you find balancing your coursework and outside obligations with your internship requirement?
15. Would you like to add any final comments?

Thank you for sharing your engagement experiences with me. Your story will aid in helping me explore whether or not student engagement through experiential learning plays a role in graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes.

## APPENDIX E INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2



Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about how internships as a type of experiential learning plays a role in graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. Through interviews with current college students, the researcher is seeking to understand the students' perception of their internships through experiential learning both on and off campus and how they make sense of these experiences.

For the purpose of this study, we are defining experiential learning as skills, knowledge, and experiences that are acquired outside of the traditional academic classroom setting, which includes internships. In our second-round interview, I am interested in hearing about any internships that you had on campus or off campus and how you felt during this experience. I am also interested in hearing about the ways in which you remained connected to campus, and any influential relationships that you feel were important to your success.

Thank you for letting me interview you about your experiences.

1. Let's start by discussing a little bit about your role as an intern.
2. Has this experience been what you expected, so far, in terms of responsibilities and development opportunities?
3. Describe to me what a typical day at your internship is like, from start to finish.
4. As an intern, do you have any opportunity to collaborate with other interns, full time staff, or supervisors on projects?
5. What has surprised you most about this experience so far?
6. Describe to me a time where you were able to apply something that you've learned in the classroom directly to the workplace.
7. Thinking back, do you feel like you were prepared for a role as an intern?
8. If you could change anything about your internship, what would it be?
9. If given the opportunity, would you stay on in a full-time role post-graduation?
10. Do you feel like you've developed any influential relationships with colleagues or supervisors?
11. How much communication do you have with administrators and faculty professionals on campus, related to your internship?
12. What has been the biggest challenge you faced as an intern?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience as an intern so far?

Thank you for sharing your engagement experiences with me. Your story will aid in helping me explore whether or not student engagement through experiential learning plays a role in graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes.

## APPENDIX F INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #3



Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about how internships as a type of experiential learning plays a role in graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes in higher education. Through interviews with current college students, the researcher is seeking to understand the students' perception of their internships through experiential learning both on and off campus and how they make sense of these experiences.

For the purpose of this study, we are defining experiential learning as skills, knowledge, and experiences that are acquired outside of the traditional academic classroom setting, which includes internships. In our final interview, I am interested in hearing about any internships that you had on campus or off campus and how you felt after this experience. I am also interested in hearing about the ways in which you feel that engagement outside of the academic setting influenced your future employment or post-graduation outcomes.

Thank you for letting me interview you about your experiences.

1. Talk a little about your overall experience as an intern and how you make sense of these opportunities and the impact they will have on your career.
2. Thinking back to your time on campus, did you know right away that you were going to complete an internship?
3. How many internship experiences did you complete over your 4 years on campus?
4. Were internships a requirement for graduation or did you elect to complete and internship on your own?
5. Do you feel prepared to enter the workplace or graduate school after completing internships?
6. Describe to me what, if anything, stood out throughout this experience that prepared you for your next steps after graduation.
7. Tell me about what you thought this experience was going to be like, vs. the reality of what your experience was.
8. Now that this experience is over (or ending soon), tell me about what your next steps are and if you have any plans post-graduation.
9. Overall, would you recommend an internship to future college students, and if so, what was the most valuable part of the experience?

Thank you for sharing your engagement experiences with me. Your story will aid in helping me explore whether or not student engagement through experiential learning plays a role in graduation, employment and post-graduation outcomes. This concludes our final (of 3) interviews. I cannot thank you enough for your time.

## APPENDIX G RECRUITMENT EMAIL



Dear Student (xyz@stjohns.edu)

My name is Jaime Grillo, and I am an Advanced Standing Doctoral Student in the Instructional Leadership program in the School of Education at St. John's University. I am writing my dissertation on the role of internships on students' graduation, employment and their post-graduation outcomes, and I am reaching out today seeking participants for my research study.

As a member of the class of 2022, and having completed at least one internship during your time at [REDACTED], you meet the criteria I am seeking in my participants. Participation in this study will include a series of 3, 30-minute interviews which will all take place virtually. Should you choose to participate, consent forms will be signed in advance, indicating that your personal information will remain confidential and basic demographic information will be collected.

If you are interested and willing to participate, I would greatly appreciate it. Please feel free to respond to this email, or call me: [REDACTED] should you have any questions.

Thank you,

Jaime L. Grillo  
Doctoral Candidate  
St. John's University

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## Vita

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