

# Multiple Internships: A Ladder or a Treadmill?

## Abstract

Multiple internships are often associated with positive academic and employment outcomes (Silva et al., 2016; Townsley et al., 2017). But little research exists on who takes multiple internships and why.

This paper is based on data collected for the *College Internship Study*, a national, mixed-methods, multi-sited, longitudinal investigation of college internships. Our survey indicates that only students with additional resources (time, financial security, social support) take multiple internships.

Our qualitative analysis of focus group participants in the study identified four main contexts that influenced students to pursue multiple internship, which we describe as:

1. *Marketability culture*
2. *Outcome focused persistence*
3. *Gatekeeping navigation*
4. *Lateral career path exploration*

These observations raise concerns about the accessibility and equity of the benefits of multiple internships.

## Research Questions

**RQ1: What are the demographic and socioeconomic factors that are associated with multiple internships for students?**

**RQ2: What are the motivations, experiences, narratives and strategies that influence students' pursuit of multiple internships?**

## Mixed Data and Analysis Methods

### Data Collection:

- At four four-year comprehensive colleges and a technical college
- T1: Spring 2018
  - Online survey of students in the second half of their academic programs (N = 1549)
  - In-person focus groups (N=100)
- T2: Spring 2019
  - Follow-up interviews with focus group participants from two sites (N = 17)

### Quantitative Analysis of Survey Results:

- 3 groups: no internship, one internship, and multiple internships.
- Chi-square test and multinomial regression:
- Relationship between internship status and demographic (race, gender, age, sexuality, disability), academic (major, GPA, enrollment status), and socioeconomic (parental income, first generation college student, employment status) characteristics

### Qualitative Analysis of Interview Transcripts:

- Thematic coding in MaxQDA
- Case study analysis

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## Survey Results

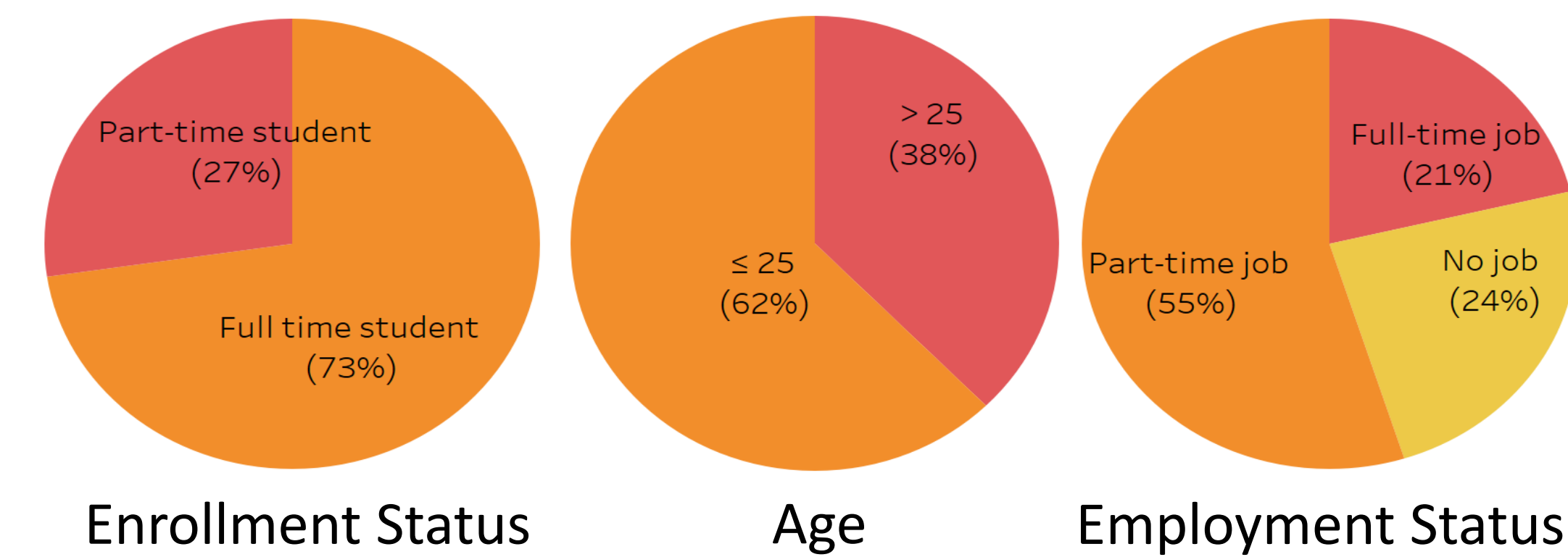


Figure 1. Profile of Survey Respondents

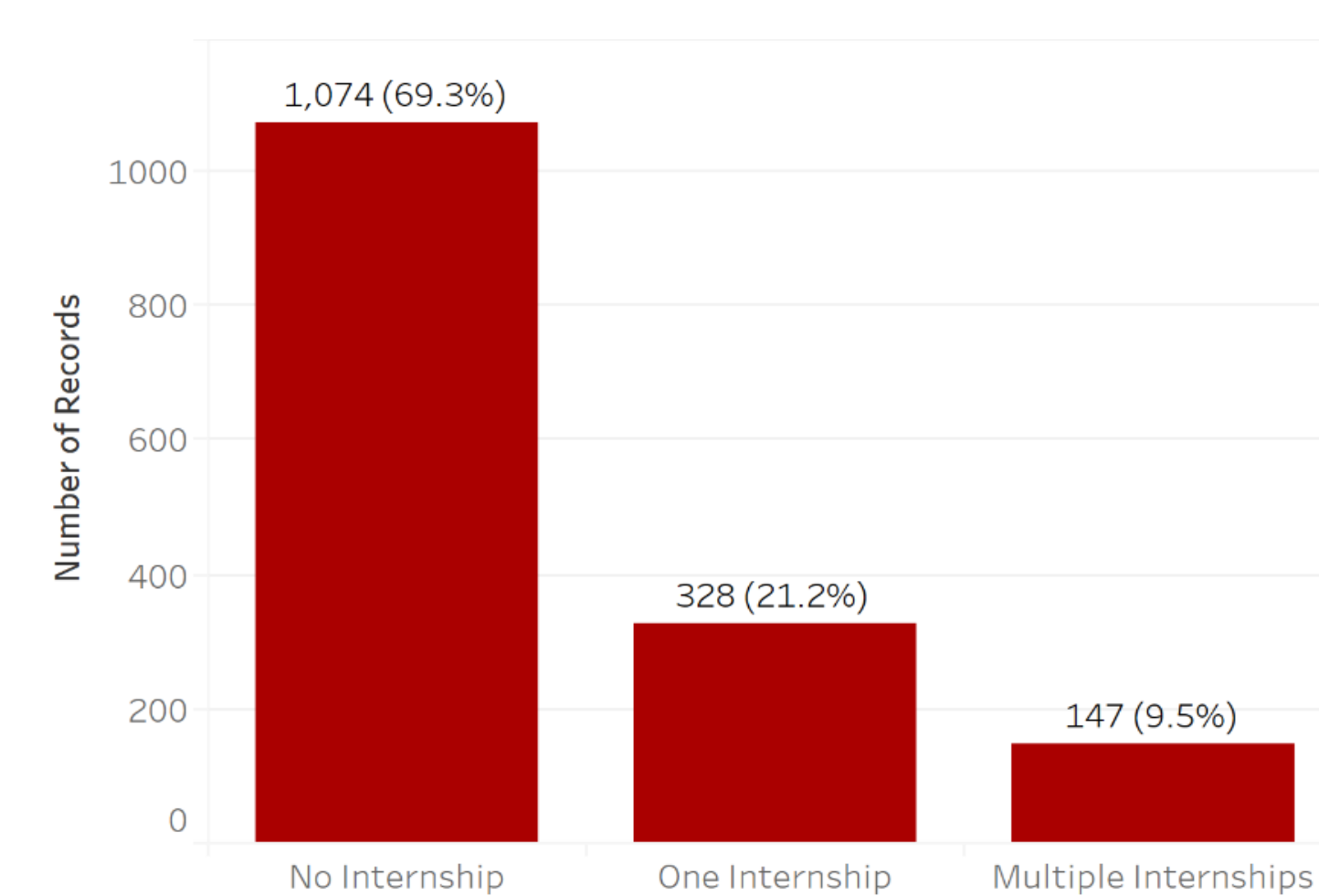


Figure 2. Number of Internships Taken by Survey Respondents

Full time students are more likely to do multiple internships (chi-square test,  $p < 0.01$ ). Working fulltime decreases the possibility of participating in multiple internships by 68% (multinomial regression,  $p < 0.01$ ).

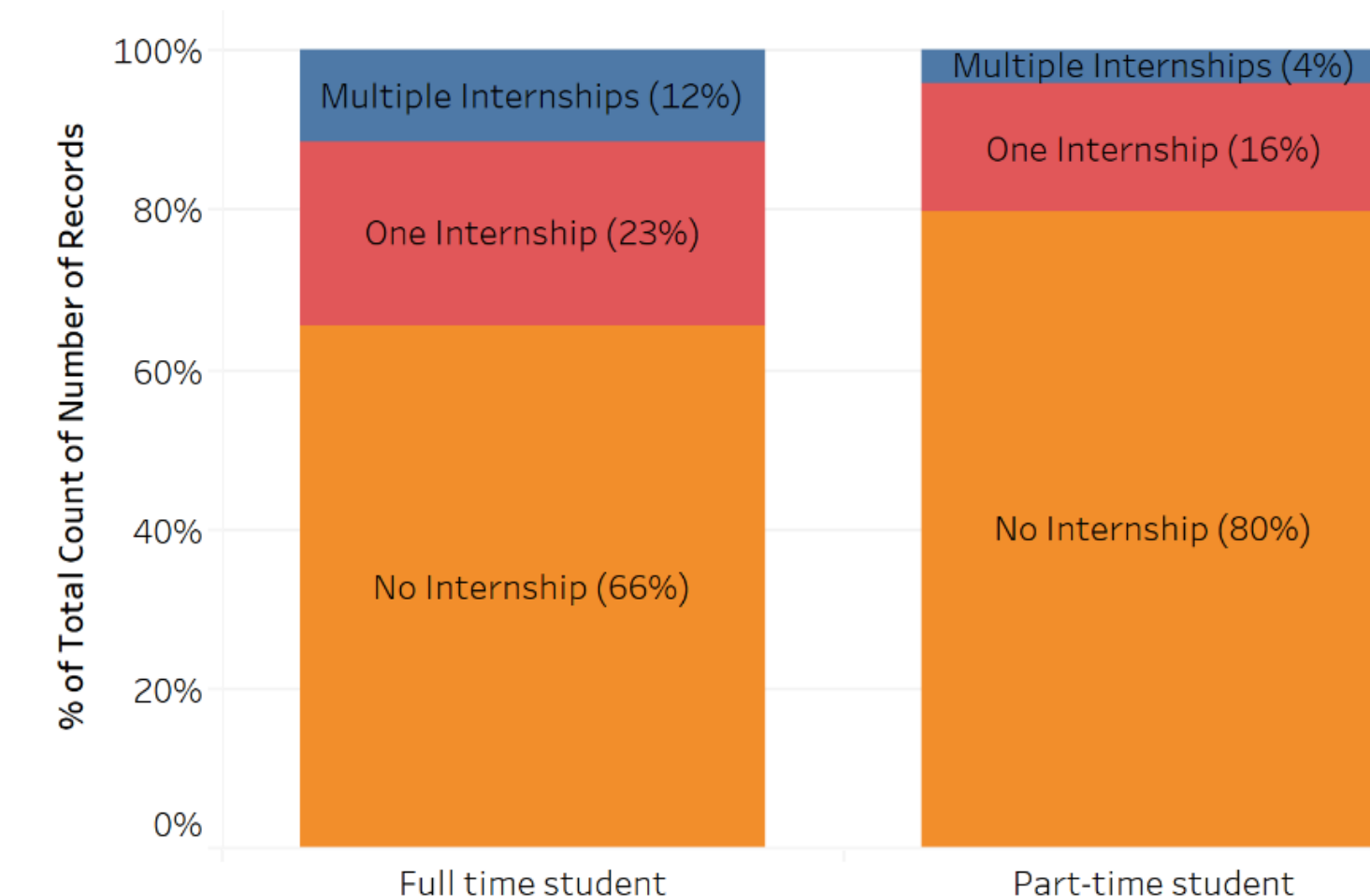


Figure 3. Comparison of Internship Participation between fulltime and part-time students

24% of students are above the age of 30. One-year older means 0.5% less likely to take one internship (multinomial regression,  $p < 0.05$ ). Average age of students with no internship experience is 28.9 while students with one and multiple internships have average ages of 25.6 and 24.6.

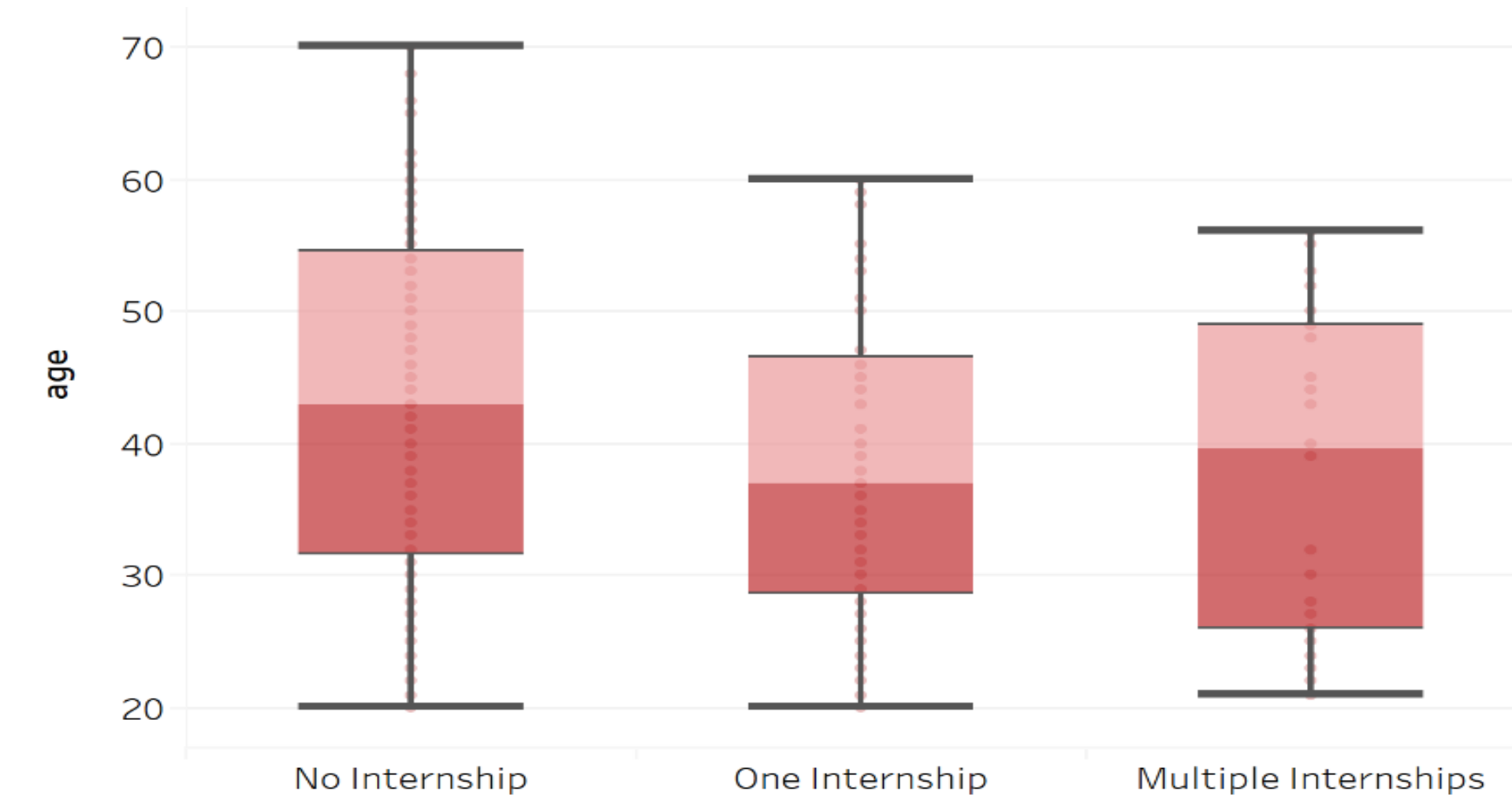


Figure 4. Age Distributions of Different Internship Participation Groups

## Focus Group Analysis

Socio-cultural contexts associated with student participation in multiple internships:

<b>Marketability culture</b>	A culture of the accumulation of multiple skills and experiences such as internships to advance students' marketability and employability
<b>Outcome focused persistence</b>	Having a failed internship and pursuing a subsequent internship to obtain the supposed benefits
<b>Gatekeeping navigation</b>	Using first poor quality internship to obtain a second higher quality internship
<b>Lateral career exploration</b>	Using multiple internships to explore and pursue career opportunities in adjacent professions

### Case Study 1: Marketability Culture

- Finance student with 5 paid internships
- Sees internships as a way to build credentials
- Expects full-time employment at his current internship site after graduating
- Was able to access last internship, because supervisor was impressed with previous internship experiences

*"And so I walked into that interview knowing absolutely nothing and then I walked out with a job. (...) I got halfway through my resume, and this is -- I will attest to this to the day I die, for college students, do the free internships because I got two internships into my resume. He told me to stop, he said, "(...) stop right there. Do you want the job?"*

### Case Study 2: Outcome Focused Persistence

- Design student
- First full-time internship at hardware store "a flop", "waste of time", irrelevant "dusting and sweeping"
- 2<sup>nd</sup> internship at interior design company: very positive, highly immersive experience: from organizing resource library to designing smart walls

*"It was easy, but it wasn't something that I was enjoying doing. So once school started, I was like, hey, great working with you, but I'm done. So then in November, I got another internship at Wisconsin Business Interiors .... And they do a lot of office design and business design. And I really like it. And I worked about 25 hours a week. And the culture is great. I get to do projects that I wouldn't really be doing otherwise while in school."*

### Case Study 3: Gatekeeping Navigation

- Theatre student
- Pressure to find multiple internships for networking
- Could only afford internship thanks to support from partner, but here peers in the department has participated in multiple unpaid internships.

*"For the most part, the -- like the first internships that you can get, and oftentimes, like the best internships you can get are not paid... I wasn't going to be able to come to school because of financials if I had taken any internships."*

### Case Study 4: Lateral Career exploration

- IT student: Completed "Service Center Technician" Program and is now transitioning into IT Cloud Support Program
- Is using a second full-time unpaid internship to explore a lateral career move in the same company.

*"...I enjoy being over there at least. I would rather, I would much rather be paid but like I enjoy it so why not and even though I get plenty of hours and I don't get penalized for anything, mainly if I work more than 40 hours a week."*

## Discussion and Outlook

- Internships are being promoted as a "high-impact practice" (HIP) to enhance students' employability (Kuh 2008).
- As our interviews illustrate, many students see multiple internships as a way to build their credentials and demonstrate exceptional motivation and determination. Yet our data show that access to multiple internships is limited to students with the necessary resources. In addition, many high-quality internships require previous internship experiences.
- Multiple internships thus potentially represent both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, they can be a ladder towards high-quality employment for students with the necessary resources. On the other hand, they may function as an endless treadmill of false promises and unpaid work for students that cannot make the jump to high-quality internships and employment.
- Further research is needed to better understand the contexts of multiple internships and their implications for students' internship experiences and outcomes.
- For now, we call for careful consideration of the findings outlined here when advocating for multiple internships as a HIP.

## References

- Townsley, E., Lierman, L., Watermill, J., & Rousseau, D. (2017). The impact of undergraduate internships on post-graduate outcomes for the liberal arts. NACE Center for Career Development and Talent Acquisition. Retrieved from: <https://www.nacweb.org/job-market/internships/study-shows-impact-of-internships-on-career-outcomes/>
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities
- Silva, P., Lopes, B., Costa, M., Seabra, D., Melo, A. I., Brito, E., & Dias, G. P. (2016). Stairway to employment? Internships in higher education. *Higher Education*, 72(6), 703-721.