

Contextualizing Serviceships: Describing and Understanding the Influence of Financial Compensation on College Student Intern Performance

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Abstract

Serviceships, contrary to traditional corporate internships, are internships hosted by nonprofit organizations. This hybrid blend of service-learning and internships offers a strategic path for students to engage with multiple high-impact practices simultaneously. High-impact practices are shown to offer various educational benefits, such as improvement in retention, engagement, and student learning, especially for students from underserved backgrounds. However, nonprofit organizations do not always have the budget to support interns. They may select an intern for an unpaid position that provides practical work experience or may seek an internship sponsor to financially support the intern experience. We employed a constructivist, qualitative study utilizing focus groups with internship supervisors at nonprofits to answer our primary research questions regarding the internship context within nonprofit organizations and how compensation impacts overall intern output and engagement in the role. Half of the nonprofit internship employers indicated that they received a greater return on investment from paid interns, while 40% indicated that they saw equal benefit from paid and unpaid interns. We learned that “paid internships” from the perspective of the nonprofit employer generally alludes to compensation, which is not always monetary but may come in other forms, such as class credit. Due to the expanded view of compensation, references to paid internships may include financial compensation or course credit, either or both positively impacting the student. Our findings have implications for nonprofit partners who host interns and for universities looking to maximize the benefits of high-impact practices for their students.

Jamie P. Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation, remarked, What should matter most is what students know, and what they are able to do with their degree. . . . I am agnostic about where you went to school. I want to know whether or not you have those outcomes that are going to prepare you for work and life. (Keierleber, 2014, para. 3–4)

Highly selective educational institutions use career development and future career placement to recruit extraordinary students to their campuses. As a result, students not only want to graduate but also want to quickly obtain a position in their chosen career.

Internships and service-learning are high-impact practices used by the university to develop undergraduate career readiness via transferable skills and to improve students’ postgraduation job placements. More important is higher education’s commitment to the community (Sengupta et al., 2020) and higher education’s mission to develop ethically and civically engaged

citizens. Therefore, higher education has made considerable investments in order to offer, vet, prepare, and assess student learning in these intentional educational experiences. Additionally, many degree programs offer academic credit or even require internships or community service for particular majors’ graduation requirements. More recently, *serviceships*—internship opportunities at nonprofit organizations rather than corporations (Hastings et al., 2018)—have been used to develop college students at the intersection of community service and internships. While the community-engaged work experience has proven valuable in student development, it is often mutually valuable to nonprofit organizations that do not have funding to hire additional staff or pay interns. Course credit often suffices as compensation for the student, ensuring the community partner has additional staff support at no additional cost. Regardless of course credit, there is interest in understanding how financial compensation impacts a student’s experience in their serviceship. The purpose of this study was to contextualize serviceships and to understand from the intern supervisor’s perspective

the effect, if any, that financial compensation has on the serviship experience in terms of intern output, engagement, and overall performance.

Literature Review

High-Impact Practices and Professional Competencies

High-impact educational practices (HIPs) are a set of teaching and learning strategies that significantly enhance student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall success in higher education (American Association of Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], n.d.; Kuh, 2008). These 11 practices include activities such as first-year seminars, collaborative assignments, service-learning, internships, and capstone projects, all of which provide students with rich, experiential learning opportunities (AAC&U, n.d.). George Kuh's pioneering work in this area highlighted the transformative potential of HIPs, emphasizing their role in fostering deep learning and promoting equitable outcomes for all students, particularly those from underserved backgrounds (Kuh, 2008). In more recent years, other scholars have also explored HIPs and their connection to college success (Katsumoto & Bowman, 2023; Valentine et al., 2021) and completion (McDaniel & Van Jura, 2022).

In 2016, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) published *Engagement and Employability*, which examined the central role cocurricular experiences play in helping students gain and articulate career skills. It focused on the top skills employers seek when hiring recent college graduates and suggested that higher education does not know enough about how certain HIPs, like civic engagement programs, internships, and on-campus student employment, contribute to success after college (Peck, 2016). Additionally, the book pointed to the persistent equity gap that historically underrepresented students (e.g., first-generation, veteran, Black, and Latino students) face in accessing, completing, and benefiting from HIPs during college. Therefore, more research and support are needed to examine these experiences and the transferable skills they help students develop, especially at the intersectional locales of nonprofit and community internships.

Service-Based Internships

Colleges have vast expectations and responsibilities related to preparing students to excel and contribute meaningfully to society as ethically engaged citizens after their time in

college (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012). Historically, internships and service-learning have been two distinct HIPs on college campuses that promote engagement and retention (Kilgo et al., 2015). Serviships offer a hybrid approach that addresses higher education's challenge to prepare students to take on challenging careers and be socially responsible leaders (Hastings et al., 2018). College and university career centers have historically provided resources for students to find internships in the for-profit sector. However, career centers have also shifted to promote internships in the nonprofit sector and expand the range of internship offerings. A study conducted by Galbraith and Mondal (2020) looking at internships and their impact on career preparation found that, for students, "gaining experience working in the field was one of the most useful benefits from an internship. These experiences enhance the application of the concepts taught in class, and aid in the career connection opportunities for students" (p. 5). When colleges and universities offer serviship opportunities, especially internships, they are widening the opportunity for students to gain valuable real-world skill sets that align with improving career development outcomes and interpersonal skills. This hybrid model is generally an asset-based approach to community engagement because it allows students to leverage their knowledge and coursework in collaboration with a community organization that is actively engaged in meeting the needs of their community (Hastings et al., 2018). The greatest component of this model is the community's active engagement in the learning process (Trager, 2021).

Some benefits of serviships are students' ability to collaborate, dialogue, and develop empathy with an expanded worldview (Geib-Swanson, 2024); gain a deeper understanding of systemic and structural proponents of social problems; expand career exploration (Twang, 2022); and unpack the complexities that have to be navigated when addressing issues in the community (Hastings et al., 2018). Drastic benefits also exist for the community, such as additional staff to complete projects, potential postgraduation recruitment of full-time staff members, and new ideas and insights on existing tasks and projects (Twang, 2022). Community partners also have noted that community-based internships are somewhat more advantageous than traditional service-learning because of the likely predetermined time commitment that makes the training and supervision experience beneficial,

while students mentioned the value of getting to complete meaningful projects (Twang, 2022). For the university, this model efficiently aids in meeting many of its student development goals (Trager, 2021) and, for some institutions, can aid in their community-university partnership efforts (Sengupta et al., 2020).

Compensated Versus Uncompensated Internships

Community-based uncompensated internships are traditionally less structured volunteer opportunities with more responsibilities. Rogers and associates (2021) highlighted the dynamic between the structure and work:

The lack of work structure typically encountered by volunteer workers has the potential to degrade the quality of their . . . work experience. Additionally, if not properly integrated into a working environment, the use of volunteer labor can inhibit workplace coordination, learning, and shared values. (p. 9)

Interns choosing to participate in unpaid internships face common barriers, such as a need for other financial means to support themselves during the internship timeframe. Capek et al. (2017) pointed out several barriers faced by interns: “If organizations do not pay interns, students are going thousands of dollars deeper in debt and working extra hours elsewhere, possibly late nights at a second or third job” (p. 19). Moreover, “unpaid interns often report being used for labor and not doing meaningful work,” while “students who were paid reported having a generally more positive experience” (Burke & Carton, 2013, p. 107). Furthermore, a study conducted by Farr (2024) highlights how the United States has seen the development of movements for paid internships, such as social work’s *Payments for Placements*, which identifies unpaid internships as exploitative of students. Federal and many state agencies have taken steps to advocate for internships to be paid. However, the difficult and strategic decision that students and organizations make when deciding to offer and accept an uncompensated internship is still a present reality.

A study conducted by Capek et al. (2017) examined whether paying an intern affects recruitment and performance for the internship. Their findings indicated that “students value their education and the experience an internship has on their future more than whether or not

the internship is paid” (Capek et al., 2017, p. 17). However, paying an intern can decrease the need for the student to maintain multiple jobs, may reduce stress, and can possibly lead to a more valuable internship experience (Capek et al., 2017). Thus, college students seem to face fewer barriers with paid internships. McHugh (2017) found that paid internships are more likely to provide higher quality mentoring and are “positively related to internship developmental value, job pursuit intentions and internship satisfaction” (p. 376). Further research conducted by Capek et al. (2017) showed that students choose the quality of an internship over compensation, but paid internships provide more return on investment (ROI) in terms of the value and experience of the internship.

Ultimately, students and organizations are faced with navigating the difficult landscape of paid versus unpaid internships. Paid or unpaid internships come with their own set of consequences that directly impact the student and organization. On the organizational side, the intern functions as a cost-effective asset and recruitment tool. For the intern, they gain critical industry knowledge and networking opportunities. This relationship can be mutually beneficial according to Rogers and associates (2021), but:

the need to address any distinctions and uneven benefits between paid and unpaid internships will continue to move front and center as organizations increasingly look to unpaid internships as a cost-effective way to control the operating expenses associated with participating in internship programs. (p. 2)

These key differences in compensated versus uncompensated internships must be deeply considered by both the organization and student because each has a lasting impact on the other.

Relevance and Importance

The purpose of this study was to understand—from the intern supervisor’s perspective—the impact, if any, that financial compensation has on the serviceship experience in terms of intern output, engagement, and overall performance. Much of the literature regarding internships omits any insight on the nonprofit perspective (Trager, 2021; Twang, 2022); however, serviceship offers a newer approach to address desired outcomes for numerous stakeholders, including the university, the community, and the student body.

The university is often charged with developing ethically engaged students (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012) and ensuring that students are well prepared to enter the workforce successfully (Twang, 2022). The university-community relationship is evolving as more universities seek to determine their responsibility in supporting proximate communities. Community partners often seek volunteers to help with projects and tasks, and volunteer work can provide field experience for students and opportunities for experiential learning.

Participation in HIPs has been shown to improve student retention and engagement in the college experience (Kilgo et al., 2015), so we aimed to understand how the hybridized serviship format can continue to support the community while offering enriching experiences to students and achieving goals for the university at large. We sought to add context to the serviship experience from the nonprofit internship supervisor perspective by answering two primary research questions (RQs): RQ1—How do nonprofit internship supervisors describe the nonprofit organization context for internships? and RQ2—What impact, from the intern supervisor's perspective, if any, does financial compensation have on the internship experience in terms of intern output, engagement, and overall performance?

Methods

We employed a constructivist, qualitative study (Creswell, 2013) utilizing focus groups with nonprofit internship supervisors to answer our primary RQs. A constructivist, qualitative study is appropriate because it is a research approach wherein researchers aim to understand subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals (e.g., intern supervisors) construct about their experiences (e.g., financially compensated internships, interns) within a specific context (e.g., nonprofit organizations; Creswell, 2013). The Research Integrity and Compliance Institutional Review Board at [masked university name] approved our protocol (IRB: 24-082) on June 10, 2024. Respondents gave written and verbal consent for participation.

Recruitment and Participants

Nonprofit internship supervisors recruited for this study were representative of supervisors who hosted student interns during the summer that research was conducted. The invited population received an email extending an offer to participate

and offering an associated \$25 Visa gift card incentive. Confirmation of interest was indicated by respondents' completion of an intake survey in which they selected participation in one of two virtual focus groups. Two email invite reminders were sent as follow-ups to supervisors who had not signed up to participate. The 10 participants who completed both the intake survey and focus group were gifted a \$25 Visa gift card as a participation incentive.

Instrument

Each participant completed an intake survey prior to participating in the focus group. Intake questions included the screener question, "Have you been an intern supervisor in a nonprofit organization?" Respondents who answered "Yes" were invited to continue, and respondents who answered "No" were informed they were not eligible to participate in the study. Other intake survey questions beyond demographic questions included "Have you received training/professional development around being an intern supervisor?" and "Do you think paid or unpaid interns have produced more return on investment for your nonprofit?"

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics and responses of the 10 study participants across both focus groups.

A facilitator script (see Appendix) was used to explain the purpose of the study, how the findings would be used, and general ground rules for engagement in the focus group. Each question asked during the focus group focused on RQ1 or RQ2. In RQ1, to better understand the professional experiences of nonprofit employees who supervise interns, participants were asked questions such as "Would you characterize your nonprofit organization as intern-friendly? Why or why not?" and "Do you have a structured internship program at your current nonprofit organization?" When we focused on RQ2 to help better understand the nonprofit ROI for paid versus unpaid interns, questions were asked such as "Do you think paid or unpaid interns have produced more return on investment for your nonprofit? What informs this belief for you?" and "Do you think interns take paid experiences more seriously and therefore produce more return on investment? Why or why not?"

Data Analysis

To aid our study, we utilized a constant comparative analysis. A subset of questions from the focus group—specific to the study RQs—was

Table 1. Participant Table

Pseudonym	Title	Age	Gender	Employed length	Intern supervisor length	Other supervisor (non-intern)	Trained
Dexter	Logistics Coordinator	29	Male	More than 3 years	1–3 years	Yes	No
Barbara	Volunteer Manager	32	Female	1–3 years	1–3 years	No	No
Lisa	Director of Out of School Time Programs	–	Female	1–3 years	1–3 years	Yes	Yes
Stacey	Volunteer and Advancement Manager	27	Female	1–3 years	Less than 6 months	Yes	No
Rory	Outreach and Education Engagement Manager	27	Female	3+ years	1–3 years	Seasonal	No
Millicent	Executive Director	45	Female	1–3 years	6 months to 1 year	Yes	No
Rachel	Education and Internship Manager	28	Female	3+ years	3+ years	Yes	No
Nathan	Administrative Assistant	67	Male	1–3 years	3+ years	No	Yes
Cesar	Center Director	66	Male	3+ years	3+ years	Yes	Yes
Michelle	Volunteer and Communications Associate	30	Female	3+ years	Less than 6 months	No	Yes

Note. “–” indicates information not available.

extracted from the focus group transcripts and field notes. Four research team members, after a shared training, used the constant comparative method for inductive content analysis (Boeije, 2002; Creswell, 2013). We used *Dedoose* software to aid in the development of an audit trail and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Codes were derived from internship supervisor responses to each question. Two research team members reviewed each focus group transcript and field note before switching. The members agreed with all codes assigned to the responses during content analysis. Concurrent coding (Creswell, 2013) was permitted on a single transcript extract, and we utilized thought unit as the level of analysis. All demographic data and intake survey results were described with descriptive statistics (Creswell, 2013), including counts and percentages.

Researcher Positionality

Positionality “reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 71). Four research team members were involved in the present study. We are all social science researchers; one of us currently serves as an internship program sponsor, meaning an individual or group who provides financial support to the intern in lieu of the nonprofit, and the other three have been internship supervisors previously. Our positionality is also shaped by our academic expertise (one undergraduate student, two master’s recipients, and one doctorate recipient), and we all have personal and professional experience with nonprofits.

Our study with internship supervisors and understanding of nonprofit organizational structures allowed us to approach this study with a nuanced perspective (Glesne, 2016). Additionally, our background in higher education provided insight into how internship programs balance student development with organizational needs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, our previous involvement in determining financial compensation for interns or setting compensation rates for one university might have influenced our analysis of how compensation impacts intern engagement and performance (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). By maintaining a reflexive stance, we ensured that our interpretations fairly represented the diverse experiences of supervisors, particularly regarding compensation and performance outcomes (Maxwell, 2012).

Findings

Nonprofit Organization Context for Internships

To answer RQ1—How do nonprofit internship supervisors describe the context of internships in the nonprofit organization?—we used themes from two focus groups with nonprofit intern supervisors. Table 2 presents themes, categories, and descriptions.

Nonprofit Organization Structure

The theme of *nonprofit organization structure* helped us understand how nonprofit internship supervisors describe the context of internships within their nonprofit organization. This theme had four composite categories: (a) internship sponsor, (b) internship program formality, (c) compensated versus uncompensated, and (d) no intern at all. Using participant narratives, we will summarize their shared lived experiences in each emergent category.

Internship Sponsor. Participants discussed the implications of having an internship sponsor, an individual or group who is financially compensating the intern in lieu of the nonprofit, on their internship structure and practices. Barbara shared the elevated expectations of the intern sponsor:

They sent me some . . . hard recommendations of what they wanted the student to experience in the internship . . . I had to take that into account when I was thinking about the work that I was going to give him.

Another participant, Cesar, noted that interns in “the College of Education . . . require biweekly evaluations of the student progress and an initial goal-setting meeting, and a structured intake and exit process.” Several other participants shared similar sentiments about how their intern structure became more defined as expectations from the intern sponsor increased.

Internship Program Formality. Participants determined the formality of the internship program primarily based on onboarding strategies and intern check-ins and evaluations. Rory described their onboarding as “an hour and a half presentation just going over what to expect in terms of hours and things like that, an overview of the company, and then just an inclusivity training.” Other participants’ onboarding efforts included elements such as *orientation*, *pre-intern survey*, and *safety training*.

Table 2. Start Codes, Themes, and Description of Nonprofit Organization Context for Internships

Theme	Categories	Descriptions	Start codes
Nonprofit organization structure	Internship partner	This emergent category is related to organizational structure and how nonprofit internship site expectations, processes, and procedures are modified to meet the requirements of internship sponsor organizations.	Formal/informal intern programs
	Intern program formality	Intern supervisors described a continuum of internship program formality, ranging from the formalized recruitment process to structured onboarding and defined intern positions in the organizational hierarchy. In contrast, others had no formal program or just used the structure imposed by the internship sponsor organization.	
	Compensated versus uncompensated	This category encompassed the reality that many nonprofit intern sites did not have a budget allocation for interns. Instead, most nonprofit internship sites relied on internship sponsors to offer course credit, financial compensation, or other means of expanded compensation.	
	No intern at all	Several intern supervisors expressed that having an intern was a new experience at their nonprofit internship site.	
Supportive and unsupportive intern environment	Supportive aspects	This category encompasses the intern-friendly aspects of the nonprofit context. Internship supervisors expressed benefits spanning intern site flexibility, ranging from engagement opportunities (events, meetings, etc.), to work hours, to work modality.	Friendly versus unfriendly aspects
	Unsupportive aspects	On the other end of this dimension, nonprofit organizations may have less intern-supportive environments. Specifically, intern supervisors shared a lack of formal internship structure, allocated budget, and physical workspace, or the inability to align projects to the skill of the intern.	
Intern as an additional staff member	--	Another emergent theme was participants viewing interns as additional nonprofit staff members. Many participants mentioned how they were uncertain about how to account for organizational workload without an intern.	
Extra intern benefits	--	Nonprofit intern supervisors mentioned how interns receive added benefits beyond compensation, possibly unique to the nonprofit context, like flexible work arrangements, résumé experiences, professional development, networking/relationships, and site tours.	Added benefits, life mentorship, network sharing/connection
Project customization	--	Participants described how they allowed a degree of project customization for interns. Specifically, projects were customized by identifying each intern's skills, knowledge, motivation, experience using emergent social media and communication platforms, workload delegation, and organizational needs. Participants aligned, in significant ways, the needs of the department and assignments with the desires of the intern.	Project creation, departmental needs, department assignments
Supervisory experience	--	Participants engaged the intern in a personal supervision experience that was guided by their own background. Specifically, participants leaned on their personal lens of supervision and internship experience to guide the supervision process.	Supervisory experience
Treatment and expectations	--	Participants navigated the treatment and expectations of nonprofit interns by balancing their own self-accountability measures with organizational and supervisor expectations. Expectations changed based on the academic pursuits of the intern, familial considerations, and compensation.	

Note. "--" = Not applicable.

Compensated Versus Uncompensated.

Participants' creative approaches to compensation when financial compensation was not available in their budget ranged from sourcing an intern sponsor to offering class credit. Rachel reflected that "because we don't pay them, I always tell all the students to go to their school, their advisor, or something like that and see if they can get course credit for it." Other participants shared that students who interned with them fulfilled a "greater class requirement," earned "course credit," or aimed to get "the experience and the résumé boost."

No Intern at All. Some participants identified their organizations as being first-time intern sites. Nathan commented that his division "never had an intern . . . before." Stacey reflected that their intern process was not formalized yet since "this is [their] first year doing it."

Supportive and Unsupportive Intern Environment

The theme of *supportive and unsupportive intern environment* further describes the context of internships within the nonprofit organization from the perspective of the intern supervisor. This theme had two composite categories, including (a) supportive aspects and (b) unsupportive aspects. Participant narratives summarize their practical reflections in each emergent category.

Supportive Aspects. Supportive aspects describe welcoming elements of the intern host site that make the intern feel like a part of the organization. Participants shared highlights of what makes their organization feel supportive and friendly. Dexter planned a final celebration for the intern "at Chicken and Pickle, so then he'll be able to interact with all of our staff just like another staff member having their last day." Another participant, Barbara, echoed this inclusive nature by sharing that her organization "invites them to our staff meetings. . . . We really just consider them as part of our family." Rory mentioned that "a soft requirement for our staff is to take our interns out for coffee on their first day . . . and do a celebratory lunch at the end."

Unsupportive Aspects. Unsupportive aspects describe elements of the intern host site that make the intern feel unwelcomed or excluded from the organization. Participants thus reflected on elements that make their organization feel unsupportive or unfriendly, particularly related to space allocation. Cesar candidly shared that "during the academic year especially, it's hard to find a space for the interns to work from." Dexter echoed this experience because his organization

"only [has] the capacity to host one dedicated intern at a time for the most part. We also don't have a dedicated space for them."

Intern as an Additional Staff Member

The theme of *intern as an additional staff member* helped us understand from the supervisor's perspective how interns and the weight of their contributions are viewed within the nonprofit context. Michelle could not easily differentiate between her intern and a regular staff member and described her intern as "basically like a staff member, like, in the office space, attending staff meetings, attending our development team meetings. Attending board, committee meetings." Similarly, Lisa shared that at her organization, they "treat them like staff no matter what. We give them the same gifts, lunches, whatever. We incorporate them and everything." Barbara echoed those sentiments, claiming her organization also "treat[s] them basically like a new hire as they're being onboarded. One, we want them to have a similar experience as our staff members. We want them to feel like they're part of our team."

Extra Intern Benefits

The theme of *extra intern benefits* describes the unanticipated or unexpected additional benefits that interns receive in the nonprofit context. Rachel shared that her nonprofit facilitates:

different professional development sessions for the interns throughout the semester . . . like going to Dallas City Hall or visiting the consuls of Mexico, just different fun experiences like that. And then they also get to come to any of our speaker programs that we have throughout the semester for free. And usually, those tickets are somewhere between \$45.00 [and] \$60.00.

Michelle's nonprofit encourages interns "to do . . . informational interviews with our staff members. And then, usually, if staff member knows someone who is maybe in the field that they're interested in, they usually connect them with the intern." Two other participants nodded and agreed with this approach.

Project Customization

Participants each allowed a degree of project customization for the intern. Specifically, projects were customized by identifying the intern's skills, knowledge, motivation, and experience using emergent social media and communication platforms and leveraging those traits with

workload delegation and organizational needs. Rachel noted, “We always ask the interns if there’s a goal or if there’s something that they want to achieve by the end of the internship—we make sure to focus and highlight that.” Several other participants aligned, in significant ways, the needs of the department and assignments with the desires of the intern. Nathan mentioned that their desire to target youth through social media platforms that they were personally unfamiliar with created an opportunity for a young intern, who told them, “This will work and that won’t work.” The intern’s involvement helped their office do “projects that we wouldn’t have had before.” This approach allowed supervisors to implement short-term projects that interns could see through from start to end, coupled with supervisor checkpoints to assess learning and project expectations.

Supervisory Experience

Participants’ personal experiences as interns or their experiences being managed by their own managers played a role in their intern supervision strategies. Specifically, participants leaned on their personal lens of supervision and internship experience to guide the supervision process. Stacey mentioned, “I also was an intern . . . before coming on staff, so [I used] my own experiences of what it was like when I interned here and us[ed] that [model] to create a good experience for our . . . interns.” Additional participants agreed with this practice; Rachel mentioned, “I’ve been basing most of the internship program for the past 3 years on my own experience as an intern within the organization.”

Treatment and Expectations

Internship supervisors balanced self-accountability with organizational and supervisor expectations, which varied based on interns’ academic goals, family circumstances, and compensation. Of note, several participants shared that their treatment of and expectations for interns were no different than those for employees. Millicent asserted, “I didn’t have any more or less for our paid or unpaid intern. We just expected them to act like employees.” On the other hand, more than half of participants seemed to adjust their treatment and expectations. Barbara highlighted this thinking: “I think there may be some unknown unconscious bias that we may probably do, but we try not to treat them differently intentionally.” Rory also embodied this category well, articulating:

I guess maybe family backgrounds. We’ve had some folks that they were more independent, so they had a car and could do after-hours events or things like that. Whereas some folks, they took public transportation, so their hours were their hours, and they were not doing anything outside of that. Or we had some folks that they live with their parents and their parents are very strict, so they showed up for one shift and were like, “My parents said I can’t do this anymore.” So I do think, kind of going back to that maturity piece that I talked about, I guess maybe it’s more so a privilege and an access piece to it too.

Overall, there seemed to be agreement that differences existed in nonprofit internship supervisors’ treatment of interns based on compensation, whether intentional or not.

Intern Output, Engagement, and Overall Performance

RQ2 sought to understand from the intern supervisor’s perspective what impact (if any) financial compensation has on the internship experience in terms of intern output, engagement, and overall performance.

During the focus group sign-up process, participants were asked to complete a brief intake survey and demographic questionnaire. Intern supervisor participants were asked, “Do you think paid or unpaid interns have produced more return on investment for your nonprofit?” Response options on the forced multiple-choice question were (a) paid, (b) unpaid, or (c) equally beneficial. The next intake survey item asked participants, in an open-ended text box, to respond to, “What informs this belief for you?” Table 3 presents responses to these two survey items, which relate to understanding intern performance and perceived ROI.

The participants expressed three main sentiments regarding ROI based on whether the internship was paid or unpaid. The first range of supervisors described paid interns as having a greater sense of ownership that creates a willingness to complete their assignments, fulfill their hours, and be more focused on their work than unpaid interns. However, Rory felt that unpaid interns have more passion to complete the work than paid interns do. The most common sentiment on ROI expressed equal benefit to having an unpaid or

Table 3. Perceptions of Intern ROI

Pseudonym	More ROI	Informs belief
Dexter	Paid	I believe people who are compensated are able to better focus on their work.
Barbara	Equally beneficial	We do not normally have a lot of unpaid interns but those that we have had worked hard.
Lisa	Equally beneficial	We’ve had both paid and unpaid interns, and all interns have been great and hardworking. They have all accomplished great work and have helped the organization.
Stacey	Equally beneficial	N/A We only had paid interns.
Rory	Unpaid	If we are speaking strictly about financial payment, I would say unpaid interns have more return on investment. From what I have observed, our unpaid interns do have more of a passion for the work that we do and are a little more “on it” than paid interns.
Millicent	Paid	Comparison.
Rachel	Paid	Just from a recruitment standpoint alone, it is much easier to convince both colleges and students to want to join us for a semester. I also believe that if students are paid, they also have a sense of ownership, and if they feel like they are being compensated, then they are more willing to complete the tasks given to them.
Nathan	Paid	More likely to work their hours.
Cesar	Equally beneficial	The paid interns were more highly incentivized to complete their assignments; while we did not provide direct pay, we did offer compensation in the form of travel to conferences and other noncash compensation.
Michelle	Paid	We couldn’t do some of our programming without certain interns. We’ve never had an unpaid intern.

paid intern. Cesar explained that paid interns are incentivized to complete their work, but unpaid interns still have noncash incentives, including work trips. Others felt that all their interns were hardworking and accomplished great things for their organization.

Additionally, several focus group questions were posed to intern supervisors to understand their perceptions of how financial compensation impacted the ROI from interns. Table 4 presents

the emerging themes.

Unanticipated Benefits

When looking at the impact of financial compensation on the nonprofit internship experience in terms of engagement, participants described ways in which interns experienced unanticipated benefits aside from monetary funds. Participant Barbara mentioned supporting an intern’s professional development:

Table 4. Start Codes, Themes, and Description of Intern Performance

Theme	Categories	Description	Start codes
<i>Engagement—</i> Unanticipated benefits	N/A	Intern supervisors highlighted several unanticipated benefits arising from financially compensated interns, including not having to rush off to a second job, interns prioritizing the internship during time management conflicts, and more.	Prioritized interns/intern program because of partner investment, employer orientation, more vetting of candidates, partner investments
	N/A	Participants discussed how internship program sponsors maintained formal standards for internship oversight (site visits, pre-mid-post), which impacted intern engagement. They managed more defined processes for vetting candidates, employer orientation, and pre-intern start communications.	
<i>Overall Intern Performance—</i> Intern passion, interest, and alignment	N/A	Intern output and ROI generally varied according to participants, often by intrinsic (e.g., personal passion, connection to nonprofit mission, future career goals, etc.) and extrinsic motivations (e.g., coursework, financial compensation) of the student intern.	Person/intern-specific
<i>Overall Intern Performance—</i> Compensated versus uncompensated comparisons	Recruitment	Participants cited that when seeking compensated interns, they were not able to find qualified interns without compensation with the special skills they needed. Plus, the type of candidate who applied seemed noticeably different from the internship supervisors. Some participants did not recruit at all since the internship compensator managed the recruitment and selection process.	Didn't have to work a second job, recruitment pool (didn't have to recruit), different kind of intern candidate, no difference, fuel/gas money, clearly asserted that there were no differences between compensated and uncompensated interns' performance or ROI.
	Prioritization	When comparing compensated and uncompensated interns, prioritization was an emergent category from intern supervisors. Prioritization manifested in the form of the intern not having to rush off to a second job or how the internship was ranked during time management conflicts.	
	Completing entire internship	When making comparisons, compensated interns were more likely to be committed to work projects and to complete the entirety of the internship experience.	
	Value and importance	Participants also asserted that compensated interns placed more importance on the internship, took the experience more seriously, and demonstrated higher degrees of self-accountability and responsibility.	
	Work quality	Intern supervisors were also more likely to share that compensated interns produced higher-quality work products that seemed more polished and complete, were more likely to meet deadlines, or demonstrated more initiative.	
	No difference	It is important to note that some participants clearly asserted in initial responses that there were no clear or apparent differences between compensated and uncompensated interns.	

We can offer them a reference letter for a job opportunity or something they may be interested in. And then just the connections that we make with them, so we've had interns that we've helped get employed after graduation or get a paid gig for another semester. So, I think there are rewards that we can't monetize really at the beginning, but there's a value-add for them even if they're not getting paid. . . . There's something that they will later expect from us or desire from us or something that we can give in a different way that we're happy to do if they were great.

Several participants described similar experiences of providing unintentional benefits around professional development, networking, and flexibility. Rachel mentioned, "We try to do fun things for them [interns] that they might not normally get to experience, like going to Dallas City Hall or visiting the consuls of Mexico." Michelle noted, "Our intern . . . did an informational interview with a board member who is in the field that he's interested in."

Internship Compensator Program Elements

In regard to the impact of financial compensation on nonprofit internship engagement, participants described mandatory *internship compensator program elements*. Participants discussed how internship program sponsors maintained formal standards for internship oversight, which impacted intern engagement. These standards ranged from orientations to debriefs, site visits, and evaluations. Rachel mentioned having more items to check off, such as "site visit," "meeting with the intern," and "making sure they're getting paid." Looking at the elements of program structure and program partners, Michelle noted that the "organization is more invested in AmeriCorps members, just because we've always had them . . . for several years now. And that structure has been built in and we literally could not run our summer camp programs without them."

Intern Passion, Interest, and Alignment

The theme of *intern passion, interest, and alignment* revealed how these factors impact overall intern performance when financial compensation may not be available from the nonprofit organization. Participants shared that passion, interest, and alignment may drive intern performance. Nathan knew that his "intern really wanted to learn about public health. She has one

more year till she goes to medical school, so she wanted to get an idea of what it'd be like for her upcoming career." Cesar's nonprofit hires many interns who "have come from the very communities that we serve . . . so they come with a special desire to give back."

Compensated Versus Uncompensated Comparisons

Another theme that emerged from the discussion of internship supervisors' experiences was the comparison of *compensated versus uncompensated interns*.

Recruitment. One category within this comparison was the experience of recruiting interns. Internship supervisors noted that when recruiting applicants for their internship programs, it is more difficult to find interns for unpaid positions. Several participants believed many people in the applicant pool simultaneously apply to other internship programs that offer compensation; therefore, if the potential intern is hired for a compensated intern position, they are highly incentivized to take that position over an unpaid role. Additionally, participants explained that potential interns are "no longer interested" in the position once they find a paying job, making compensation the "decision maker [on] whether or not they're going to choose to do it in the first place." Ultimately, it is "harder to get qualified and dedicated people to do unpaid sometimes."

Prioritization. A second category within this theme involved interns' prioritization of the internship when time management conflicts arose. The participants agreed that the intern's desire to participate in the nonprofit's work is a crucial factor for determining the degree to which they prioritize their experience. Dexter has seen "really amazing unpaid interns and some paid interns that I just kind of never, ever saw." Although unpaid interns' passion for the work may encourage them to prioritize their assignments, the focus group still determined that compensation helps because "they're not trying to rush off to their second jobs." Therefore, compensated interns have more time to spend with the nonprofit if they actually desire to be there. The concept of punctuality and availability was expressed by other supervisors, who found compensated interns "very good about showing up and meeting [their] commitments," which is not "always the case, especially with our unpaid interns."

Completing Entire Internship. The third category within this theme was interns' drive to complete their internship in its entirety. A common sentiment among the focus groups was that unpaid

interns are more likely to “fall off halfway through the internship,” and supervisors cannot convince or encourage these interns to finish the internship because they are unpaid. Conversely, focus groups described paid interns as having a “higher sense of responsibility” and “seriousness” because “they know that if they don’t finish, they don’t get paid or get credit.” Furthermore, students receiving class credit are incentivized to “stay invested” because they know a professor is monitoring their productivity. Stacey felt paid interns “have a higher level of self-accountability” and described one intern who could not complete their project due to illness but still volunteered to complete his assignments at a later date.

Value and Importance. This category revealed participants’ understanding of how unpaid versus paid interns place importance and value on the internship experience altogether—even when juggling other commitments. The focus group felt paid interns are more likely to finish their work, “have skin in the game,” and see the importance of the experience because if they do not finish their task, they will not be compensated. Some participants expressed that paid interns’ seriousness toward their responsibilities may be transactional, since their compensation relies on finished assignments. Additionally, Barbara explained, since these interns are compensated, their organization desires to put them on more important and valuable work since they are investing money in the work they do. This notion can incentivize paid interns to complete their work. However, the focus group agreed with our researcher that compensation isn’t the only deciding factor; personal motivation and compassion toward the work also compels interns to do well, regardless of whether they are paid or not.

Work Quality. The next category related to the perceived differences in work quality of paid and unpaid interns. For instance, the statement that “timelines and polish are slightly better with paid” elicited several head nods from other focus group participants. This work quality difference seemed to extend from the “added level of responsibility and ownership when it comes to paid interns.” Tori best summed up this outlook: “When it comes to understanding time commitments, when . . . turning in things on time, . . . email communication, it seems like the ones that are getting paid . . . [seem] to have a little bit more skin in the game.”

No Difference. The final category was “no difference” between compensated or

uncompensated intern performance. Internship supervisors were quick to assert early on that there was “no difference in ROI,” “we hold all of our interns to high standards,” “there is no distinguishability between paid and unpaid,” and “we do all the same things.” However, in the same breath, participants began to parse nuanced differences as identified in the aforementioned theme categories.

Discussion

Compensated Serviceship ROI

Five of 10 serviceship-based internship supervisors agreed that paid interns contribute more ROI than unpaid interns. According to these supervisors, paid interns are more focused on their work and completing their hours since they are compensated for their time. This revelation was not only prominent in the intake survey but also in focus group discussions. Similar to Hastings et al. (2018), the internship supervisors’ justification for paid interns’ ROI came from service-based internship incentives that allow students to use their assets and strengths to help solve problems within the community and learn how to become socially responsible leaders. Therefore, community-engagement internships allow students to utilize knowledge when collaborating with community organizations. The students are dedicated to hard work no matter if they are compensated, monetarily or with course credit, because they are driven by passion. Scholars described high-impact educational opportunities such as nonprofit work as rich and experiential learning opportunities, which illustrates the value interns have received and can capitalize on based on their personal motivation and desire to excel within these opportunities (AAC&U, n.d.; Ducoffe, 2022).

Internship supervisors understand that compensation is a driving factor for students who are recruited to apply for their program. They also understand that compensated students have more focus on completing their hours and fulfilling their assignments because there is more ownership and accountability associated with compensation through funding or class credit. These added benefits are prominent within our study themes and categories. Therefore, more investments should be made to increase the number of paid serviceships to ensure serviceships’ ability to foster deeper learning and promote equitable outcomes for students in underserved backgrounds (Kuh, 2008).

Structuring Nonprofit Internship Programs

The literature discusses internship programs (MacDonald, 2008; Rehling, 2000; Twang, 2022) in the corporate or for-profit context; however, our study extends the knowledge base into the less-studied nonprofit internship context. Understanding nonprofit or community-based internship programs and structures is important for both higher education institutions and their nonprofit partners to improve ROI and student employability.

Our findings, like Twang's (2022), emphasize internship program structures (e.g., recruitment, training, position descriptions, evaluation) as being pertinent to bolstering servicer pathways and satisfaction. Twang (2022) asserted that more consistency and models for the working relationship between higher education and their community partners are needed because nonprofit employers experience challenges such as a lack of commitment and ROI from interns, low professional skills of interns, and difficulty in providing meaningful work experiences (Maertz et al., 2014; Trager, 2021). Our findings reveal that many nonprofits do not have formal internship programs and often rely on the compensator partner (e.g., university course faculty, community engagement program staff) to provide their structure. Rogers (2013) also argued that unpaid internships have poorer job design, which ultimately results in lower job satisfaction. Therefore, we amplify the literature by asserting that more structured and formal internship programs are needed in the nonprofit context—whether compensated or not. We believe such models and structures can enhance efforts to streamline recruitment, strengthen the intern experience during the internship, and make the nonprofit context more appealing to college student candidates.

Implications

Our research study highlights several practical implications for stakeholders. Many nonprofit internship supervisors acknowledged never being trained formally in supervision and instead leaning on their previous experiences as former interns, as mentioned in the *supervisory experience* theme. This presents an opportunity for university career centers to offer formal supervisory training for supervisors, particularly those in the nonprofit sector. Additionally, career centers should consider opportunities to include nonprofit partners strategically in career fairs. From a larger, university lens, assisting nonprofit

partners with recruitment, selection, and financial compensation of interns may create more equitable opportunities for students. Consideration should be geared toward understanding how the ability to offer compensation impacts the diversity and skill levels of intern applicants.

When considering the theme of *intern as an additional staff member*, nonprofit sites who host interns should consider quantifying the impact of an intern and writing the need, with a financial amount, into grant submissions. Sites should also consider how to improve the supportive or friendly nature of their internship site, such as providing additional add-ins, obtaining a grant for resources such as laptops for interns, restructuring the work modality to ensure that interns have a work space in the office, or adding a remote work option.

Future research regarding compensated and uncompensated interns at nonprofit sites should assess the impact and ROI for the student and nonprofit partner simultaneously to gain a holistic understanding of the internship experience. Since supervisors vary in their experience and approach to managing interns, future research can examine how targeted supervisor training influences the quality of internships, particularly in nonprofit settings with less formalized programs. Additionally, some intern supervisors felt interns were not motivated by compensation but by their own passion, interest, and intrinsic motivation, as shown in Table 4. Additional research studies should assess the long-term impact of passion, motivation, and interest on the intern's future career trajectory through a pre-assessment before the internship starts and post-assessment a few years beyond internship completion. In conjunction with each future recommendation, there may be value in conducting a similar study with a quantitative method to gather grounded data about the number of participants included and their responses as a means of better informing the field and contextualizing the findings.

Limitations

Though we believe this study to be sound, we note two limitations. The first limitation is the relationship between the nonprofit supervisors and the research institution. All selected nonprofit supervisors had internship sponsors for at least one intern by the research site institution, and all nonprofits are regionally connected. There were no independent nonprofits who were unaffiliated with the research site. This may cause a skewed interpretation of the internship experience within

the nonprofit context, thus limiting the study's transferability, since the sponsoring research institution also provided the framework for the intern and internship supervisor participating in the program. Second, we focused on the internship experience through the supervisor's lens, but a more comprehensive understanding of the internship experience could have been conveyed if interns and intern supervisors were both included in the survey and focus group process. Therefore, we recommend repeating this study and expanding the purposive criteria to include both interns and internship supervisors. An expanded participant sample offers a complete view of the internship experience and the impact of compensation on ROI. In the current study, intern supervisors gauged intern motivation and engagement based on work output, but it would be beneficial to hear from the interns themselves about motivation, engagement, and the impact that compensation had, as well as the impact of other outlying factors perhaps unknown to internship supervisors.

Conclusion

We sought to understand more of the internship context within nonprofit organizations as well as the impact of compensation on overall intern output and engagement. Our participants' insights helped articulate a rich understanding of the nonprofit internship context—from aspects of program structures to supportive and unsupportive intern environments, to how interns are viewed as additional staff members, to the extra intern benefits they receive in this context, to how intern supervisors customize their projects. In regard to ROI, half of the participants indicated that they received a greater ROI from paid interns. Our participants revealed that, though viewed differently among the supervisors, intern ROI was best understood by intern engagement (e.g., unanticipated benefits, internship compensator program elements) and overall intern performance based on the intern's passion and interest. Due to these findings, we offered a general discussion on serviceship ROI and nonprofit internship programs. Ultimately, we made several recommendations for university and nonprofit leaders and future researchers regarding this intersectional HIP space for college students.

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Appendix

Part I: Welcome & Introduction

Welcome and thank you for being here today. You were selected as a participant because you have been identified as an [community partner] who hosted a paid intern during summer 2024. The purpose of this gathering is to understand your experiences as an intern supervisor with both [community engagement program name] and other programs. Specifically, we want to understand better the intern output, engagement, and overall performance demonstrated by paid versus unpaid interns observed in your experience as a supervisor of interns over the years.

My name is [facilitator name] and I will be the moderator in today's discussion. The format we are using is a focus group. A focus group is a conversation that focuses on specific questions in a safe and private environment. I will guide the conversation by asking questions that each of you can respond to. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. If you wish, you can also respond to each other's comments, like you would in an ordinary conversation. It is my responsibility to make sure that everyone has an opportunity to participate and that we stay on track.

The information we learn today will be compiled into a final report to better inform [community engagement program name]'s understanding of the internship experience from the supervisor's perspective. That report will include a summary of your comments and some conclusions and recommendations. It will be shared with [community engagement program name] campus partners, submitted to research publications, and presented at conferences to inform other higher education community engagement practitioners better. Additionally, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with. This focus group today is anonymous and private. We will record this focus group session to summarize your comments. The recording will only be used to make sure our notes are correct and will not be heard by anyone outside of this project. Today's focus group will last no more than 90 minutes. There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation. You must be at least 18 years old to participate. If you agree to participate in the focus group, please say "yes."

I would like to go over a few ground rules for the focus group. These are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your experiences and opinions.

- a. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.
- b. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.
- c. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You will not be asked to reach consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.
- d. *Participation Is Important* – It is important that everyone's voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!
- e. *Breaks* - Let me know if you need a break.

Are there any questions? [allow participants to ask questions]

Before we begin, I would like to know a little about each of you. Please tell me:

1. Your name
2. Share a little about your role and nonprofit organization you work for.

Part II: Questions

A. *Outcome 1:* To understand the professional experiences of nonprofit employees who supervise interns

- Tell us about your first intern you supervised in a nonprofit context.
- How were you prepared or trained, if at all, to be an intern supervisor during your professional life?
- Share your experiences as an internship supervisor in a nonprofit organization.
 - Determine responsibilities and roles for the intern.
 - How do you recruit interns? Train and onboard interns?
 - How do you select interns? Interview process? Evaluation of qualifications?
 - Provide feedback and evaluation to interns?
- Would you characterize your nonprofit organization as intern friendly? Why or why not?
- Do you have a structured internship program at your current nonprofit organization?
 - Tiers?
 - Compensation levels?
 - Expertise/academic classification levels?
 - Does the sponsoring organization have expectations of the nonprofit?
- How many interns did your organization host this summer and from which programs (e.g., AmeriCorps, SMU, Paul Quinn)?
 - Are you the only intern supervisors in your organization?
 - Were these interns all compensated/paid or not?
 - Can you share about 1–2 of their major projects?
- How many and how often do you supervise interns in your current nonprofit organization?
 - How, if at all, do you compensate your interns at your nonprofit?

B. *Outcome 2:* To understand the nonprofit return on investment for paid versus unpaid interns. We consider paid interns to be those compensated by hourly pay, a stipend, or via course credit.

- Do you think **paid** or **unpaid** interns have produced more return on investment for your nonprofit? What informs this belief for you?
 - In your experience, what have been the output, engagement, and overall performance of **paid interns** with your organization?
 - In your experience, what have been the output, engagement, and overall performance of **unpaid interns** with your organization?
- Do you perceive **partner organizations** are more invested in paid/compensated interns than unpaid? Why or why not?
 - In what ways are partner organizations more invested?
- Do you perceive **your organization** is more invested in paid/compensated interns than unpaid?
 - Does it depend on who is paying?
- Do you think interns take paid experiences more seriously and therefore produce more return on investment? Why or why not?

Part III: Summary & Conclusion

[Recap of the focus group]

Thank you all for your time. Your perspective is important and your comments have given us a lot of important and useful information. If you have any questions moving forward please contact [facilitator name] at [facilitator email] or [facilitator email].