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On the Intersectional Amplification of Barriers to College Internships: A Comparative Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

Research shows that college internships yield academic, economic, and professional benefits. However, the ability to locate and participate in internships is not equitable across all student demographic and socioeconomic spectrums. There are multiple complex barriers to internship participation for students with low socioeconomic status, and for those who are minoritized by race, gender, or other factors. Contextual factors such as finances, work responsibilities, travel, and gendered familial obligations intersect to amplify the challenges to internship participation. In the research described in this paper, the research team conducted focus groups among 24 students from a comprehensive federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution. The team explored the data using intersectionality theory and comparative case study analysis; and in this paper we present a comparative case study analysis of five students in our study. We determined that delineation of barriers into types, such as financial, social, and cultural, runs the risk of misconstruing students' actual experience when they struggle to access internships and other educational opportunities.

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Introduction

College internships are sometimes represented as a “win-win-win” in today’s economy—they benefit students’ career development, help educators further the goals of their institution, and allow employers to review and hire new talent (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002). Indeed, research on student outcomes of internship participation indicates a number of advantages, such as enhanced grades (Binder et al., 2015), better developed career goals (Taylor, 1988), and increased wages (Saniter & Siedler, 2014). As a result, internships have been labeled a “high-impact practice” that colleges and universities should promote as an important part of the college experience (Kuh, 2008). Internships are also beginning to play an important role in social reproduction and social mobility in the economy (Perlin, 2012). Internships provide anticipatory socialization of professional labor (Dailey, 2016); function as a signal to the market (Nunley et al., 2016); provide an extended, up-close, relatively low-risk, and low-cost opportunity to screen interns for employment (Zhao & Liden, 2011); and serve a social gate-keeping function for access to professional firms (Hora et al., 2019). Given the well-documented student outcomes and the centrality of internships in the economy, some educators, higher education administrators, and policymakers advocate for expanding, and even mandating internship participation (Hora et al., 2017).

However, mounting evidence indicates that access to college internships is inequitable. Barriers can be financial, in the form of low or unpaid internships; geographic, due to required travel and relocation costs; social and cultural, in light of the role played by classed-based social networks and knowledge to access internships; and institutional, such as the inequitable distribution of resources to support internships (Curiale, 2009; Finley & McNair, 2013; Hora et al., 2019; Milburn, 2009; Perlin, 2012).

This study analyzes how students’ complex identities and social positioning combine to limit internship access. Using data collected from student focus groups (n=24 participants) conducted at an urban, minority-serving, comprehensive university, we present a set of five comparative case studies that highlight how indicators of social class, such as low-income and first-generation college status, are important factors that can curtail access to internships. We demonstrate that such factors can be acutely amplified when compounded by additional factors, such as a student’s race, gender, or immigration status—a process we refer to as “intersectional amplification.” We argue that research on barriers to internship participation would benefit from a clearer recognition and analysis of the intersectional nature of the factors that impact student access. Our analysis focuses on the following research question: *How do social and cultural factors combine to amplify barriers to internship participation for minoritized college students?*

Barriers to Internship Participation

Research on barriers to internship participation focuses on financial, geographic, social, cultural, and institutional obstacles. While we acknowledge the significant accomplishments of this research in identifying barriers and how they impact students, we suggest that current perspectives are hampered by deficit thinking, which individualizes the problem of access as a consequence of what students “lack” (e.g., finances, connections, knowledge). The current literature also promotes a compartmentalized understanding of how barriers operate, rather than addressing how factors coordinate, compound, and amplify the barriers to internship participation.

The research literature focuses above all on students’ financial struggles associated with unpaid or inadequately paid internships. Studies have documented how financial obstacles can limit students’ ability to obtain an internship. For example, the internship application and vetting process is often competitive, and access may be limited to those who have already obtained the kind of relevant volunteer experiences that low-income students may struggle to afford (Ashley et al., 2015). Other documented financial obstacles include the need for paid work; time constraints and scheduling conflicts created by multiple jobs, academic work, and social care obligations; and the costs of applying, such as purchasing needed outfits and tools, and traveling to the internships (Hora, Wolfgram, & Chen, 2019). The research also indicates that financial constraints tend to disproportionately disadvantage low-income students, students minoritized by race or gender, working students, older students, and students with time-consuming family and social responsibilities (DiRienzo, 2016; Harvey & Reyes, 2015; Hora et al., 2019; Matsumoto, 2015; Shade & Jacobson, 2015; Taylor, 1998).

Research has also shown that internship access is often mediated by class-based social networks that privilege students with elite social and professional connections (Parks-Yancy, 2012). This social barrier to internship participation is common in creative industries (Frenette, 2013; Shade & Jacobson, 2015; Allen et al., 2013) and the so-called elite professions, including finance, banking, law, and marketing, which have historically relied on informal social networks and connections to elite higher education institutions for recruitment and hiring (Ashley et al., 2015; Boulton, 2015; Milburn, 2009).

Cultural barriers to internship participation have also been documented. First-generation college students, for example, may lack knowledge from their own social networks about the value of internships to their career development (O’Connor, & Bodicoat, 2017). For the same reason, they may hold incorrect or unhelpful ideas about internships, which constrain their participation (Bathmaker et al., 2013). In addition, students are potentially habituated by their class positioning to a set of dispositions that mark them unfavorably in the internship vetting process (Allen et al., 2013).

Lastly, research has indicated that institutional barriers may exist for some students to access internships. Elite institutions that serve affluent students provide extensive student coaching as well as outreach to employers to support internship opportunities, whereas universities that serve

working-class students tend to lack such services (Allen et al., 2013). Students may struggle to successfully pursue internships on their own, without the support and institutional networks of their university (Webber, 2005). For example, Finley and McNair (2013) found that lack of advising to support student internships was an obstacle for student participation.

Overall, the literature on barriers to internship participation has made several important advancements. It has highlighted the significant obstacles that students must overcome to access and succeed in a high-value educational practice; demonstrated that these obstacles disproportionately affect low-income, first-generation, and minoritized students; and identified some of the financial, geographic, social, cultural, and institutional factors, processes, and contexts that operate to obstruct and frustrate student participation. In total, the evidence shows that these factors establish a context that influences students to self-select not to pursue or participate in an internship opportunity (Allen et al., 2013). This literature often draws upon social capital theories (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; 1986; Lin, 2001) to clarify how economics, networks, and cultural habits form and constrain the conditions of access to internships. Lack of access operates as a gatekeeper to professional employment (Hora et al., 2019).

Elsewhere, we have addressed two major concerns with current approaches to barriers to internship participation (Hora et al., 2019). We further develop our argument in this article. First, some social and cultural capital approaches to studying barriers to internship participation tend to import a deficit model (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) that attributes struggles with access to the insufficient resources, knowledge, and networks (i.e., economic, social and cultural capitals) of a particular student. Although not generally acknowledged, deficit thinking is a common assumption in education research and policy approaches to social problems (Brown 2013; Reay, 2013), and it features more explicitly in research on barriers to internship participation. The research tends to focus on what students lack vis-à-vis their more affluent, White, and otherwise majoritarian peers, rather than on the sociocultural and institutional factors that systematically undermine the success of minoritized students (e.g., see “social capital deficiency” as a barrier to internship participation, in Parks-Yancy, 2012). Critical perspectives on education research have described how such deficit models of analysis tend to individualize social problems, thereby obfuscating the systemic social and institutional processes that influence an individual’s ability to act (Brown, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Reay, 2013).

Second, the analytical mode of social and cultural capital theory tends toward the segmentation of a complex experience into a set of delineated capitals, such as economic, social, cultural, symbolic, and linguistic capital. There is methodological value in this approach: clear delineation aids in measuring the factors’ effects on student internship participation. In our research, however, we have found that students rarely discuss their struggles to identify, access, and succeed in internships in these terms; rather, they describe a complex and unified experience (Hora et al., 2019). An accurate, empirical understanding of how barriers to internships operate to frustrate students’ education and career development requires an analytical framework that is free from the hyper-individualism of deficit thinking and can also clarify the multiplex

coordination of contexts and experiences, to better represent the reality of how students struggle to access internships.

Here, we draw on intersectionality theory to illustrate how individuals are enmeshed in social and institutional contexts, to counter deficit models of education research, and to clarify how multiple factors coordinate and interact to amplify barriers to internship participation. We present a comparative case study analysis as an ideal analytical approach to maximize the conceptual power of intersectionality theory.

Conceptual Framework: Intersectional Amplification of Barriers

Intersectionality theory is a conceptual lens emerging from feminist legal theory and critical race studies (Crenshaw, 1991; Cho et al., 2013). It clarifies and centers for analytical focus the multiplex nature of human experience, foregrounding the social factors, identities, and ideologies that shape a person's experiences and possibilities. A fundamentally transdisciplinary idea, intersectionality has been employed as a theory, concept, framework, methodology, perspective, and political strategy. Collins and Chepp (2013) reviewed these framings and proposed this definition:

Intersectionality consists of an assemblage of ideas and practices that maintain that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and similar phenomena cannot be analytically understood in isolation from one another; instead, these constructs signal an intersecting constellation of power relationships that produce unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups positioned within them (pp. 59-60).

Analysis guided by this frame can expose the "privileges and penalties associated with intersecting systems of oppression" (Collins and Chepp, 2013, p. 60). Thus, an intersectional approach departs from traditional sociological analyses, which tend to isolate factors of race, class, and gender (Ferree & Hall, 1996; Ferree, 2018). There are other sociological approaches such as social field theory which also provide a framework to analyze the complex manner that social positioning can constrain educational opportunity (Nuñez & Sansone, 2016), although importantly, intersectionality theory highlights the importance of the confluence of identities in that process (Ferree, 2018).

McCall (2005) describes a more nuanced approach to intersectionality as an analysis that can simultaneously denaturalize social categories, recognize the significance of variation within social categories, and highlight the coordination of multiple categories together. The analytical rigor of an intersectional approach emerges from this multi-focal perspective, which is simultaneously anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical. This analysis is particularly sensitive to how the specificity of an individual's social positioning can impact their experiences of oppression. It also acknowledges that individuals can experience disadvantage and privilege simultaneously (Crenshaw 1991).

Several studies have employed the concept of intersectionality to analyze problems of access and success for minoritized college students (Museus & Griffin, 2011; Nunez, 2014). Museus and Griffin noted that the critical perspective of intersectional theory functions as a needed corrective to education research that “categorizes students along singular dimensions of identity”; those approaches “provide limited information, which can restrict the ability of higher education scholars and institutional researchers to fully—and sometimes accurately—understand and respond to problems that exist in postsecondary education” (Museus & Griffin, 2011, p. 5). Equally important for education research is the embedding of situated experiences within larger systems of oppression (sometimes called the “matrix of oppression” [Collins, 2002]), which destabilizes the problematic individualism and deficit thinking that vexes some education research.

Importantly, intersectionality theory not only recognizes the multiplex positionalities of individuals, and the consequences of large-scale ideologies and institutional, socio-political, and economic processes—it foregrounds new and generative research questions that are central to our analysis. Focusing on this complex of factors, we ask how these factors combine, amplify, and impact individuals in certain situations, and how institutional, socio-cultural, economic, and historical contexts inform this process. Sociological research on barriers to internship participation demonstrates that common social-economic indicators such as low-income and first-generation college status are important factors that can curtail access to internships; we are interested in how these factors become acutely amplified when compounded by additional factors such as a student’s race, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status. Following intersectionality theory, we describe this process of coordinating and compounding factors as an experience of “intersectional amplification,” which, for some students, can transform an obstacle to internship participation into a nearly insurmountable barrier.

Methodology and Research Site

The College Internship Study

The College Internship Study is a national, multi-site, mixed-methods, longitudinal study of the barriers, characteristics, and outcomes of colleges internships (e.g., Chen et al., 2019). The data we collected for the study include an online survey of students in the second half of their academic programs, focus groups with students who participated in and who did not participate in an internship experience, interviews with individuals (e.g., career coaches, faculty, and area employers) involved in internship program administration and implementation, and documents and online resources about internship programs and services at the institution.

The online consent form and survey was emailed to a sample of 1,500 students with junior or senior status, with a cash incentive of \$15 mailed to the student after completion of the survey. At the end of the survey, students were asked if they would consent to being contacted to participate in an in-person focus group, and those students were contacted by email to schedule the groups. Students received a \$20 cash incentive after consenting to participate in the audio-recorded focus group.

The College Internship Study survey contained questions regarding students' participation in an internship in the last 12 months while in college, their employment status, and demographic characteristics. Students who answered "no" to having participated in an internship answered questions about their career preparation and any factors that may have dissuaded them from pursuing an internship (e.g., finances, child care); for students who answered "yes," questions were asked about the characteristics of their internship along with questions about demographics, career adaptability, and their satisfaction and perceptions of the developmental value of their internship experience.

Focus groups were organized into groups of 1–4 participants, in groups of student who did and who did not participate in an internship. For students who did not participate in an internship, questions focused on the reasons why they did not, as well as questions about their other educational and career goals and experiences. Students who had an internship experience during college answered questions about the nature of their experience, about support from both the academic program and their job-site supervisor, and general questions about their other educational and career goals and experiences.

Metropolis State College

Metropolis State College (MSC) is a pseudonym for our research site, which is an urban, regional, comprehensive, state-funded college located in a large midwestern city in the U.S. MSC serves larger numbers of students who are minoritized in different ways, which is why we elected to focus on this research site from among a larger multi-sited study, for a deeper investigation of how minoritized students struggle with access to internship participation. It is also a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), with an overall student population of approximately 7,400 undergraduate and graduate students. MSC is considered one of the most diverse colleges in the country, with a student body comprised of approximately 40% Latinx, 11% African American, 27% White American, 10% Asian American, and 2% two or more races. Of the nearly 6,000 undergraduates, between 55% and 60% identified as female and approximately 40% identified as male; the remainder were unknown or elected not to self-identify. MSC serves both traditional and non-traditional students. The largest age group of students is in the 18–22 age range (40%), however, there are nearly 1,000 undergraduates over the age of 31.

As an institution that serves a diverse and often marginalized student population, it is not surprising that between 45% and 50% of its undergraduate students identified as being first-generation college attendees. MSC has a robust relationship with area community colleges and is made up of over 50% transfer students versus 25% first-time full-time students. The remaining students enter through other means, such as re-admitted and unclassified students.

Budget Crisis

In 2015, opposing factions in the state assembly and the governor's office fought over the state budget, leading to three years without a state budget. During the three-year period when

MSC did not receive its normal state appropriations, the college reduced its workforce by approximately 180 staff and support personnel. Financial aid, career services, admissions, and student services were all affected. Students began to experience long wait times, unresponsiveness, and difficulty in obtaining the support needed to ensure success. The loss of staff has especially impacted first-generation students; neither these students nor their families have experience in negotiating the bureaucracies of higher education. As a result of the budget crisis, the MSC bureaucracy now poses an even greater challenge than usual.

Sample

The research sample for the follow-up focus group comprised 24 MSC undergraduate students; nine had participated in an internship and 15 had not. Their ages ranged from 21 to 39. Whether reflective of the discipline's nature or its popularity, seven identified as psychology majors. Consistent with MSC's HSI status, nine identified as Hispanic; four as African American, three as Asian American, and eight as White American. Nine identified as male and 15 as female. The sample is representative of the school population. Fourteen of the participants considered themselves first-generation college students.

The 24 focus group participants were matched using a coded study participant identification with their responses College Internship Study survey. We further examined this subset to better understand these students. Seven of the 14 students who had not participated in an internship listed the "need to work in their current job" as one of the three top reasons they had not participated in an internship opportunity; 20 of 24 students were working in a non-internship job, and seven participants were working more than one job. These working students labored from eight to 50 hours per week, with an average of approximately 25 hours.

In terms of socioeconomic status, one participant considered their family to be lower class, nine working class, six lower middle class, five middle class, and three upper middle class. Family income ranged from under \$20,000 to \$200,000 per year, with a median family income range of \$60,000 to \$79,999. Students funded their education through multiple means: 10 via student loans, 13 through grants such as MAP and FASFA, 10 received money from family, 11 from savings, 12 from current jobs, and only two through a paid internship. Fortunately, none had experienced adverse events such as evictions or utilities being turned off; however, three students related that they were forced to borrow money to make ends meet.

Comparative Case Study Analysis

Comparative case study analysis is well situated to accomplish two key methodological goals required to observe and theorize the process of intersectional amplification: (1) prioritization of descriptive narratives of individuals in their complex social contexts to highlight the coordination of factors, including the privileges and barriers to internship participation; and (2) juxtaposition of the rich narratives for comparison, to permit identification of privileges and barriers across the sample, as well as the contexts in which they compound and amplify to impact the students' education and career goals and experiences.

This approach requires rich, highly contextualized narrative accounts of experience, with simultaneous attention to a person's multiplex positionalities and the larger institutions and contexts they inhabit. It calls for narratives akin to Geertz's concept of an "ethnography as thick description" (1972). Several qualitative research writing genres involve this type of individually focused and socially situated narrative. Life-histories, extended narratives that contain ethnographic and anthropological themes, have been used to document educational barriers (Wolcott, 1983). Ethnographic portraiture involves individualized, often highly nuanced and poetically styled descriptions of experiences (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008); auto-ethnographic narratives are composed by researchers who are participants in the communities or institutions that they investigate (Roth, 2005). Lastly, counter-narratives describe the experiences of marginalized individuals whose voices are often unheard, and point to the ways that the dominant ideology creates "master narratives" about people of color (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002).

In this article, we draw from these narrative traditions, adding a comparative framework to illustrate the complexity of each case and derive a more generalizable understanding from a systematic comparison of contexts (Ragin, 1987). Bartlett and Varus (2016) have discussed different axes of comparison for comparative cases studies, comparing across micro-, meso-, and macro-scales (vertical axis), across contexts (horizontal axis), and across time (transversal axis). Our juxtaposition of student experiences in this article works to account for all of these comparative contexts, documenting the impact of multiple scales of social and economic positionalities, of various institutional and social contexts, and of recent institutional changes caused by the state disinvestment from higher education.

We developed our set of comparative case studies of student education and career preparation experiences at MSC through the following process. First, the focus groups were transcribed and coded using MaxQDA software (VERBI Software, 2017). A pair of researchers divided the transcripts into more manageable units based on the topics of the semi-structured protocol; applied a set of codes based on the research literature on barriers to internship participation; and engaged in a round of inductive open coding of the corpus, noting recurrent phrases, ideas, and observations related to obstacles inhibiting participation in an internship (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We checked inter-rater agreement between the pair of researchers for the literature-based codes, applied to three randomly selected transcripts from the corpus; agreement was measured to be high at 88%. The coders then met to compare coding results and reconcile any remaining disagreements (Campbell et al., 2013). Once coded, we used the searching, categorizing, and memoing functions in MaxQDA to identify recurrent patterns across the corpus, to select empirically rich case studies that exemplified those patterns, and to map how the cases compared and contrasted with one another. We compiled our notes into a set of analytical memos (Maxwell, 2012) supplemented by careful analysis and incorporation of all the transcript data for each case study, and continued to juxtapose the cases in the memos to highlight the comparative framework. Through this process, we selected, analyzed, and narrated the set of competitive case studies featured in the following section.

Intersectional Juxtapositions: The Privileges and Barriers to Internship Participation

This section presents our research findings from the experiences of five students: Sofia, Aziz, Yolanda, Sara, and Lucia. The case studies elucidate the privileges and barriers associated with internship participation and, taken together, document a process that we call the intersectional amplification of barriers to internship participation.

Sofia

Sofia is Latina. Like many students at MSC, she transferred from a community college, commutes from home to MSC for classes, and is a first-generation college student. “I’m the first person in the entire family of like 50 cousins!” Sofia’s parents tried to discourage her from attending college—an unfamiliar world they perceive as fraught with potential risk. “Honestly, I wasn’t supposed to go to college. Like my parents used to tell me all the time. After I graduated high school, you’re just going to go to community college [rather than MSC].” Sofia has taken financial and social risks to attend college, and feels pressure to graduate and begin a professional career.

Sofia’s original goal was to double major in history and secondary education, and become a history teacher; however, the teaching credential program was phased out due to university budget cuts. She would need to get a graduate degree to obtain the teaching credential. College was already struggle for Sofia and her family; additional schooling, student debt, and increased pressure from family did not seem feasible. Sofia is finishing her history major with a minor in communications, and she is anxious about her career prospects. “I mean honestly I’m not entirely sure what I’m going to do.” The advice from Sofia’s friends and family has not been encouraging, “... whenever I tell people that I’m a history major, their first thought is they go like ‘oh, you’re never going to get a job.’”

Sofia believes that an internship would help her to identify career possibilities. Friends in her Latina-based professional sorority told her an internship may lead to a permanent job offer at the same company, “So, just the possibility of that, of maybe having like a for sure job once I graduate, just automatically like makes me more, you know, wanting to do that [internship].” They also told her that most internships are unpaid. This advice is accurate. In our survey of MSC students for the College Internship Study, we found that among juniors and seniors who had participated in an internship (n = 81), as many as 73% were unpaid. Because of budget cuts, MSC lacks adequate staff to help students obtain high-quality paid internships, and has no funds to supplement unpaid internships.

Sofia had searched for internships online, and she confirmed that almost all of them were unpaid. Sofia summarized the problem, “of course it’s going to look good on my resume ... but I mean I still have bills!” Sofia already worked around 36 hours per week, in addition to the hours needed for classes, study time, and family care responsibilities. The necessity of paid work to meet financial obligations can create intractable time pressures and scheduling conflicts that

present a clear barrier to internship participation. Sofia explains how these financial and time pressures compound:

I go to school just two days a week and then I work from Friday through Monday and then, like, I work at least nine hours a day when I have to work and then Wednesday is really my only day off. But because it's my only day off, I use it to like schedule doctors' appointments [for my elderly parents] or to, like, help my mom with the grocery shopping and everything like that, so it's not really a day off. So, I'm always doing something. And if I had to replace some of those like work hours, for example, with an internship and if it was like unpaid, then ... I still have to pay car insurance.

The regular expense of maintaining her vehicle, upon which she and her family depend, is an added stress, "It's like every time that you have money, your car decides to break down for some reason. I don't understand!" Adding to this concern is an ever-present sense of financial precarity. An unexpected expense, such as the need for a new car, could escalate their troubles.

Sofia's father is legally blind, her mother does not drive, and both parents are unemployed. Her parents depend on Sofia to drive and help with household and care work. As the unmarried and only daughter in a traditional Latinx home, most family care responsibilities fall to Sofia. Her two brothers could help but, "Is there this kind of expectation with like my older brother and my younger brother? No. They don't have to do that." Indeed, several students in our focus groups at MSC had family care responsibilities, including students who are parents with dependent children and those who are the children of aging, disabled, or ill parents. The time and financial commitments of this care work can be a barrier to internship participation.

Mobility constraints pose another major obstacle. Sofia spends three hours per week commuting from her suburb to MSC for classes. The burden of additional commuting time and expense for an internship seemed untenable. Furthermore, she knew her parents would not approve of extra travel, especially to other areas in the city. "It took forever for me to convince them to just go to school here. And it's like the safest campus in the state, that's the reason I was able to convince them." Sofia had explored the possibility of living in the campus dorms, which would allow her to take advantage of nearby internships, work, and the chance to study with peers. However, her extensive family care responsibilities and the \$10,000 annual cost was prohibitive, and she worried about increasing her student loan debt.

Another factor is the pressure Sofia's parents put on her to graduate as soon as possible and enter the workforce, "they're very traditional Latino parents, so they won't understand that [the idea of the value of an unpaid internship], like, oh, sometimes you just get paid in experience, not in money, and they'll think that it's like pointless. So, that's why I've been kind of hesitant to actually like look for an internship." Sofia asked a history professor for advice and learned about an unpaid internship at a museum, but given the compounding factors of family responsibilities and financial, time, and mobility constraints, Sofia self-selected not to apply.

Sofia's experience illustrates how her multiplex social positioning—her race, class, gender, in the cultural context of being Latina—was exacerbated by the state's disinvestment of MSC, and the lack of well-funded institutional supports. Together, these factors work to amplify the barriers to internship participation.

Next, we turn to Aziz. Like Sofia, Aziz believes in the value of internships and has encountered obstacles to participation. Both students are minoritized in different ways, are first-generation college students, struggle with limited resources, time, and mobility, and have been impacted by the budget cuts to their institution. Thus, Sofia and Aziz face similar barriers to internship participation, including family care responsibilities, though care work is differently gendered for Aziz. When interviewed for this study, Sofia had been unsuccessful in overcoming the obstacles to participate in an internship; Aziz had completed an internship early in college and was working to obtain a second prior to graduating from MSC.

Aziz

Aziz, a first-generation American and a first-generation college student, studies biology at MSC. His parents immigrated from the Middle East, and he and his sister were born in the U.S. city where they now live. His goals are to graduate from college, take the MCAT examination, and ultimately, gain admission to medical school and become a physician. Aziz currently volunteers in his biology professor's research lab to gain experience and support his future applications for medical school. For the same reason, he would like to obtain an internship in the medical field, or in a biology research lab. With his paid part-time job, classes, studies, and volunteering, the constraints to Aziz's time and finances are considerable, so he is targeting internships in his field that are located conveniently and offer adequate pay.

Aziz had already completed an unpaid internship early in his college career in 2015, in one of his biology professor's labs. That internship involved doing DNA repair work for cell biology research, "So, a lot of things that I need to study for the MCAT were already in that internship." A research journal club associated with the internship helped Aziz focus on his future, set career goals, and acquire additional knowledge for his future MCAT exam.

When Aziz started college, his father was a taxi driver in the city. With the rise in popularity of the ridesharing application Uber, Aziz's father's income—the sole financial support for the family—was first cut in half, and gradually declined even more. Aziz explains how this situation impacted his education:

A lot happened, so he wasn't making as much, and it just creates stress. And under that kind of stress, I just can't focus on school and everything. So, at that point I just—after that semester, I think I failed a class and then I just stopped taking classes. I applied for a job and then I found this job, which I was really happy to get it because it was nice. It was a position as a manager. So, yeah, I started working there and just was assisting him [his father] for several years.

Aziz left school to work full-time to support his family. His job as a surgical practice manager paid well but “it drove me away from my goal” of becoming a physician:

It’s mainly because in order to apply for medical school I have to study for the MCAT and then when you are working full time as a manager, and in my case ... I was already working six days a week, you know, full time, so there was no time to do anything. And then, the nature of the work that I did was mostly just administration paperwork, inventory, ordering.... It was related to my goal, but really didn’t have anything to do with an MCAT.

One day Aziz was helping the doctor manipulate an X-ray machine when he had an epiphany:

I was looking at the doctor and I was thinking this is not what I want to do [be an office manager]. That’s what I want to do [be a doctor]. So, just like that split second ... at that point I think I just quit. But it wasn’t right away. It was after I spoke to my sister because she started getting paid.... So, she took over.

After that, he was able to arrange financial responsibilities with his sister and his father, each providing half the family’s financial resources. With the arrangement in place, Aziz returned to school.

Prior to leaving MSC, before the budget cuts, Aziz had received academic and career support from the Science Engagement Center and obtained his first internship in a campus biology lab. While the current staffing and resources at the Center have cut, Aziz was able to use his prior connections to obtain professional recommendations from MSC professors for internships that could prepare him for a medical career. He was actively pursuing leads for high-value internships, some of which were paid. This is a common experience of students at MSC; those who can afford to engage in unpaid internships and other voluntary opportunities are often able to leverage those experiences into future, higher-quality and potentially paid internships. Further, Aziz’s sister is a graduate student at a more selective public research university in the same city, where she had a research internship with one of her professors. Through that connection, Aziz was offered a desirable paid internship to conduct stem cell research. Unfortunately, he had to decline because of the additional 1.5-hour one-way commute on public transportation.

The juxtaposed cases of Aziz and Sofia illustrate how factors may combine to limit opportunities, and how, in the absence of an intersectional amplification, it is possible to coordinate resources to overcome obstacles. Aziz took advantage of career resources he received as a student prior to the budget cuts at MSC. When he returned to college during the time when Sofia was also a student, “a lot of things were different.” Underfunding and staff layoffs for student support services and advising directly impacted the students’ ability to pursue internships and engage in other career preparation. Aziz is optimistic about finding a relevant, high-quality, paid internship to enhance his future medical school applications. Like most students in our focus groups, Aziz must struggle to manage constraints on his time, mobility, and resources. But after leaving school to work full-time to support his family, he managed to coordinate his family

responsibilities with his older sister, return to school, and pursue his goals. At the end of the focus group, when Sofia expressed her need for independence from her parents so that she could also pursue her goals, Aziz responded to her directly, “Yeah, I feel the same too. I would feel bad, because like if I move out then who is going to take care of them.” To which Sofia replied, “Well, yeah, but it’s just that like I always have to take care of them,” a gendered-obligation from which her brothers are free.

Yolanda

Sofia and Aziz’s experiences illustrate how one factor, such as gendered family care work, can amplify barriers differently based on the students’ intersectional positionalities. In the third comparative case study, Yolanda’s experiences follow a similar process of amplification, but from the vantage of a non-traditional student. Yolanda’s case underscores the impact of time pressures and scheduling constraints on access to internship participation and other educational opportunities.

Yolanda is a 32-year-old Black woman. Her mother has a college degree and teaches at a charter school that serves low-income, at-risk families in the city. Yolanda works at the same school as an after-school instructor. After graduating from community college and then taking a break from school to work and raise a family, Yolanda is now at MSC studying psychology. She enjoys learning about how people think, and hopes to become a mental health counselor in her community, “because I think that inner city is lacking a lot of resources when it comes to counseling and therapy.” Like most of the students in our focus groups at MSC, Yolanda has absorbed the message from professors and peers that internships help with career advancement, and she has received emails from her psychology professors advertising internships in the counseling field. “I know that it will be beneficial for my major, and for my degree, and my career, but it’s kind of just like, how can I afford to do that?” Yolanda explains how her work, school, and family care responsibilities conflict with an internship opportunity:

The ones that I see that are interesting to me, that I get in the emails, they’re always far and require travel, or just a—you have to kind of abandon what you already have going on. And for me, that’s a bit difficult because I’m in school part time. I work part time, and then I have two children. So, it’s kind of like, I would have to just – yeah, like drop everything. I feel like I haven’t found one or seen one that would work with my schedule, really.

Yolanda works an average of 25 hours per week at the school in the same neighborhood where she lives with her two daughters, an 8-year-old and a baby. She works additional hours on days that the students have off school. Yolanda and other working students in our study often expressed a concern that an internship would cause scheduling conflicts with their regular paid employment. Scheduling conflicts caused by a temporary and often unpaid internship could imperil their regular jobs, for example, by causing tension with supervisors. For Yolanda, the risk is untenable. Her husband recently died, and the income from her part-time work is the sole source of financial support for her family. The time pressures and scheduling conflicts, combined

with the challenges of coordinating childcare for her daughters, and commuting across town for part-time classes at MSC, directly impact Yolanda's educational goals:

I have like lots of responsibilities, especially because I'm a single mom. So, it's like, anything that I've seen that I will be interested in, like an internship, it's like, how can I do this? You know, even when I wanted to study abroad, last semester, it was just like, how can I do this? So, I kind of, just feel like I have limited resources for those kind of things.

Yolanda views herself as "still trying to stay on the path for success." However, she is stymied by the lack of resources to support her goals, and by the way that obstacles combine to amplify the barriers along her path.

Next, we turn to the case study of Sara. Like Yolanda, Sara is a psychology major and a part-time, non-continuous student who is older than her MSC peers. Both women face challenges related to being minoritized, albeit in different ways. But whereas Yolanda struggled with the coordination of multiple factors that rendered her unable to pursue an internship to enhance her career development, Sara was able to complete successful internships with multiple positive outcomes for her education and career.

Sara

Sara is a 39-year-old White woman. Unlike Yolanda, whose mother is a teacher, Sara is a first-generation college student. When Sara graduated from high school, there was a lack of financial and emotional support from her family to attend college. She applied for financial aid but only received loans because of her middle-class family income. Despite her intellectual curiosity and academic inclinations, she decided to forego college after high school, and started working various jobs. Ten years later, she entered college part-time at MSC, where tuition is low enough that she was able to support herself. "I've had to pay as I go. And so, it's taken me a really long time."

Sara started studying at MSC over a decade ago, but left school for several years to start her own business as a yoga teacher trainer, which provided personal fulfillment and some financial stability. She returned to MSC and was in her last semester before graduating when we interviewed her for this study. Sara's goal is to attend graduate school in neuropsychology, and to become a research professional in that field. During her senior year, she received an internship at a business incubator, a "really special and rare opportunity" to develop and conduct a research project on the entrepreneurs that the incubator supported. The chair of the psychology department personally selected Sara for the project.

Honestly, it was a gift. It was an opportunity offered to me from the chair, and it just sounded really fascinating and wonderful. And so, I couldn't turn it down. And it was one of the most wonderful things I've done since I've been in school.... And so they asked me, I didn't go looking for it. It just magically plopped down in front of me.

There was no public announcement or application process and Sara did not know why she was selected, although she guessed that her high GPA, the “social skills” that she displays in class, her punctual attendance, and her reputation as a “hard-working student” may have played a role. “So, I think they could just rely on me, honestly.” Educators are often concerned to foster relationships with business and other organizations in the community, and to promote the good reputation of their university and department. As a consequence, they tend to select students that they feel will reflect positively on the institution. Such informal channels tend to privilege White, middle-class students who have the resources and dispositions to display “professional behaviors” to their professors. It is therefore highly likely that Sara’s race and class afforded her the privilege of receiving an opportunity that was unavailable to her peers in the Psychology Department (including Yolanda).

For her internship, Sara conducted and analyzed in-depth interviews with 14 entrepreneurs. She likened her project to the ethnographies she studied in her anthropology classes. She submitted her findings in a 60-page report to the incubator and to the business communities it supports, and MSC published a description of internship as an “MSC success story,” along with her photo on the university website. Sara has plans with her professor to publish the research in an academic journal. She intends to foreground that publication and the internship experience in her applications to graduate school next year.

There were challenges, however. A group of men would congregate outside the business incubator office, catcalling her as she entered the building, which made her feel nervous and unsafe. Near the end of the internship, Sara mentioned the situation to her supervisor, who directed the building security staff to deal with the problem. The unpaid internship was 15 hours per week, so for a time Sara taught fewer classes as a yoga teacher trainer, creating a financial strain. Her husband, however, is a psychotherapist with his own practice and he was able to pick up more clients to make up for the lost income. Still, with her own work, part-time classes, and 15 hours of unpaid labor per week, “I was pretty taxed last semester. It was definitely my most stressful semester.”

The contrasting experiences of Yolanda and Sara illustrate several consequential factors that entail strikingly different outcomes. Yolanda has investigated internships and other opportunities, but her goals remain stalled due to a coordination of multiple obstacles. She recognizes the time and resources that these opportunities require and the lack of institutional resources to support her goals; and thus, while she sees these internships and similar opportunities as steps “on the path for success,” she self-selects not to apply. Sara received institutional resources, in the form of a unique internship opportunity brokered by her professor, without even applying. While financial and time pressures created a lot of “stress” during her internship, she was able to succeed at the internship and receive multiple beneficial outcomes.

Comparisons of the experiences of Sofia and Aziz, and of Yolanda and Sara, show that access to internships is mediated by a multiplex coordination of privileges and barriers. We now turn to a final case study. Lucia was able to successfully complete both an unpaid internship and

several volunteer opportunities, but she faces legal barriers to her career goals because of her undocumented immigration status.

Lucia

Lucia is Latina. Like Sofia, Aziz, and Sara, she is a first-generation college student; and like Yolanda and Sara, she is a long-term, part-time student, following the “pay-as-you-go” strategy and moderating her course enrollment to her available finances. She has been able to study continuously at MSC, sometimes taking only one or two classes “or just what I could afford.” Lucia has undocumented immigration status and is not eligible for financial aid. However, she holds a work permit through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and she works as many hours as possible to pay for the tuition and other expenses. She also spends considerable extra time and effort applying for at least 10 scholarships a year to support her education.

Lucia is a biology and anthropology major, with a minor in linguistics. In her internship at a refugee resettlement organization, she accompanied and supported refugee families with children who have speech impediments during their visits to a speech-language pathologist. This experience inspired her, “I found that I want to work with kids who suffer from speech impediments. I think that [internship] pretty much set me to have a goal in life.”

Throughout college, Lucia has consistently engaged in many hours of unpaid labor to prepare for a career. “Throughout the time I’ve been here, they [the MSC faculty] tell us do internships, do internships,” as well as other voluntary opportunities “to gain experience.” Lucia and the other students in our study described feeling “pressure” to pursue such opportunities to advance their careers. She completed two spring break service trips to help refugee communities in the American Southwest, first as a participant, and then as a peer mentor. She foregrounded these volunteer experiences in her application and interview for a highly competitive unpaid internship at another refugee resettlement organization in her city. After successfully completing that internship, she again stressed her volunteer and internship experiences to obtain another high-value voluntary position at a local hospital. Part of this work will involve supporting a speech-language pathologist, which will help her to explore and advance her major career goal of entering that field. Lucia explained that obtaining such high-value volunteer work requires previous volunteer and internship positions, which “show commitment, which is really, really important. They needed a six-month commitment [for the hospital volunteer position] and my internship shows that I’m able to make that commitment.”

Similar to the other students presented in this article, time pressures and scheduling conflicts were a major struggle for Lucia. She needed to work the maximum available 20 hours per week at her on-campus job as a front desk student aide at the Campus Culture Center in order to maintain a minimum of financial stability, “because I needed the money.” Her classes and work hours were during regular business hours Monday through Friday, so she looked for an internship with weekend hours, but she was unable to find one. The prized internship at the resettlement organization only offered regular business and regular weekday hours, 15 hours per

week. These time constraints resulted in what other students in our study have called “back-to-back-to-back scheduling” (Hora, Wolfgram, & Chen, 2019), as Lucia describes:

I had to sit down and literally plan my hours. I’m like, 5:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m., what am I going to do and where am I going to be at? So it was stressful, the fact that it was a non-paid, but I’m like, I’m going to have to do it now because I don’t want to wait until ... I get busier.

To this schedule, Lucia adds study on weekends and late into the night most weeknights at the MSC library. Luckily, her internship supervisor was sympathetic and was able to offer highly flexible scheduling, with multiple shorter increments of work hours between the gaps in her “back-to-back-to-back schedule,” and by allowing her to flex hours before exams to provide extra time to prepare. Students rarely report this type of flexibility at their internship site. Lucia attributed it to the personality of her supervisor who—as someone who supports refugees—is “very supportive” and “very understanding.” Without this rare scheduling flexibility, Lucia would not have been able to do her internship.

Several other factors informed Lucia’s success. Like Sofia and Aziz, Lucia is able to limit her living expenses by living with her parents, but unlike those two and Yolanda, Lucia does not have extensive family obligations. She admits that with her extracurricular, academic, and work schedule, on most nights she may not see her family until midnight when she returns home from the library, which “is a sacrifice, not seeing my family.” Also, unlike many of her peers who commute and face mobility constraints (including Sofia, Aziz, and Yolanda), Lucia lives near campus. Her internship and other voluntary positions have all been located nearby, with convenient public transportation through relatively safe neighborhoods.

Because of her internship and multiple volunteer positions, Lucia feels confident that she is qualified for entry-level jobs in the human services fields, and that her “extracurriculars” will make her graduate school applications more competitive. However, the anti-immigration rhetoric of the Trump Administration is concerning for Lucia. “With our political climate right now, we don’t know what’s going to happen to that work permit, if I’m going to be able to renew it. I mean, I’m going to graduate from college, but who knows if I’m going to be able to work after I graduate.” Even with a valid permit, Lucia worries that employers may not want to hire her because of the unpredictability of her work status. Another student who participated in a focus group for the study, also a Latina, felt that she would be discriminated against in the internship application process because of her undocumented immigration status, illustrating how legal barriers can amplify other socioeconomic and institutional barriers. Given the struggles, costs, and uncertainty associated with college, work, study, large amounts of paid and unpaid labor—and the political and legal barriers to success—Lucia and other undocumented students cultivate an attitude that is equal parts frustration and optimism: “It could be discouraging, but I always have hope that something positive will happen.”

Discussion

Our goal in this paper was to contribute new empirical insights into how different social factors coordinate to frustrate students' goals to participate in internships. Across our five comparative case studies, Sofia and Yolanda were unable to participate in an internships because of an intersectional amplification of barriers. Aziz was able to coordinate resources and is working towards obtaining a second internship, and Sara and Lucia completed internships, although Lucia had concerns that she would be unable to find professional work after graduation because of her undocumented immigration status.

Traditional approaches to examining barriers to internship participation rely on a delineation of factors, segmenting barriers into types of capital such as financial, social, cultural, and so on. These approaches run the risk of misconstruing the actual experience that students face when struggling to access internships and other educational opportunities; the experience is always multifactorial and holistic (Hora et al., 2019). By contrast, these comparative case studies document the process of intersectional amplification of barriers to internship participation, by which race, class, gender, and multiple other factors accumulate, coordinate, and compound to hinder student success.

All five students in our study were minoritized by race, class, and gender in different ways, and there are significant differences in the meaning and consequences of that minoritization across the case studies. First-generation college status, for example, was a major barrier to internship participation for Sofia. For Sara, Aziz, and Lucia, first-generation college status impacted their education significantly, but with additional resources and connections, it was not a major obstacle to their internship participation. On the other hand, Yolanda's mother was a college graduate who provided support, knowledge, and some resources; yet as a second-generation college student, a combination of multiple other factors established an intractable barrier to Yolanda's internship participation. These case studies indicate a complex relationship between social factors—in this case, first-generation college status—and barriers to educational opportunity, and strongly suggest that a framework such as intersectionality is needed to analyze potential barriers to student success.

Several tipping-points amplified the barriers to internship participation: time pressures and scheduling conflicts, constraints on mobility, family care obligations, and legal constraints. The issue of time was a major concern for all the students except Sara, who felt "stressed" but had extra resources to draw upon to support her internship participation. Sofia and Yolanda could not arrange the time for an internship; Lucia also struggled, but her internship supervisor made accommodations, she lived near school and the internship site, and she did not have extensive family care obligations. Mobility was a major factor for Sofia, Aziz, and Yolanda; Aziz had to decline a high-quality, paid internship in his field due to the inconvenience of travel across town on public transportation. Sofia and Yolanda had significant family care obligations that obstructed their internship participation; and Aziz left school to work and support his family, but was able to return after arranging support from other family members. It is significant that only Sofia and Yolanda struggled with all these obstacles simultaneously. For them, there was little

chance of movement toward their educational goals without additional resources and support from their institution. The other students, *who faced similar challenges but not all the same challenges at the same time*, were able to develop a path forward and participate in an internship. Lastly, Lucia was concerned that even with her internship, volunteering, and academics, she would struggle to obtain professional employment because of her undocumented immigrant status. The rise of anti-immigrant nationalism has made this concern even more pressing. Another undocumented student in our sample said that the legal ambiguity of her work status was a major factor in her decision not to apply for internships; indicating that for undocumented students the status of legality may operate as a “master status” having a dominant effect on their education and career opportunities (Terriquez, 2015).

The case studies also reflect the consequences of state disinvestment from public higher education, especially for minority-serving institutions such as MSC. After a massive round of layoffs, the remaining educators, advisors, and support staff at MCS lack the time and resources to support students and to cultivate relationships with employers and community organizations. Academic programs have been cut, student support services have been reduced, and there is a lack of additional financial resources to support students while they work as unpaid interns.

Implications for Future Research

The comparative case studies presented in this article illustrate a need for more research into how students experience barriers to educational opportunity and internship participation. We argue that approaches that can account for the complex and multifactorial nature of these experiences will generate the most interesting insights, and we believe the coordination of intersectionality theory and comparative case study analysis, as modeled in this article, exemplifies a theory and method that can account for this complexity, situate it within multiple scales of context, and provide empirical knowledge and theory about the process of the amplification of barriers.

An area for future investigation that emerged from our analysis is the impact of family care work on access to educational opportunities. Research has described obstacles faced by working parents (Goldrick-Rab & Sorensen, 2010), and documented how low-income students often contribute financially and otherwise to their families while in college (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Research has also documented the gender and racial biases and stigmatization of care work in U.S. society (England, 2005), and there is a particular focus on how family care obligations can frustrate education and careers goals for Latinas in particular (Espinoza, 2010; Sy & Romero, 2008). There is a lack of research over all on how race and gender affect care work among college students, and the relationship between care work and educational opportunity for minoritized students. Given the prominence of raced and gendered patterns of care work featured in this article, we propose this topic as an important area for further investigation.

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