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Internships and Beyond

**Strengthening Career Value Across Diverse
Models of Work-Based Learning**

Connecting education with opportunity

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Internships and Beyond

Strengthening Career Value Across Diverse Models of Work-Based Learning

Higher education serves multiple purposes for students, including expanding their knowledge and understanding of the world, helping them find purpose and answer life's big questions, and preparing them for a career that is fulfilling and will provide sufficient earnings to support themselves and their families. These purposes are interconnected – graduates must develop a core set of higher-order skills and must be able to support themselves financially in order to accomplish their goals.

Colleges and universities recognize that students are looking to them as a launching pad for their future. Eighty percent of freshmen say that “getting a better job” is a very important reason for attending, and 74 percent say “gaining training for a specific career” is very important in their decision to go to college.¹ To better meet the needs and goals of their students, colleges and universities increasingly are focused on strategies that help their students connect their education to career opportunities.

One of the most promising strategies for making this connection is giving students the opportunity to participate in off-campus learning experiences that are aligned with their field of study. Unfortunately, these kinds of work-based learning experiences remain too scarce, so only a limited number of students reap the benefits.

For example, only a quarter of recent graduates from public universities had participated in a paid internship, with participation even lower among graduates in the liberal arts, social sciences, and psychology.² Despite persistent student interest and growing emphasis in the rhetoric from education leaders and policymakers, internship participation rates have remained steady since 2013, with evidence showing considerable problems with equitable access to high-quality, paid internships.³ Thus, innovation and the expansion of the scale and scope of work-based learning opportunities are needed to enable more students to have experiences that bridge academic and workplace learning.

¹ Austin Freeman, Nguyen Nguyen, and Kara Seidel, “Factors Affecting First-Year Students’ College Choices: Insights from the 2023 CIRP Freshman Survey,” (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, and Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, School of Education and Information Studies, 2023). <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/HERI-TFS-Brief.pdf>.

² State Opportunity Index: Work-based Learning Appendix, (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2024); “Talent Disrupted: College Graduates, Unemployment, and the Way Forward,” (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2024).

³ Dave Clayton, Sowmya Ghosh, and Nichole Torpey-Saboe, “From college to career: Students’ internship expectations and experiences,” (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2023).

Key Findings

1. Students are focused on leveraging work-based learning to help them on their path to a planned career. They seek work-based learning experiences not primarily to explore careers, but rather to gain experience and skills for a specific career.
2. Most students who participate in a work-based learning experience feel it has made them a better job candidate for the kind of career they want.
3. Students' perceptions of the career value of on-campus and off-campus jobs are not as strong as the perceived value of other work-based learning experiences.
4. For students, the most powerful work-based learning experiences are those that help them expand their professional network and build their technical skills.



Work-based learning has continued to increase in priority within higher education and state workforce planning, and conversations about what “counts” as work-based learning are taking center stage. In some programs of study, off-campus experiences with employers, including practices such as internships, co-ops, and

practica, are the norm. In others, on-campus experiences such as undergraduate research with a faculty member or project-based learning in partnership with an employer are crucial pathways. An emergent question in these conversations also puts focus on the possibilities for utilizing on- and off-campus jobs as a means through which students can have quality work-based learning experiences. For the purposes of this report, we will refer to this broad range of experiences as work-based learning, and focus on the benefits associated with various models.

Despite the diversity of work-based learning experiences that are available to students, most research to date has focused only on internships. This study takes a first step in filling that gap by exploring students' perceptions of the value and benefits of a range of models. Student experiences and perceptions can deepen the field's understanding of these models and inform steps for improvement.

Study Background

The National Survey of Work-Based Learning is a 15-minute online survey fielded to a nationally representative sample of seniors enrolled at public four-year universities and colleges.⁴ More than 2,000 (n=2,131) individuals completed the survey between October and December 2024. The survey was developed by Strada Education Foundation and the Center for College Workforce Transitions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This report explores students' responses to questions about seven different experiences that blend academic learning and authentic or work-based experiences, including paid and unpaid internships, practica (such as supervised clinical experiences in health professions or student teaching),⁵ project-based learning, undergraduate research with a faculty member, on-campus jobs, and off-campus jobs.⁶ (Please see the appendix for survey items and definitions.)

Some of these experiences long have been recognized as high-impact practices that facilitate student learning and completion,⁷ while others, such as on- and off-campus jobs, have not always been considered in the

same context. Yet given the prevalence of student participation in on- and off-campus jobs (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 49 percent of college students are in the workforce), their potential for



impact is substantial.⁸ Furthermore, recent research has demonstrated that students derive economic and learning benefits from paid employment during college.⁹ For this reason, we wanted to explore how these experiences compare with other more traditional models of work-based learning, such as internships.

4 Results are nationally representative of seniors at public four-year institutions by race/ethnicity, gender, and three broad categories of field of study: 1) business, computer science, and engineering; 2) education and health-related programs; and 3) all other majors.

5 The survey definition of a practicum was "A practicum immerses students in a profession-specific environment under close guidance, enabling them to develop practical skills and integrate classroom knowledge with real-world applications, particularly common in fields like education, health care, and social work." Please see the appendix for verbatim survey items for the results included in this report.

6 Experiences with very low sample sizes in our dataset (n<50) were excluded from the report. These experiences include micro-internships, apprenticeships, co-ops, and service learning.

7 George D. Kuh, "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter," (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008).

8 "College Enrollment and Work Activity of Recent High School and College Graduates — 2024," (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, April 22, 2025). <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm>.

9 Daniel Douglas and Paul Attewell, "The Relationship Between Work During College and Post College Earnings," *Frontiers in Sociology* 4 (2019): 78, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00078/full>; Anne-Marie Nuñez and Vanessa A. Sansone, "Earning and learning: Exploring the meaning of work in the experiences of first-generation Latino college students," *The Review of Higher Education* 40, no. 1 (2016): 91-116.

The Purposes of Work-Based Learning

Some forms of work-based learning, such as apprenticeships or practica, traditionally have been tightly connected to careers, while other experiences, such as internships, sometimes have been viewed more as a way for students to explore and learn about a particular job, industry, or program of study. However, today's students are much more likely to view their experiences as instrumental rather than exploratory. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of students said that their primary purpose in participating in work-based learning experiences was to gain experiences or skills in a specific career that they plan on pursuing, and another 8 percent said

they were looking to secure a permanent full-time job (see Figure 1). Only 13 percent said that their goal was to explore different career options.

The focus on specific career preparation cuts across different types of work-based learning, including project-based learning, undergraduate research, paid and unpaid internships, and practica (see Figure 2).

When asked about their purpose in taking a job (either on or off campus), students were less likely to cite gaining experience or skills for a specific career, though even for those experiences, specific career preparation is the most common reason cited.

FIGURE 1

Main purpose for taking a work-based learning experience

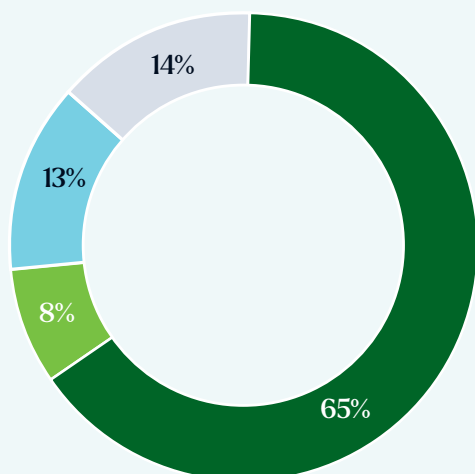
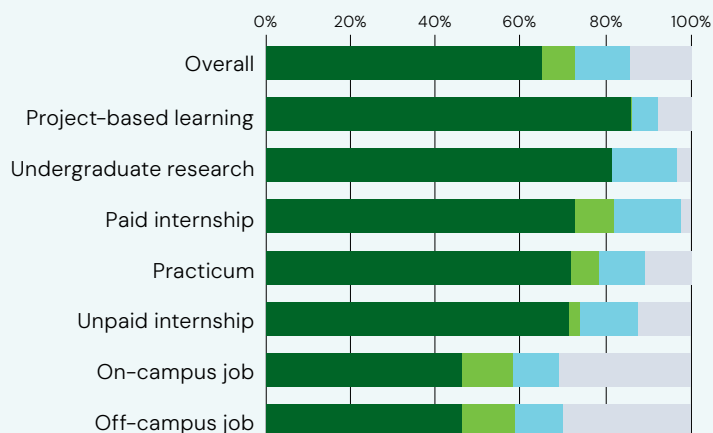


FIGURE 2

Main purpose for taking a work-based learning experience, by experience type



What was your main purpose for taking the experience?

- Gaining experience or skills in a specific career that I plan on pursuing as my chosen profession.
- Securing a permanent full-time job at the site of my experience.
- Exploring different career options because I am not yet sure about my chosen profession.
- Other.

The Value of Work-Based Learning

Given that a majority of students share a common goal of career preparation, it is important to understand how well different work-based learning experiences meet these goals and deliver career value. For this study, career value is measured by student ratings of the extent to which a work-based learning experience *"makes you a stronger candidate for the kind of job you want."* Figures 3–8 explore the different dimensions of career value as perceived by students engaged in work-based learning experiences.

Among all the work-based learning experiences examined in this study, the career value of paid internships has the most solid base in existing research. Prior research, including our own, has found that graduates who completed a paid internship earned more than their peers in their first job after completing their degree, even after controlling for other factors such as field of study and student characteristics.¹⁰

Paid internships also are linked to a stronger likelihood of career satisfaction, securing a college-level job, and being satisfied with career progress.¹¹

Nonetheless, the standard work-based learning approach may vary by field. For example, nursing, social work, architecture, and education majors often require practica, education majors have student teaching experiences, and biology and the natural sciences emphasize undergraduate experience working in a campus research laboratory.

Students endorsed the career value of these discipline-specific work-based learning pathways, too. Figure 3 shows how students – on a scale of 1–10 – rated the extent to which the experiences they had *"make you a stronger candidate for the kind of job you want."* We found that paid internships, undergraduate research, and practica all received very strong ratings with an average of 8 or higher.

FIGURE 3

Career value of work-based learning experience, by experience type

Please rate the extent to which your experience makes you a **stronger candidate for the kind of job you want**.



¹⁰ Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Elaine W. Leigh, and Dave Clayton, "The Power of Work-Based Learning" (Indianapolis: Strada Education Network, 2022). https://stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/031522_PV-report.pdf.

¹¹ State Opportunity Index – Full Report, (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2024). <https://stradaeducation.org/state-opportunity-index-full-report-2/>.

Some students had only one work-based learning experience, but others had multiple. Therefore, to understand more fully the dimensions of value, we asked students to assess the qualities of their most valuable work-based learning experience.

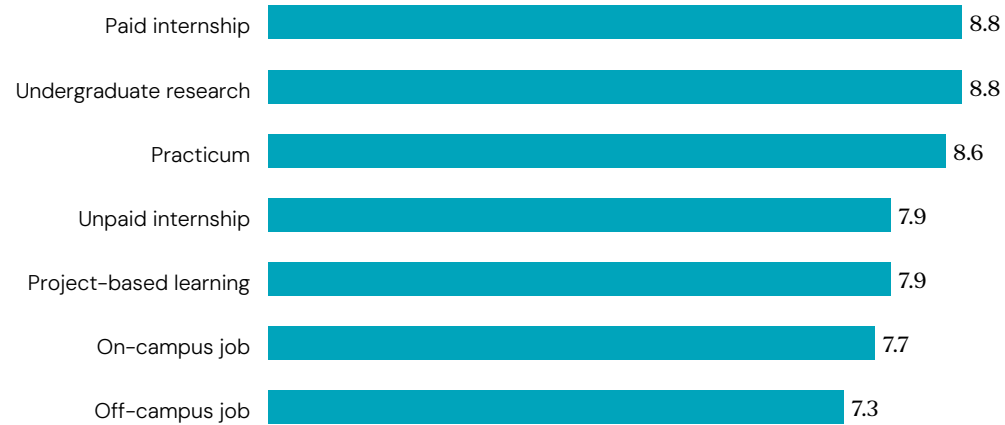
Unsurprisingly, when looking at the career value of their most valuable work-based learning experience, students' ratings go up across the board, as shown in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4

Career value of most valuable work-based learning experience, by experience type

Please rate the extent to which your experience makes you a **stronger candidate for the kind of job you want**.

1 = Not At All and 10 = A Great Deal



Value - most valuable experience

When describing their most valuable work-based learning experience, the career value of undergraduate research is rated as high as paid internships, with practica close behind. Unpaid internships and project-based learning rate slightly lower on the 10-point scale.

The biggest difference between the ratings of all students who had an experience and the ratings of those for whom the experience was their most valuable is found when examining on-campus jobs. On-campus jobs rated only 6.5 in career value among all respondents, but for those for whom it was their best experience, the average rating was 7.7. This

suggests that some on-campus jobs already are delivering strong career value, and that there may be potential to increase the career benefits for more students who work on campus. This could be a matter of embedding college-level skills into more on-campus jobs, as well as teaching students to translate the skills they are gaining across contexts.

Overall, 81 percent of students rated their most valuable experience as at least a 7 out of 10, and 40 percent rated it at a 10 out of 10, indicating that the vast majority of students found these work-based learning experiences made them a stronger candidate for the kind of job they seek (see Figure 5).

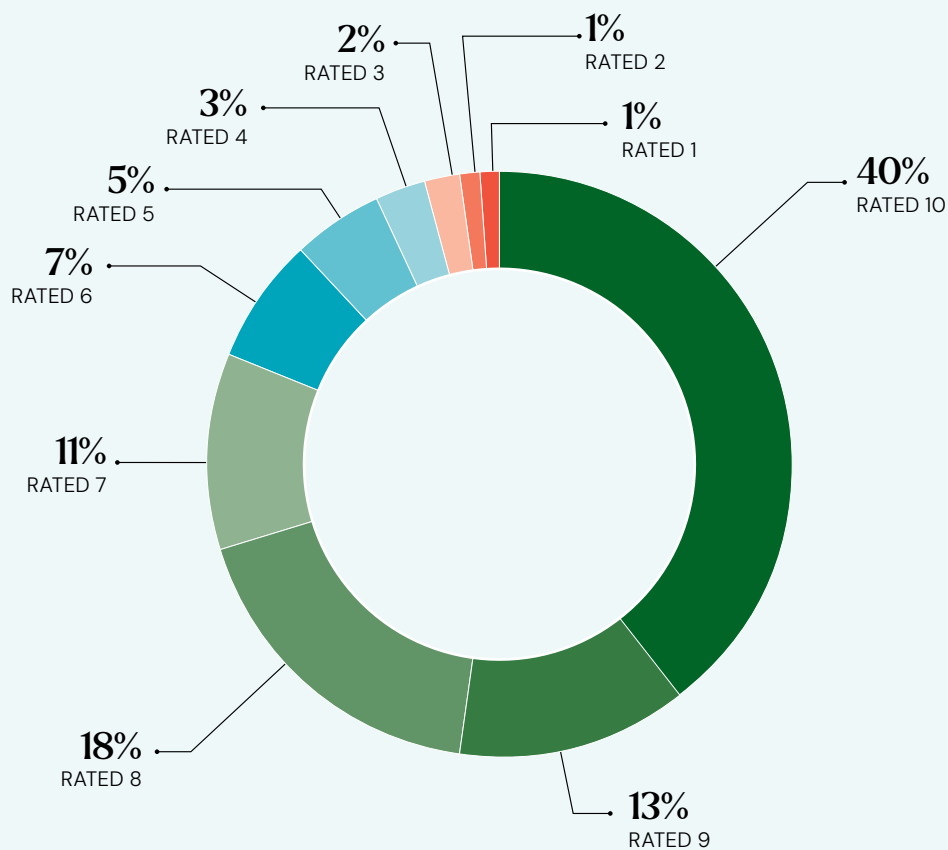


FIGURE 5

Career value of most valuable work-based learning experience

Please rate the extent to which your experience makes you a **stronger candidate for the kind of job you want**.

1 = Not At All and 10 = A Great Deal



Elements of Valuable Work-Based Learning

When examining the qualities of the experiences that students found most valuable, including types of tasks, skill development, mentoring, professional network development, pay, and credit, we find that the dimensions most strongly linked to higher ratings of career value are the development of social capital and technical skills.¹² In the student experience, it's both who you know and what you know that matter.

Social Capital

The development of social capital – relationships that students can leverage for future career opportunities – is particularly impactful. Those students who said that their work-based learning experience did expand their network a great deal rated the career value of the experience at 9.3, while those who said that their work-based learning experience had not expanded their professional network at all rated the career value of the experience at only 5.5 (see Figure 6). Prior research suggests that students who are the first in their families to attend college are less likely to participate in social

capital building activities, making it even more critical to find opportunities for these students to build relationships via their work-based learning experiences.¹³

Paid internships deliver the strongest boost in social capital, as measured by expanding students' professional networks and connecting them with people they feel will be helpful for career opportunities (see Figure 7). At the other end of the spectrum, experiences such as jobs or project-based learning in a course were rated much lower by students in terms of developing social capital that they can leverage for securing a future job.

FIGURE 6

Career value and expansion of professional network

Please rate the extent to which your experience makes you a **stronger candidate for the kind of job you want**.

1 = Not At All and 10 = A Great Deal



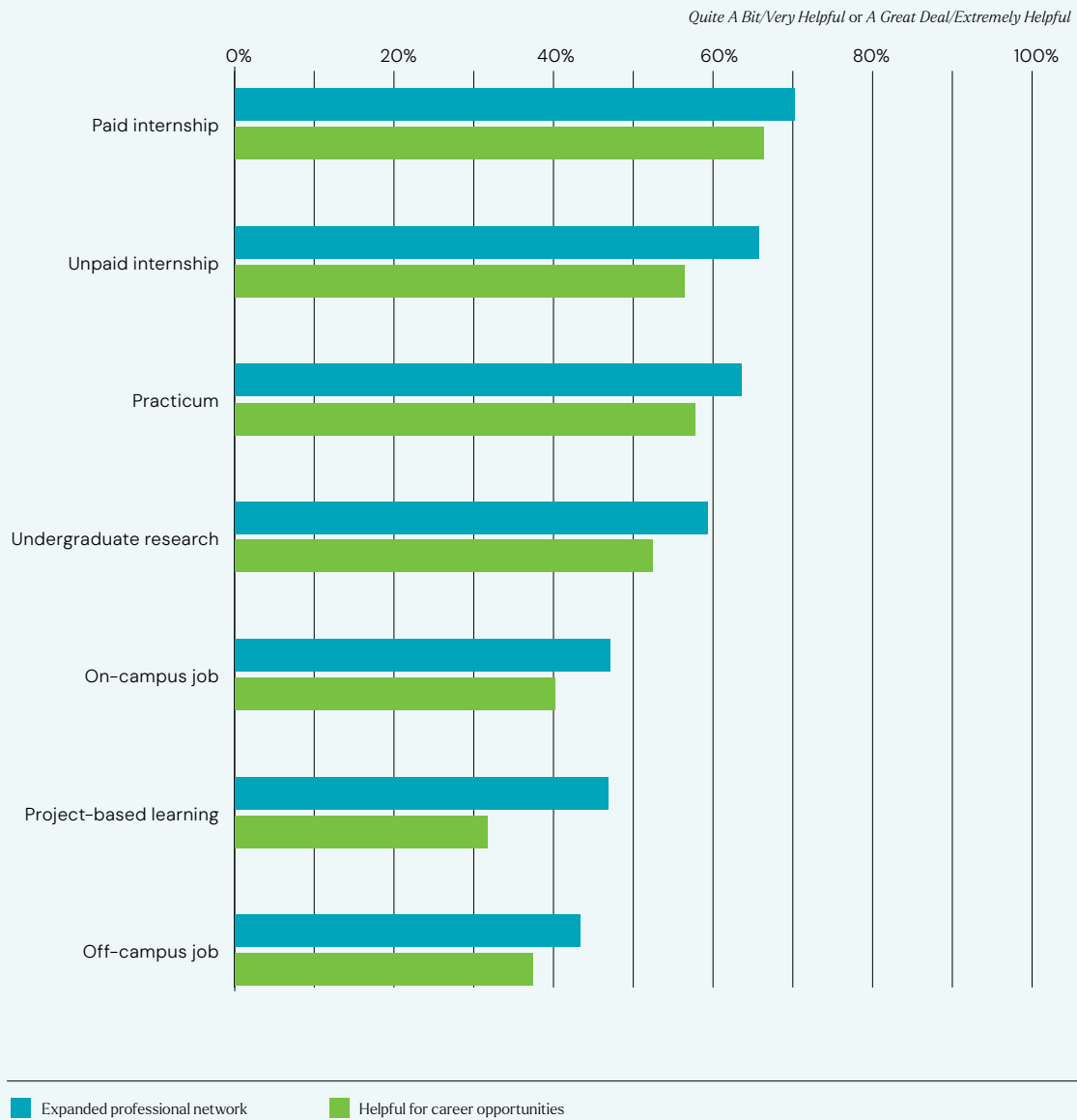
¹² See the appendix for the methodological description of how these dimensions were identified.

¹³ Elaine W. Leigh, "Understanding Undergraduates' Career Preparation Experiences," (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2021). <https://www.strada.org/reports/understanding-undergraduates-career-preparation-experiences>.

FIGURE 7

Expansion of professional network, by experience type

To what extent do you think your experience expanded your professional network?
How helpful do you think people you met in the experience will be for career opportunities?



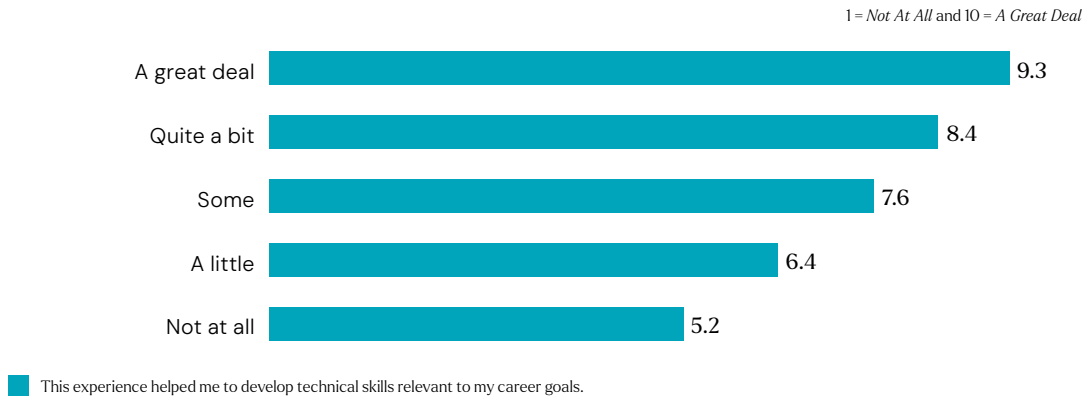
Skill Development

There also are strong links between the development of technical skills¹⁴ and the rating of the extent to which the experience makes them a stronger candidate for the kind of job they want (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8

Career value and development of technical skills

Please rate the extent to which your experience makes you a **stronger candidate for the kind of job you want**.

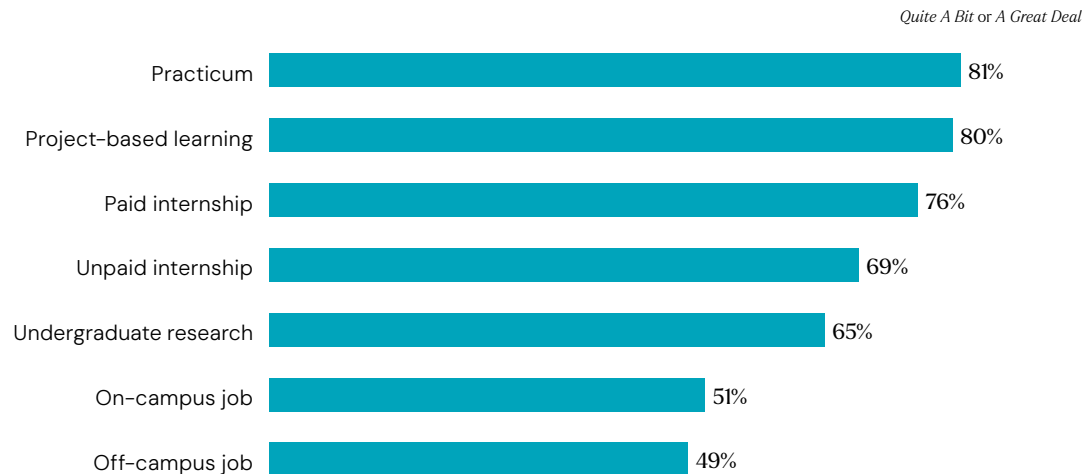


Students gave the highest ratings of technical skill development to practica, project-based learning experiences, and paid internships, followed by unpaid internships and undergraduate research (see Figure 9). About half of students reported that their on-campus or off-campus job has helped them to develop technical skills relevant to their career goals.

FIGURE 9

Technical skill development, by experience type

This experience helped me to develop technical skills relevant to my career goals.



¹⁴ The question wording was "This [work-based learning experience] helped me to develop technical skills relevant to my career goals (for example, coding in a particular programming language or use of specific software or equipment)."



Broad skills,¹⁵ while not linked as closely to students' perceptions of career value, are frequently cited by employers as something they are seeking from entry-level talent.¹⁶ In students' assessment of the development of broad skills, there are smaller differences across types of work-based learning experiences (see Figure 10). Internships, practica, and undergraduate research still rated most highly for broad skill development (66–70 percent said their experience helped them *Quite a bit* or *A great deal*), but 59 percent of students said that

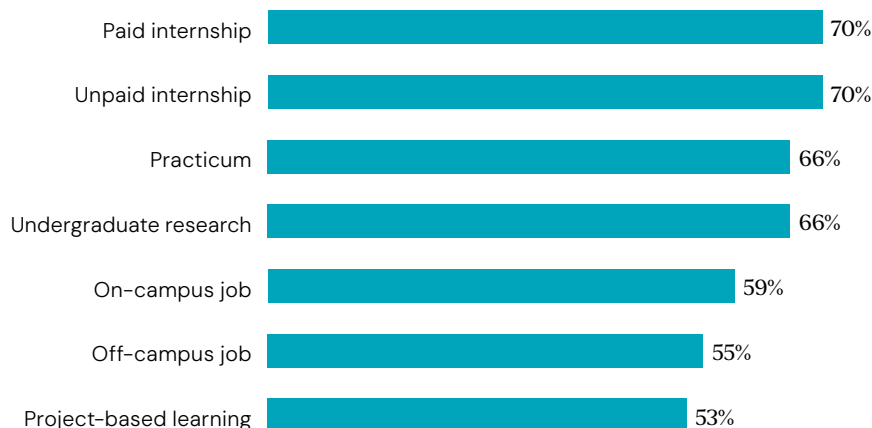
their on-campus job helped them to develop broad skills relevant to a range of careers. The lowest-rated experiences for broad skill development were off-campus jobs (also rated low on technical skill development) and project-based learning, which was very highly rated for technical skills. Some of these low ratings may be due to students not fully understanding which skills they had developed that could be broadly applicable. It is possible that asking students to rate their growth on skills such as communication or problem-solving could yield different results.

FIGURE 10

Broad skill development, by experience type

This experience helped me develop broad skills relevant to a range of different careers.

Quite A Bit or A Great Deal



¹⁵ The survey item was, "This [insert work-based learning experience] helped me to develop broad skills relevant to a range of different careers (for example, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership)."

¹⁶ Kevin Gray, "What Are Employers Looking for When Reviewing College Students' Resumes?" (Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers, December 9, 2024). <https://www.nacweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/what-are-employers-looking-for-when-reviewing-college-students-resumes/>.

Mentoring

Lastly, we examined student assessments of the quality of mentoring provided by supervisors, as career guidance and support has been linked to stronger first-job outcomes for recent graduates and

stronger career satisfaction.¹⁷ Students viewed mentoring as strong across the range of experiences, with about 8 in 10 students who participated in a practicum, internship, project-based learning, or undergraduate research experience saying that their

supervisor had provided Quite a bit or A great deal of mentorship to support their career goals (see Figure 11). Students reported less mentoring from supervisors in their on-campus and off-campus jobs, though there was a marked difference between mentoring for on-campus jobs (68 percent) as compared to off-campus jobs (49 percent).

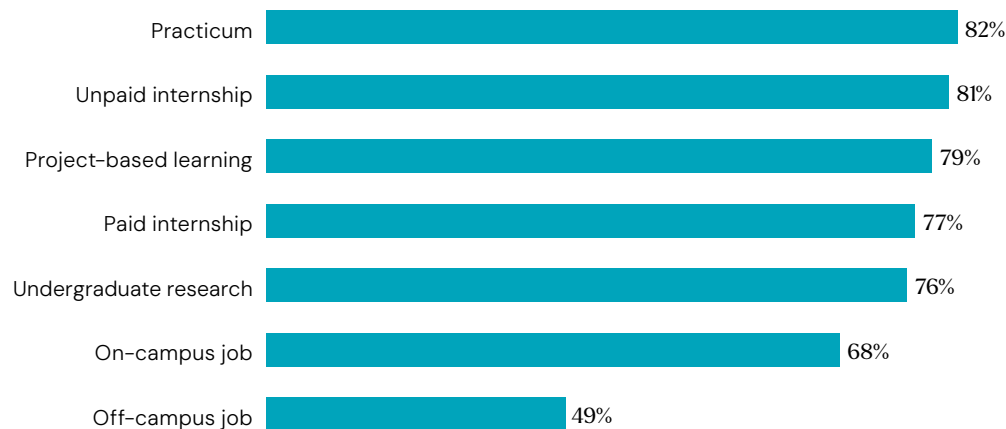


FIGURE 11

Mentoring, by experience type

To what extent did supervisor provide mentorship to support your career goals?

Quite A Bit or A Great Deal



¹⁷ Matthew T. Hora, Zi Chen, Matthew Wolfram, Jiahong Zhang, and Jacklyn John Fischer, "Designing effective internships: A mixed-methods exploration of the sociocultural aspects of intern satisfaction and development," *The Journal of Higher Education* 95, no. 5 (2024): 579–606; Nichole Torpey-Saboe, Melissa Leavitt, Akua Amankwah-Ayeh, and Dave Clayton, "Quality Coaching: Helping Students Navigate the Journey from Education to Career," (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, 2024). https://stradaeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Quality-Coaching-Full-Report_Oct.2024.pdf.



Pay and Credit

Paid internships showed evidence of stronger career value compared to unpaid internships – a finding that is consistent with prior research that found stronger employment and earnings outcomes for paid versus unpaid internships. The ways in which pay or credit contribute to value in modes of work-based learning other than internships are difficult to untangle in this study, as many experiences did not vary in these attributes; for example, nearly all project-based learning and practica were both credit-bearing and unpaid. More information on pay and credit for each type of experience can be found in the appendix.¹⁸

Apart from the question of value, both pay and credit help make work-based learning

accessible to more learners. Students reported that a heavy course load was their top barrier to participating in an internship.¹⁹ Embedding work-based learning experiences into courses or offering credit allows students to participate in these valuable experiences without imposing an additional time burden on them. Similarly, many students reported being unable to participate in internships because they needed to work or because the internship did not pay enough (or at all).²⁰ Paying students a competitive wage can ease these financial constraints and free students from being forced to choose between earning the money they need to support themselves in the short term and investing in career preparation to improve their future earnings.

¹⁸ See also: Kyoungjin Jang-Tucci, Matthew T. Hora, and Jiahong Zhang, "Gatekeeping at work: a multi-dimensional analysis of student, institutional, and employer characteristics associated with unpaid internships," (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions, November 2022).

¹⁹ "Building better internships: Understanding and improving the internship experience," (Indianapolis: Strada Education Foundation, May 2024). <https://stradaeducation.org/report/building-better-internships/>.

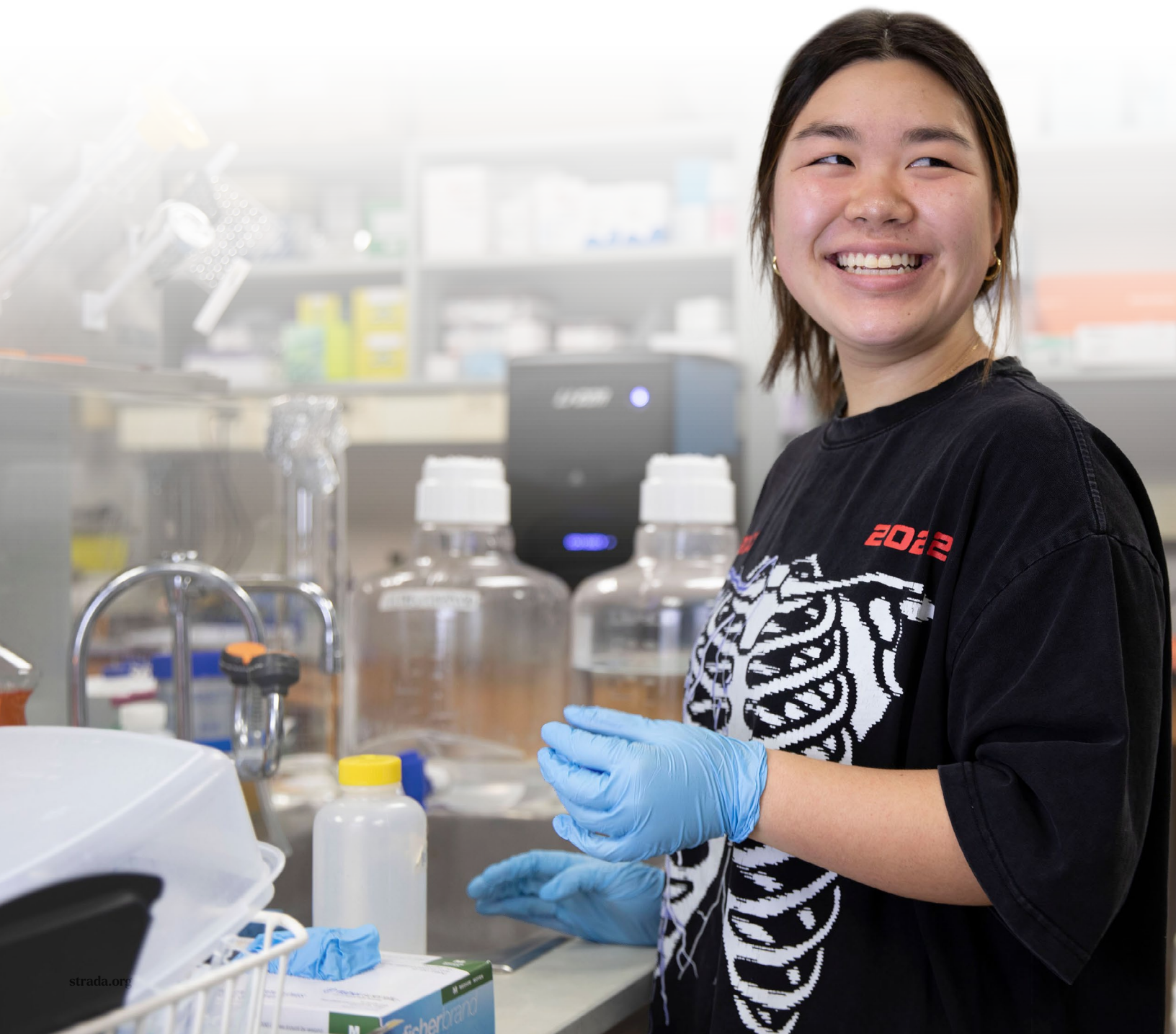
²⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion and Action Steps

Ensuring every student has access to at least one, if not multiple, work-based learning experience that provides career benefits will require both expanding access to those experiences with the clearest value and enhancing the value of other experiences that already are more widely accessible. One way to reach every student is to incorporate quality elements of work-based learning into things students are already doing, for example, embedding project-based learning

that includes employer partnership into a credit-bearing course or enhancing on-campus jobs with social capital building and professional skill development.

To help students fulfill their goal of making themselves stronger candidates for jobs in their chosen career, there are several steps that colleges and universities, in partnership with employers, can consider:



- **Set a goal for every student to have at least one career-aligned work-based learning experience.**
 - Create a work-based learning plan aligned with each major. This may be fulfilled by required practica or undergraduate research in fields in which these are the standard, or by expanding access to paid internships for majors in the liberal arts, social sciences, and psychology, for which work-based learning is relatively scarce and the potential benefits are highest.
 - Adopt shared definitions of work-based learning models, standards of quality, and data collection systems to track progress toward the goal – the more these definitions, quality markers, and data systems are standardized across the field, the more helpful this will be to understanding outcomes and establishing the evidence base for scaling solutions.
- **Bring work-integrated learning to where students already are – the classroom and on-campus jobs.**
 - Add a project-based learning component to fields of study in which work-based learning is scarce to help students see the relevance of what they are learning and gain technical skills applicable to their future career. This will require investment in professional development and practical resources for faculty and instructors, who may not have expertise in designing project-based experiences.
 - Train supervisors of on-campus student employees to be career mentors and help students understand and articulate the transferable skills they are gaining. Some resources created for on-campus student employees also might be made available for off-campus student employees.
- **Use employer feedback to design and embed relevant skill development in on-campus experiences.**
 - Provide opportunities for professional development of faculty and staff to learn from industry about which skills and industry credentials are most valuable.
 - Use employer feedback to embed relevant technical skills in courses and on-campus experiences and to help students translate the skills they are learning into language that will resonate with an employer.
 - Look for opportunities to align learning goals for courses, projects, work programs, and internships with existing competency frameworks that have been co-developed with employers. One place to find these frameworks is the Competency Model Clearinghouse from the U.S. Department of Labor Education and Training Administration.
- **Boost on-campus experiences with opportunities to develop social capital.**
 - Work with students to create plans for building networks in relevant fields and, where possible, make introductions to local employers and contacts who are working on similar problems of practice.
 - Bring students and employers together via employer class visits, assignments in which students interview community members, and structured mentoring programs involving alumni and parents working in fields of interest.

Appendix

Key Survey Items and Definitions

Participation question: During your time in college, have you participated in any of the following? (Select all that apply.)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paid internship (An internship is a position held within an established company or organization while also completing a college degree, certificate, or diploma program and performing tasks similar to those done by entry-level employees.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Practicum (A practicum immerses students in a profession-specific environment under close guidance, enabling them to develop practical skills and integrate classroom knowledge with real-world applications, particularly common in fields such as education, health care, and social work.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unpaid internship (An internship is a position held within an established company or organization while also completing a college degree, certificate, or diploma program and performing tasks similar to those done by entry-level employees.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Project-based learning activity in a course (Project-based learning involves participating in real industry projects that help students apply classroom knowledge and help employers fulfill short-term needs.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Micro-internship (A micro-internship is a short-term, project-based work experience that involves fewer than 40 hours of work, allowing students to gain practical skills by completing a specific project within a professional setting.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Service learning (Service learning integrates volunteer work with academic coursework, allowing students to deepen their understanding by applying classroom knowledge to address community needs.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Apprenticeship (An apprenticeship is a paid job that integrates on-the-job training with classroom learning, allowing individuals to learn a trade or profession and gain real-world experience under the guidance of an experienced mentor.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate research experience (Undergraduate research provides students with the opportunity to participate in ongoing scholarly investigations alongside faculty mentors, contributing to new knowledge in a specific field.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Co-op program (Co-ops provide students with alternating semesters of classroom study and paid professional work experiences, fostering a deep connection between theory and practice in a specific career field.) | <input type="checkbox"/> On-campus job |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Off-campus job |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> None of the above |

Purpose question: What was your main purpose for taking the [INSERT EXPERIENCE]?

- 1) Exploring different career options because I am not yet sure about my chosen profession.
- 2) Gaining experience or skills in a specific career that I plan on pursuing as my chosen profession.
- 3) Securing a permanent full-time job at the site of my [INSERT EXPERIENCE].
- 4) Other (*Write-in*).

Career value question: Please rate the extent to which your [INSERT EXPERIENCE] makes you a stronger candidate for the kind of job you want. *Use a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 equals Not At All and 10 equals A Great Deal.*

Most valuable experience question: Which of the work-based learning experiences that you participated in has been most valuable?

Professional network question: To what extent do you think your [INSERT EXPERIENCE] expanded your professional network?

Instrumental interpersonal connections

question: How helpful do you think the people you met in your [INSERT EXPERIENCE] will be in helping you obtain future career opportunities?

Technical skills question: Please rate the following aspect of your [INSERT EXPERIENCE] using the scale below. This [INSERT EXPERIENCE] helped me to develop technical skills relevant to my career goals (for example, coding in a particular programming language or use of specific software or equipment).

Broad skills question: Please rate the following aspect of your [INSERT EXPERIENCE] using the scale below. This [INSERT EXPERIENCE] helped me to develop broad skills relevant to a range of different careers (for example, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership).

Mentoring question: To what extent did your supervisor provide coaching, feedback, or mentorship to support your career goals?



Method of Analysis: Most Important Work-Based Learning Characteristics

The method for identifying the most important work-based learning characteristics was a two-step process.

First, items on a similar topic were tested for internal consistency or reliability to see if they were measuring the same underlying concept. In cases in which the Chronbach's alpha was greater than 0.7, these items were combined into a single index. This was the case with the items on social capital.

Second, survey items or indices were put into a multiple regression model, with career value as the dependent variable. The statistically significant variables with the highest t-score in this model – the social capital index and the item on technical skill development – were identified as the most important characteristics of work-based learning associated with high career value.

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