

**Increasing High-Quality Internship Participation Among African American Males at
Kennesaw State University**

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Area of Inquiry

Organizational Background

Kennesaw State University is a large public university located in Kennesaw, Georgia, with approximately 42,000 students enrolled between two campuses about 10 miles apart. According to the most recent enrollment data, 25 percent of the KSU undergraduate student population identifies as African American/Black and male, which is about 10,604 students. (Kennesaw State University Student Enrollment Profile, n.d.). The Department of Career Planning and Development (CPD) is housed within the university's student retention services division and has offices on both campuses. CPD employs 19 staff members, which includes 12 career counselors and 7 employee relations staff. Career counselors assist students as they explore internships and career opportunities through classroom workshops, 1:1 career advising, resume writing, interview preparation, and other developmental activities. The employee relations staff are primarily concerned with interfacing with external partners for internship and career fairs and providing on-campus opportunities for students to meet with recruiters and other staff who can answer common questions about culture, climate, and pathways to careers. CPD hopes that access to these services will positively impact students' participation in experiential learning opportunities.

While the menu of services offered by the Department of Career Planning and Development is wide-ranging, the department is concerned with the number of students who access their services and participate in internship opportunities. The Director of Career Advising is specifically concerned about the number of African American men competing for high-quality internship opportunities at Kennesaw State University. KSU has assembled a Quality Enhancement Planning Committee focusing on engagement, including internships, service learning, and undergraduate research for the entire student population. CPD staff have

representation on this committee but would like to further their understanding of how to increase the engagement of underrepresented student populations. While the QEP committee is more focused on increasing student engagement using a one size fits all approach. According to data collected by the Department of Career Planning and Development staff, internship placements for African American/Black males were between 13-14 percent of the total internship placements across demographics during the Fall 2021 through Summer 2022 academic year. In addition, this population is sought after by employers to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion within specific career fields, such as engineering and business careers. However, their participation in internships has yet to catch up with the demand for more diversity within the workplace.

Problem of Practice

Experiential Learning, also referred to by Zilvinskis (2022) as a high-impact practice (HIP), includes service learning, undergraduate research, and internships. For this capstone project and to align with KSU's Quality Enhancement Project around engagement, experiential learning will focus on internships to gauge students' preparation for paid, full-time employment within their chosen career field. KSU has adopted its definition of internships from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), which defines the opportunities as one-time work or service experiences related to a student's major or career goal (NACE, 2016). These activities can be paid or unpaid and may or may not be completed for course credit. Existing literature has identified internship opportunities as a primary indicator to employers that students are career-ready (Hora et al., 2021). I have decided to focus my study in the following areas to better understand African American/Black male students' intentions for participation in internships and make recommendations to CPD to increase their future participation in work-based experiences.

1) Internships are an indicator of career readiness.

The QEP has outlined indicators that signal to employers that students are ready to work within their chosen field or industry or are deemed career ready. However, the committee must examine the institutional structures that may hinder students from participating in such activities. The campus provides programs for a population of students that have the privilege of time and resources. Ensuring all students have pathways to career exploration and experiential learning opportunities is important to the Career Planning and Development Department at Kennesaw State University.

2) The gap between underrepresented populations and their counterparts regarding high-quality internship participation.

Kennesaw State University's Career Planning and Development Department understands the need to provide career counseling and other support to students that help them become career ready. Their participation in the QEP committee is evidence of their work; however, they would like to take their effort a step further to better understand the experiences of African American/Black men as they seek high-quality internships. In addition, during this academic year, KSU's student demographics have labeled it a majority-minority university, meaning the number of students who identify as a minority population (by race/ethnicity) has now surpassed the number of white men and women (the majority) who enroll at the university. Addressing barriers for students with minoritized identities will be prudent for the university.

3) Understanding Barriers that may hinder African American/Black males from participating in internships and highlighting attributes of students within the population who successfully participated in the experiences.

Understanding the barriers African American/Black men encounter to participate in internship opportunities could offer Kennesaw State University and the Career Planning and Development Department the chance to decrease barriers and provide equity in practices that have been regarded as a high priority among the universities leadership as is evident by the development of the QEP committee. In addition, research on the outcomes of HIPs also suggests that the benefits are most prevalent among historically underrepresented students; however, this group is the least likely to participate in such opportunities (Grabsch et al., 2021; Kuh, 2008). The gap in participation suggests equity issues in implementing HIPs within the higher education setting.

The University has committed to increasing student opportunities that yield greater benefits to the state's economy as a part of its goals. Increasing the number of students who participate in internships assists them in also delivering on their promise, and CPD is a key stakeholder in making this shift happen. The research synthesis section of my white paper will focus on the importance of internships, elements of high-quality internship participation, and barriers underrepresented students experience to participating in high-quality internships.

Capstone Purpose

The goal of my capstone project is to identify institutionalized practices that may impact internship participation among African American male students, determine strategies to increase equity in internship participation and make recommendations to the Career Planning and Development staff that will increase the percentage of students who identify as African

American males and attain high-quality internship opportunities while enrolled at Kennesaw State University.

Research Synthesis

Scholars have reported that HIPs contribute to higher persistence of students, grade point averages, and increased student interactions with faculty (Grabsch et al., 2021; Hora et al., 2021; McDaniel & Jura, 2022). Opportunities classified as HIPs according to McDaniel and Jura (2022) include the following characteristics:

1. substantial time and effort directed toward an educational task;
2. shared experiences between the students, peers, and faculty;
3. directives for students to step outside their comfort zone and engage diverse worldviews;
4. frequent high-quality feedback;
5. opportunities for students to apply what they are learning to new settings; and
6. conditions that encourage students to synthesize what they are learning in ways that change their worldview and self-awareness (p. 742).

While internships may be considered HIPs, not all experiences embody the abovementioned characteristics making it difficult to make causal claims linking the internship experience to outcomes. Hence, my capstone project focused on developing equitable practices and assisting my partner organization with building structures that assist students in developing skills needed for favorable employment outcomes.

Why Are Internships Important?

Internships are defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers as a one-time work or service experience related to a student's major or career goal, which can be paid or unpaid (Collins, 2021). The relevance of internship experiences is thought to be valuable for students who are completing their undergraduate degrees as these opportunities have the

potential to create career pathways after graduation. According to the 2021 employer survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), the conversion rate of interns to full-time employees is about 62 percent; during the pandemic, these offers increased from 68 percent to about 80 percent (Collins, 2021). Scholars and practitioners have worked to explain the differences in access and internship participation by assessing the gap in internship participation among underrepresented populations.

Underrepresented populations and high-quality internships

Underrepresented student populations are least likely to participate in out-of-class opportunities such as internships, study abroad, and service-learning. This is especially true for African Americans and other minoritized students (Kuh, 2008). Minoritization refers to the ongoing devaluing and marginalization of the experience of socially stigmatized identities (Wolfgram et al., 2023; Kuh, 2009). Investigating and understanding the issue as systemic rather than deficiencies held by minoritized students is essential for developing interventions that decrease the access gap.

It is also important to note that while many studies examine internship participation among underrepresented populations, few articles examine this phenomenon for African American men and do so without highlighting academic and social deficits that impact their experiences or comparing them to African American women. I want this study to center on a more critical approach that acknowledges and values African American men's educational and personal experiences and addresses the gaps in KSU's strategies to provide opportunities for high-quality internship participation.

Barriers to Internships

The Kennesaw State University student population is diverse regarding students' race, ethnicity, and economic status. In reference to the literature that addresses barriers to internships among underrepresented populations, the most common impediments to internship access were financial, internship scheduling, location, and availability of opportunities within the student's chosen major (Hora et al., 2021; Hora et al., 2020; Grabsch et al. al., 2021; Moss-Pech, 2021; and Wolfgram et al., 2023). Low or no wages are a barrier for students who need to support themselves or their families as they complete their college degrees (Hora et al., 2021; Grabsch et al., 2021). Another documented barrier is students' need to find internships that allow a flexible work schedule so coursework can be completed and other obligations can also be tended to, like family, social life, extra-curricular activities, etc. (Hora et al., 2001; Hora et al., 2020; and Wolfgram et al., 2023).

The final two documented barriers were the internship's location and the availability of opportunities within the student's chosen majors. The location of the internship site is important, especially if traveling for the internship poses a hardship for the student (Hora et al., 2021). Those who did not have the means to travel were less likely to participate in internships. In addition, students who did not find internships within their majors did not move forward with internship opportunities. This also suggests that higher education institutions that can develop connections with employers can provide their students ample opportunities to be supported with internships (Wolfgram et al., 2023). Advising and institutional support are essential to assist students in the internship-seeking process.

What is a high-quality internship?

Matthew Hora (2020) further discusses barriers in his analysis of factors that impede internship participation and what makes an internship of high quality. High-quality internships

require intentional connections between the student, worksite, and university. According to Matthew Hora et al. (2020), this trifecta impacts two factors determining high-quality experiences: student satisfaction and supervisor support. Additional elements that classify an internship as high-quality are mentoring, task clarity, compensation, and links to the student's academic program and value, the developmental outcomes for students who participated in internships (Hora, 2020 & O'Shea et al., 2022). What is most important about this work is that the research focused less on students' deficits but on the barriers for students who may have been interested in internships and did not participate. Students across studies indicated the value of internship participation, including real work or hands-on experience and being able to explore different pathways in their chosen field and workplace cultures that could influence future decisions (Hora, 2020; Grabsch, 2021; Collins, 2021). This indicates that not only are internships important for students' employability after graduation, but it is also important for students to understand the environments and contexts in which they will work to make informed decisions about moving forward in their chosen field.

Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework for my project relies on two models: the Process Model of Internships developed by Hora et al. (2020) and the Anti-deficit Achievement Framework by Shaun Harper (2012). The Process Model of the Internship Experiences seeks to identify factors that facilitate high-quality internship attainment for those who participate and barriers for those who do not engage in the opportunities. The Anti-deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF) is concerned with reframing African American male achievement from one that centralizes their identity as marked by underrepresentation and underachievement.

Process Model of Internship Experiences

The process model of the internship experience is concerned with the interplay of the student, university, and internship organization. This relationship triad is essential to determining student satisfaction with their experiences and other outcomes, such as mentorship and gaining valuable experience in their future careers. The core functions of this process are gaining access to internship opportunities, program structures that influence students' conceptualization of program satisfaction and development, and career-related outcomes, such as preparedness and employment. By complicating the narrative that internships are high-impact practices in and of themselves, this model challenges the notion that all experiential experiences are the same (internships, co-ops, practicum, capstone, etc.) and their value can be evaluated through a question that asks whether a student has completed the opportunity. I used the Process Model of Internships Experiences in my study to assess the process students follow to determine whether they will participate in internships and if those experiences have elements needed to be considered high-quality.

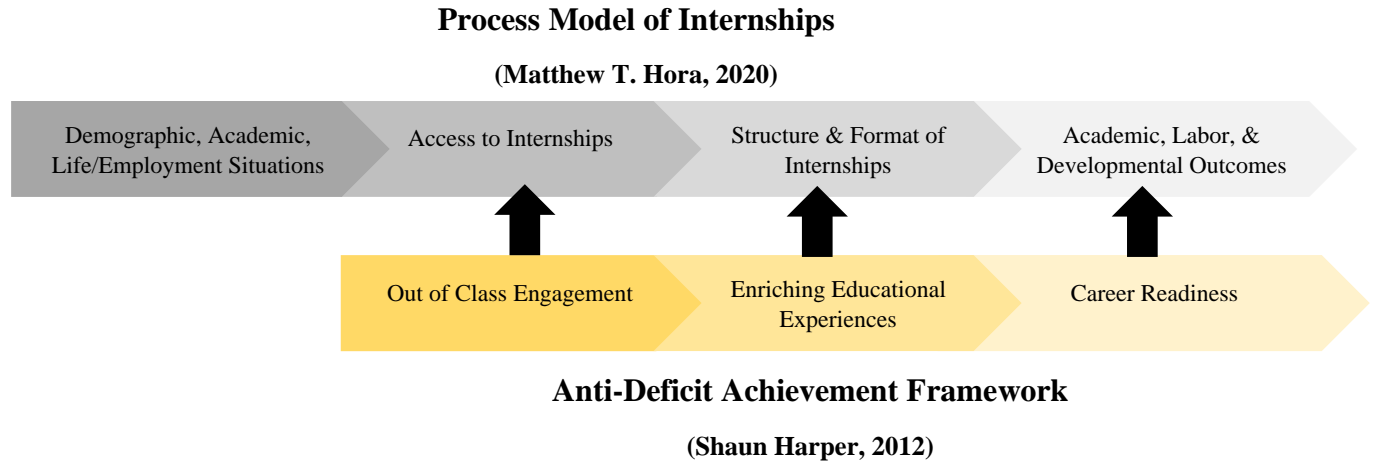
Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF)

Approaching this topic through a critical lens allows me and the partner organization space to differentiate black male collegiate experiences from their white counterparts who attend primarily white colleges and universities (PWIs). Previous African American male achievement studies have been rooted in Black male exceptionalism. Paul Butler (2013) explained Black male exceptionalism as “the premise that African American men fare more poorly than any other group in the United States” (p. 485). This type of framework centers on a deficit approach that does not account for the experiences of African American male students deemed high achievers. My capstone project is grounded in the anti-deficit approach as the primary framework for understanding how African American males at Kennesaw State University negotiate aspects of their experiences to participate in high-quality internship opportunities.

Shaun Harper (2012) developed the Anti-deficit Achievement Framework (ADAF), which inverts commonly asked questions concerning educational disadvantage, underrepresentation, insufficient preparation, academic underperformance, disengagement, and attrition (p.5). While three primary constructs factor into the ADAF (pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success), I used career readiness as a part of the post-college success component of the theory to assess African American male experiences with internship attainment at Kennesaw State University.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Project Questions

I answered the following questions regarding internship participation among African American males at Kennesaw State University using the Anti-deficit Achievement Framework and Process Model of the Internship Experience:

- a. Are there barriers that impact internship participation among African American males at Kennesaw State University?
- b. Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity before graduation?

The frameworks assisted in (1) identifying how students conceptualize their own internship experiences or the lack thereof, (2) understanding the variance in internship experiences among the population, and (3) determining how barriers impact internship attainment among African American/Black males at Kennesaw State University.

Project Design

Data was collected by a mixed methods approach to answer the project questions. An explanatory sequential mix methods design was adopted for my project. Explanatory sequential mixed methods design is characterized by gathering quantitative and then using qualitative data to clarify and interpret the quantitative data (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017, p. 197). I utilized a survey for this design that was then used to develop an interview protocol for one-on-one interviews with participants who self-selected while completing the initial survey. The one-on-one interviews were held with current undergraduate students to gather information about their internship participation within the past 12 months. Figure 1 provides an outline that connects the study questions, data collection, and conceptual framework.

Figure 2

Data Collection Outline

Study Question	Data Collection Method	Conceptual Framework
Are there barriers that impact internship participation among African American males at Kennesaw State University?	Survey Semi-structured interviews	Process Theory of Internships Anti-Deficit Achievement Model
Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity before graduation?	Semi-structured interviews	Process Theory of Internships Anti-deficit Achievement model

Quantitative Data Collection

I adapted a survey instrument developed for the National Survey of College Internships for this project. The tool provided questions in six parts and utilized skip logic for questions designed for students who participated in internships and those who did not during the most

recent calendar year (Chen et al., 2021). The survey questions used can be found the Appendix C.

Data for my study was gathered through purposeful sampling, which is the strategic selection of participants based on their ability to answer a study's research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 83). The decision for the sampling design was primarily due to issues I encountered when trying to disseminate the survey through Kennesaw State University's Office of Institutional Research. The survey was disseminated to students in the Career Planning and Development database in November 2022 via a Qualtrics link. Therefore, most students had at least one touch point (attended a career coaching appointment, career/job fair, workshop, etc.) with CPD. Follow-up emails were sent to students in December 2022 and January 2023. Although I did not analyze data for all participants for this study, the information could be helpful to the Department of Career Planning and Development.

The questionnaire began with items that funneled students through the appropriate questions based on their internship participation. If students participated in an internship, they answered subsequent questions about their experience. Students who did not participate in an internship within the past 12 months answered questions about their perceived barriers so that I could better understand why they did not participate in the high-impact practice. Additional items in the survey included questions about their internship experience, equitable access to high-quality internships, and assessment of the quality of internship opportunities.

The survey ended with a final set of demographic questions to gather information about participants' race, ethnicity, gender, work status (at employment other than an internship), and willingness to participate in an interview as a follow-up to the survey. These questions were used

to sort the data for African American male students since the survey was sent to every student within the CPD database, not just the group that is the focus of my study.

Survey Questions and Connection to Conceptual Framework

I asked the following survey questions to highlight the student characteristics that help or hinder their completion of an internship, perceived access to opportunities, the triadic relationship between the student, the university sponsor, and the internship supervisor, and internship outcomes. Figure 2 details the alignment between the conceptual framework and survey questions.

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework and Survey Questions Alignment

Study Question	Conceptual Framework	Survey Question
Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity prior to graduation?	Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework	Student’s intentions to participate in an internship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is an internship required to graduate from your academic program? • In the past 12 months, were you interested in an internship? • Currently, what type of program are you in? • What was the main purpose for your taking the internship?
Are there barriers that impact internship participation among African American males at Kennesaw State University?	Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework	Access to internships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select each item you consider as a reason for why you were unable to pursue an internship. • During the past 12 months, have you worked for pay at a job that is NOT an internship?
Study Question: Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity prior to graduation?	Process Model of Internships Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework	Internship Outcomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How satisfied were you with your internship experience? • Please think of your most recent internship experience and rate how related do you feel your goals were to your academic program? • Was the internship paid or unpaid? • How did you initially learn about your internship opportunity?

In addition to the survey data I collected, the Career Planning and Development department provided preliminary data on how many African American male students currently access their services and participate in internship and career fair offerings. The department also captured students' experiential learning experiences across all majors at the university. This data is relevant to identify other areas of inquiry concerning internship attainment that may warrant follow-up questions, which were included in the interview protocol.

Qualitative Data Collection

The final survey question asked if the participants were willing to be contacted for an interview to further discuss their experiences with internship participation at Kennesaw State University. I asked the students to schedule a 45-minute time frame to discuss their experiences securing a high-quality internship. Interview questions focused specifically on seeking and preparing for internship participation, individuals or groups who played a role in their participation, and the relationship between the student, their internship supervisor, and the faculty advisor. For students who did not complete an internship, the questions focused on the support the needed and the barriers that impact their ability to secure an internship. One interviewer conducted these interviews in a semi-structured format. The interviews were collected using the Zoom platform and transcribed with Otter.ai. Figure 3 outlines the interview protocol for each qualitative data collection.

Figure 4*Individual Interview Protocol*

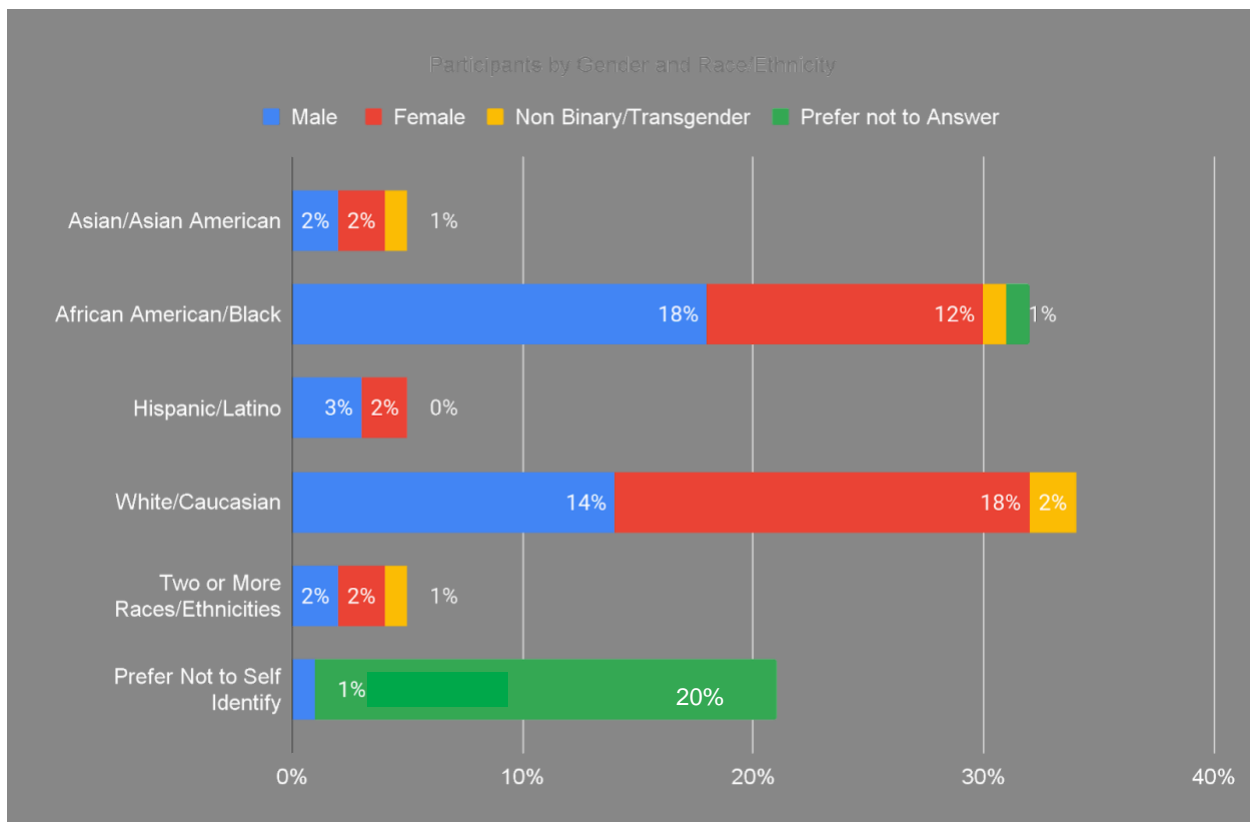
Conceptual Framework	Study Question	Interview Question
Anti-Deficit Achievement Model	<p>a. Are there barriers that impact internship participation among African American males at Kennesaw State University?</p> <p>b. Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity prior to graduation?</p>	<p>1. Have you participated in an internship program?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, tell me about your experience seeking an internship opportunity. • Are you a member of any student success programs (AAMI, Thrive, Achieve Atlanta, Honors College, FSL, etc.)? <p>2. How have these affiliations assisted you in seeking internships?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If no, did/do you have intentions of completing an internship? • Tell me about your barriers to seeking an internship.
Anti-Deficit Achievement Model Process Model of Internships	<p>b. Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity prior to graduation?</p>	<p>1. Will you describe the tasks you were assigned during your internship? Please list examples of the work you completed during your internship.</p> <p>2. Will you describe the level of support you received from your faculty/staff advisor at KSU?</p>
Process Model of Internships	<p>b. Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship opportunity prior to graduation?</p>	<p>Describe how satisfied you were with your internship experience.</p>

Data Analysis

After coding the survey questions, I used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyze the data. I ran descriptive statistics to review the items and deleted cases that were missing data. Descriptive statistics helped me describe the sample of participants. I used measures of frequency and variance to describe the population when applicable. At the end of the recruitment phase, 190 surveys were recorded in the Qualtrics platform. CPD disseminated the survey to every student who engaged with their range of services, so the survey participants included students who did not identify as African American/Black or male. Race/ethnicity and gender data for the entire sample can be found in Figure 4. Of the 190 surveys, 169 were usable after the data was reviewed and cleaned.

Figure 4

Survey Respondent Demographics by Race/Ethnicity and Gender



Qualitative Analysis

After I recorded and transcribed the interviews, they were reviewed for missing or inaccurate statements. The interviews were then uploaded into MAXQDA and analyzed based on three parent themes. These themes were derived from the interviews and represented in the research on internship participation among underrepresented student populations. For a theme to be included, it had to appear in at least three interviews. When themes were created, I ran an analysis in MAXQDA to determine quotes corresponding to the themes. Quotes from respondents are highlighted in the findings section.

Data Collection and Analysis Report

There were 30 survey respondents (18 percent) identified as African American or Black males. In addition, about 23 percent of the students who identified as the population of focus for my study also responded that they participated in an internship within the past 12 months. Of the 23 percent, about 14 percent of the respondents reported that their academic department required their internship. The average hours spent at their worksite was 24 (hours per week), and 30 percent of the opportunities were paid. In addition, 49 percent of survey respondents indicated they were interested in participating in an internship in the past 12 months.

Table 1*African American Male Internship Participation*

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Internship Participation (n=30)		
Yes	7	23%
No	23	77%
Internship Requirement (n=7)		
Yes	1	14%
No	4	57%
Not Sure	2	29%
Compensation (n=7)		
Yes	7	100%
No	0	0%
Intention to Complete an Internship (n=23)		
Yes	22	96%
No	1	4%

The low number of respondents who identified as African American and male made it harder for me to analyze the data using methods other than descriptive statistics. However, it is worth noting that out of the 30 students, only 7 reported an internship experience. This allowed me to better understand the barriers African American male students reported to high-quality internship participation.

It is also important to note that there may have been more students who would have similar experiences but to get the most complete survey responses, I included options for students not to identify their race/ethnicity and gender. While I could not put them into categories based on race/ethnicity or gender, there was still some rich data that was gathered that can assist me in explaining the barriers and attributes that contribute to students' experiences in their pursuit of participating in high-quality internships.

Overall, students were satisfied or extremely satisfied with their internship experiences. Students also indicated the level of contact they had with their supervisor. The most significant was that students rated their supervisors high on a scale of 1-5 in their ability to suggest strategies to assist them in achieving their goals (86 percent), give feedback on their performance (71 percent), and assign work that presented opportunities for them to learn new skills (67 percent).

Regarding support from campus internship coordinators (faculty, staff, or other personnel), 14 percent of the students reported that they made regular contact with their internship coordinator at least once per month, and 57 percent met daily or weekly. Among the internship participants, 57 percent were provided a written document outlining their internship's learning goals and activities, either by their internship coordinator or host organization. Overall, most African American male students who responded to the survey reported being either extremely or somewhat satisfied (85 percent) with their internship experience.

Qualitative Data Analysis Report

I utilized individual interviews to determine the barriers to students obtaining internships and better understand the attributes that may increase the likelihood of completing such opportunities. Eight interviews were completed and were comprised of four students who had

participated in an internship and three students who did not complete an internship opportunity. All students, except one identified as a senior, and one student was a sophomore. Parent themes and the number of times they appeared in files can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Qualitative Analysis Codebook (parent codes)

Theme	Description	Files	References
Internship Experience	Quality of Internship Experience	3	15
Affiliations	Prior experiences and connections to create develop readiness	5	30
Barriers/Challenges	Hindrances to internship participation	4	25

I will discuss the findings and recommendations from the one-on-one interview in more detail in the subsequent sections of my white paper.

Study Findings

I have generated three findings from my data analysis that will be shared with the Career Planning and Development Department at Kennesaw State University. The first finding corresponds to the research question that addresses barriers that impact internship participation among African American men at Kennesaw State University. The final two findings correspond to the research question that refers to attributes that increase the likelihood that African American men will participate in at least one high-quality internship before they graduate from Kennesaw State University.

Finding #1

Research Question: Are there barriers that impact internship participation among African American men at Kennesaw State University?

The respondents who did not participate in an internship in the past 12 months were asked about barriers to participation. The top five barriers included:

1. course load
2. needing to work a job
3. inability to find internship opportunities
4. Insufficient pay
5. not being selected for internship opportunities

Table 3*Rank Order of Barriers*

Barrier	Mean	SD
Inability to Find an Internship	2.45	1.70
Course Load	2.92	2.81
Needing to Work a Job	2.90	1.91
Insufficient Pay	3.43	2.30
Not Selected for Internship Opportunities	3.17	3.35

All the barriers, except not being selected, indicate that students needed either time or financial means to participate in the experiences if selected. Many undergraduate students work to support themselves, and their work obligations may not allow for co-curricular activities (Hora et al., 2001). About 53 percent of the respondents indicated that they worked for pay at a job other than an internship while taking courses at Kennesaw State University. About 63 percent of the respondents indicated they worked 20 or more hours per week, even if they held an internship position. The findings were consistent with the research on barriers to internships among underrepresented populations, which indicates that the top barriers are needing a job outside of an internship and having a heavy course load (Grabsch et al., 2021; Hora et al., 2021).

These findings warrant further investigation into the set-up of internships as complimentary to coursework at KSU and understanding the financial needs of the students, in addition to marketing internship opportunities in a way that does not impact the quality of the experience or students' quality of life via their finances. I have a concern that many students indicated they were not selected or did not know how to access internships. Their inability to be

selected for an internship may indicate their limited access to tools that provide guidance in preparation for internship opportunities.

Michael Hora et al. (2021) wrote extensively about the importance of internships for underrepresented populations. The National Association of Colleges and Employers recognized that internship opportunities are important and that in 2021, about 71 percent of interns were converted to full-time employees (Collins, 2021). However, there may need to be more work to assess the role DEI plays in creating equity for underrepresented students.

Barriers to participation were also discussed with students during individual interviews. The impact of working a job not classified as an internship was mentioned by almost all students who did not participate in an internship within the past 12 months. One student discussed the need to work and how it hindered co-curricular activities and their ability to develop connections on campus.

Bobby: "...I had just recently resigned from a job. I worked there for about six months. But I recently resigned because although I was making good money, I worked from nine to six. I wasn't getting connected and I wasn't getting any networking. I felt like I was wasting my college experience. And I, I don't, I don't want that".

Another common barrier was that students did not know where to start searching or preparing for internship opportunities, which was represented in the survey findings and the one-on-one interviews. When asked to describe how barriers to internships can be reduced, three respondents spoke about the process of finding internship opportunities. A respondent who had not participated in an internship opportunity said the following:

Javier: "Most of it would probably be more knowledge or openness from KSU for having those opportunities or providing information on how to find them".

Bobby also spoke candidly with me about not knowing where to find internships:

Bobby: *“Honestly, because I don’t know any part of the process, really? Honestly, the whole college thing is not me; my family didn’t go to college like that. So up to this point, I’ve just been winging it. Even scholarships and internships, all that stuff. I’ve never been privy to how to go about getting things done correctly”.*

Dante also spoke about how information is shared between students and advisors regarding internship opportunities. When I asked if internships were mentioned during advising appointments, he responded with the following:

Dante: *“If it was, it was only in passing of internships are a thing you could do, but not really any way to get involved with them”.*

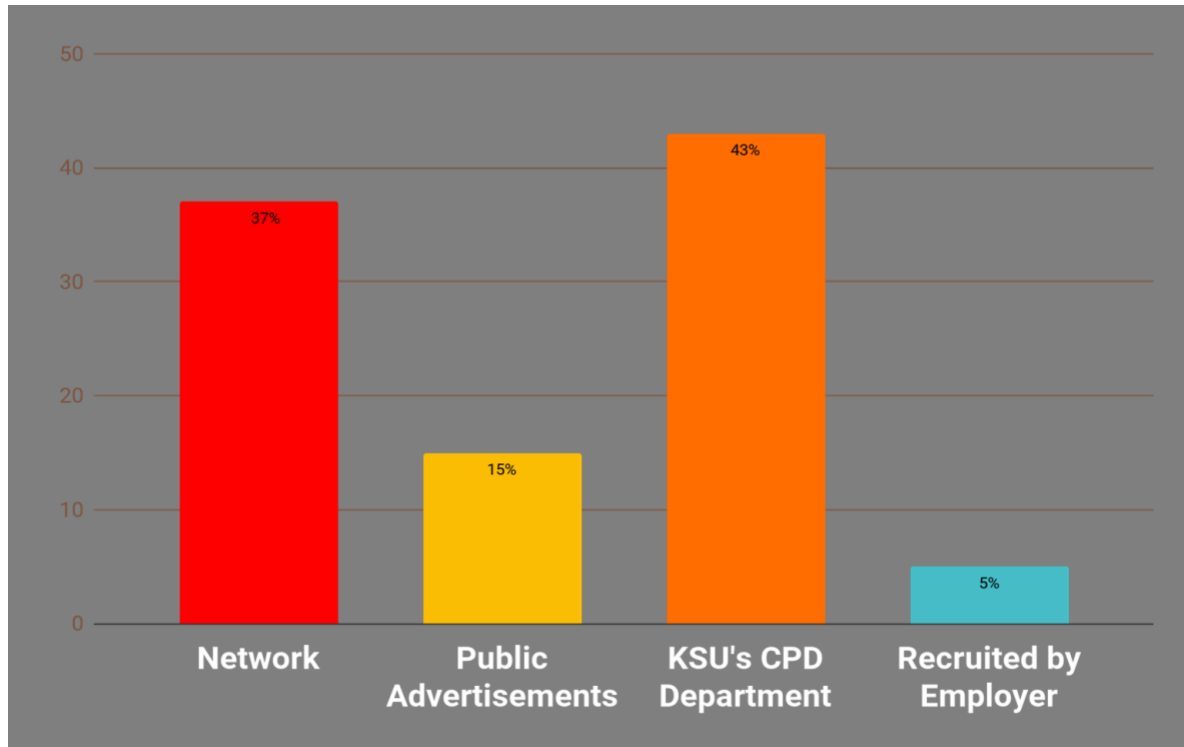
Finding #2

Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship experience before graduation?

Students who reported internship participation within the past 12 months reported that they found their opportunities through the Department of Career Planning and Development (45%) and their networks (37%). This finding highlights the importance of the students’ connection to campus and other networks that can help them navigate early career exploration opportunities and develop skills that assist them in being career ready. Figure 2 details the findings for the survey question that asked participants where they found information about internship opportunities.

Figure 5

How did you Find Out about Internship Opportunities?



All of the students I interviewed who reported participation in an internship within the past 12 months reported that a friend, family member, or professor was instrumental in helping them find the opportunity.

Jason spoke about the assistance he received from Kennesaw State University alumni and his parents during the internship-seeking process.

Jason: *“It was like figuring all this out as I go. And like one of my friends, he's from the same high school as me. And so like his sister and brother, they all went to KSU before us and they graduated and somebody gave us a bunch of advice and showed us the way to go. But like it was really just a bunch of figuring it out”.*

Jason also spoke about how he found his first internship opportunity and navigated the process with his parents.

Jason: *“Oh, my mom and my grandma... My mom works in HR, so she kind of knows like questions that's asked, so she was helpful”.*

The findings highlight the need for messages about internships to be reinforced by staff on campus. Even though students receive messages from alumni and their families, there still seem to be barriers when accessing high-quality internships. In the case of Jason, he had support but still reported the feeling of “figuring out” the process.

Finding #3

Research Question: *Are there attributes that increase the likelihood that African American males will complete at least one high-quality internship experience before graduation?*

The Process Model of Internship Experiences developed by Matthew Hora and Zi Chen (2020) challenged the assumption that all internship experiences are the same. However, my questions took his work further to examine the relationships a student may need to develop skills and gain the information needed to prepare for internships. For this reason, I included the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework developed by Shaun Harper (2012), which focuses on African American males who are high achievers rather than deficits that assume this population has educational disadvantages and that everyone who is an African American male has the same barriers to achieving positive outcomes. The individual interviews were my primary source of information for this section. All the students I interviewed, except one, mentioned their network as vital to their preparation and seeking internship opportunities. For one student, they could not gain an internship immediately but engaged in other experiences that assisted them with career preparation.

One student mentioned that his connection to an academic support program gave him access to additional tools that allowed him to gain career planning and development skills, which led to him recently accepting an offer to work for a global communications company this summer:

James: *“With my experience in AAMI my first year, I think we did some like some slight professional development or at least workshops to kind of help us explore ourselves. And then with the Kennesaw State Society of Black Engineers, there's like professional development workshops. And then with BravenX, one thing that carried me the farthest because they kind of like told me exactly how to have a great resume. Exactly how to be attractive to an interviewer and to recruiters, exactly how to follow up”.*

Javier did not identify as African American/Black. However, I thought it was important to highlight that he also connected to university personnel and identity-based programs when I asked what affiliations he had on campus.

Javier: *“Um, let's see, I am a part of the Psychology Club. And then I'm also a part of, it just got rebranded. It's called HOLAS now, but I don't know what the acronym stands for it is for Hispanic individuals and non-Hispanic individuals at KSU. It used to be called like the RPG but yep”.*

Javier also spoke about his experience working with a faculty member to gain valuable research experience when he could not find an internship.

Javier: *“Um, in terms of the research, I was able to go to NCORE, the National Conference for Undergrad Researchers. I was able to present at the Cancer Symposium and I've been doing that. I think I didn't do it. Not last year, but the year before, I usually make it to that. So those are definitely opportunities”.*

It is also important to note that all groups of students (those who completed an internship and those who did not) experienced barriers—however, the barriers presented at different stages of the internship-seeking process for both groups. Students who navigated the internship-seeking process reported success due to their networks.

Recommendations

The Department of Career Planning and Development at Kennesaw State University is in a great position to assist students in exploring internship opportunities. Based on my findings, I developed three recommendations for the Department of Career Planning at KSU that can move the department forward in its efforts to better serve underrepresented populations in their pursuit of high-quality internship experiences.

Partner with Academic Departments

The first recommendation is to partner with academic departments to underscore the importance of early experiential training opportunities through internships. About 10 percent of respondents reported that an internship is optional for graduation by their academic department. During the interviews I conducted, students also mentioned that there were barriers to beginning internships because they did not meet certain requirements even though they were in or approaching their senior year and on target to graduate on time. Making the recommendation to add internship conversations during advising sessions at a certain point in the program of study for each academic program will place these opportunities at the forefront of the students' minds, especially if they have not built a network of people who are reinforcing the need to engage in such opportunities or need assistance to prepare the internship seeking process.

Florida State University has implemented a program (Formative Experience) that supports first-generation and underrepresented populations as they participate in experiential learning experiences across the curriculum; financial aid is also provided to students who participate in the experiences (O'Shea et al., 2022). FSU's primary area of inquiry was how to increase the consistency and quality of student learning and access to HIPs. In the article on increasing students' access and learning in employment and internship experiences (O'Shea et

al., 2022), the authors outline four key questions to develop a strategy for expanding participation in students' experiential learning opportunities:

- a. Assess what barriers exist on your campus for students to understand, locate, and engage in experiential learning. What are data and students telling you about participation trends and obstacles students are facing?
- b. What curricular opportunities exist to embed experiential learning, and what support is needed to do so?
- c. Evaluate what internal and external partners, including alumni, exist who can provide new opportunities, funding, and mentorship. Does the institution have a compelling vision for the role of experiential learning, and how are donors and other partners responding?
- d. How do you know your students are learning in experiential opportunities, and how can you amplify learning and professional development (pp. 196-197)

These questions can be helpful as the Career Planning and Development Department continues investigating strategies to increase participation in high-quality internships for African American/Black male students.

Provide Financial Assistance for Internship Participants

My second recommendation for CPD is to provide scholarships for students who receive unpaid or underpaid internship opportunities to alleviate their need to work another job to support themselves or their families. Some universities have implemented similar programs, including the University of Miami, the University of Washington, and Vanderbilt University. A thorough benchmark of these universities reveals various ways to implement the scholarship.

The Career Planning and Development department must determine the best option for the KSU student population.

One example of how a university established programs to decrease barriers to internships is Florida State University's InternFSU initiative. This program provides a paid on-campus internship opportunity so students can participate in an internship regardless of their financial situation or ability to access transportation (O'Shea et al., 2022). This intervention could be a great way to merge work-study or student assistant opportunities, where students are already doing work congruent with their academic studies. This investment will incorporate the elements of high-quality internships outlined by Matthew Hora (2020 in the Process Model of Internship Experiences to ensure outcomes are desirable in that they lead to gains in career-related experiences, feedback and guidance from faculty and advisors, and mentorship from internship supervisors.

FSU also established scholarship funds for underserved students through funding from existing budgets, donors, and other organizations; the university distributed over 2 million annually for students who needed financial assistance to participate in experiential learning opportunities (O'shea et al., 2022). While Kennesaw State University may not be able to provide this level of funding right away for students, this could be aspirational in supporting students with financial barriers to participating in internships.

Pathways for Internships through Strategic Partnerships

The final recommendation for CPD is based on the finding that the students interviewed did not think about internships until they were further along in their academic studies and started preparing for graduation, which was also true for the survey respondents. Over 60 percent of African American/Black male respondents identified as a junior or senior and had intentions of

or participated in an internship within the past 12 months. For first-generation college students or those without a support network, delayed internship participation could create barriers later in their academic program. My recommendation is to provide students with opportunities that do not add additional burdens on the students but integrate the information they need into their classroom instruction. For example, introductory courses for first-year students are focused on the success and progression of students within their majors. Toward the end of those classes, the conversation could shift toward what's next and developing a pathway for gaining experience within their fields, along with additional opportunities to engage with CPD staff to help them build a detailed plan. This recommendation also does not create an additional burden for the student as the time they will spend learning about Career Planning and Development and creating a roadmap for their future will occur in the classroom setting. Advisors can follow up on those conversations so that a common language comes from different campus support services.

In addition, it would be helpful for CPD to organize events alongside student affairs staff, academic departments, and other services that students are already connected to to expand their reach across campus. Many programs cater to specific populations that are underserved at KSU. While there was not one specific program that can be attributed to the success of African American males at Kennesaw State University who participated in internships, some of the areas mentioned were identity-based services or organizations, such as the African American Male Initiative, Kennesaw State's Society of Black Engineers, and the Strategic Outreach and Diversity Initiatives (Thrive and Achieve Atlanta) to name a few. The recommendation also aligns with literature that supports leveraging students' networks to assist with developing their career readiness (Hora et al., 2021; Grabsch et al., 202; Wolfgram et al., 2023).

This recommendation is also consistent with current research that examines students' social connections and the positive impact on their understanding of the importance of internships and gaining access to information that prepares them for internship seeking and participation (Wolfgram et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2021). Students who were interviewed relied on family, faculty, staff, and peers to receive information and support in seeking internships, and most of the students were connected to identity-based or cultural organizations that served as a springboard for gaining access to internship preparation tools.

Unfortunately, most students connected to support services self-selected for an interview. The challenge for CPD is finding students who are not connected and determining what they need to be successful in seeking and completing high-quality internships. It is also important to note that internships are not always appropriate for a profession or particular career path. In addition, some departments have different terms for their experiential learning opportunities that fit nicely with the broader definition of an internship.

Conclusion

The issue of creating access to internships and other experiences labeled as beneficial to the development of students is well-researched. My findings and recommendations from the study highlight the need to engage African American/Black male students in programs and services that prepare them for high-quality internship opportunities and remove barriers to participation. Students reported needing time, financial compensation, and guidance in searching and preparing for internship opportunities. After further investigation, I realized that before the study can evaluate the quality of internships, KSU must ensure that its structure for equitable internship participation is developed.

My recommendations to increase partnerships with academic colleges, provide need-based financial assistance to students who are seeking to complete unpaid or under-funded internship opportunities, and the need to leverage students' support systems can significantly improve equity in pathways for participation in high-quality internships among African American male students. Students' early exposure to career development opportunities, connection to faculty, staff, support services, and aid for un or underpaid students will be valuable to the student experience and increase the expected employment outcome after graduation. My findings will be summarized via a presentation to the Career Planning and Development Office at Kennesaw State University.

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Appendix A: Survey Participation Letter

Greetings, KSU Student,

As part of my doctoral studies at Vanderbilt University, I am working with The Department of Career Planning and Development as they consider strategies to increase access to high-quality internships for African American males at Kennesaw State University. The study will explore students' decision-making process to participate in internships, institutional barriers to participation, and assess the quality of internship experiences.

This survey will assist the Department of Career Planning and Development as they explore students' decision-making process to participate in internships, institutional barriers to participation, and assess the quality of internship experiences.

The survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept anonymous. You will have the option to not respond to any question that you choose. Please complete the survey by December 12, 2022.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the Principal Investigator, Shameka Wells, via email at swils138@kennesaw.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Neel, at michael.a.neel@vanderbilt.edu.

Sincerely,

Shameka Wells
Leadership and Learning in Organizations
Vanderbilt University
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B: Interview Participation Letter

Hello (Student's Name),

Thank you for completing the internship experience survey sent by the Department of Career Planning and Development. You are receiving this message because you provided your email to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

Please select a time for us to meet virtually. This interview will take approximately 15 - 30 minutes of your time. Also, please remember that this project is meant to better understand your internship experience or barriers to participating in an internship. Your name will not be used in the dissemination of the project findings. Don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Click Here to Schedule an Interview: [Schedule Here](#)

Thank you,
Shameka Wells
LLO Doctoral Candidate
Vanderbilt University

Appendix C: Participant Survey

Internship Experience Survey

Start of Block: Consent Question

QC This survey will assist the Department of Career Planning and Development as they explore students' decision-making process to participate in internships, institutional barriers to participation, and assess the quality of internship experiences.

The survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept anonymous. You will have the option to not respond to any question that you choose. Please complete the survey by December 12, 2022.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact the Principal Investigator, Shameka Wells, via email at shameka.wells@vanderbilt.edu or my faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Neel, at michael.a.neel@vanderbilt.edu.

Sincerely,

Shameka Wells
Leadership and Learning in Organizations
Vanderbilt University
Doctoral Candidate



QC2 Would you like to complete the survey?

Yes

No

Skip To: End of Survey If QC2 = No

End of Block: Consent Question

Start of Block: Academic Questions



Q1 As of today, are you enrolled in college full-time or part-time?

- Full-time, at least 12 credits
- Part-time, less than 12 credits
- No, I'm not attending college

Skip To: End of Survey If Q1 = No, I'm not attending college



Q2 Currently, what type of program are you in?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree

Skip To: End of Survey If Q2 = Master's Degree

Skip To: End of Survey If Q2 = Doctoral Degree



Q3 Please select the choice that best describes you.

- Undergraduate Freshman
- Undergraduate Sophomore
- Undergraduate Junior
- Undergraduate Senior



Q4 What is your major or the discipline of your academic program?

▼ Psychology ... Music

Q5 Slide the bar to the right until you reach the number that answers the following question:
Thinking about the past 2021-2022 academic year, which of the following best describes your grade point average (GPA)?

0 0 1 1 2 2 2 3 3 4

Click to write Choice 1



End of Block: Academic Questions

Start of Block: Internship Participation Questions



Q6 In the past 12 months, have you participated in an internship?

Yes

No

Display This Question:

If Q6 = No



Q7 In the past 12 months, have you participated in any of the following non-internship experiences?

- Apprenticeship
- Co-Op Program
- Practicum
- Project-Based Learning Activity in a Course
- Service Learning
- Undergraduate Research Experience

End of Block: Internship Participation Questions

Start of Block: Internship Experience Questions

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

X→

Q8 Was your most recent internship an in-person or online experience? An online internship means that you did not physically appear at the organization where you interned, and instead worked remotely using digital technologies (e.g., laptop).

- In-Person
- Online Internship
- Other, please specify: _____

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

X→

Q9 Is an internship required to graduate from your academic program?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

X→

Q10 Did you take this internship for credit or non-course credit?

- For Credit
- Not for Credit

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

X→

Q11 At what type of organization was the internship?

- Private for Profit
 - Non-Profit
 - State or Local Government
 - Federal Government
 - Educational Institution (k-12, college, university, etc.)
-

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q12 In what industry or field was the internship in?

▼ Accommodation and Food Service ... Technology

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

Q13 Slide to answer the following questions about the duration of your internship.

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

How many weeks did you participate in the internship?	
In a typical week, how many hours did you work at the internship?	

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q14 What was your main purpose for taking the internship?

- Exploring different career options because I am unsure about my chosen profession
- Gaining experience in a specific career that I plan on pursuing as my chosen profession
- Other, please specify: _____

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q15 Was the internship paid or unpaid?

- Paid
- Unpaid

End of Block: Internship Experience Questions

Start of Block: Equitable Access to Internships Questions

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q16 Were you provided with a written document that outlined the learning goals and activities for your internship, either by your academic advisor or your internship host organization?

- Yes
- No

Display This Question:

If Q8 = In-Person



Q17 How did you physically get to your internship?

- I used my own vehicle and/or took public transportation using my own money
- I used my own vehicle and/or took public transportation using subsidies provided by my internship host organization
- Others, please specify: _____

Display This Question:

If Q8 = Online Internship



Q18 Did you have sufficient information technology (e.g., internet bandwidth, laptop, etc.) to complete the online internship?

- Yes
- No

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q19 How often were you in contact with the university employee responsible for coordinating your internship experience?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Twice a Month
- Monthly
- Less than once per month
- Never

End of Block: Equitable Access to Internships Questions

Start of Block: Quality of Internships Questions

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

X→

Q20 Please think of your most recent internship experience and rate the following:

	Not at all	A Little	Somewhat	Very	Extremely
How clear you felt your internship supervisor stated the goals of your internship	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How related you feel your internship was to your academic program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q21 Please think of your most recent internship experience and select all that apply. This internship helped me...

- gain opportunities to apply what I have learned in my academic program to real-world situations.
- identify what I should focus on studying in my academic program.
- develop the motivation to look for more hands-on learning opportunities that enhance my academic learning.
- identify my academic knowledge gaps.
- better understand the knowledge I learned in my academic program.

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes



Q22 Please think of your most recent internship experience and rate the following. In this internship, how often did your supervisor...

	None	A Little	Some	Quite a Bit	A Great Deal
Suggest specific strategies for achieving career goals?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Give feedback regarding job performance?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Give you assignments that presented opportunities to learn new skills?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:
If Q6 = Yes



Q23 Please think of your most recent internship experience and select all that apply. This internship helped me...

- clarify my career goals.
- gain important skills relevant to my career goals.
- learn new career-related skills.
- to identify specific organizations where I can apply for jobs in the future, including your internship site.
- become more confident in my ability to pursue future career opportunities.

Display This Question:

If Q6 = Yes

X→

Q24 How satisfied were you with your internship experience?

- Extremely Dissatisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Extremely Satisfied

X→

Q25 How did you initially learn about your internship opportunity?

- Informal networks (e.g., professors, family, and friends, etc.)
- Public advertisements and/or forums (e.g., job board, LinkedIn, company website, etc.)
- KSU's Department of Career Planning and Development (e.g., Handshake, job/internship fair, consultation, etc.)
- I was recruited by an employer for the position
- Other, please specify: _____

End of Block: Quality of Internships Questions

Start of Block: Barriers to Internship

Display This Question:

If Q6 = No



Q26 You indicated that you did not participate in an internship in the past 12 months. In the past 12 months, were you interested in participating in an internship?

- Yes
- No

Display This Question:

If Q26 = Yes



Q27 Select each item you consider as a reason for why you were unable to pursue an internship in the past 12 months. Rank the most important to least important for not pursuing an internship.

- _____ Course Load at School too Heavy
 _____ Insufficient Pay Offered
 _____ Needed to Work at Current Job
 _____ Lack of Transportation
 _____ Lack of Childcare
 _____ Lack of Internship Opportunities in my Field
 _____ Internship Cancelled due to Covid-19 Pandemic
 _____ Was not Selected for Internships that I applied to
 _____ Not Sure How to Find an Internship
 _____ If Reason not Listed, please explain:

End of Block: Barriers to Internship

Start of Block: Life and Employment Situation



Q28 During the past 12 months, have you worked for pay at a job that is NOT an internship? Please consider all positions you are financially compensated for, including part-time, evening, or weekend work.

- Yes
 No
-

Q29 During a typical week, how many hours do you work at your paid non-internship job(s)?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Click to write Choice 1



End of Block: Life and Employment Situation

Start of Block: Demographic Information



Q30 With what race/ethnicity do you most closely identify?

- American Indian, Native American, First American, Alaska Native
 - Asian, Asian-American
 - Black/African American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
 - White/Caucasian
 - Two or more Races/Ethnicities
 - Other, please describe _____
-



Q31 How do you describe your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Non-Binary
- Another Gender Identity _____
- Prefer not to say

End of Block: Demographic Information

Start of Block: Consent to Contact for Interview



Q32 Would you like to be contacted to discuss your answers during a virtual interview further?

Yes

No

Skip To: End of Survey If Q32 = No

Display This Question:

If Q32 = Yes



QIC Thank you for being willing to participate in an interview with us. Please enter your email address so we can contact you to discuss the next steps.

Email Address: _____

End of Block: Consent to Contact for Interview
