

The Unseen Scars of Experiential Learning: Secondary Trauma in Political Science Internships

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ABSTRACT Public service internships are a staple in contemporary political science curricula. Research shows that internships produce better thinkers, employees, and citizens. Yet, political science interns are on the frontlines in observing the firsthand trauma, stress, and mental health challenges of many people seeking support and services from government. In turn, students may internalize this stress and trauma, a phenomenon recognized as secondary traumatic stress (STS). This study addresses a significant gap in the discipline's understanding of the frequency and severity of STS experienced by political science interns in their fieldwork. We relied on surveys and written assessments from students enrolled in internship courses at two public universities. We find that interns report increased exposure to STS at the end of the semester. Furthermore, STS vulnerability varies among interns, with higher incidence rates among those with a history of primary trauma, older students, and women. We outline coping strategies for students, propose adaptations to experiential learning to enhance support, and emphasize the need for further research on this issue.

Public service internships are mainstays in contemporary political science curricula, helping students to connect their theoretical and conceptual understanding of the discipline to the applied professional arena. Abundant scholarship on teaching and learning underscores the numerous benefits of internships on students' substantive knowledge, career development, and democratic citizenship (Collins, Knotts, and Schiff 2012; Foley and Jordan 2024; Van Vechten, Gentry, and Berg 2021).

However, there may be unseen and unanticipated consequences of these practicums. Political science interns often are on the frontlines of observing the firsthand trauma, stress, and mental health challenges that frequently accompany people who are seeking support and services from government. This may include legislative interns who are assisting impoverished constituents in securing food stamps, students who are helping survivors navigate an application for a personal protection order, and legal externs who are reviewing evidence in a murder trial. As such, students may experience secondary traumatic stress (STS), which is defined as the "stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (Figley 1995). Like other researchers, we refer interchangeably to STS as "secondary trauma," "vicarious trauma," "secondhand trauma," and "empathy-based stress," among other terms (Lipsky and Burk 2009).

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The discipline rightly has explored the traumatic effects from field research and data collection of human rights abuses, violence, and conflict on students' and faculty members' well-being (Eck and Cohen 2020; Gade and Wallace 2023; Hummel and El Kurd 2021; Loyle and Simoni 2017). However, it has yet to examine students' indirect exposure to trauma via public service internships. We employed this phenomenological study of STS among students engaging in public service internships to address the current gap in political science teaching and learning scholarship.

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To assess the frequency and intensity of STS exposure among political science interns, we administered surveys to 146 undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in internship courses from two public universities. We asked them about their knowledge of, exposure to, and potential symptoms of vicarious trauma, as well as how often they practiced self-care. In addition, halfway through the academic semester, we required students to watch a 25-minute video lecture about STS, its effects, and strategies to cope with or mitigate such empathy-based stress. Students then penned a journal reflection documenting their qualitative exposure to secondary trauma during their internship and their proposed action plan to deal with resultant stress and feelings of helplessness.

We found that political science interns experience STS during their practicums. Although priming effects cannot be ruled out entirely, qualitative responses and quantitative analyses of survey data indicated that, controlling for individual characteristics and internship type, the interns' STS exposure increased by an average of 14.6 percentage points during the semester. Notably, women, older students, and those with a history of primary trauma were more likely to report STS subjection. Nevertheless, the adage "knowledge is power" holds in this context. Students who reported higher levels of STS also were more likely to implement action plans (i.e., 36.9 percentage points) by outlining coping strategies after watching the mid-semester video lecture. Our findings emphasize the need for political science departments

explore the short- and long-term impacts of STS on students' core competency development and professional growth.

SECONDARY TRAUMA IN HELPING PROFESSIONS

Political scientists recently highlighted the potential trauma that both students and scholars may be exposed to in the classroom (Zartner 2019), through political violence data coding (Gade and Wallace 2023), and during fieldwork research involving survivors of human rights violations (Eck and Cohen 2020; Hummel and El Kurd 2021; Loyle and Simoni 2017). Nevertheless, our discipline's

research is limited in documenting the existence and effects of trauma on students during these experiential-learning endeavors, including public service internships.

STS arises from one-time or repeated exposure to assisting or desiring to assist individuals who have directly experienced trauma and have shared their traumatic experiences with the person serving them (Figley 1995; Lipsky and Burk 2009). STS involves distress and emotional disruption from observing, learning about, or listening to narratives of survivors of primary trauma (Figley 1995; Lipsky and Burk 2009). STS can trigger both psychological and physiological responses, including elevated blood pressure, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and an increased risk of stroke, among other effects (Lipsky and Burk 2009). STS also may produce emotional dysregulation, self-doubt, impaired decision making, porous boundaries, relationship difficulties, physical ailments, disconnection from surroundings, and a diminished sense of meaning and hope (Pearlman and McKay 2008). Failure to recognize and manage secondary trauma can lead to lower job satisfaction, emotional and physical strain, burnout, compassion fatigue, and moral distress, which ultimately jeopardize career longevity (Figley 1995; Lipsky and Burk 2009).

Researchers have documented the prevalence and consequences of STS among human service professionals, including therapists and mental healthcare providers (Hesse 2002), nurses and physicians (Boitet et al. 2023), immigration attorneys and judges (Harris and Mellinger 2021; Lustig et al. 2008), and higher-

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and internship coordinators to educate students about the risk of STS and to provide resources to foster resilience and coping mechanisms. Future political science pedagogical research should

education student-affairs professionals (Lynch 2023). Additionally, scholars have identified secondary trauma among students through their educational and training experiences, such as social

work students in practicums (Cunningham 2004; Harr and Moore 2011; Rinfrette et al. 2021); law students during externships (Bakhshi, Wesley, and Reddy 2021); criminal justice interns (Hilinski-Rosick, Branch, and Walker 2022); and psychology students in both classroom and clinical settings (Simiola et al. 2018; Zurbriggen 2011). Political science increasingly encourages departments to integrate internship opportunities into their curriculum to enhance students' substantive knowledge and civic values (Foley and Jordan 2024; Van Vechten, Gentry, and Berg 2021). However, there is limited understanding of how these interns encounter and manage secondary trauma.

SECONDARY TRAUMA IN PUBLIC SERVICE INTERNSHIPS

Interns often become voyeuristic onlookers to people's trauma. Whether these interactions are one-time or frequent, this spill-over trauma can affect student well-being. Helping hurt people also may harm interns.¹ This exposure to secondary trauma may motivate interns to further engagement or debilitate them in unexpected ways. Students experiencing STS may have difficulty sleeping, endure disturbing dreams, or become less active. Others might disengage socially, struggle to concentrate, or become more fearful and forgetful. Some may feel easily annoyed, discouraged, or disillusioned, whereas others might develop grandiose thoughts about their work or try to numb their feelings through excessive media consumption, smoking, or drinking (Lipsky and Burk 2009). These varied reactions reflect the impact of the trauma that student interns have experienced (Bakhshi, Wesley, and Reddy 2021; Harr and Moore 2011; Hilinski-Rosick, Branch, and Walker 2022; Simiola et al. 2018). Prolonged exposure to stress can impair a person's ability to regulate emotions and lead to significant mental health issues (Lipsky and Burk 2009).

Whereas all interns can experience STS, vulnerability to it is likely heterogeneous. Drawing on previous research, we hypothesized that interns with a history of primary trauma may be more susceptible to secondary trauma (Cunningham 2004; Guarino and Chagnon 2018; Pearlman and McKay 2008). Vicarious trauma experienced during the internship may compound the effects of personal trauma, further impacting their ability to process it. This may include individuals from marginalized groups with intergenerational trauma and historical discrimination (Williams, Thompson, and Hora 2020). Tosone, Nuttman-Shwartz, and Stephens (2012) noted that "collective catastrophic events" can affect both victims and helpers, particularly when they belong to the same community, creating "shared trauma." However, evidence suggests that experiencing and acknowledging primary trauma may foster coping mechanisms that enhance resilience to STS (Méndez-Fernández et al. 2022). This raises the possibility that individuals from historically marginalized groups may have developed greater resilience to STS in some cases (Siller and Aydin 2022).

Research reveals that women report higher levels of burnout and stress associated with STS (Bakhshi, Wesley, and Reddy 2021; Guarino and Chagnon 2018). Accordingly, we expected female students to exhibit higher rates of STS incidence. Prior experience (or lack thereof) also may influence interns' vulnerability to STS, either mitigating or exacerbating its effects. Research suggests that novices often lack adequate coping strategies and the power to address beneficiaries' needs, making early professionals more susceptible to STS (Cunningham 2004;

Guarino and Chagnon 2018; Lynch 2023). Conversely, other studies highlight that greater workload and prolonged exposure may increase vulnerability (Levin et al. 2011). We did not make any *a priori* assumptions but instead assessed interns' prior experience using multiple variables: age, completion of a previous internship, average weekly hours (logged) at the internship, and first-generation college-student status. Younger students, first-time interns, those working fewer hours, and first-generation college students may be more vulnerable due to limited experience. Alternatively, older students, those with multiple internships, individuals working longer hours, and students with college-educated parents may report higher STS levels, reflecting the cumulative effects of vicarious trauma over time.

Finally, the type of internship also may matter. Due to the distressing nature of the cases and high workload exposure, students in legal and legislative placements—in which they deal with first-person accounts most often—may be particularly susceptible to STS (Levin et al. 2011; Zurbriggen 2011). Beyond these variables, we also controlled for students' residency status (i.e., in-state, out-of-state, or international) and whether their internship was paid.

INCIDENCE AND IMPACT OF SECONDARY TRAUMA ON INTERNS

To determine the incidence and impact of secondary trauma on public service interns, we administered pre- and post-surveys to 146 political science undergraduate and master of public policy students at two public universities in the Midwest: Michigan State University and Western Michigan University.² This sample leveraged variation in internship type, student academic status, degree program, demographics, and higher-education institution. Our approach improved on past studies (Harr and Moore 2011) by leveraging critical variation, moving beyond single-institution, posttest-only surveys of interns in similar field placements. We adapted survey questions from Bride et al. (2004), who developed the STS scale, and Guarino and Chagnon's (2018) guide for helping schools mitigate trauma in students.

Among survey respondents, most were juniors or seniors, with an average age of 21 and a mean GPA of 3.67 (Jordan, Jordan, and Foley 2025). Additionally, almost 40% identified as racial/ethnic minorities, more than 60% as female, and more than 25% as first-generation college students; more than half received financial aid. Furthermore, 44% of students obtained paid internships, working a median of 18 hours per week.³

Our pre-questionnaire assessed students' prior knowledge of secondary trauma, their anticipated trauma during internships, self-care practices, incidence of primary trauma, and demographic characteristics. Mid-semester, students watched a 25-minute video lecture on secondary trauma⁴ and its potential effects, symptoms, and coping strategies, and then wrote a journal entry on their experiences and mitigation plans. The post-survey reassessed their STS knowledge, STS exposure, self-care practices, and implementation of provided strategies.

In the pre-survey, respondents indicated limited awareness of having heard the term "secondary trauma," averaging 0.41 on a "No" (0), "Maybe" (0.5), or "Yes" (1) scale. By the end of their internship, following the video lecture, familiarity significantly increased to 0.82 on a more refined five-point scale from "Not at all familiar" (0) to "Extremely familiar" (1). Regarding STS exposure,

23.3% reported experiencing it during a prior internship or at the beginning of their current praxis. By the end of the semester, this percentage had increased to 38.4%, a statistically significant ($p = 0.003$, $\alpha = 0.05$) and substantively important increase.

We documented students' experiences with STS symptoms by asking 17 questions, encompassing issues including emotional numbness, anxiety, sleep disturbances, hypervigilance, avoidance, irritability, and memory lapses.⁵ By the end of the semester, interns reported increases in 10 of these 17 symptoms; three attained statistical significance at conventional levels: intrusive thoughts about their work outside of intended moments; distress triggered by reminders of their work; and reexperiencing trauma encountered by their clients, constituents, or customers. These results are presented in online appendix figure A1.

In their mid-semester journal entries, students shared qualitative insights about their internship experiences and exposure to vicarious trauma. Online appendix table A2 presents excerpts from these responses, highlighting the variety of internships that political science students undertake and illustrating the emotional, psychological, and physical impacts that they encounter when assisting individuals in distress. Students recounted fielding calls from parents whose children were detained overseas, assisting constituents facing food and housing insecurity, representing accused rapists, listening to victim-impact statements in court, engaging with grieving voters during campaign canvassing, addressing urgent requests for unemployment benefits, and processing cases involving the sexual exploitation of minors. Many students described feeling stressed, powerless, numb, or depressed because of these encounters, with several indicating that these experiences prompted them to reconsider their career aspirations.

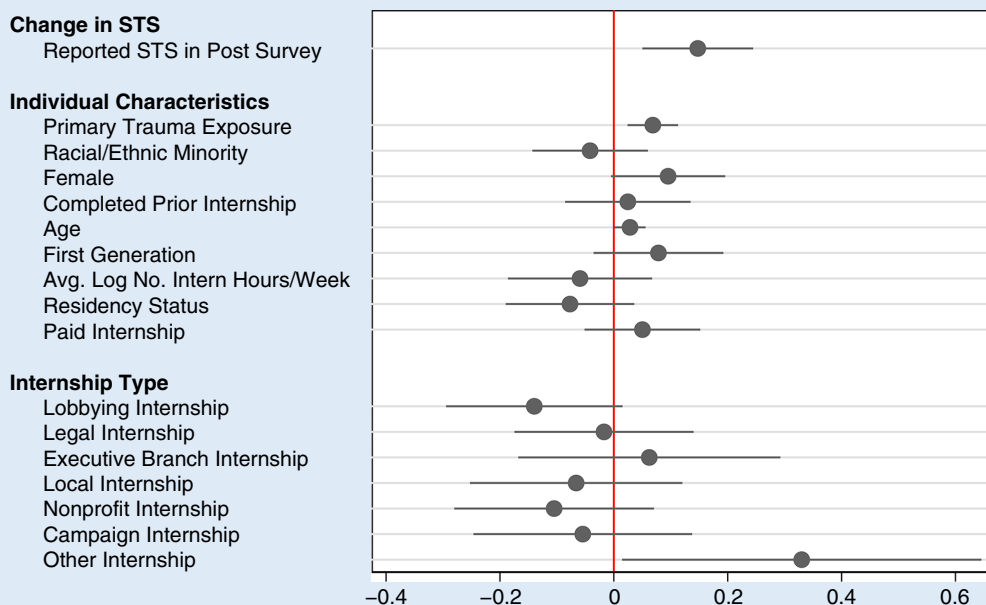
In addition to these narratives, we empirically measured interns' STS exposure using a random-effects model for panel data. This

approach enabled us to account for key time-invariant demographic and contextual variables.⁶ The dependent variable measured students' self-reported experience of secondary trauma on a scale of "No Exposure" (0), "Maybe Exposure" (0.5), or "Yes Exposure" (1).⁷ Drawing on previous research about STS predictors, we included several independent variables in the model: respondents' self-reported level of primary trauma exposure (scale from 1 "None" to 5 "Extensive"), racial/ethnic minority status, gender, prior internship experience, age, first-generation college-student status, average logged number of hours worked per week, residency status (i.e., in-state, out-of-state, or international), whether the internship was paid, and type of internship placement. Figure 1 illustrates the coefficient plot for the key covariates. Detailed model results are presented in online appendix table A3.

Students reported a substantial increase in vicarious trauma by the end of the semester. Accounting for variables at their observed values, the average marginal increase in STS exposure was 14.6 percentage points. Students with a history of primary trauma were more likely to report secondary trauma: the marginal effect showed a 30.8-percentage-point increase in STS incidence when comparing students with no primary trauma to those with extensive trauma. Older and female students also reported higher STS rates. Specifically, holding other factors constant, increasing a student's age from 19 (fifth percentile) to 24 (95th percentile) resulted in a 13.6 percentage point increase in STS exposure. One possible explanation is that older students entered their internship with higher levels of STS exposure due to their previous praxis experiences, which potentially highlighted the cumulative impact of STS over time. Women students reported STS exposure that was 10 percentage points higher than non-female students, although this narrowly missed

Figure 1

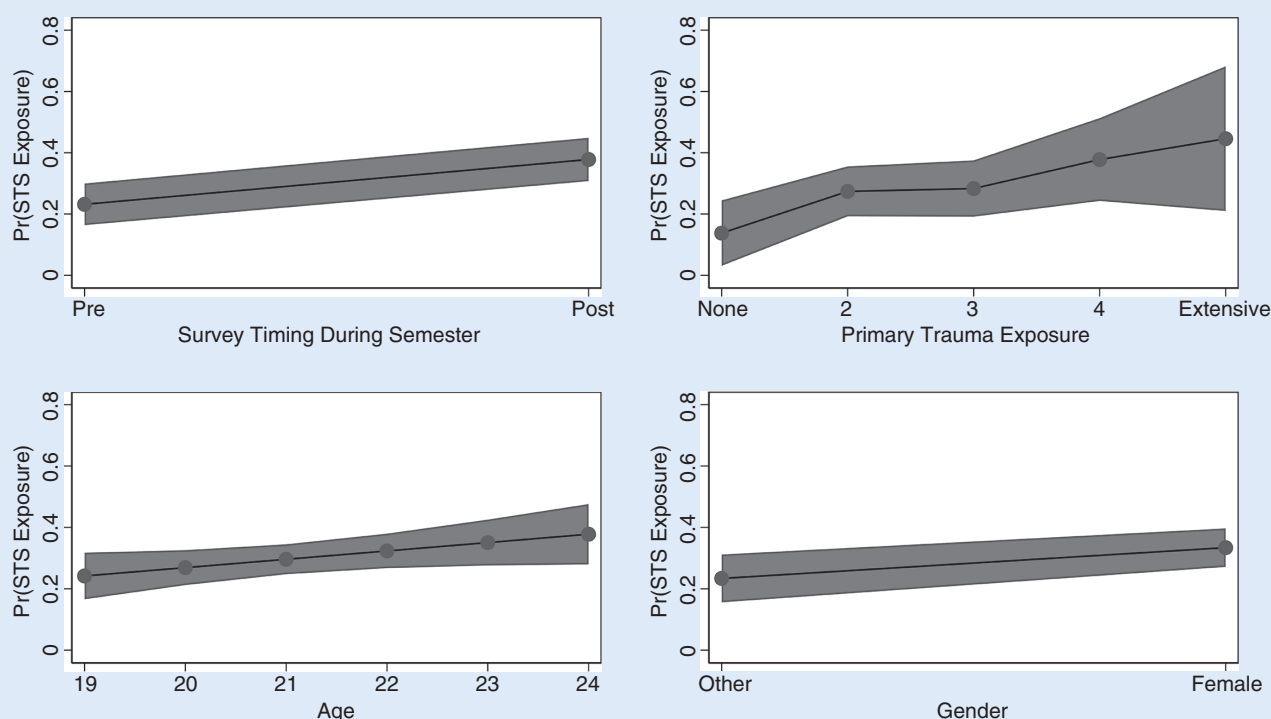
Political Science Interns' STS Exposure



Random-effects linear regression model for panel data. The dependent variable is exposure to secondary trauma on 0 ("No"), 0.5 ("Maybe"), or 1 ("Yes") scale. Robust standard errors clustered on individual IDs. Point estimates are displayed with 95% two-tail confidence intervals. Estimates for which confidence intervals do not cross the red zero line are statistically significant at the $\alpha=0.05$ level. The omitted category for internship type is legislative internships.

Figure 2

Predictive Margins of Key Variables on Secondary Trauma Exposure



The dependent variable represents respondents' self-reported exposure to secondary trauma on a 0 ("No Exposure"), 0.5 ("Maybe"), or 1 ("STS Exposure") scale. 95% two-tail confidence intervals.

statistical significance ($\alpha = 0.05$). Figure 2 presents the predictive margins of these four key variables.

Variables such as racial/ethnic minority status, prior internship experience, weekly internship hours logged, first-generation college-student status, enrollment type, and whether the internship was paid did not indicate statistically distinguishable associations with STS exposure. It is curious that internship type had a minimal effect on STS hazard. Students in lobbying internships were slightly less likely to report secondhand trauma compared to those in legislative internships (i.e., the omitted reference category and the modal category), whereas students in "other" placements were more likely to report STS.⁸ This suggests that regardless of internship type, political science students regularly engage with traumatized individuals and experience empathy-based trauma as a result. Collectively, these findings are generally consistent with previous studies (Bakhshi, Wesley, and Reddy 2021; Levin et al. 2011; Lynch 2023; Pearlman and McKay 2008).

An important caveat is that we cannot rule out entirely the priming effects from the pretest or intervention (Kim and Willson 2010). Ideally, a randomized design with control and treatment groups would address this concern. However, ethical and fairness considerations prevented us from withholding information about STS and coping strategies from some students or delaying its delivery until the end of the semester because all interns may have encountered this trauma. Nevertheless, three design elements mitigated the priming risks. First, meta-analyses suggest minimal priming in interventions assessing attitudinal rather than cognitive changes (Kim and Willson 2010). Second, priming effects diminish when pretests, interventions, and posttests are spaced

more than a month apart (Kim and Willson 2010). Third, interventions clarify concepts, reducing reliance on subjective interpretation (Hopkins and King 2010). Our design aligned with these criteria by capturing the interns' self-assessed STS exposure, implementing a six-week gap between assessments and intervention, and ensuring clear definitions of STS. Nevertheless, a robustness check adjusting for pretest effects yielded similar results (see the online appendix "Evaluating Pre-Test Priming Effect").

INTERNALIZATION OF SECONDARY TRAUMA

Students can enhance their professional resilience and capacity to make a meaningful difference in others' lives by prioritizing their well-being and implementing strategies to manage secondary trauma. Failure to address STS can lead to disengagement, destructive numbing behavior, social isolation, anger, burnout, and other negative outcomes, which ultimately compromises the trust and reliance placed on them by those they serve (Lipsky and Burk 2009).

To assess whether students' internship experiences affected their self-care routines or habits, we also asked a battery of 25 questions regarding their physical, psychological, emotional, and workplace self-care on the pre- and post-surveys. These included questions about their physical health (e.g., eating regularly, exercising, and getting enough sleep), mental health (e.g., seeking therapy, practicing mindfulness, and engaging in creative activities), and social connections (e.g., building peer-support networks, spending time outdoors, and maintaining relationships). These habits collectively aim to promote resilience, reduce stress, and enhance well-being among students who are experiencing STS.

Except for a decline in the physical self-care category in the post-survey, students' self-care habits showed minimal change during the semester; however, none of these shifts were statistically significant. This decline may stem from increased STS exposure or typical end-of-semester stress. The only psychological self-care metric with a significant increase was students' efforts to actively reduce stress: from 2.78 to 3.03 on a five-point scale from "Never" to "Very Often." Interns also reported improvements in two workplace self-care indicators: "Identifying with projects or tasks that are exciting, growth-promoting, and rewarding" (3.81 to 4.03), and "How often do you take time to chat with coworkers?" (3.82 to 4.02); however, the second indicator narrowly missed statistical significance ($\alpha = 0.05$). Online appendix figures A2–A5 present the full results. Limited changes in student self-care may suggest that STS had a minimal short-term impact or that students effectively employed the coping strategies introduced in the video lecture and outlined in their action plans.

COPING STRATEGIES FOR SECONDARY TRAUMA

To help students mitigate and cope with STS, the Awareness–Balance–Connection (ABC) framework provides a holistic approach (Saakvitne and Pearlman 1996). Awareness encourages recognition of stress triggers and behavioral changes, such as avoidance or numbing behaviors (e.g., excessive social media use and smoking). Balance emphasizes setting boundaries between work and personal life, prioritizing self-care, and maintaining personal well-being. Connection highlights fostering supportive relationships with supervisors, faculty members, peers, and family members for emotional support and combating isolation. The ABC framework does not prevent these emotions but instead helps students to manage them by increasing self-awareness, establishing healthy boundaries, and nurturing supportive connections to ensure long-term success in their government, legal, and public policy careers. These strategies are not "one-size-fits-all"; students should reflect on their stress triggers and plan accordingly.

Most students followed the video lecture's guidance to create an action plan. Those who experienced higher levels of STS developed plans at higher rates, with a one-unit increase in STS incidence correlating with a 36.9 percentage-point increase in action-plan creation. Racial and ethnic minorities were 15.2 percentage points more likely, and students in nontraditional internships also were more likely, to create an action plan. Online appendix table A5 presents the full results.

Journal responses indicated that students were adopting an action plan involving physical activity (e.g., exercise, walking, and yoga) to alleviate stress. Many sought professional and

also were commonly used to center themselves, and hobbies and creative outlets provided productive distractions. Students also highlighted the importance of setting boundaries between work and personal life to maintain a healthy work–life balance through self-care and leisure.

CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study underscores the incidence of STS among political science interns, revealing significant risks to their psychological, physical, and emotional well-being. Quantitative and qualitative evidence reveals a striking pattern: public service interns across diverse placements reported notable STS exposure, even in part-time roles during a 15-week semester. Although priming and intervention effects are possible, our design minimizes these risks. All interns are vulnerable; however, students with a history of primary trauma, older students, and women are particularly susceptible to higher levels of STS exposure.

Faculty members who are overseeing experiential-learning programs must recognize STS and proactively integrate strategies and curricular components to mitigate its effects. By thoroughly understanding the psychological, physical, and emotional toll of these stressors, faculty members can foster a more supportive experiential-learning environment that equips students to navigate the complexities of early professional experiences. A key goal of higher education is to prepare students for an enduring, impactful career in public service. Providing tools to navigate STS can mitigate burnout and reduce attrition in the field.

With the goal of fostering a "sustainable practice of trauma stewardship" (Lipsky and Burk 2009, 16) in students, we encourage internship coordinators to normalize discussions of STS and to equip them with coping strategies. Providing a clear understanding of STS, including its definition, symptoms, and management strategies, can empower students to recognize and address these challenges (Cunningham 2004; Hummel and El Kurd 2021; Zartner 2019). Faculty members and supervisors must offer consistent support, validate students' emotional experiences, help set realistic professional expectations, and introduce flexibility in tackling responsibilities to prevent overload (Williams, Thompson, and Hora 2020).

To help students manage STS and thrive, faculty members can promote self-care and resilience by introducing them to the ABC framework: Awareness of stress triggers, Balance through boundaries and restorative practices, and Connection with supportive relationships.

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social support, engaging with therapists, supervisors, family, and friends for emotional guidance and connection. Mindfulness practices such as journaling, meditation, and breathing exercises

members also should partner with campus mental health providers to provide resources and counseling for STS to attend to students' well-being needs.

In conclusion, addressing STS in experiential learning requires educating students, providing faculty support, and ensuring access to mental health resources. By developing a curriculum that supports students through difficult experiences, faculty members can help them navigate internship demands while fostering the skills, resilience, and emotional readiness essential for both academic and professional success. Moreover, future pedagogical research should investigate the nuanced impacts of STS on political science students, examining both the immediate effects during short-term internships and the long-term implications for their career trajectory. Well-being is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652510142X>.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GWC818>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Interns may experience direct trauma, such as threats, safety concerns during protests, and verbal abuse from constituents. Whereas this study focuses on vicarious trauma from assisting individuals with primary trauma, future research also should explore these direct traumatic experiences.
2. Survey scripts are included in online appendix A. The Institutional Review Board approval for Michigan State University is STUDY00009990; for Western Michigan University, it is IRB-2023-354.
3. See online appendix table A1 for descriptive statistics of respondents.
4. One of the lectures is available at https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/Secondary+Trauma+in+Public+Service/1_53vzlhlm.
5. One limitation of this study is that we asked about STS indicators experienced in the past two weeks—a relatively short timeframe. Given that interns often work only 10–20 hours per week, reported incidence rates might have been higher if we had extended the timeframe to a month or more.
6. A Hausman test suggests a random-effects model is preferable, indicating no correlation between individual-specific effects and the explanatory variables, thereby allowing for the inclusion of time-invariant variables. However, a fixed-effects model produces almost identical results.
7. Although our dependent variable is ordinal, we used linear regression for parsimony and ease of interpretation, which is consistent with prior research showing comparable results to ordinal logistic models in most cases (Carifio and Perla 2007). A robustness check using a random-effects ordinal logistic model (see online appendix table A4) yielded parallel findings.
8. We did not place significant emphasis on this finding because only eight of the 146 respondents classified their internship as “other.” This category served as a catch-all for private-sector internships as well as students uncertain about their placement classification. The results may be influenced by a few outlier responses.

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