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“It Was Supposed to Be an Internship”: The Consequences of Semiotic Ambiguity for Labor and Learning in the New Economy

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Abstract

This article documents the historical and semiotic factors that have entailed a normative ambiguity of “the internship,” both as an ideological sign and as a participant role that has increasingly mediated the relationships between higher education and careers in the United States. We present comparative life history narratives of two interns drawn from a longitudinal interview study, which illustrate the negotiations, experiences, and consequences that the ambiguity of the internship participant role entails for students attempting to navigate the transition between education and employment. We argue that the stable semiotic ambiguity of the internship participant role is a consequence of a political economy of collusion, in which employers, educators, and students benefit from the emergence and spread of the internship economy, with students finding it uniquely useful to establish credibility in the highly competitive employment market. We point out how students’ class-based resources, networks, and positionalities constrain the possible outcomes for them from this process.

Keywords: linguistic anthropology; participant framework; higher education; hope labor; internship economy

Introduction: Unpacking the “win-win-win” ideology of the internship economy

Internship experiences have been integrated into contemporary US higher education because key stakeholders consider them a universally positive intervention: beneficial for students who desire skills and access to the employment market, advantageous for educators who desire to show evidence of increasing their students’ employability, and favorable for employers who desire access to talented new employees (Fiori and Pearce 2009; Knemeyer and Paul 2002; Sanahuja Vélez and Ribes Giner 2015). Yet, the rise of the internship economy (Frenette 2013, 2015; Skujiņa and Loots 2020; Wolfgram

and Ahrens 2022) has not been without critics as it is seen as a “great way to ... earn nothing and learn little in the brave new economy” (Perlin 2011). There is considerable concern over the quality of internship opportunities (O’Neill 2010), informed by evidence that variations in supervision, mentorship, work design, and other characteristics of the internship can modify the degree to which students receive educational and career benefits from the experience (McHugh 2017). There have also been long-unanswered concerns about the legal, ethical, and social consequences of low and unpaid internships (Curiale 2009; Yamada 2002), and how they in essence provide low-cost, college-educated labor to employers (Gregory 1998) while outsourcing the costs of career development to students (see, e.g. Hamilton et al. 2024).

This article offers an explanation for these two present realities of opportunity and exploitation, which have become deeply intertwined through the formation of “the internship”: a discursive category that occupies an equivocal position between education and work. Internships are categorized as what has become referred to as a High Impact Practice (HIP) in the higher education sector (Kuh 2008), but in contrast with other HIPs like undergraduate research, community-service learning courses, residential learning communities, and other course-based or institution-facilitated extracurricular programs, internships are relatively unregulated in the degree to which the organization of the experience is outsourced. Internships likewise contrast with other highly regulated work-based learning (WBL; or work-integrated learning, WIL) labor-training roles for professions that require or lead to state licensure, such as apprenticeships for trades, practicums for teachers and clinical practitioners, and cooperative training agreements (or co-ops) for engineers. These WBL/WIL roles often involve clear contractual obligations with legal regulation between students, employers, and educational institutions, delineating the hours, duration, work tasks, skills, supervision, compensation (or lack thereof), other expectations and learning goals, and potentially future employment (McRae and Johnston 2016; see also Corrigan 2015; Yamada 2002).

We argue that internships have emerged as a key suture between the world of work and the world of college-level education because of the indeterminacy underpinning this category of experience—a semiotic ambiguity that has been actively shaped by the state and institutions of capital; discursively elaborated by the actors in higher education who have come to mediate the experience; and projected by middle class fantasies of hope for the future. This work qua educational experience, taking place through a set of relationships over time and space, forms a particular participant role. We find that this participant role behaves in ways similar to the strategically deployable shifters (SDSs) described in Bonnie Urciuoli’s work (2003, 2008), but with different political economic conditions and entailments. We propose that the *normative ambiguity of the internship participant role* is an institutional and interactional achievement, and that the analysis of this achievement is clarified by critical attention to the political economic relations and motivations for establishing and maintaining a stable ambiguity of representation (by mislabeling, stretching, and obfuscating the definitions and uses of the term). We argue that the semantic vagueness and polysemy of the term “internship,” and its use and reference in discourse as an SDS, are deployed to produce a semiotic ambiguity of the participant role in the social world. It is ultimately the association of

“learning” with the internship participant role which becomes the indeterminate sign that makes the current internship economy cohere.

This article presents comparative life history narratives of two interns drawn from a large corpus of longitudinal interviews of college interns in the United States (Hora et al. 2023). These narratives illustrate the negotiations, experiences, and consequences that the ambiguity of the internship participant role entails for students attempting to navigate education and the start of a post-college working life. We argue that the stable semiotic ambiguity of the internship participant role is a consequence of a political economy of collusion, in which employers and educators benefit from the emergence and spread of the internship economy, and students attempt to do so as a way to establish credibility in the highly competitive employment market. Yet, we argue that students’ class-based resources, networks, and positionality constrain their possible outcomes from this process. In the next section, we theorize the semiotic and historical process of how a participant role such as “an internship” becomes a normatively ambiguous sign, deployable as a shifter by educators, employers, students, and others (such as academics and policymakers), for different ends.

How does a participant role come to function as a normatively ambiguous sign?

The semiotic indeterminacy of participant roles

Bonnie Urciuoli’s development of the concept of the SDS has followed from attention to lexemes common in contemporary higher education, including “leadership,” “excellence,” “communication,” and “diversity.” Such lexemes, in the tradition of shifters, convey meanings that vary by context and “display social alignments” through their pragmatic entailments (2008, 214). However, to the extent that they “are otherwise seen as ordinary words with dictionary definitions,” any emergent indeterminacy can be of strategic benefit to positions contributing disproportionately to authoritative discourse (e.g., politicians, CEOs, and institutional leadership).

“Internship” is a lexeme that seems as if it would have potential to become “enregistered” (ibid.) in contemporary neoliberal higher education discourse along with other lexemes such as those mentioned above (including others such as “skills” and “critical thinking”) that Urciuoli has noted serve as SDSs contributing to such discourse. Additionally, unlike many SDSs, “internships” are also a category of labor relation. As such, a college “internship” forms a particularly grounded participant role, one of entering into a legally referenced type of agreement between a student and an employer with all the particular participation frames and (ongoing) discursive histories that come with a work environment. We argue that the shifting, vague, and polysemous deployment of the term “internship” in institutional discourse entails a semiotic ambiguation of the social characteristics and material consequences of the participant role for educators, employers, and students.

Judith Irvine’s discussion of shadow conversations that emerge from participant roles presages our exploration here of the semiotic work that the ambiguity of the internship type and token performs in twenty-first-century US higher education. Using the work of Goffman and then Bakhtin to comment on Wolof *xaxaar* insult poems, Irvine observes, “[I]t is not just the speaker who is doubled (or multiplied) by other

voices, but a set of dialogic relations that are crucially informed by other sets—shadow conversations that surround the conversation at hand” (1996, 152). The participant roles of *xaxaar*, as described by Irvine, emerge in concrete speech events, even if those events themselves are not bounded but bear traces of indeterminate voices from other communicative information in time and space, lending them a certain ambiguity. In the case of college internships, we find persuasive evidence that a regularized or institutionalized participant role can itself function like a shifter, or SDS, with all the accompanying entailments of ambiguity. We see ambiguity emerging through a particular dynamic in the tangled educational, economic, affective, and legal multiparty relationship that is formed through a college student’s participation in an internship: collusion. The creation of a category of labor that is *normatively ambiguous* both in its individual occurrences and over time is a semiotic accomplishment that requires interactive work—and a particular political economy of higher education—to maintain.

We turn to a genealogy of how internships became a normatively ambiguous participant role and sign to unpack how lawmakers, US courts, and higher education policymakers have worked to establish and defend the normative ambiguity of the internship participant role.

The legal and cultural ambiguity of the internship participant role

The medical historian Rosemary Stevens (1978) has traced the earliest application of the term “intern” in American English referring to a postgraduate hospital training role to 1865. The term “internship” was deployed to refer to a new labor training participant role, as part of the institutionalization and professionalization of several key professions in the 1930s and 1940s, such as in medicine, teaching, and government services (Stiles et al. 1960; see also Benavides, Dicke, and Holt 2013). This development occurred at the same time as the first federal legislation to protect workers, the Fair Labor Standards Act (or FLSA) of 1938, which was passed with the explicit goal of preventing employers from engaging in unfair labor practices (such as practices requiring unpaid work) that would drive down wages (Bennett 2011).

The legal basis for an unpaid labor training role was established in a case about training for railway brakemen that went before the US Supreme Court—*Walling vs. Portland Terminal Co.* (1947)—in which the Court found “trainees” ineligible for the financial compensation required for regular employees under the FLSA, provided that the activity was of educational benefit to the trainees and a relative burden (not benefit) to the employer. The costs and benefits of “learning” became key factors in determining the “trainee” exemption under the FLSA. The Fitzgerald Act of 1937 provided clarity about the definition, characteristics, and learning outcomes of the apprenticeship role, whereas “internships” became an ambiguous legal category (not referenced explicitly in any US law) which became understood as any related arrangement of variable duration, intensity, and nature to offer practical experience in which “an intern” consents to the value of the learning experience as the primary, if not sole, compensation (Frenette 2015). By the second half of the 1960s, fresh calls for the value of experience in education, reviving the arguments of earlier advocates such as John Dewey (1963), added weight to a push of internships for academic credit into fields such as social work,

psychology, criminal justice, journalism, and family science for credit (Smart and Berke 2004).

It subsequently fell to the Wage and Hour Division (WHD) of the US Department of Labor to interpret the *Portland Terminal* decision by issuing Fact Sheets on how to interpret labor laws. The following are the six criteria for determining trainee (including “intern”) status from the *Portland Terminal* case that the WHD was advising as of April 2010, at a time of increased attention to the question of interns’ rights (Curiale 2009; Yamada 2002):

1. The training, even though it includes the actual operation of the employer’s facilities, is similar to that which would be given in a vocational school;
2. The training is for the benefit of the trainee;
3. The trainees do not displace regular employees, but work under close observation;
4. The employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the trainees and on occasion the employer’s operations may actually be impeded;
5. The trainees are not necessarily entitled to a job upon the completion of the training period; and
6. The employer and the trainee understand that the trainees are not entitled to wages for the time spent in training.

There is a clear difference between the restricted seven-to-eight-day training course that was the subject of the *Portland Terminal* decision and the more fluid month- to year-long experiences, part-time or full-time, that have become classifiable as a college “internship.” The significant institutional mediating role that the issuing of college credit (and the tuition fees that accompany it) now plays marks a further significant difference for what might constitute an “internship,” as opposed to a “traineeship.” The rules issued by the WHD in 2018 (US Department of Labor 2018) make a relatively significant update to how a seventy-year-old legal ruling is to be interpreted, broadening the language from “vocational” to include eight references to such new terms as “education,” “educational,” “academic,” or “learning.” However, there is still allowance for tremendous variation in the nature, scope, and depth of an intern’s activities and responsibilities in the workplace. Furthermore, the rules suggest that the internship is still largely a relationship between an employer and the intern. The WHD Fact Sheet would seem to provide clarity as to the conditions of a legally unpaid training role (i.e., an internship). However, the Department of Labor’s chronic underenforcement of these rules leavens their ambiguity by allowing variations to proliferate (Bennett 2011). Critics add that the paucity of court decisions in the United States related to the employment status of interns has only contributed to the dynamic (Braun 2012).

The Obama Administration briefly attempted to crack down on potentially illegal unpaid internships (Braun 2012). However, various think tanks and lobbyists representing the private sector responded by advocating for the status quo: in one opponent’s words, the state should remain “pro-choice” in regard to college internships (Stossel 2010; Braun 2012, 286). More striking was a letter that thirteen presidents of US colleges and universities sent to the Secretary of the US Department of Labor:

[W]e are troubled by the Department of Labor's apparent recent shift.... The Department's public statements could significantly erode employers' willingness to provide valuable and sought-after opportunities for American college students. While we share your concerns about the potential for exploitation, our institutions take great pains to ensure students are placed in secure and productive environments that further their education.... We urge great caution in changing an approach to learning that is viewed as a huge success by educators, employers, and students alike ... (Aoun 2010)

The leader of the pushback against the Obama Administration, President of Northeastern University Joseph E. Aoun, explained, "We had to speak out. It's up to the colleges and universities to define the educational import of the internship" (Lipka 2010). University presidents' assertions that their institutions should be trusted to define a meaningful internship have protected a status quo that ultimately leaves individual interns to navigate the vicissitudes of the field of options on their own and, as we shall show in our interview case studies, have maintained biases on who can assume such risks of participation.

The *Portland Terminal* and subsequent upholding decisions, in addition to the academic, policy, and public discourse about the role of internships in the US economy, have established how internships are governed (and not governed) in a gray zone between education and work. In the words of one legal theorist, "Ambiguous statutory language, unclear legal precedent, and nonbinding agency interpretation have resulted in courts' applying inconsistent standards to determine the employment status of interns" (Malik 2015; see also Corrigan 2015; Frenette 2013). Yet there is one further piece we find important to delineate to understand this political economy of collusion that has stabilized internships as a normatively ambiguous participant role.

Collusion and the political economy of internships

The flexible ambiguity of the internship category entails a social relationship based on an interactive "collusion" between employers, educators, and students. By "collusion," we mean a meso-social interactional achievement in which participants navigate a power-laden situation with shared yet unstated suppositions that ultimately legitimate it (McDermott and Tylbor 1983).

Internships provide employers with a low-risk and low-cost way to shift investments from training and onboarding to recruiting and selecting "talent" who already possess the requisite work-ready skills, putting the burden of labor-training onto the prospective worker (Gregory 1998). The profit-maximization motive of contemporary capitalism impels cost-cutting measures, and US firms have increasingly reduced time and resources in training new employees. Furthermore, employers can use internships to fill labor shortages or to do work that regular employees find menial or unattractive, and in the process review students as potential new employees (Moss-Pech 2021; Zhao and Liden 2011). As one internship policy review states, "Indeed, it is the very ambiguity of terms such as internship—which can encompass paid or unpaid opportunities and learning or productive work—that opens the door for organizations to exploit unpaid workers, irrespective of the potential illegality or the practice" (Grant-Smith and McDonald 2018, 561).

For educators under increasing pressure to show evidence of supporting both the career outcomes for students and the economic development of the state and nation, internships coordinate public higher education with the interests of the private sector by providing access to educated labor and providing career benefits to students which are measurable within a logic of accountability (Lane 2009). Thus, US universities are promoting internships to sell the value of a college degree to students and families (Einstein 2015)—a move tied to the defense of their authority to define what can count as an internship (Lipka 2010). Academic programs have increasingly required internships for graduation, leading advisors and faculty to promote (and often pressure) students to participate in one, in part as preparation to “sell” themselves on the job market (Larson 2008; Urciuoli 2008; see also Handler 2013; Ladousa 2013).

From the perspective of students, collusion involves pursuing precarious and ambiguous forms of work in exchange for promises—or even, hints or suggestions—of valuable “learning” and opportunities to “get one’s foot in the door.” Students thus approach internships as a form of “hope labor,” where contingent and irregular work is configured as a temporary “sacrifice” for the gain of future stable, regular, and well-paid career outcomes (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013; Mackenzie and McKinlay 2021). In this way, semantic ambiguity in the term “internship” and semiotic ambiguity in the actual labor relation animate students’ hope labor. Students are pressured to participate in multiple internships, and those with the needed resources and connections may attempt to do so, in hopes of reaping the benefits of increased employability (Wolfgang and Ahrens 2022). However, this hope is not equitably distributed because the social conditions of college internships often exclude students from minoritized backgrounds (Allen et al. 2013; Hora et al. 2021; Wolfgang, Vivona, and Akram 2021). For students who face race and class barriers to internship (and, if necessary, multiple internship) participation, the ongoing pursuit of a beneficial internship encounter may ultimately be experienced as a cruel, optimistic fantasy (Berlant 2010).

Findings: Selected case studies from *The College Internship Study*

To illustrate this analytic of the ambiguity in the internship participant role, and the political economy of collusion that increasingly binds it together, we turn now to two individual student life history narratives, which are constructed from a longitudinal sequence of three interviews in which fifty-eight students participated to completion (more details below). We selected the narratives of these two students’ experiences—based on both the richness and relevance of their descriptive details and on the insights gained from their comparative juxtaposition—to illustrate how students are caught up in this semiotic ambiguity, with real effects on their personal direction after an internship experience. These two case studies are drawn from and reflect patterns and insights gained from the analysis of the large dataset, *The College Internship Study*: a national, multi-sited, mixed-methods, longitudinal study of the participation barriers, experiences, and outcomes of college internships. From 2019 to 2022, an interdisciplinary team of researchers administered a survey among students with junior standing or above, and then used it to recruit participants for focus groups (Time 1). The research team conducted follow-up interviews with the panel of focus group participants in the subsequent two years (Time 2 and 3). The team also conducted interviews with

educators and advisors who coordinate and support college internships ($n = 105$), and employers who host those internships ($n = 51$). The study was conducted at fourteen postsecondary institutions representing diverse institutional types and student demographics: two community colleges, three predominantly white institutions, three Hispanic-serving institutions, and six Historically Black Colleges and Universities, located in the American Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and Southwest. One of the authors of this paper (Wolfgram) was a co-investigator responsible for leading the fieldwork and analysis for the longitudinal interview portion of the study, resulting in 283 focus group participants at Time 1, 151 interview participants at Time 2, and 58 interviews at Time 3 (Hora et al. 2023).

The analysis of the corpus of interviews involved iterations of open coding and theme identification (Ryan and Bernard 2003), systematic and comparative coding (Corbin and Strauss 2015), as well as longitudinal coding (Saldaña 2003), and the development of longitudinal narrative case studies (Bartlett and Vavrus 2016). Through this process of open coding, theming, and case-study development, we identified a set of analytical themes associated with the ambiguity of the internship role and its consequences; this became the basis for a codebook applied to the corpus of interviews. The varieties of representational ambiguity that we used to code students' talk included the following:

1. **Ambiguities of scope:** This involves an expansive inclusion and labeling of internship-adjacent experiences (e.g., volunteering, undergraduate research) as an internship;
2. **Ambiguities of character:** This represents an activity as an internship, but which either lacks important normative characteristics of an internship (e.g., learning, career development, mentorship, etc.), or possesses important normative counter-indicating characteristics (e.g., employment contracts);
3. **Ambiguities of classification:** This involves a (potentially disingenuous) mislabeling of an activity (such as low-wage entry level employment) as an internship.

For the individual case study analysis presented in this paper, the authors selected experiences of two students from *The College Internship Study* corpus that were informed by each of the three varieties of representational ambiguity coded across the corpus, whose comments offered extensive reflections on the problems of ambiguity, and whose case studies documented longitudinally the socially stratified material consequences of ambiguity. Drawing on the longitudinal interview data for the selected case studies, we developed a set of two individualized case narratives—similar in style to other genres of ethnographic writing—such as portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2005), life history (Jeffrey and Dyson 2008), and counter-stories (Solórzano and Yosso 2002)—which contextualize and highlight the patterns and consequences of internship work role ambiguity for college students.

“She called it an internship at first... but then it turned out to be something very different”: Joy’s epic (and disastrous) quest for a clinical internship in psychology

Joy is a African American female who at the time of her interview in 2019 was majoring in psychology at a public predominantly white institution. Joy had transferred into the

university from a community college and was in her second semester, studying psychology. Her career goal was to become a school counselor. Joy stated she was highly motivated to work with children and felt at that time that a degree in “psychology is really getting me there.” Joy received consistent messaging from professors, advisors, and peers about internships as something “important” that enhances “learning and being able to be hands on,” which could result in “more experience and a better insight [sic].” She hoped that these experiences can help facilitate “networking and really learning and really figuring out, okay, if this is something that I really want to do ... for the rest of your [sic] life.” Her professor also said that an internship in the field “would look good on my resume when I’m applying for a Master’s program.” This messaging about the learning, career development, and employment credibility-boosting outcomes of internship participation is consistent with the research evidence (Gillespie, Zhang, and Wolfram 2020).

Given this messaging that internships are key to career development and building credibility for graduate school, she started searching her university’s online internship and employment directory for internships related to her academic and career goals; however, “that really didn’t get me anywhere.” For support she met with a career advisor who found what seemed to be several relevant internships, but they all required either temporary relocation or travel outside this city to places that were inaccessible to public transportation; Joy did not have access to a vehicle. In addition to transportation barriers, she needed part-time work to pay her bills and manage the obligations of full-time schooling. She struggled to find time to accommodate an internship in her busy schedule. However, despite this challenging coordination of barriers (Wolfram, Vivona, and Akram 2021), she reasoned that if she could locate and obtain an internship opportunity relevant to her academic and career goals—one located within the area circumscribed by her transportation constraints—that she would be willing to “make a sacrifice,” perhaps over the summer when she did not have classes, “especially if it’s something that’s getting me closer to the one [career] I’m trying to do.”

Joy’s applications to internships were unsuccessful. Her career advisor recommended volunteering as an internship-adjacent practice, which could provide an opportunity for her to gain some experiences and enhance her resume, making her more competitive in the internship market. Joy registered herself to volunteer at a school in her neighborhood to “read to children” or help teachers in other ways, which she hoped could “just build up my experience if I don’t find an internship.” She also thought that she might establish connections through the school: “maybe if I work with them ... they might have a link to somewhere that ... actually got an internship. [They] could probably help [me] out...”

The neighborhood school turned out not to have relevant voluntary work, so Joy searched for daycares and other facilities where she might gain relevant experiences with youth:

I’m still trying to network and make my connections around and find other jobs related with kids, but ... I told her [a daycare director] I’m willing to

volunteer also just to make it—you know, because volunteer is good too. But I can't volunteer all my time because, you know, I got to pay for school.

When we interviewed Joy approximately one year later, in 2020, she was getting ready to graduate and preparing her applications for graduate school in counseling psychology. For Joy, the barriers of transportation, the need for paid work, scheduling constraints, and the competitive internship market continued to frustrate her efforts: "I've definitely been looking for internships for like a very long time. But it's hard to really find something." After a year of searching, she started to feel that the university was not providing enough support for her goals: "They would just tell me to look it up online." She felt that "Internships are something important and it shouldn't be that difficult for me to be having a hard time with it." Joy had participated in a few interviews, but she found that for some internships—especially those that are paid and relevant to her interests in psychology—"they want people to already have certain experience. And, you know, [if] you don't have that sort of experience, they really don't accept you into the internship." During interviews for internships, she thought about foregrounding her experiences babysitting her niece and nephew as relevant work experience working with youth, but demurred: "You know, I babysit a lot but they don't want to hear that. They want to see you working for a company." Additionally, her limited volunteering did not provide enough relevant experience and credibility to secure an internship, and her paid work to afford living expenses was not in a professional or related field:

I also know as far as references, that's another thing, because I just work warehouse jobs because I'm a college student. It's hard to really find any type of good job that would look good on my resume... So, you know, yeah, my references won't really look all that good, due to the barriers.

Highly motivated to pursue career development opportunities, Joy was also equally bewildered and critical of the selective nature of the process: "And I know some people will say, 'well, if you can't get a job try to do an internship.' But internships, they just make the process harder for you just to get in." Joy was facing a problem that many students encounter in accessing an internship, which is the Catch-22 of needing experience to gain experience. She asked, "You know, how am I supposed to learn and nobody gives me a chance?" Joy admitted that the stress of the process was discouraging: "That's just the whole process, it just becomes stressful and stuff because it's like it just makes [it so] you don't even want to apply for certain things." Joy's experiences revealed in the interview track with how low-income and minoritized students disproportionately choose not to apply for competitive internships due to multiple socioeconomic barriers to participation (Hora et al. 2021; Wolfgram, Vivona, and Akram 2021).

After graduating from college, Joy was finally able to access what seemed like an "internship," working at a private mental health clinic supporting a clinical psychologist. The position was indeed advertised as an "internship," but during the interview for the position, Joy started to feel confused: "I mean, she called it an internship at first. It seemed like that's what it was, but then it turned out to be something very different." Joy's concept of the "internship" role, she explained, focused on learning: "It's mainly you're really learning and you're not actually working because you're trying to learn

what you had to do so that when you're able to work, you know what you are doing." For Joy, "the whole point about an internship is for me to learn."

Joy's concept of an "internship," as distinct from the "actual work" of the labor role of regular employment, is based on the principle that internships are for training, and thus the primary outcome and performance expectation should be "learning." Joy is correct in this understanding, as "learning" is central to the definition of the internship labor role employed in education and workforce policy (Owens and Stewart 2016), and it is central to the messaging targeted to students by educators (Hora, Parrott, and Her 2020). The legal ambiguity of this labor and institutional participant role looms in the background as Joy explains:

I feel like with internships they [employers] really don't understand. It's like they do the same way—I feel like an internship and a job are two different things and I feel like that when I look up an internship, I feel like I'm applying for a job.

Joy found this ambiguity illustrated in the stance of her supervisor at the mental health clinic: "So it was like she mainly just called it... really say that it was an internship but she really just wanted somebody to just do her tasks that she didn't want to be responsible of [for], and pay me little for it." The clinic mainly provided mental health services to individuals struggling with different forms of addiction. As Joy elaborated, "She told me she wanted to bring me in on the clinical side and be able to teach me, but she wasn't teaching me." In reality, Joy found that her work tasks involved work appropriate for regular employees such as administrative work and insurance billing, but also work tasks that were not appropriate for employees at all, such as helping the clinic director prepare her own coursework (i.e., do her homework). Joy explained that her work at the clinic "wasn't at all like the thing that I was supposed to be doing. Like I told you as far as the clinical side, working with clients, I was not doing that. I was basically at her home office helping her pay her bills, her funds, and, you know, stuff." Later in the internship Joy was assigned the task of conducting phone clinical intake interviews, but she was forced to do so without training or supervision:

One time we were supposed to do a call together for her to evaluate the patient.... We were supposed to be on the first call together because I never did it before. But then she decided to leave me by myself. And while I was busy working doing other tasks, she wanted me to talk to this client and, you know, to me, it was like knowing that it was a job, I needed the money, I didn't want to really say no, so I went on ahead and did it but it was just really kind of shocking to me.

Joy evidences considerable self-advocacy skills in this exploitative and inappropriate situation, suggesting after the fact that the situation was unexpected, but at the same time, she expressed, "... knowing that it was a job, I needed the money, I didn't want to really say no, so I went on ahead and did it..." She was also concerned that if the internship failed, she would not be able to use her supervisor as a reference, which was the only counseling-related work experience that she had been able to acquire after over three years of searching and applying.

The six months of work at the clinic had not resulted in enhanced learning, career insights, or enhanced credibility for the future post-graduation employment market.

While it was initially represented as “an internship” that would provide her with clinical experience relevant to her career field, it did not bear fruit. In reality, Joy had been doing the work of a regular employee at the clinic for low pay, no benefits, no job security, and no relevant learning or career development. When Joy attempted to advocate for herself and address the exploitative conditions of her work, there was no formal contract or memorandum of understanding detailing the expectations and conditions of the internship. Joy lacked allies to support her in the situation: “That’s where the issue comes because nobody is not going to come and look out for you if it’s not worth it. That’s like an internship.”

At the time of Joy’s third interview, she had started yet another part-time job that was “like an internship”—in this case, as a temporary childcare worker—and her professors advised her to find work “related to my field for the degree.” But, as Joy explained, her lack of relevant work experience as credentialed by a bona fide “internship” limited her: “It’s just mainly a struggle when, you know, you have the degrees but then it’s like some job they still don’t want to hire you [to do] because you don’t have the experience.” We might add that it only adds to the struggle when the desired (and unambiguous) classification of an experience as “an internship” is elusive.

Keisha’s experience with the cruise line “college internship program”: The glamor of labor on the high seas (impressment, with a fortunate ending)

Joy’s experience illustrates profound and persistent confusion that someone of the prime age and demographic for a college internship can experience regarding the potentially elusive hunt for this kind of educational qua work experience. In her case, the reputation of the value of an internship, cultivated significantly by various actors at her institution, drove the sense that she must be missing something if she could not find one, even if the supply seemed more limited than she had been led to believe (particularly once factoring in personal circumstances of schedule and financial resources). She emerged from her experience with ongoing confusion about the differences between an internship and job. On the one hand, she seemed adamant that an internship should be defined by the potential for learning. On the other hand, Joy observed, “I feel like that when I look up an internship, I feel like I’m applying for a job.”

As we saw earlier in our outline of the history of internships in US higher education, college presidents have weighed in forcefully to defend “flexibility” in the internship relation, with institutions of higher education reserving the right to proclaim whether individual “token” occurrences are indeed of that “type.” We also noted how the allure around internships can be fed by an associated “glamor,” a quality that feeds internships’ mystical and hopeful association with fruitful middle-class self-development. To illustrate how glamor and ambiguity might combine in an internship relation to yield something exploitative, let us turn to another student from the interviews: one who set out for the adventure of an internship on a cruise ship.

Keisha is an African American female, who at the time of the interview was finishing her final year in a social science program at an Historically Black College/University. Keisha applied and was accepted to the “college program internship” of a major cruise line. She recalled being encouraged to do an internship by her mentor, who had herself

done multiple internships while in college, one of which led to employment in her career field. Furthermore, the internship would satisfy a graduation requirement at her university. Keisha was also enticed by the “opportunity to travel” and to learn skills associated with management. Keisha was impressed by the aura of professionalism and efficiency that she experienced during the orientation process that occurred at the corporate headquarters of the cruise line, which she described as “really, really smooth,” “really consistent,” and “very on top of things.” This process communicated to Keisha and her fellow interns an unambiguous message that the “internship program” was tailored to students, associated with the learning and career development goals of “leadership” and “management skills,” and that the internship was separate from the role of a regular employee:

I understood that there were people who actually worked for the company, but it was explained to me that the students that came on, they all had to be enrolled in school so that we would be basically in a separate program. It was explained that we would be held to the same standards, but that there would be certain things that we would not have to do because we were trying to learn the roles of the managers, so that after receiving our degrees, we could go straight into the field of hospitality or management. The information they gave us was that we were on an internship, so I was expecting that.

However, Keisha’s experience of the “internship program” was not born out by these expectations; in fact, she came to understand that the corporate messaging about the internship program was a form of prevarication:

We came to find out that there actually was not a program for the internship. So they basically hired us on as just regular employees, and we worked sixty hours, like, a week. And the living conditions were, of course, very poor as we were on a cruise ship. We were supposed to be learning the manager role, but we never had an opportunity to do that. So I really did not enjoy my experience.... It was not an organized internship. because it really was just a way to gain more employees. And they did that through advertising the job as an internship for college students.... Of course, you know, college students who are smart will take advantage of it because you do get to travel. But you’re held to the same standard of the employees. And it’s not really, you’re not, it’s not really a position like an internship where you can learn about leadership. You work for the leadership. And you do as they say. And it wasn’t advertised to be what it was. And I figured that out once I was on my first assignment.

Keisha quit the internship after only five weeks and returned home to her family, stating “Money is not worth my mental stability.” In contrast with other students’ experience—in which a failed internship entailed severely serious and long-lasting consequences—Keisha was able to rely upon privileges of her social class to both exit the exploitative internship and transition to quality and career-oriented post-graduation employment. Her father was a well-known and influential figure in the community of her hometown. Thus, the social networks of her positioning insulated her from the consequences of this exploitative and failed internship: “I do not have serious worries about getting a

job. And it's only due to, and I hate to say this, but who my father is and his connections that he has as being a city official.... So basically, he knows a lot of people." In fact, when we interviewed Keisha a year after her failed internship, she had graduated from college and was well-placed in her community's city government.

Conclusions: The hope labor and cruel optimism of the internship economy

The theoretical intervention developed in this paper is the claim that the semiotic indeterminacy of participant roles is a social, interactional, and institutional achievement, which requires the collusion of the institutional actors involved—who benefit or attempt to benefit from the establishment and maintenance of semantic vagueness and polysemy of the term “internship” and its reference in discourse. The narrative case studies presented in this article illustrate how Joy and Keisha attempted to navigate their education and careers by pursuing and participating in various activities dubbed “internships.” “Learning” has come to serve as the sign that facilitates the three-way collusive relationship between employers, educators, and students. However, Joy and Keisha were targeted with disingenuous messaging to participate in an “internship” that turned out to be contingent entry-level employment with no provision of the promised “learning,” “mentorship,” or “career development.” As we conclude, it is worth noting a particular two-sided structure of feeling that motivates student participants on their paths from education to work: hope labor and cruel optimism.

The sociologist Andrew Ross (2009), among others, has pointed to a revolt against work that developed particularly in the 1960s, as demand grew for greater flexibility, autonomy, and potential for what felt more authentic to a self as a means of earning a living. If work has become, for young Americans such as Joy, something more than a means to earn a living, it has taken on an expansive affective quality suffused with hope, dreams, and distinction (see, e.g., Graeber 2011). These deeper cultural discourses have fertilized the spread of internships into workspaces such as creative industries (Frenette 2015) and entertainment (such as Disneyland), distant from their prewar origins in medicine, education, and public administration. In more recent years, such potentially transcendent glamor for middle-class self-fashioning has been reflected and advanced in popular culture by the phenomenon of celebrities playing the role of interns on reality television (see Perlin 2011, xii et passim for examples). For some people, what might seem more glamorous and rewarding than getting to work on a cruise ship? Keisha was in part enticed into the cruise industry internship by the fun and exciting “opportunity to travel.” This wider formation of hope through labor motivates and is further crafted by the anxious persistence of students such as Joy and Keisha, scrambling to be awarded the moral credential of personal capacity for hard work, growth mindset, and hustle (Wolfgram and Ahrens 2022).

Yet the larger story told by the set of interviews to which Joy's and Keisha's belong is that the internship, as an increasingly malleable credential of negotiated class status, also serves as a professionalizing gate that blocks entry in myriad ways (Allen et al. 2013; Hora et al. 2021; Wolfgram, Vivona, and Akram 2021). We are reminded of Emily Martin's work on how “flexibility,” while potentially attractive to workers, was promoted in a self-serving fashion by expanding human resource departments, serving corporate and political ends of decoupling from previous commitments to

support and provide stability to the workforce (see, e.g., Martin 1994, chap. 7, esp. pp. 158–59). This trend has led us from temporary work to the expansion of consulting, the gig economy, and even the category of “unpaid work” (Grant-Smith and McDonald 2018). This is the era of neoliberal governmentality that has also, as noted earlier, led institutions of higher education to increase claims to how they prepare students to join a workforce, including through their role in integrating internships into a student’s degree (Einstein 2015). Yet, as the cases of students like Keisha and Joy demonstrate, such hope labor is a cruel optimism: one’s ability to make the ambiguity of an internship work for a path from higher education to a job of one’s fantasy is dependent on the capital that helps one both to navigate the murky prognoses of higher education actors and the fuzzy promises of employers, and to bounce back from experiences that do not turn out as presented, imagined, or hoped.

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