

From the Daily: Unpaid Internships as an Exploitive Stepping-Stone

BY THE MICHIGAN DAILY

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We all have heard that dreaded question from relatives and friends, ‘so what are you doing this summer?’ And although in a perfect world we would all have flawless answers with gleaming smiles on our faces, the words that we do mumble often include a bunch of ‘wells’, ‘I am waiting to hear back from...’ so on and so forth. Over the past decade, companies have increasingly taken advantage of college students based on their eagerness to make the leap from classroom to workplace. In theory, internships sound great. They provide experience in competitive industries, add depth to your resume, and solidify reputable contacts and connections. Yet, when analyzed more closely, unpaid internships exploit the individual, widen the gap between well-off students and those less affluent, and even damage our already unstable economy.

Shocked? Confused? Keep reading.

Employers have turned what is supposed to be a beneficial learning experience for the intern into their own profitable and exploitive stepping-stone. Not surprising, however. After all, what good businessman wouldn’t want to save money? The exponentially increasing demand for internships has allowed for the replacement of monetary compensation with the value of experience. Ross Perlin in his widely acclaimed book, *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*, states that

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internships save firms on average \$600 million dollars every year. Unpaid internships will only continue to dominate since the current recession has left thousands of companies in a budgetary bind. And since internship experience has become one of the most crucial factors for future employment in a desired field, ambitious students – Michigan students - are sacrificing whatever is necessary to get them.

Stories of interns being taking advantage of inundate newspapers and are hard to ignore. For example, at a Manhattan children’s film company a New York University student wished to work in animation through her unpaid internship. Instead, her employers assigned the student tedious and irrelevant tasks such as wiping the door handles each day to reduce the spread of swine flu. Yes, we would all like to think that we would never partake in such intellectually degrading tasks. Yet, stories and studies show that *very* frequently would students rationalize that a little cleaning is worth having industry-specific

“experience” on a resume. With smiling faces would many of us would respond, “of course, where are the gloves?”

Additionally, another New York University senior who worked, without pay, at a musical talent company spent most of her time photocopying, filing, and answering routine emails. She explains, “It would have been nice to be paid, but at this point, it’s so expected of me to do this for free. If you want to be in the music industry that’s the way it works. If you want to get your foot in the door somehow, this is the easiest way to do it. You suck it up.” These stories demonstrate the common intern’s mentality that any experience is good experience. Most interns know that much of the work asked of them is unfair, particularly if not receiving monetary compensation for it. However, it seems to be the only way to advance in the workforce at this point in time.

Yet, less known are the effects of unpaid internships not solely regarding the individual. The increasing amount of unpaid internships contributes to widely diverging economic classes. Many less affluent students cannot afford spending the summer working for free in high-cost cities. Financial strains such as tuition, traveling costs, and spending money are already very heavy burdens for the average college student. While interns who can afford and are willing to work without monetary compensation gain experience and make profitable connections, those who do not have the ability to accept an unpaid position are at a distinct disadvantage in the labor market. Unpaid internships are promoting sharp class divides between students who can afford to take them and those who cannot. Just another way, many people would say, that society has made social mobility and equal opportunity difficult to attain.

Not only do unpaid internships place burdens on the economically disadvantaged, but they also affect the economy as a whole. Specifically, unpaid internships outsource jobs that otherwise would be given to low-skilled workers. Unpaid internships create an oversupply of individuals willing to work for nothing. Opinion writer for The New York Times Anya Kamenetz in her article, “Take This Internship and Shove It” cites a recent survey administered by journalists who found “an influx of unpaid graduates kept wages down and patched up the gaps left by job cuts.” Therefore, employers benefit from getting rid of low-skill employees who unpaid interns can replace. They reduce company money spent while maintaining production levels and leveling their budgets.

As college undergraduates, we are one of the most targeted groups for continuing the trend of unpaid internships, and therefore it is crucial that we understand all the ramifications. If this trend continues, we may be forced to work without pay for longer periods of time, which would in turn deprive us of the independence and career advancement that we have diligently prepared for throughout college. As passionate and logical Wolverines we must take back the control that large corporations hold over our futures. Apply for internship programs that compliment your skill sets and educational goals. Already have an unpaid internship? Then don’t be afraid to ask questions and negotiate potential benefits or ways to increase your involvement within the company. We must remember that we are the talent and fresh new minds that industries need in order to develop and stay competitive in their fields. Don’t discredit what you have to offer.

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