



Unpaid Journalism Internships: Education or Exploitation?

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ABSTRACT

Internships are a required component for many post-secondary journalism programs in Canada, but many positions tend to be unpaid. Sixty-five per cent (n=250) of students who responded to our survey said they would be less likely to apply for unpaid positions. The same proportion of respondents said that being paid for the work is extremely or very important for them. Some cite affordability as a factor while others feel that unpaid positions are unethical, and that work has value even though it is being performed by student interns. We conducted surveys to gauge attitudes towards internships among three different groups: students enrolled in English-language post-secondary journalism programs; employers in Canadian newsrooms; and the heads of journalism programs. This is the first study in Canada to survey a large number of journalism students on their attitudes towards unpaid internships and the first to survey these different groups simultaneously for comparative analysis. While most survey respondents recognize the value that internships can provide to journalism students, we find strong evidence that a lack of payment is a disincentive for students to participate. In principle, journalism program heads could simply end participation in unpaid placements. But they are reluctant to do that, evidently because they fear many positions would disappear, making it difficult for their students to complete course or program requirements. However, if journalism educators and employers want to ensure that access to experience and possible career paths is truly equitable, they must seek a way to end this practice.

Keywords: internships, journalism education, journalism students, unpaid internships

RÉSUMÉ

Stages non payés en journalisme : Éducation ou exploitation?

Les stages sont des éléments requis dans plusieurs programmes de journalisme de troisième cycle au Canada, mais ces stages sont, pour la plupart, non payés. Soixante-cinq pour cent (n=250) des étudiants qui répondaient à notre enquête ont dit qu'ils seraient peu enclins à poser leur candidature pour des positions non payées. La même proportion des répondants ont constaté que la rémunération est extrêmement importante pour eux. Certains sont influencés par l'abordabilité, tandis que d'autres estiment qu'il est malhonnête d'offrir des positions non payées, et que le travail a sa valeur, même si ce sont des stagiaires qui l'accomplissent. Nos enquêtes s'adressaient à trois groupes différents pour déterminer leur attitude envers les stages: étudiants de troisième cycle dans des programmes de journalisme en anglais; employés dans des salles de rédaction; directeurs de programmes de journalisme. C'est la

première enquête au Canada qui sonde un grand éventail d'étudiants en journalisme sur cette question, et la première à interroger les trois groupes simultanément pour faire une analyse comparée. La plupart des répondants reconnaissent la valeur de ces stages pour les étudiants; nous trouvons néanmoins une forte indication que le manque de rémunération pose un obstacle à leur participation. En principe, les directeurs de programmes pourraient simplement mettre fin à la participation en placements non payés. Mais ils sont peu enclins à faire cela, de crainte que les positions ne disparaissent, ce qui rendrait difficile l'achèvement des programmes. Pourtant, si les enseignants et les employeurs veulent assurer l'équité d'accès à l'expérience et aux carrières éventuelles, ils devraient chercher le moyen de mettre fin à ce système.

Mots-clés : stages, formation en journalisme, étudiants en journalisme, stages non rémunérés

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INTRODUCTION

Canadian journalism students, educators and employers are conflicted about internships. Many see these positions as opportunities for mentorship, gaining “real-world” experience and opening the door to career paths, along with a host of other benefits. But many students are also either suspicious or downright hostile to the idea of internships being unpaid. Of the students surveyed in this study, 65% said they would be less likely to apply for an internship position if it was unpaid and few (20%) believed that the non-financial benefits compensate for a lack of payment. Student respondents said they were struggling with paying tuition and living expenses and often had jobs; a system of unpaid internships was seen as unfair to those who cannot afford to do unpaid work.

Most (59%) newsroom employers surveyed in this study agreed in principle that internships should be paid but cited a variety of obstacles: limited budgets; union rules to navigate; a shortage of personnel to provide guidance and mentorship. Notably, some employers said that newsrooms should not be expected to pay interns, who they are already helping to train and mentor.

Some suggested that journalism programs are off-loading a small but important part of a student's education, a part that is often a requirement for students to either complete courses or graduate.

Although nearly half of the journalism program heads surveyed said that students should always receive some payment for these placements, most said they were reluctant to require that internships be paid, citing a concern that it would almost certainly reduce the number of positions available.

SURVEY METHODS

All the surveys in this study were developed in Qualtrics. Each journalism program was provided a separate but identical survey and the responses were combined after the survey period was complete. The surveys were approved by the research ethics boards at participating institutions and students were sent survey invitations by email from their own programs. Student surveys were completed during the 2021/2022 academic year.

The surveys of employers and journalism program heads received research ethics board approval. Survey invitations were sent to journalism program heads in March and April, 2022, and to employers in April, 2022.

J-Schools Canada/Écoles-J Canada member programs were invited to take part. The participating programs were those that had faculty members available to navigate the research ethics process. Students in six English-language journalism programs across Canada (Carleton University, Humber

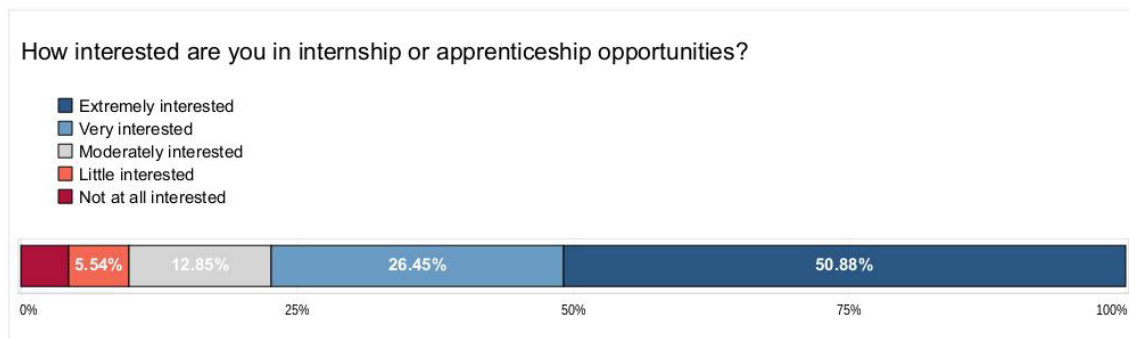
College, University of King's College, MacEwan University, Sheridan College, and Toronto Metropolitan University) were sent survey invitations. There were 489 respondents.

SURVEY RESULTS

STUDENTS

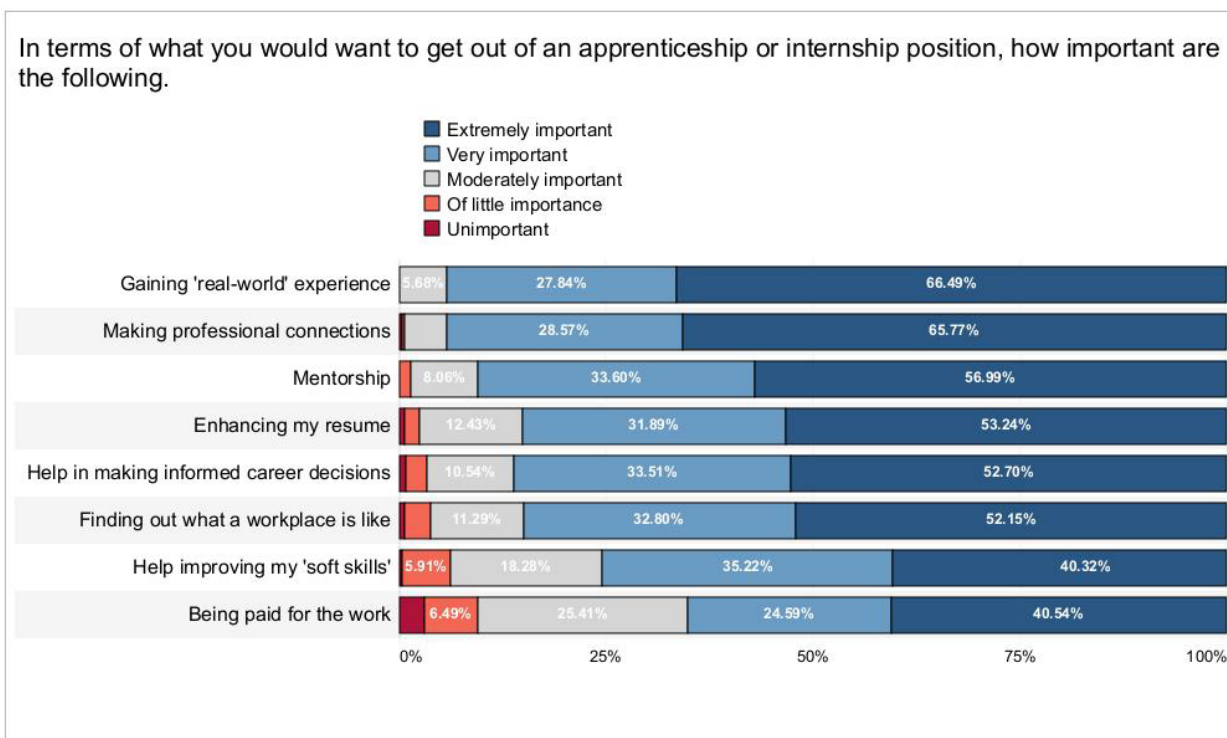
Students expressed a high degree of interest in internships [Fig. 1]. Just over 75% of respondents said they were either extremely interested or very interested in these opportunities, while about 5% said that they were not at all interested. Sixty-seven per cent of respondents indicated they were interested in internships in the field of journalism, while some indicated an interest in other fields such as public relations (6%), non-profit-based communications (5%), and government policy (3%).

Figure 1.



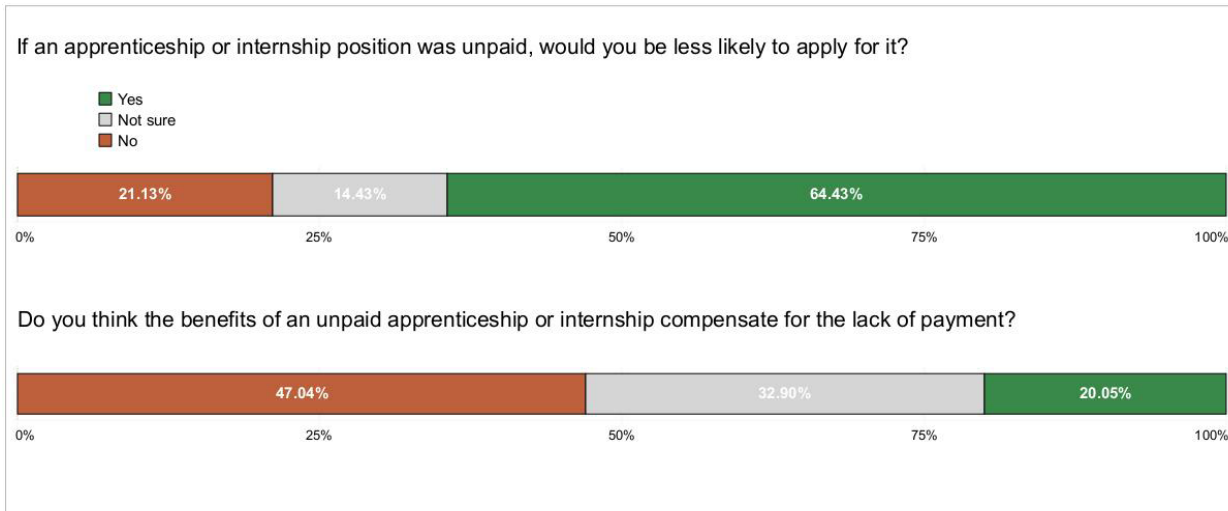
Students said that there were many benefits to internships that were important to them, including gaining “real-world” experience, making professional connections and mentorship. Being paid for the work was the least important of the listed benefits, although nearly 65% of the students said being paid was either extremely or very important [Fig. 2].

Figure 2.



A strong majority of students (nearly 65%) also said they would be less likely to apply for an internship position if it was unpaid. Students were invited to submit an open-ended explanation for this response, for which there were 212 submissions. Students touched on many different themes, including affordability (94 respondents), and the observation that all work has value (40 respondents). Twenty-eight students indicated that they were doing paid work outside of school.

Figure 3.



Finally, nearly 50% of students perceived that the non-financial benefits of an internship would not compensate for the lack of payment. Just over 20% said “yes” they would. Nearly 33% said they weren’t sure, which suggests that many are conflicted.

EMPLOYERS

The second survey was administered to senior staff in English-speaking newsrooms across the country. There were 56 respondents. A large proportion of the news organizations represented were small, with between one and 10 people producing editorial content.

Most (85%) reported they accepted student interns. (Since this survey is non-random, we cannot generalize from these results to conclude that most news organizations in Canada accept student interns.) Most respondents (60%) believed that student interns should receive payment, though a quarter said they were not sure, suggesting that the issue is contentious. Nearly half of respondents reported they currently pay student interns [Fig. 4].

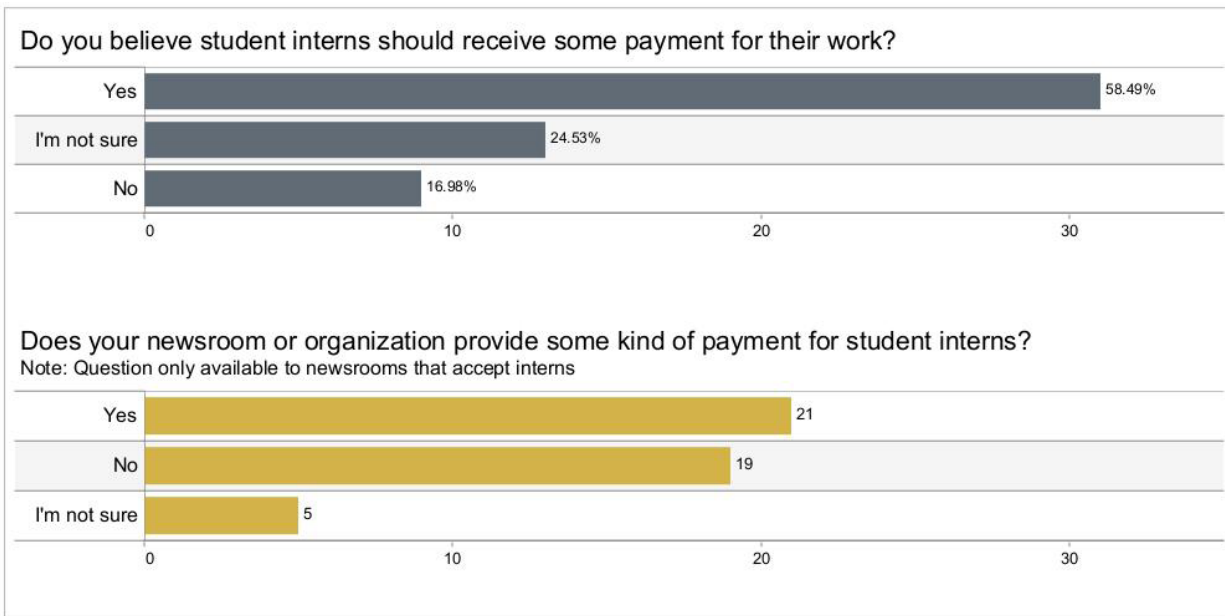
Newsroom leaders who said that interns should be paid were asked to explain why in an open-ended question; there were 30 responses. These comments fell into the broad categories of principled (work has value, unethical practice, inequity, fairness) and practical (value for service, affordability). Newsroom leaders who said that student interns should not be paid were similarly asked to explain why in an open-ended question. Response categories included: already paying for labour; not willing or unable to pay; students received course credit; paying would reduce positions; and union rules.

Respondents were also asked about challenges to paying interns. Budget restrictions were by far the most cited challenge (40 of the 52 responses), but others were raised as well (capacity, union, management, internship quality and policy).

Newsroom staff were invited to add comments in a final, open-ended question. Of the 17 responses, some highlighted the need to pay student interns to ensure that there is equal opportunity to access internships and, by extension, careers in journalism. Others suggested that new funding models be developed to support paid positions. Some expressed frustration that newsrooms are expected both to help train young journalists and to pay interns.

We should acknowledge that students also complete internships in fields outside of journalism. These workplaces are not captured in this study.

Figure 4.



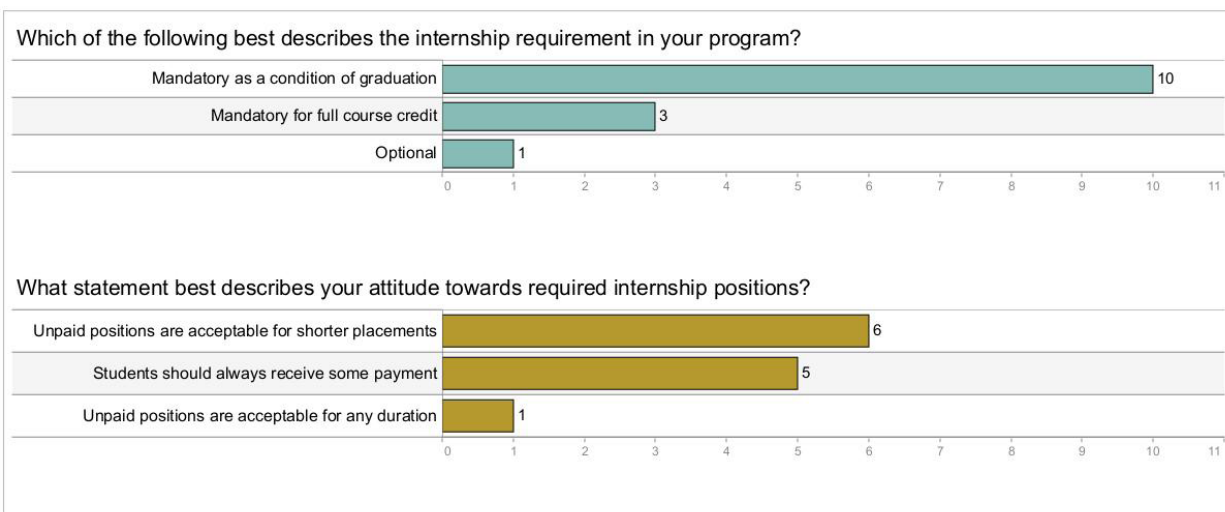
JOURNALISM PROGRAMS

The third survey was sent to journalism program heads (members of J-Schools Canada/Écoles-J Canada). Of the 20 member programs at the time, there were 14 respondents.

All but one of the programs represented reported having internships as some kind of requirement [Fig. 5]. (This study did not delve into the details of how each program's internship program works.) For programs that required internships, one program required a duration of 1-2 weeks, two required 3-4 weeks, six required 5-6 weeks, one required 9-10 weeks and two required more than 10 weeks.

Among the program heads there was some disagreement over whether internship positions should always be paid. Six respondents said that unpaid positions are acceptable for shorter placements, while five said students should always receive some payment. One respondent said unpaid positions are acceptable for any duration [Fig. 5].

Figure 5



The seven respondents who indicated some support for unpaid placements were asked why they support these positions. Five of the comments referred to an expected reduction in internship opportunities if employers were required to pay.

DISCUSSION

The survey results paint a complex picture of attitudes towards unpaid journalism internships. On the one hand, student respondents – particularly those who want to pursue careers in journalism – evidenced strong interest in these positions, seeing them as good opportunities for gaining experience, making connections, and receiving mentorship, among other things. Students also ranked “being paid” as the least important of the pre-coded values, although a large majority of the students indicated that this was still very or extremely important.

Even so, a large proportion of students said they were less inclined to apply for unpaid positions. Explanations included because they can’t afford to, because they view the practice as unethical, because they feel that their work has value even though they are just embarking on their careers, and a host of other reasons.

Some open-ended responses strongly suggest that unpaid internships risk creating (or perpetuating) two classes of students: those who can afford to participate in unpaid positions; and those who can’t and must find some alternative ways of fulfilling such a requirement. Assuming internships often represent the first rung on a ladder that leads to full-time employment, students who are unable to take part will be kept off that ladder, making their paths into journalism careers that much more difficult. And, if so, newsroom diversity will suffer. Other Canadian research (Attfield & Couture, 2014) has raised this prospect.

Our survey found that underpaid internships are more likely to be taken by those who are from high income, non-visible minority backgrounds. If this trend is persistent over time, it means that access to internships—and the potentially valuable career starting experiences they offer—are only realistically accessible to individuals from high income households and Caucasian backgrounds (p. 14).

Recent studies in Canada (Gollmitzer, 2021) and the United Kingdom (Holford, 2017) have found evidence that unpaid internships benefit those with higher socio-economic status. Additionally, a Canadian study (Shade & Jacobson, 2015) suggested that unpaid internships may perpetuate gender inequalities, particularly in media industries where female students often make up a large proportion of students.

Many senior newsroom staff responded that they believe – at least in principle – that internships should be paid. This idea, however, bumps up against the harsh reality faced by Canadian news organizations – a long period of difficult business conditions, with many forced to close their doors (Lindgren, n.d.).

Most newsrooms represented in this data are small and few indicated they can afford to dedicate staff to providing the mentorship and feedback, let alone payment. Some newsroom staff also questioned the fairness of having to pay students who are getting hands-on, educational experiences that are usually a requirement of their programs. Journalism program heads evidently recognize this tension, which would explain why so few stated they were prepared to allow their students to participate only in paid positions.

Some scholars (Burke & Carton, 2013) have argued that unpaid internships may be ethically justified if there is a clear and substantive pedagogical component.

Collecting tuition from the student in exchange for the privilege of working without remuneration might be justifiable if the college plays a central role in securing the internship and ensuring a substantive academic experience in a quality work environment, but campus career centers do not uniformly monitor and reassess all placements or visit students’ workplaces. (pp. 122-123).

Yet others have critiqued the idea that learning should compensate for a lack of payment. Sukarieh & Tannock (2017) argue that this line of thought “risks implying that work itself is an activity in which learning does not occur” (p. 250).

Even assuming internships have a substantial pedagogical component, there is still the practical matter of affordability. Our survey results indicate that, with the demands of school and jobs, many students simply can’t afford to work with no pay, regardless of how beneficial the experience might be. Educators and newsroom staff should also be cautious about small payments that would be closer to token amounts than to an actual wage. In their study, Attfield & Couture (2014) distinguish between “unpaid” and “underpaid” internships (pp. 3-4). Underpaid internships usually refer to positions that pay below the local minimum wage.

A number of Canadian advocacy organizations have argued that a minimum wage is not the same as a livable wage, and is usually substantially lower (Living Wage Canada, 2022), so token payments would not address the affordability issue.

Journalism programs are in an awkward position, since many require internship placements of some duration. For those that are unpaid, are programs forcing their students to participate in a program that many view as unethical? Similarly, employers derive some value from interns, even though newsroom staff provide mentorship and other benefits to students. It appears, however, that some newsrooms are unable (or unwilling) to provide payment on top of these benefits.

Programs also face uncertainty regarding the impact of reforms. If journalism programs ended their participation in unpaid positions tomorrow, would it result in fewer opportunities for students to gain valuable experience? Would it eliminate opportunities for those students who might want to participate even if the positions are unpaid?

On the other hand, since unpaid positions discriminate against many students, does a principled position demand that this practice be ended or at least reformed? For news organizations and journalism programs that aspire to be more inclusive, having a door to employment that is only open to those with the financial means would suggest only a token commitment to that goal.

This research was intended only to gauge attitudes that the three different groups have towards unpaid internships and the results don’t point toward specific solutions. Journalism programs, however, must acknowledge their role in this system. Internship requirements may have made sense when there was a much larger media ecosystem, but that is no longer the case, at least not for journalism-specific positions.

Moving forward, journalism programs might consider two potential measures. First, the duration of internships could be shortened. Internship periods of more than two weeks create incentives for unpaid labour. Second, programs could provide funding opportunities directly to students to help support them during internships. Journalism programs could negotiate with employers about providing payment to student interns. If programs were able to bring some funding to the table, some of the costs could be split with employers. This would be an acknowledgement that employers are being asked to provide training and mentorship while at the same time deriving some benefit from student work.

There is not likely to be a one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges of unpaid internships. But diversity in journalism will suffer if programs and employers do not address this contentious issue.



Note: Susan Harada is a member of the Facts & Frictions editorial board. Her co-authorship was not disclosed to board members, and she did not participate in any part of the selection and review process for this research note.

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APPENDIX 1 - SURVEY QUESTIONS

This appendix includes only those questions that are directly referenced in the research note. For a complete list of survey questions, email AneurinBosley@cunet.carleton.ca

Note: Some of the questions in the survey involved question logic, potentially reducing the number of possible respondents to any given question.

STUDENT SURVEY

Internships or apprenticeships of a week or two (at minimum) are intended to provide professional experience and other benefits to students. How interested are you in internship or apprenticeship opportunities?

- Not at all interested
- Little interested
- Moderately interested
- Very interested
- Extremely interested

Display This Question: If Internships or apprenticeships of a week or two (at minimum) are intended to provide professional... = Not at all interested

What is the primary reason(s) you are not interested in internships or apprenticeships?

Display This Question: **If** Internships or apprenticeships of a week or two (at minimum) are intended to provide professional... = *Not at all interested*

In terms of what you would want to get out of an apprenticeship or internship position, how important are the following:

	Unimportant	Of little im- portance	Moderately important	Very im- portant	Extremely important
Gaining 'real-world' experience	0	0	0	0	0
Making professional connections	0	0	0	0	0
Mentorship	0	0	0	0	0
Finding out what a work- place is like	0	0	0	0	0
Enhancing my resume	0	0	0	0	0
Being paid for the work	0	0	0	0	0
Help im- proving my 'soft skills' (communi- cation, team- work, etc.)	0	0	0	0	0
Help in mak- ing informed career deci- sions	0	0	0	0	0

Display This Question: If Internships or apprenticeships of a week or two (at minimum) are intended to provide professional... = Not at all interested

Are there other things you would want to get out of an internship or apprenticeship position? (Leave blank if not)

Display This Question: If Internships or apprenticeships of a week or two (at minimum) are intended to provide professional... != Not at all interested

In which field would you be most interested in completing an internship or apprenticeship?

- Journalism
- Public Relations
- Advertising
- Communications
- Public service

Display This Question: **If** Internships or apprenticeships of a week or two (at minimum) are intended to provide professional... = *Not at all interested*

Is there a different field in which you would be interested in completing an internship or apprenticeship? (Leave blank if not)

Do you think the benefits of an unpaid apprenticeship or internship compensate for the lack of payment?

- No
- Yes
- Not sure

If an apprenticeship or internship position was *unpaid*, would you be *less likely* to apply for it?

- No
- Yes
- Not sure

Display This Question: **If** an apprenticeship or internship position was unpaid, would you be less likely to apply for it? = *Yes*

What is the reason(s) that you would be less likely to apply for an apprenticeship or internship position if it was unpaid?

EMPLOYER SURVEY

Does your newsroom or organization accept students doing internships or apprenticeships?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Do you believe student interns should receive some payment for their work?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Display This Question: If Do you believe student interns should receive some payment for their work?
= Yes

Why do you believe student interns should receive some payment?

Display This Question: **If** Do you believe student interns should receive some payment for their work? = No

Why do you believe student interns should not receive some payment?

Display This Question: **If** Does your newsroom or organization accept students doing internships or apprenticeships? = Yes

Does your newsroom or organization provide some kind of payment for student interns?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

In your newsroom or organization, what are the main challenges to offering payment to student interns?

Roughly how many people are there in your local newsroom or organization who help produce editorial content?

- 1-10
- 21-20
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 50 or more

If you have any additional comments or suggestions about internships and/or paying students for this work please enter it below.

JOURNALISM SCHOOLS SURVEY

Does your program have some kind of internship/apprenticeship component?

- Yes
- No

Do your students have a minimum number of weeks that they need in order to meet the requirement?

- Yes
- No

Display This Question: If Do your students have a minimum number of weeks that they need in order to meet the requirement? = *Yes*

How many weeks of internship are undergraduate/diploma/certificate students required to complete?

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7-8
- 9-10
- More than 10

What statement best describes your attitude towards internship positions for journalism students who are required to complete them?

- Students should always receive some payment
- Unpaid positions are acceptable for shorter placements
- Unpaid positions are acceptable for any duration
- Other (please specify) _____

Display This Question: If What statement best describes your attitude towards internship positions for journalism students... = *Students should always receive some payment*

What kind of payment from employers do you think would be most appropriate?

- Hourly wages
- Weekly fee
- Overall honorarium (not necessarily tied to number of placement weeks)
- Not sure
- Other (please specify) _____

WWDisplay This Question: If What statement best describes your attitude towards internship positions for journalism students... = *Unpaid positions are acceptable for shorter placements*

What statement best describes your attitude towards internship positions for journalism students...

What is the main reason (or reasons) you think internships can be unpaid?

Display This Question: If What statement best describes your attitude towards internship positions for journalism students... = *Unpaid positions are acceptable for shorter placements*, **Or** What statement best describes your attitude towards internship positions for journalism students... = *Unpaid positions are acceptable for any duration*

Is your program willing to only work with employers who will compensate your students when they do internships?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure