

Increasing Social and Cultural Capital Through Internships

Lisa Mann, Ed.D.

University of North Carolina, Asheville

Director, Career Center

lisacarinmann@gmail.com | [LinkedIn](#)

Abstract: Utilizing graduate employability capitals, this article tests an internship program designed to eliminate barriers to access internships and to build college students' social and cultural capital. The primary components of the program were: 1) financial support, 2) social and cultural capital resources provided by the college and the employer, 3) institutional support during the intern-site matching process, and 4) support to build graduate employability capitals throughout the internship. The program increased students' social and cultural capital and created a model to improve how colleges share institutional resources with students to improve students' social mobility.

Keywords: internships, graduate employability, social capital, cultural capital, social mobility

Increasingly, students pursue college degrees expecting success in their postgraduate job searches and a boost in social mobility (Chan, 2016) or the ability to move up in social class and socioeconomic status (SES). However, recent economic analysis calls into question the efficacy of a college degree in moving graduates from lower SES to higher SES (Chetty et al., 2020). Only a few colleges are able to reliably move their lower SES students to a higher SES postgraduate outcome (Chetty et al., 2020). The Pew Research Center supported the finding that college degrees do not always provide students with equal access to social mobility, noting that first-generation college students lag behind their second-generation peers in income after graduation, earning significantly less in median family income in 2021 (Schaeffer, 2022).

The national conversation on college degrees includes the expectation that all colleges produce strong career outcomes for students. The expectation operates from a skills-to-jobs framework that ignores human decision-making in the hiring process (Holmes, 2013; Hora, 2017). Employers do not hire based on degrees alone. Instead, deciding which candidates to hire based on network connections and cultural "fit" (Hora, 2017; Hora, 2020; Rivera, 2012). Hiring based on connections and fit often privileges college students from higher SES backgrounds with access to connections from their family of origin (Hora, 2020; Rivera, 2012; Stuber, 2009). Students who start life with more connections and access within society continue to experience the benefits throughout college and after (Stuber, 2009).

Internships have been touted as one of the best methods available for colleges to improve students' postgraduate outcomes, regardless of the connections a student has when they start college. The benefits of internships for postgraduate career outcomes are widely established. Internships are one of the American Association of Colleges and Universities

(AAC&U) recognized High Impact Practices (AAC&U, 2023), and an internship related to one's career goals is a high-impact career practice from the National Alumni Career Mobility Report (The Career Leadership Collective, 2022). Using their Job Outlook 2023 data, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) reported that employers view an internship as the deciding factor among two otherwise equally qualified candidates (NACE, 2023b). The power of internships was also confirmed in a causal experiment in Europe, where researchers sent identical resumes with and without internship experience to open positions and found that those with internship experience received 12% more invitations to interview (Baert et al., 2021).

Internships are an established intervention to promote and improve postgraduate career outcomes, but internships also have significant barriers preventing students from accessing them (Hora et al., 2021). Based on results from the The National Survey of College Internships (NSCI) 2021 Report, Hora et. al (2021) reported that the primary barrier for students to access internships is a lack of knowledge on how to find an internship. Conducted by the Center for Research on College and Workforce Transitions (CCWT) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the NSCI surveyed over 12,000 students across 17 campuses, including public and private, in 2021 (Hora et al., 2021). Two-thirds of students surveyed wanted to take part in an internship but were not able to. Respondents shared additional barriers to participation that included the need for paid work and lack of transportation (Hora et al., 2021). In 2023, NSCI relaunched as a partnership with Strada Education Foundation and released a dashboard in Spring 2023 based on a survey of 2,603 students. In addition to pay and transportation, 67% of students named "no opportunities" as a factor in preventing them from completing an internship (National Survey of College Internships, 2023). Internships are an important experiential learning opportunity that provides a path to careers after graduation, but many students are being left behind due to a lack of access.

Is there a way to build an internship program that eliminates barriers to access and increases students' network connections and 'fit' for postgraduate career outcomes? This study explores the design, execution, and results of an internship program designed to do both.

Theoretical Framework

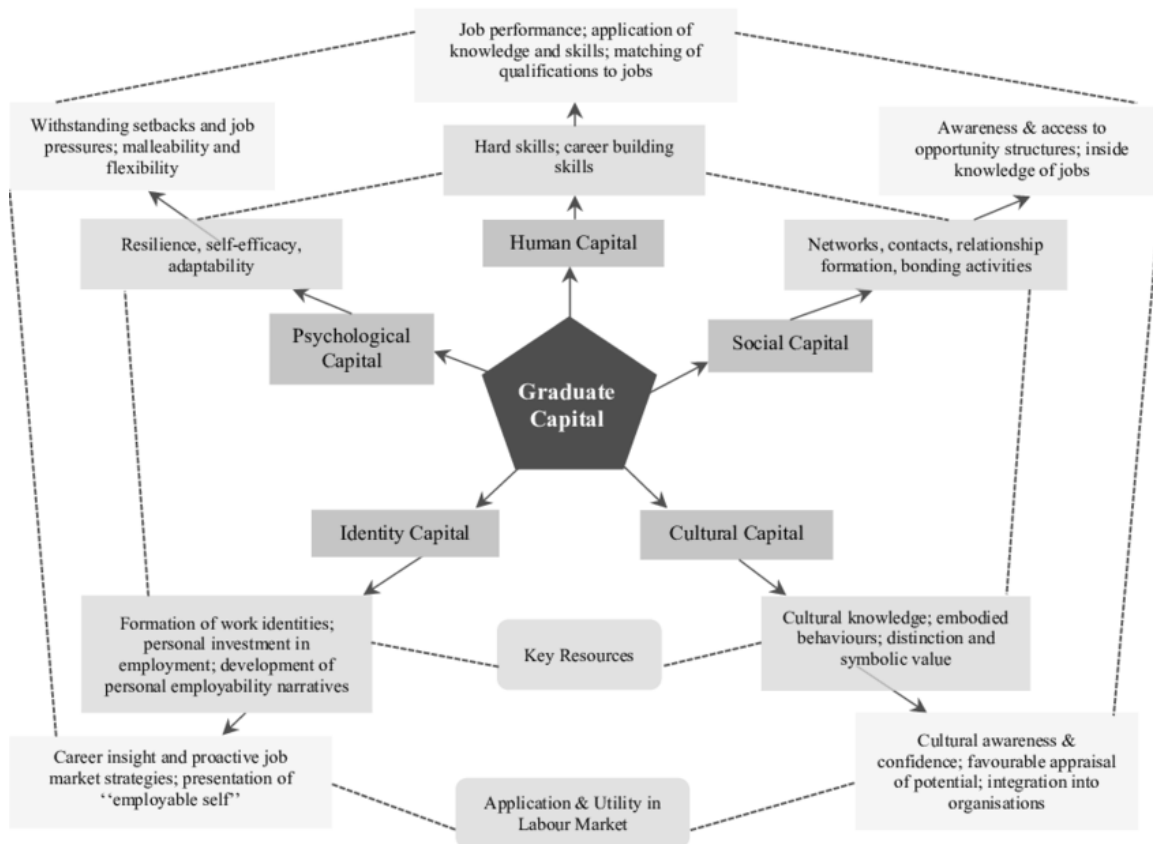
We have all heard, "it's not what you know, but who you know," a phrase often repeated when referring to the job search process. The phrase refers to the social networks that individuals have around them that provide access to resources, including information and people. These networks and resources, known as social capital, provide college students greater access to opportunities throughout the job search process and beyond (Bourdieu, 1986; Museus & Neville, 2012). Based on the NSCI data (2023), 32% of students surveyed who had completed internships found them through informal networks, and 36% found their internships with help from their Career Center, both forms of social capital. The field of career education has begun to recognize the importance of social capital, as evidenced by the recent inclusion of social capital in the NACE definition of internships released in 2023 (NACE, 2023a):

An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional workplace setting (across in-person, remote, or hybrid modalities). Internships provide students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience, develop social capital, explore career fields, and make connections in professional fields. In addition, internships serve as a significant recruiting mechanism for employers, providing them with the opportunity to guide and evaluate potential candidates.

In addition to social capital, Tomlinson (2017) offered a theory of graduate employability comprising five capitals: human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological. College educators can use these five capitals to prepare graduates for employability after completing a degree.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship of the five capitals to generate graduate employability capital in the service of postgraduate outcomes. Tomlinson (2017) defines human capital as the job-related skills transmitted through education, which is central to the skills-to-jobs assumption. Social capital is the “sum of social relationships and networks that help mobilise graduates’ existing human capital” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 342) and draws

Figure 1. *The Five Graduate Capitals*



Note. The graphic representation in Figure 1 was developed by Nghia et al. (2023) to illustrate the five graduate capitals developed by Tomlinson (2017).

on the importance of group membership for success. Social capital helps students source potential opportunities for internships and jobs after graduation through their relationships and networks. Tomlinson (2017) then identifies cultural capital as needed for entry into a particular field or industry, including graduates learning the norms and behaviors expected within that industry. For example, a manufacturing company is likely looking for cultural signifiers that are different from those of a technology company. Most often, when employers refer to 'fit,' they are referencing cultural capital (Hora, 2017; Tomlinson, 2017). Identity capital and psychological capital are internal capitals that graduates build throughout their time in college and through experiential learning; these capitals help students determine a career of interest and maintain resilience in the face of changing labor markets, as well as when faced with bias and discrimination (Tomlinson, 2017).

This study utilized Tomlinson's (2017) framework, specifically on social and cultural capital, to create an internship program to increase students' social and cultural capital. Internships are immersive, time-limited interventions where students temporarily become employees in new organizations. A long-term experience in a new industry may increase cultural capital as students learn the norms and behaviors expected of employees in that field (Hora, 2017). It is also likely to increase social capital as students meet new people and create connections at their internship organization. Internships provide a good opportunity to measure growth in social and cultural capital through an external immersion experience.

The University of North Carolina Asheville Internship Program

In 2024, the University of North Carolina (UNC) Asheville Internship program launched using Tomlinson's conceptual framework. It was intentionally designed to eliminate barriers to access, strategically share social capital, and support students during the internship to build cultural capital in their chosen industry.

The UNC Asheville Internship program's first component was to increase students' access to internships. To ensure all internships were paid, the program required that for-profit organizations offering internships provide adequate hourly compensation. For nonprofits and government organizations lacking the funds to pay an intern, the UNC Asheville Internship Assistance Fund was used to provide compensation for those internships through a \$1500 scholarship for the duration of the internship. Every UNC Asheville Internship Program participant was paid by using one of these two funding sources. Additionally, students did not have to 'spend' current social and cultural capital to gain access to the program. Students did not need to ask for references, write an essay, interview, or provide additional proof of current social and cultural capital to be eligible. Instead, to participate in the program, students needed to be among the first 50 students to sign up.

The program's second component, sharing social capital, involved the intentional development of internship sites by staff at UNC Asheville. College internship programs often require students to use their own networks to find internship opportunities (Hora et al., 2021; Stuber, 2009). The UNC Asheville Internship Program did not require students to have or use pre-existing personal and family networks to source an internship site. Further,

the UNC Asheville Internship Program built social capital for students over the duration of the internship. To be a part of the UNC Asheville Internship Program, an organization had to agree to provide regular supervision to develop a relationship between the student and a member of that organization and agree to introduce the student to at least one other person in their industry of interest at another organization. Through the introductions, students gained relationships with professionals beyond their internship to expand their professional network and social capital.

The third component of the program focused on institutional support for students and sites during the internship-site matching process to share connections (social capital) and prepare students for internships (cultural capital). The Career Center could not place students at participant internship sites due to professional ethical guidelines from NACE. To ensure equity of access to opportunity, positions must be advertised to all students who meet the qualifications for the position (NACE, 2020). Therefore, all internships set aside for the UNC Asheville Internship Program were shared with all students within the program. Students selected which sites in the program they wanted their application materials sent to, and the sites then determined who to interview and offer an internship. The UNC Asheville Internship Program provided students with preparation workshops that covered expectations in written application materials, interviews, and general on-site behavioral expectations during the internship (timeliness, communication, etc.). When resumes were sent to sites for review during the internship matching process, the internship program manager and director in the Career Center supported students and sites to ensure that all students who signed up for the program secured an internship at a participating organization.

Finally, and most importantly, the fourth component of the internship program was to build social and cultural capital during the internship. All students and site supervisors in the UNC Asheville Internship Program received a check-in interview via Zoom or in person and support from the Career Center at UNC Asheville over the semester-long internship experience. Students and site supervisors were prompted via email with topics listed in Appendix A for discussion during weekly supervision meetings that focused on building social and cultural capital and directly addressed the validated graduate capital scale items from Tomlinson et al. (2022). Support included having a Career Center staff member readily available for emails and phone calls throughout the program whenever students and supervisors had questions about challenges that arose during the internship.

The four components served as the foundation for the UNC Asheville Internship Program, making it one of the only internship programs in the nation to focus on removing the need for students to use financial, social, and cultural capital for access, be open to any major, and include a curriculum to grow students' social and cultural capital during the experience.

Research Design

This study included three measures to understand the impact of the UNC Asheville Internship Program on the development of students' social and cultural capital. The

measures included a pre-post survey, check-in interviews during the internship, and student reflection essays. Methods utilized a mixture of quantitative and qualitative techniques grounded in Tomlinson et al.'s (2022) definitions of social and cultural capital.

Tomlinson et al. (2022) developed a scale to measure the 'employability' of college graduates based on the five graduate capitals. The pre- and post-surveys utilize the employability scale's social and cultural capital portions (Tomlinson et al., 2022). These surveys were given to interns to measure growth in these two capitals from the beginning to the end of the internship program. The surveys were built in Qualtrics and administered via email at the beginning and end of the internships. The data collected is a six-point Likert Scale to be compared between pre- and post-surveys. Therefore, the data analysis utilized t-tests to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between social and cultural capital before and after the internship experience. In addition, the pre-survey included questions on demographics and to identify what made the program appealing to the students. The post-survey included a question about concrete job outcomes from the internship program, including job offers. These questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Students also completed a final reflective essay to support and seek nuance in the quantitative outcome data collected via the pre- and post-surveys. Prompts were designed to ask students to provide specific examples of growth in their social and cultural capital and share the next steps they have identified for their career after completing the internship. The data collected through students' final reflective essays was analyzed using a priori coding found in Appendix B, with predetermined codes aligned with the descriptions of the graduate capitals defined by Tomlinson et al. (2022).

During the internship, check-in interviews provided an additional measure of social and cultural capital. The check-in interviews were semi-structured and conducted separately with the internship site supervisor and the student intern. The check-in interviews were completed over Zoom, with the internship program manager or director of the Career Center leading the meeting. The check-in interviews included yes/no, numerical, and open-ended response questions. The open-ended response questions were analyzed using the coding found in Appendix B.

Participants

Participants in the UNC Asheville Internship program included students from UNC Asheville and employers recruited by the internship program manager. From application to internship completion, 28 students participated in the UNC Asheville Internship Program in Summer 2024. To be accepted into the program, students had to be currently enrolled at UNC Asheville, have completed 60 credit hours, including transfer credits, and not have completed a prior internship. Participants included nine sophomores, 16 juniors, and three seniors. Self-identified genders included 18 female students, nine male, and one non-binary. Majors included music, mass communication, business, accounting, new media, sociology, psychology, philosophy, mechatronics, environmental studies, and computer science. Student participant demographics showed that 54% had an average family

income of less than \$100,000, and 37% had parents/guardians who had not yet attained a four-year degree, making them first-generation four-year college students.

Twenty-six individual employers matched with a student intern, and 24 of the employers were local to the Asheville metro region. Twenty-four sites had one intern, while two sites had two interns. Two organizations from other parts of North Carolina participated, including one in Winston-Salem with one intern and one in Charlotte with two interns working in different parts of the organization under different site supervisors. Thirteen of the sites were for-profit, and 13 were nonprofit, representing a range of industries, including education, law, logistics, communications, banking and finance, science testing and research, music/events, hospitality, and human services.

Internships

The internships had a range of pay and hours, as pay and hours are almost impossible to standardize across industries and internship sites. 13 of the internships were paid by the employer, representing the for-profit companies. UNC Asheville paid 15 internships via the internship scholarship associated with the UNC Asheville Internship Program, representing the nonprofit employers in the program. Students paid via the UNC Asheville Internship scholarship earned a flat rate of \$1500 for the summer, while students paid by their site ranged from \$12 an hour to \$20 an hour. Hours working on-site during the internship program varied, with some students working as many as 40 hours per week and others working as few as five hours per week. The UNC Asheville Internship Program recommended that students work 100 hours on-site over the summer, especially those paid via scholarship, so their pay rate would average around \$15 an hour. Most of the internships took place in person, with 72% of students reporting their work was fully in-person (13 students) and two reporting hybrid work for a total of 83% (15 students) with in-person contact at their sites. Students worked a wide range of hours (from 5 to 40 hours per week) during their internships, with a median of 16 hours per week and an average of 17.5 hours per week.

Results

The results discussed here include qualitative results from the check-in interviews and final reflections coded for social and cultural capital, quantitative results from a dependent means t-test to test for statistical significance in changes in social and cultural capital from beginning to end, and a comparison of pre- and post-survey question frequencies.

Check-In Interviews

Twenty-two of the interns and 18 of the site supervisors took part in the check-in interviews. At the time of the check-in interviews, 55% of students and 56% of site supervisors (12 students and 10 site supervisors) reported regularly utilizing the weekly topics during supervision. The check-in interviews reminded site supervisors to begin using the topics if they had not yet.

Social Capital

The first three a priori codes are associated with social capital: employers, jobs, and connections (Appendix B). The social capital code Connections, as seen in Table 1, had the most transcript excerpts assigned for site supervisors (21) and interns (26). A few weeks into the internship, most of the site supervisors reported that their intern had met all or most of the employees at their site. Interns in externally facing positions had met more people outside of their organization than interns with internally facing responsibilities. Several students talked about getting to know people outside of their organization through events the organization was running, including partnerships with associations. For some interns, external events were part of their jobs, but for others, the invitation to attend external networking events came through their site supervisors.

Like their site supervisors, interns did not discuss the employer code in detail during their check-in interviews. As seen in Table 2, for the interns who mentioned the employer code (6), the growth ranged from knowing who to talk to for more information, how their organization fits within an industry, and wanting to stay at their current internship site after the internship ended. Students spoke more about jobs than their site supervisors did, with 17 transcript excerpts assigned across 12 student interviews. Interns mentioned that site supervisors, coworkers, and volunteers at their site all played a role in employer and job knowledge growth and career exploration for interns.

The check-in interviews reminded site supervisors to introduce the intern to someone who works in the field outside of their organization. Some site supervisors discussed their strategy for future introductions, including identifying a person to introduce the intern to or

Table 1. *Employer Check-In Interviews Social Capital Codes*

A priori code	Participants contributing (n)	Excerpts assigned (n)	Sample quote
Connections	15	21	"I've set up some meetings for her. She's probably gotten to meet 50% of the staff so far, and both in social settings as well as in, you know, more formal work, one-on-one settings."
Jobs	4	4	"I've told her, if she wants a job after her internship, we would take her in a heartbeat."
Employer connections	3	3	"She's not sure if she was kind of interested in the nonprofit path, so, you know, we've talked about that versus the government."

Note. N = 18.

Table 2. Student Intern Check-In Interviews Social Capital Codes

A priori code	Participants contributing (n)	Excerpts assigned (n)	Sample quote
Connections	18	26	“Five or six partners, and they come to events, and they come and help out whenever they can, so they come in and out, and I've met them and talked with them, and they've told me some of what they do, and I've helped them out.”
Jobs	12	17	“I now know I can kind of break into commercial lending. I know what it looks like. I know what the kind of goals are with it.”
Employers	6	6	“I like the idea of working as like an environmental specialist in a lab setting, but I guess I just, I don't really know what the options are in water quality testing.”

Note. N = 18.

asking the intern what type of person they would like to meet. One student said of their site supervisor:

She's like, really putting me in contact with [industry connection] so that I can continue and kind of work with them in the fall a little bit. So she's really helping us with, like, what we're interested in and where we want to go.

For most interns, the site supervisor served as their most important connection at their internship site, with students reporting that they viewed them as the person most able to open doors and create introductions to others within and outside the organization.

For students working with coworkers in addition to their site supervisor, the relationship building in the downtime/quiet time between work projects offered deeper learning about the industry and field. One student mentioned building a relationship with a temp at their site who had connections in their field to learn more about the industry and connect with the professionals on LinkedIn. Another talked about deepening a relationship with someone subbing in for the primary person they work with on projects and learning about that person’s years in the industry. At one site, an alumna from UNC Asheville made a special effort to get to know the two interns, taking them out to lunch and showing a special interest in them. Both interns highlighted the connection with the alumna during their check-in interviews. The relationships built on-site made a difference in the interns' building social capital.

Cultural Capital

The second three a priori codes are associated with cultural capital: personal development, cultural fit, and confidence. Table 3 shows that site supervisors spoke more

Table 3. *Employer Check-In Interviews Cultural Capital Codes*

A priori code	Participants contributing (n)	Excerpts assigned (n)	Sample quote
Cultural fit	16	31	“Most of our staff is kind of like head down, work hard, you know, kind of take care of things. And she fits in really well with that. So behaviorally, yeah, we communicate that kind of, this is the expectation. This is the standard that we have.”
Personal development	8	9	“I think like she's growing in that realm of just like the knowledge of what tools people in these fields are using, and in what ways, and how can I utilize that for myself.”
Confidence	6	6	“She wanted to work on feeling confident speaking in front of people, and I think that our Saturday time together, facilitating outside has made [Student Name] a more comfortable facilitator.”

Note. N = 18.

about cultural fit (31), and considerably less about personal development (9) and confidence (6). Site supervisors talked about their expectations for interns on communication and attire, with one site supervisor discussing the nuance of dressing professionally for a job outdoors and in rivers. Two site supervisors shared that their interns prompted them to explain their behavioral expectations at the start of the internship, and that the questions during the check-in interviews helped site supervisors think about what they needed to share with their interns.

Several site supervisors talked about the behaviors that students brought with them as assets to the organization, without having to be shared as an expectation of the internship. Examples included interns being “proactive,” “inquisitive,” “punctual,” “intentional,” “an active listener,” “detail-oriented,” “hardworking,” and engaging in “formal communication.” Some site supervisors talked about their interns’ behavior in vague language, such as “appropriate” and “professional,” without defining what those words mean in the context of their organizations. The best example of talking about cultural fit without being clear came from a site supervisor about their approach to the interview with the intern:

I was just telling [Student Name], like, some of the stuff about interviews and expectations. I was like, in all of my experiences, I said, I really think it's like a vibe fit. I said, you can have your resume match up, but you interview with the place and you guys aren't the same vibes.

The ‘vibe fit’ example illustrates how much cultural capital is often implicit rather than explicit and potentially difficult to communicate and learn.

Site supervisors talked less about confidence and personal development, which may be because it can be difficult to observe and share where someone other than yourself has experienced a change in confidence or personal development. The themes shared here centered around interns' growth in skills during the internship and observable instances of interns taking initiative.

The analysis from the interviews also showed that interns spent more time discussing all three aspects of cultural capital more than their site supervisors (see Table 4).

Students expressed personal development regarding skills currently mastered and skills they want to learn during and after the remainder of their internship. Interns mentioned soft skills, including how to prioritize and organize work projects. The interns shared that the adjustment to the internship itself was viewed as personal development, well-captured in this quote:

I've learned that I have a tendency to take whatever prompt they give me and try to bring it 1000 miles further regardless of whether they wanted me to do that or not. And at first I thought, oh, that's great. They'll love that I'm doing so much more work, until I spent, I think, three days, no so, two and a half days last week where I got no sleep because I was putting so many hours into making sure I got this project done, which they did not want me to do. So I think that was something I've been again, slowly piecing together.

Table 4. Student Intern Check-In Interviews Cultural Capital Codes

A priori code	Participants contributing (n)	Excerpts assigned (n)	Sample quote
Personal development	16	21	"Learning different software here and there, and the best ways to like go about getting certain work done and learning, like, how to prioritize. Like, okay, like this should come first before I do this project and that sort of thing."
Cultural fit	16	26	"I'd say there is a bit of an expectation to have, like the ability to learn things very quickly and pick up on instructions quickly and not have to constantly look at written directions. And I feel like I've been doing pretty well at that so far."
Confidence	13	18	"Another success I would say is I feel like I've gotten pretty comfortable with, like, emailing other people in foundation that are not just like in the communications department."

Note. N = 18.

Students described growth in cultural fit in terms of learning the unspoken expectations on the job through trial and error. Many talked about being nervous at the beginning of the internship, compared to the check-in interview completed a few weeks into their time on site. Students also talked about learning how their internship environment differs from a school environment: “It’s more like, when people get into the field, the corrections can be made at the last minute. And so that’s something I’ve kind of had to retrain my brain on, coming from a school environment to a work one.” Another intern had been unsure if they would like their internship and was pleasantly surprised at how much they loved it. The adjustment from classroom to work was an important theme within the cultural capital codes for students.

Confidence Overlap. Confidence notably overlapped with the learning expressed in personal development and cultural fit. Students talked about personal development and skills learned, noting increased confidence when building those skills. Students also talked about gaining confidence on-site when learning how to follow the spoken and unspoken expectations of the site. Confidence was coded separately, but it became difficult to determine where the overlap between the cultural capital codes leaned towards confidence rather than personal development or cultural fit. An example here: “Another success I would say is I feel like I’ve gotten pretty comfortable with, like, emailing other people in the foundation that are not just like in the communications department.” The excerpt, also used as an example in Table 4, is coded as confidence because of the emphasis on growing in comfort, but knowing how to email other people could also be cultural fit or personal development. One student did a nice job of summarizing what growth in confidence looked like for many of the responses from the check-in interviews: “I think I’ve learned, like, it’s easy to kind of doubt yourself when you’re starting something new, but like, having faith in my own abilities.” The check-in interviews showed that cultural capital is nuanced and implicit and grew for interns in the first few weeks of the UNC Asheville Internship Program.

Student Final Reflections

In early August 2024, students were asked to complete the final reflection via written answers or an online interview utilizing Big Interview software. Of the 13 students who completed it, six completed it via recorded interviews, and seven completed it via written answer format. The final reflections were coded utilizing the same a priori codes used for the check-in interviews in Appendix B. Results can be found in Table 5.

Similar to the check-in interviews, connections had the most transcript excerpts assigned, with 18. Students spoke about the depth of connections made with site supervisors and colleagues at their sites. The students noted the time and attention given by professionals at their sites who demonstrated a strong interest in helping with their careers:

[Site supervisor] has had a huge impact on my future career. She has helped me to explore my passion for reading and writing by offering me experience in her field. She even took it a step further and helped me brainstorm what possible careers I might like to pursue in the future. She encouraged my potential and has given me great hope for the future of my career.

Table 5. Final Reflection A Priori Codes for Student Interns

A priori code	Participants contributing (<i>n</i>)	Excerpts assigned (<i>n</i>)	Sample quote
Confidence	12	17	"I have really opened up a lot more and built more confidence in myself."
Jobs	10	14	"I've just learned a lot of really great lab procedures that have really prepared me to work in a water testing lab or any lab in general."
Connections	10	18	"I was able to meet, actually, like 14 different people through this [site name] partnership. And so I've really built up those connections."
Cultural fit	10	17	"The skills I've gained during my internship have definitely been like those one-on-one conversation skills, so I think the biggest skill is definitely learning to talk to managers and learn about management and how to have those conversations. And it was way easier than I expected."
Personal development	8	8	"I also learned a lot of skills within the company, like marketing, business, graphic design, so I would love to further those skills as well."
Employers	6	7	"After this internship, I've realized that environmental monitoring is really the field for me. I loved working within a small team, and for a nonprofit organization, you can really see the difference that your work makes."

Note. *N* = 18.

In addition to site supervisors, interns discussed coworkers, volunteers, and community members they came in contact with during their internships who impacted their next career steps. Interns also shared that the process of meeting people and creating new relationships with professionals in their field inspired them to continue to reach out to build their career networks. The increase in social capital through their internships created confidence in interns to continue the practice after the internships, potentially bolstering the efficacy of internships in building social capital after the program has ended.

For the cultural fit and confidence codes, interns talked about fitting in at their sites, growing communication skills, and gaining confidence in their new field and industry, as well as in themselves and their ability to navigate what comes next for them professionally.

Learning how they fit in at their sites helped interns gain confidence in new settings. One student illustrated the way confidence and cultural fit are entwined:

I've gained a lot more confidence in myself and my abilities to navigate a more professional setting, as opposed to working in more of a retail setting. Everyone I had a chance with to interact over the course of my internship definitely influenced and impacted how I feel about working in a professional setting and just having that confidence to be open in communication and willing to have that kind of dialog. I think that I've learned that's the most important part of any job or career setting in general, no matter where you work. So really, everyone in general that I had the chance to interact with impacted me.

All of the students who completed the final reflection assignment discussed growth in social and cultural capital due to their internship experience.

Pre- and Post-Survey

Interns in the UNC Asheville Internship Program received the pre-survey in May 2024, and 24 students completed it. The post-survey was administered in August 2024, and 24 interns completed it. Nineteen interns completed both the pre- and post-surveys. The first seven questions aligned with social capital, and the second seven questions aligned with cultural capital. Each set of seven questions was run as a separate dependent t-test to isolate each type of graduate capital.

For the 19 students who took the pre- and post-surveys, dependent t-tests were run using the statistical software SPSS to determine if the UNC Asheville Internship Program affected social and cultural capital. A dependent t-test is used to compare two similar groups to determine if there is a statistically significant difference between the means. In this case, the tests compared the means of the students' social and cultural capital scores before and after the internship.

The first research question for this analysis was "Does the UNC Asheville Internship Program affect social capital outcome scores?"

The null hypothesis is: $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$

The alternate hypothesis is: $H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$

The pre-survey social had a sample mean of 30.42 (SD = 3.37) and the post-survey had a sample mean of 33.57 (SD = 4.22). The dependent samples t-test indicated that the means were significantly different for the pre- and post-survey ($t = -3.203$, $df = 18$, $p = .005$). Thus, the null hypothesis that the UNC Asheville Internship Program does not affect social capital is rejected at the .005 significance level. The effect size d was $-.73$. Using Cohen's guidelines, this is a moderate effect.

The second research question for this analysis is "does the UNC Asheville Internship Program affect cultural capital outcome scores?" The result of the dependent t-test will help us understand if the UNC Asheville Internship Program was an improvement for interns' cultural capital.

The null hypothesis is: $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$

The alternate hypothesis is: $H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$

The pre-survey had a sample mean of 34.05 (SD = 3.61) and the post-survey had a sample mean of 35.42 (SD = 3.56). The dependent samples t-test indicated that the means were significantly different for the pre- and post-survey ($t = -2.269$, $df = 18$, $p = .036$). Thus, the null hypothesis that the UNC Asheville Internship Program does not affect cultural capital as measured by the pre- and post-surveys is rejected at the .036 significance level. The effect size d was $-.520$. Using Cohen's guidelines, this is a moderate effect. The pre- and post-survey dependent t-tests on social and cultural capital showed that the UNC Asheville Internship Program positively affected students' social and cultural capital.

Additional Questions

The pre-survey included a question asking students why they chose to participate in the UNC Asheville Internship Program. Students could "select all that apply" and fill in an "other" answer. Over half of the 24 students who completed the pre-survey selected guaranteed pay (62.5%), and the majority selected Career Center support (75%) and expanded career network (87.5%). 8.33% chose "other" and wrote: "The program seemed like a great opportunity to obtain professional experience in a more career-related setting" and "Felt it was a very good opportunity to get experience with the support of the Career Center." The desire for Career Center support aligns with the findings from national internship surveys that students find it challenging to source their own internships, especially students without high levels of social and cultural capital (Hora et al., 2021).

The pre-survey also included a "select all that apply" question asking interns what they hoped to gain from the UNC Asheville Internship program. The post-survey asked a mirrored question for interns to "select all that apply" for what they felt the primary outcomes from the UNC Asheville Internship Program had been for them. From these two questions, we can compare what interns intended to gain from the program with their perceived outcomes. The answers to these questions were measured by frequency. The options for selecting all the questions that apply can be mapped to the social and cultural capital from Tomlinson et al.'s (2022) graduate capitals. Improve resume, job skills, and interview skills mapped to cultural capital. Increase career network, understand the hiring process, and understand day-to-day job, mapped to social capital. Table 6 shows the percentages of responses in the pre-test and the post-test.

The survey questions cannot tell us an effect size or a true comparison between the six outcomes, but we can learn about what interns went in hoping to get out of their internship, and what they saw as the primary outcomes of the internship. As seen in Table 6, interns shared that increasing their career network was a primary outcome of the internship (95.45%), further supporting the findings on social capital as a benefit of the UNC Asheville Internship Program. Interview skills are a form of cultural capital, and it was the second-highest reported primary outcome of the internship at 90.9%. The results from the two select-all-that-apply questions support the finding that the UNC Asheville Internship program increased students' social and cultural capital.

Finally, the post-survey included a question asking if interns received a job offer at their internship site after their internship. Ten interns reported receiving an offer to continue at

Table 6. Comparing Pre-survey and Post-survey Student Reported Internship Outcomes

Outcomes of the internship	% Hoped (pre-survey)	% Reported (post-survey)
Understand the day-to-day work of the job	91.66	81.81
Improve job skills	81.81	81.81
Increase career network	79.16	95.45
Improve interview skills	54.00	90.09
Understand hiring process	45.83	54.54

their internship site, with 9 of those offers being part-time (the 10th student did not specify full or part-time), presumably because the majority of students are returning in the Fall 2024 semester for coursework at UNC Asheville (25 underclassmen and 3 seniors) and unable to work full-time yet. Around half of the students accepted the offers they received to continue working at their organization. Overall, 5 of the 24 who completed the post-survey continue to work at their internship site after August 2024.

The quantitative and qualitative measures for the UNC Asheville Internship Program showed that students gained social and cultural capital during their internships. Students made new connections at their internship sites both internally and externally to their organizations, increasing social capital. For cultural capital, students learned how to fit within the behavioral expectations of their job site and communicate with supervisors and coworkers. The results provide career educators with opportunities for discussion on the ways in which internships increase social and cultural capital and recommendations for practitioners who run internship programs.

Discussion

The results raised a few areas for discussion, including a closer look at the subtopics within social capital with the fewest codes assigned from coding the check-in interviews, supervisor buy-in on the curriculum of social and cultural capital weekly supervision topics, and the challenge of making cultural capital explicit.

Social Capital

The check-in interviews demonstrated that students were building social and cultural capital as intended during the internship. The codes with the least assigned transcripts across all evaluations were jobs and employers, which fall under social capital. Students grew in the connections part of social capital, but did not make the same gains in knowledge of jobs and employers. While it makes sense that in the first third of the internship hours, when check-in interviews took place, the site supervisor and students would not yet have focused on what employment the intern may seek after completing their internship. However, if this learning occurred in the second two-thirds of the

internship, the assigned transcript codes would have been higher in the final reflection interviews. The lower number of social capital transcript excerpts coded for jobs and employers shows that students may still need help identifying next steps following an internship. The results suggest that the current iteration of the UNC Asheville Internship Program is doing well in building connections (networks) but not helping students utilize those networks to source job and employer information. It may be because that will happen in the months and years following the internship, as the intern utilizes the connections made during the internship, as connections come before knowledge and information sharing. It will be important to continue to study future iterations of the UNC Asheville internship program to determine the point at which information sharing becomes a part of the students' social capital.

Supervisor Use of Weekly Topics

The weekly topics are intended to make social and cultural capital building an explicit part of the internship. The use of the weekly topics with interns and supervisors showed that at the time of check-in interviews, 45% of site supervisors were not yet using the weekly topics. Most site supervisors expressed a desire to start using the weekly topics when asked during the check-in interview, but shared either having forgotten or not having had time yet. It is unlikely that site supervisors would share a lack of buy-in because of the desire to maintain a good relationship with the internship program manager and director of the Career Center. Therefore, we cannot know the level of buy-in. It is also possible that weekly emails are not the best method for every site supervisor to be prompted on the topics.

Conversations with site supervisors outside of the check-in interviews may provide an opportunity to discuss the best way to embed the supervision topics into their internships, as the best method will likely vary from site to site and supervisor to supervisor because of the unique differences in people and organizations. It is beneficial to share the weekly topics with students in addition to site supervisors, as several students reported prompting the conversation on topics with their site supervisors. However, the responsibility of initiating the topics cannot rest solely with student interns, as the relationship with their internship site supervisor is unequal, with the supervisor holding more authority than the intern. It may be difficult for interns with less confidence and experience on the job to initiate conversations with supervisors about the weekly topics or even other topics, an important dynamic for practitioners to consider in all internship programs. A closer look at the timing, method of sharing, and topics included in the supervision curriculum will be important to increase buy-in and usage of a curriculum focused on building social and cultural capital.

Challenge of Making Cultural Capital Explicit

The results showed that despite the weekly topics, site supervisors still struggled to make the behavioral expectations of the internship explicit outside of the words like "professional" and "appropriate." These findings suggest that the cultural capital needed for students to demonstrate 'fit' at an organization is not easy for supervisors to communicate and, therefore, potentially difficult for career educators to teach and for students to learn outside of an internship experience. Students expressed gains in cultural

capital through long-term exposure to their industry norms at their internship sites, with growth in all of the codes associated with cultural capital, in addition to statistically significant growth. To uncover more nuance to this growth, it may be useful to ask students in the future which aspects of the internship experience contributed the most to learning about their industry's behavioral norms. A greater discussion is needed between hiring managers and career educators on how colleges can better prepare students for the cultural norms of specific industries, rather than assuming everyone understands what 'professional' means across industries and that a vague understanding of 'professionalism' is all that students need to demonstrate 'fit' in the hiring process.

Implications for Practice

For practitioners who wish to increase social mobility for students and fulfill the promise of higher education (Chan, 2016), I offer the following recommendations: 1) Develop foundational knowledge of the difference between the graduate employability capitals (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2022), and how to build each one. The UNC Asheville Internship Program focused on social and cultural capital. Still, practitioners must become familiar with all five graduate employability capitals to create programming to increase social mobility. 2) Commit to a high-touch process that offers interns and site supervisors support before and throughout the internship to benefit all participants. These recommendations drove the success of the UNC Asheville Internship Program and can guide practitioners to create effective programs to grow students' graduate employability capitals.

Foundational Knowledge of Graduate Employability Capitals

Most internship programs are currently grounded in the belief that human capital is all that students need to be successful in the job market (Hora, 2017; Hora, 2020). As practitioners, we must recognize social capital, as NACE has (NACE, 2023a), and acknowledge that students need more than just connections and skills to land jobs. The site supervisor who discussed "vibe fit" in interviews gave a perfect example that hiring is more than just skills and connections. As the literature on hiring demonstrates, students need to be able to speak the language of their chosen industry and demonstrate the behaviors desired by that industry (Chua & Mamanian, 2020; Hora, 2017; Rivera, 2012; Tomlinson, 2017).

Following the essential belief that hiring is more than just a skills-to-jobs framework, practitioners need to expand into the full definitions of all five graduate employability capitals defined by Tomlinson (2017). Social and cultural capital are covered at length in this research for the role they play in the hiring process and student access to opportunities on campus and beyond (Chua & Mamanian, 2020; Hora, 2020; Martin, 2009; Rivera, 2012; Stuber, 2009; Tomlinson, 2017). Not studied here are two additional graduate employability capitals: identity capital and psychological capital (Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). These two capitals offer higher education practitioners across colleges, not just those in career education, an opportunity to focus on aspects of personal growth that can help students define their identity and develop skills for psychological resilience in their careers to promote strong postgraduate outcomes long-term.

Committing to the recognition of all five graduate employability capitals provides practitioners with many more options to improve students' postgraduate outcomes than the singular focus of developing job skills (human capital). The graduate employability capitals provide a framework for practitioners to strengthen internship programs.

Commit to High Touch

The UNC Asheville Internship Program addressed a desire from students for more support in internships (Hora et al., 2021). While pay is a serious issue preventing students from participating in internships (Hora et al., 2021; NACE, n.d.), students have reported a desire for greater support in sourcing and completing internships, as evidenced through the pre-survey for the UNC Asheville Internship Program. Site supervisors also shared the desire for and appreciation of support from colleges during internships and check-in interviews. The human aspects of the UNC Asheville Internship Program are its greatest asset, even as scaling will necessarily require technology to automate some parts of the program. Remaining committed to a high-touch, human-centered program is essential in growing graduate employability capitals through an internship program structured like the UNC Asheville Internship Program. The UNC Asheville Internship Program demonstrated two critical points in the internship process where high touch yields strong outcomes: the preparation process prior to the internship and check-in interviews during the internship.

Preparation Process

Prior to the internships, the program provided support during the matching process, including preparing students to create application materials and interview, which site supervisors spoke of highly during check-in interviews. Supervisors shared that students in the program were more prepared than students from other internship programs, meaning that the preparation may have contributed to growth in students' cultural capital even prior to the internship. More research is needed to determine the aspects of the preparation that were most impactful in helping students feel prepared to interview for internships and demonstrate 'fit' with internship sites. However, there are still lessons for practitioners from this process.

The high-touch preparation process included every student having a point person to ask questions as they prepared, a four-hour hands-on workshop to create application materials, and an overview of what the application and interview process entails. When considering how to scale, ensuring students feel supported through the preparation process is a key component of remaining high-touch. While practitioners may incorporate technological elements in the preparation, such as AI interview practice, technological components must complement rather than eliminate a human mentoring resource for students during their preparation.

Check-In Interviews

Check-in interviews served as a data collection point and an important high-touch component of the internship program. During the internships, site supervisors discussed appreciating the check-in interviews as an opportunity to share about the internship and ask questions they may not have thought to ask about without that touchpoint. Students also appreciated the check-ins and asked questions about how to handle situations on site

that they may not have reached out to ask otherwise. The check-in interviews gave dedicated time for students and supervisors to address challenges during the internships that could have hindered the growth of social and cultural capital. The check-in interview conversations also provided an opportunity for practitioners to ensure that the internships were focused on building more than just human capital.

It may be tempting for practitioners to forgo this touchpoint and assume students and site supervisors will reach out with any questions, especially as an internship program grows in the number of participants. However, as the researcher learned, students and site supervisors hold on to small questions or concerns and only express them when presented with the time and opportunity to do so. The check-in interviews also gave an opportunity for the internship program manager and researcher to deepen relationships with students and site supervisors, ensuring that both viewed the college and career center as a resource in the future. These relationships provided an ongoing opportunity to continue the growth of the current interns' graduate employability capitals, and to develop strong employer partnerships to host future internships.

Despite the time involved in meeting with each program participant, most conversations were less than twenty minutes, and practitioners may be able to share the check-in load with colleagues across the college as internship programs increase in size. It is also possible to consider a format other than many one-to-one conversations that still allows for relationship building and space for questions; practitioners may explore meeting with students and supervisors simultaneously on the same call or meeting with several students and several site supervisors. The check-in interviews are an important high-touch practice. While they may evolve to include different formats, the researcher recommends practitioners remain committed to the check-ins as they yield promising results.

Through these recommendations for practitioners, higher education professionals across the nation can consider what type of internship program design will have the greatest impact on students' graduate employability capitals on their campus. UNC Asheville remains committed to improving the current internship program design. With these recommendations, other designs for internship programs may also prove effective in growing students' graduate employability capitals and making good on the promise of social mobility for college students.

Limitations of the Study

The findings from the first implementation of the UNC Asheville Internship Program have two primary limitations to be considered: sample size and type of university. 28 students completed an internship as part of the program. From there, 19 interns completed the pre- and post-surveys, while 24 students completed the pre-survey and 24 completed the post-survey. The size of this sample studied in the UNC Asheville Internship Program is small. Therefore, the results need future iterations to determine if the effects seen in the outcomes of the study are replicable.

UNC Asheville is a small, public, liberal arts university with students majoring in traditional liberal arts majors and typically not in job-focused degrees. An internship program

structured like the UNC Asheville Internship Program may have different outcomes at larger universities and within career-focused majors (like hospitality, nursing, education, etc.). Student engagement and investment may differ for students attending college to pursue specific work outcomes. Therefore, their internship outcomes may vary based on the context of the college or university implementing a similar internship program.

Despite the limitations, the results shared from the first UNC Asheville Internship Program hold promise that the program's structure makes a difference in interns' social and cultural capital, including first-generation and lower SES students. Utilizing the program's structure and supporting students to grow cultural and human capital explicitly provides the groundwork that colleges and universities can use across majors to improve postgraduate outcomes for students and increase students' social and cultural capital.

Future Research

The UNC Asheville Internship Program offers two areas for future research: defining and growing cultural capital and comparison research with other internship programs.

The UNC Asheville Internship Program increased social and cultural capital for students, especially regarding the growth of students' career networks and how to 'fit in' in new professional environments. However, there was a challenge for site supervisors to talk about the specific behaviors needed for their sites in terms other than 'professionalism.' As evidenced by the transcript excerpts from site supervisors, behaviors are more nuanced and expected to be implicit rather than explicit. Future research on methods that can tease out the nuance of cultural capital and how to grow it explicitly will benefit internship programs.

The UNC Asheville Internship Program represented a small, public, liberal arts university. Future research on the impact of internship structures that focus on social and cultural capital in other contexts would provide solid evidence that the model used in this program can be replicated and used at different types of colleges, especially those of larger size and with more career-related majors. The context of UNC Asheville is considered a limitation; therefore, that context provides insight that is ripe for future research.

Conclusion

As reflected in NACE's addition of social capital into the definition of internships (NACE, 2023b), the field of career education recognizes that more than just human capital is needed to provide students with postgraduate career success. The UNC Asheville Internship Program created a structure for internships to focus on both social and cultural capital as defined by Tomlinson et al. (2022) in the eventual service of increasing postgraduate outcomes for students at a time when the effectiveness of a college degree in providing social mobility is being questioned. The UNC Asheville Internship Program provided a college-led intervention for students to participate in internships without spending their personal resources, a challenge many students face when considering an internship (Hora et al., 2021). While the program had a small sample size and took place at a small traditional liberal arts university, the UNC Asheville Internship Program created a

structured model that can be used at colleges across the United States to improve the way that universities share their institutional resources with students in the service of improving postgraduate career outcomes. UNC Asheville will continue to use and improve on this model with the hope that other colleges will join.

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Appendix A

Topics for the UNC Asheville Internship Program

Topic: Introduction and orientation to the workplace (cultural capital)

During regular weekly supervision meeting with your intern go over expectations of the internship site including, but not limited to:

- Best ways to communicate with you and other members of the organization
- Timeliness expectation of communication
- Regular attire for on-site work

Topic: Introduction to key members of the organization (social capital)

During regular weekly supervision with your intern, go over the structure of your organization and introduce your intern to key members of the organization

- Mission statement
- Organizational chart
- Key decision-makers in the organization
 - Set up time for the intern to meet individually with members of the organization they don't regularly work with
- Competitors and/or collaborative organizations

Topic: Jargon and Industry expectations (cultural capital)

During regular weekly supervision with your intern, go over typical jargon used in the industry, as well as behavioral expectations that organizations have

- Words and acronyms the student should be familiar with in a job search
- Resume standards – what do employers look to see on a resume
 - What pointers do you have for the intern's resume?
- Typical entry-level job titles for the industry
- Interview standards – what do employers look for an interview?

Topic: Introduction to at least one person outside of your organization (social capital)

During regular weekly supervision with your intern, introduce them to a person who works in your industry, but does not work at your organization

- Student will reach out and complete an informational interview (with the support of the UNC Asheville Career Center for conversation topics/questions)
- Offer insight into topics the student should address with the networking contact

Topic: Online presence: LinkedIn, and how to find information on your industry (social capital)

During regular weekly supervision with your intern, go over how to access more about this field/industry online

- Professional Associations
- Conferences or networking events
- LinkedIn: how is it used within this field

- What pointers do you have for your intern's LinkedIn page?
- Online job search: where is it best to look

Topic: Skills: What skills does the intern still need to build?

During regular weekly supervision with your intern, talk about the skills they have gained during the internship and recommendations to build future skills.

- What job skills has the intern built during their internship?
- What skills do they still need to gain to be competitive in this industry?
- How can the intern continue to build those skills after the internship ends?

Topic: Next Steps: where does the intern want to go from here?

During regular weekly supervision with your intern, talk about what is next for them when the internship ends.

- If they want to go into your field, when should they begin their job search?
- What is the best process to add more contacts to their personal network?
- What should they include from their internship on their resume?
- What type of interview questions should they be prepared to answer?

Appendix B
Data Analysis: A Priori Codes

Table 7. *Determined using the graduate capital scale (Tomlinson et al., 2022)*

Code	Definition	Cultural Capital or Social Capital
Employers	Names of organizations and potential places the intern may work after graduation	Social Capital
Jobs	Specific positions within employers and organizations where the intern may work after graduation	Social Capital
Connections	The people the intern considers to be a part of their career network, including new contacts made at their internship site	Social Capital
Personal Development	How the intern is intending to grow their skills and behaviors to meet the demands of their intended future career	Cultural Capital
Cultural Fit	How the intern describes the behaviors and personal attributes/work style needed for success in their industry	Cultural Capital
Confidence	How the intern describes their skills, ability, and potential to fit in their industry, may include discussion of achievements	Cultural Capital