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# Run Me My Money: Unpaid Internships, Student Political Values, and COVID-19

Sophia Bautista



**Abstract:** This article examines how unpaid internships, whether enforced by universities or by a student's need to guard against job insecurity, are a symptom of neoliberalism brought to attention by the COVID-19 pandemic. Neoliberalism, under the guise of an impartial and objective free market, facilitates a brutal economic reality brought on by the pandemic. This article seeks to trace the deep inequalities encoded in the United States' neoliberal structure, and how unpaid interns have been affected both materially and psychologically.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, internships, unpaid internships, United States, political psychology

## 1. Introduction

Many students are told a degree guarantees you a job after graduation, and internships make them a more competitive job applicant. Students are told it is okay to work an unpaid internship; it is a rite of passage every job applicant has to go through before securing a job.

Unpaid internships became acceptable for students as the job market became more competitive. It is in this acceptability that the jewel of normalization finds its power, and danger, in its invisibility; it entices us to not examine or interrogate it. The COVID-19 crisis removed the illusion of acceptability. It is the first time Americans have recoiled at the faultlines of inequality inherent in our structures.

Los Angeles did not issue any moratorium freezing rent in the beginning of the pandemic. The CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act — which included a one-time \$1,200 stimulus check — did not include the majority of college students since they are tax-dependents. UCLA, in particular, did not lower tuition rates despite the adjustment to remote learning. Students — as the primary financiers of their education — were expected to still pay tuition, rent, and other normal recurrent expenses like groceries or oil changes.

The COVID-19 economic shock also deeply scarred the job market: for every ten layoffs, only three new jobs were being created (Barrero et al. 2020). Students graduating into these economic conditions self-enhance themselves as competitive applicants to combat the scarcity of jobs. Securing an internship acts as a way of closing the gap between being a student and being an employee. The starting annual salary for college graduates who completed a paid internship was \$52,000 compared to \$37,000 for those who did not complete an internship (Carnevale et al. 2015). The question is: who can afford to take up an unpaid internship right now?

For low-income students, this question is not new. Low-income students, particularly low-income African Americans and Hispanic students, could never afford to take on these unpaid internships. For one, tuition within the UC system grew at nearly five times the rate of inflation

between 1977 and 2018; CSU tuition grew by about 900% in the last four decades, not including additional fees imposed by individual campuses (Mello 2015). The cost of living also increased in California with housing prices 80% above U.S. levels by 1980. A typical California home was twice as expensive than average national home prices by 2010 (Legislative Analyst's Office 2015). With so many rising expenses, many low-income students of color in California find themselves working to pay off college. Hispanic students in particular make up nearly half (46%) of all young workers (UCLA Labor Center 2020). Unpaid internships were never attainable for low-income students, and if they were, it came at a cost.

How did we get here? Beginning in the 1970s, policies of government aid were disregarded as neoliberalism became the dominant ideology in the United States. The beginning of neoliberalism, defined as “the benevolence of the free market, started the era of minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy, and the individual as a rational economic actor” (Saunders 2010, 45). All of these values enshrined in neoliberalism manifested in “drastic cuts in state funding” of higher education, and education no longer was a public good but a private enterprise. Congruent with the privatization and commercialization of other public goods, higher education has transmogrified students into customers, as the “reduction in state support led to dramatic increases in the price of tuition and fees, which increasingly made the student the chief financier of her own education. . . [bearing] the full responsibility of funding her education, which is viewed as any product sold on the open market” (Saunders 2010, 56).

American neoliberalism uses the meritocratic values of individual success and effort to rationalize obstacles students — particularly working class students of color — face. Education under a neoliberal lens sees universities as sites of job and career training as opposed to critical thinking. Thus, failure to get a job post-graduation is an aberration rather than an attribute of the neoliberal structure itself. All students are rational economic actors and, as a result, the structural barriers low-income students face are ignored. With the subjugation of working class, low-income students (doomed to inhabit the borders of the economy) are

negated by default. What happens when a pandemic does away with the illusion of rationality and neutrality as it becomes clear our “normalcy” is suddenly not normal — or rather, shouldn’t be. This is relevant as COVID-19 worsened many students’ financial conditions. Who can afford to take on an unpaid internship when they still have to pay tuition, rent, and other amenities?

COVID-19 exposed the failure of the neoliberal state in addressing these inequalities. Thus, this report seeks to examine how the pandemic put a harsh interrogation light on the normalization and indoctrination of neoliberal capitalism by promising that the participation in internships guarantees job security.

## **2. Taking on the Unpaid Internship**

I don’t think [internships for academic credit] really solves issues low-income students face because the time I could’ve invested in that internship, I could’ve invested in a job. Those positions are made for students who could afford to not receive that money.

This is a quote from a sociology major who interned at a non-profit. The majority of respondents (81%) applied for federal student aid, or FAFSA, demonstrating financial need that is able to be covered through government funding to offset the cost of education. Over a third (34%) of those who receive FAFSA are recipients of Pell Grants or CalGrants.<sup>1</sup> Of those who said they receive FAFSA, most are listed as dependents (74%), meaning they are dependent on their parents or guardians for financial assistance. Only 8% are independent.

Receive Pell Grant or Cal Grant	Listed as dependent, meaning the student is not financially responsible for themselves and must rely on parents' income	Parents contribute some or none
34%	74%	49%

**Figure 1:** Financial Support and Status

Although half (51%) report that their parents contribute most or all to their educational expenses, it's important to note that over a third (30%) receive no help from their parents. Nineteen percent report that their parents offset some, but not most, of their educational expenses. Financial aid is not enough to address students' needs.

One graduate, who majored in communications, recalls interning for a political campaign while financial aid only covered tuition, but not her living conditions:

I sought out additional loans just to pay rent. I remember going to the grocery store and being really stressed out about what I could and couldn't get [...] I would use my credit card. . . I ended up going into a lot of student loan debt and credit card debt because the student loan debt was for rent, and credit card debt was for groceries and gas. So I ended up racking around \$12k in credit card debt and then \$10k in private school loans and \$30k in federal loans.

An international student — who interned at a non-profit — speaks to the “pay-to-play”<sup>2</sup> culture of unpaid internships, expressing her

resentment toward her internship site for not even providing a travel stipend to offset the obstacles of getting to work:

I had to move back to [redacted] because of COVID. Prior to that, I didn't have a car, so whenever I had to Uber there, it'd cost me \$15 each way. . . I did not like the fact [my parents] had to pay \$15 each way twice a week just to be at this internship. Not only am I not getting paid to work, I was paying to do labor for them.

Financial aid does not cover students' needs holistically, which includes the mentioned amenities like rent, groceries, and transportation.

Furthermore, the majority of college students, because they are mostly dependents, were not eligible for the stimulus money the CARES Act provided for COVID-19 relief. A sociology major, who interned at a non-profit, discusses:

I remember that the CARE Act was created, it only afforded certain individuals, who were non-dependents from their parents. . . There's this weird gap that a lot of college students are in where they're not really dependent on their parents, but they are not even children, they're adults. But we're also not able to receive benefits that are being given to adults our age who are in college. And then, we keep accumulating a lot of debt because we're not afforded these grants, or even debts of our own.

## 2.1 Internships

Internships are an important tool in career building and education development. This is clear when over half of respondents cite career development as the primary motivation to pursue an internship, whether it is to be competitive, advance their career, or secure future employment

in the industry (58%). Only 11% of respondents say it is for their own personal growth of knowledge.

Reasons	%
To be a competitive job applicant	26
To receive hands-on learning in my field of study	23
To advance my career	17
For future employment in that industry	15
Personal growth	11
Other	8

**Table 1:** Reasons for Pursuing Internship

Internships come in paid or unpaid forms but over half of respondents did not have access to paid internships. Further, over a quarter (32%) felt like they could not obtain a paid one. So, those without parental support or financial aid still have to choose an unpaid internship due to a lack of paid options.

Availability	%
Not Available	55
Available but didn't think could get one	32
Available but chose not do it	8
Have paid internship in addition to unpaid	6

**Table 2:** Availability of Paid Internships



With the COVID-19 economic crisis sending many graduating students into a panic about the job market, and the shrinking availability of paid internships (55%), students were forced to take up unpaid internships despite the challenge of financial and time constraints. An intern for a law firm, who majored in economics, recalls the desperation following the onset of the crisis:

I got let go [from my job] because of the pandemic, and I've been applying for Legal Assistant jobs for three months, and no firm wanted to hire because of the pandemic. I just had to resort to unpaid, and that's how I got this position. I haven't even done any marketing in my life! I took it out of desperation, I just needed experience — I was going to take anything at that point.

A graduate, majoring in communications, reflects on their time interning for a politician with bitterness, noting the irony of being unable to even provide a stipend for a full-time, unpaid internship:

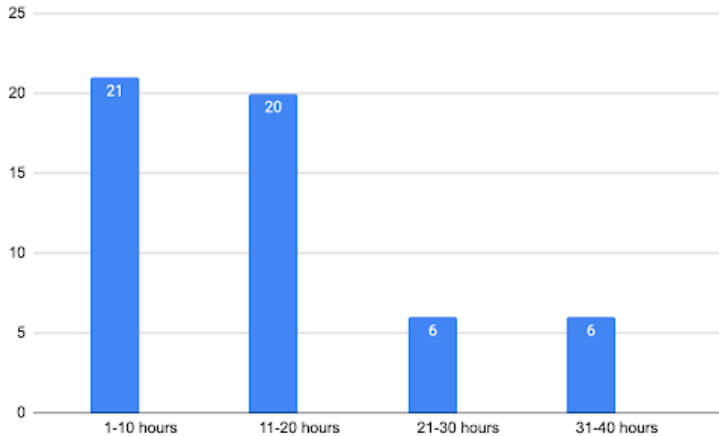
When I was working for [redacted], I was like, “Dude, you have ten million dollars. You can't even give me a stipend?” I put in 40 hours of work.

More than half (58%) of the respondents have one unpaid internship. However, 42% are working in multiple unpaid internships. Students are balancing hours worth of both education and unpaid labor.

Number of Unpaid Internships	%
1	58
2	25
3	17

**Table 3:** Number of Unpaid Internships

Nearly a quarter (22%) work at their unpaid internship part-time to full-time at 21 to 40 hours a week. It is important to note that 78% of respondents work 1 to 20 hours a week. Again, unpaid internships are not included in the economic indices of employment despite their labor, so they are ineligible for the health benefits that come with a full-time job.



**Figure 2:** Hours of Internships Per Week

Despite internships being positioned as not being a job, respondents obtained their internship through a job board site (32%), although some tapped into their own personal networks through professors or friends (34%). The industries respondents are most concentrated in are at sites like the Capitol, with over a quarter reporting that they worked their internship in politics and government.

Obtained through	%
Job Board Site	32
Other	28
Referred by professor	19
Referred by friend	15
School club	6

**Table 4:** Getting the Internship

It is telling that most respondents gained their internship by searching through a job board site, since the majority of respondents also report that they took up the internship to be a competitive job applicant (26%).

The sheer amount of hours students are putting in, taking into account those who work multiple unpaid internships, is a reflection of the purpose of neoliberal capitalism. To secure a job, yes, but at its core, to compete, through any means necessary. One student, who interned for a non-profit, says:

[I worked] 32-40 hours a week. . . When we didn't meet, they wouldn't [say they're] upset. So, we'd have video chats about how 'this isn't getting done, this isn't getting done,' but the fact of the matter is we're at capacity. . . I had to relay to my job, 'Hey, is there any way I could accommodate my hours for this internship?' And luckily, they understand what was going on, the role this internship played, because they were offering academic credit. But I think it's interesting the academic credit doesn't equate to the labor that was actually being invested into it because... what? Four hours a week, for ten weeks — that's 40 hours in a class. Whereas, during an internship, you're investing

almost what you invest in a whole quarter in one or two weeks.

To note, interns are more likely to face “sexual harassment than full-time employees, and scandals abound in Washington [DC] and elsewhere to prove that point” (Saunders 2010, 118). Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, employers are held liable for sexual harassment in the workplace, but these statutory protections do not apply to interns who were never “hired” as employees (Burke et al. 2013, 115).

It is also interesting to note that many of the industries that function due to the work of unpaid interns are in humanities and the social sciences (50%) as opposed to STEM, which includes healthcare and technology (17%). Globalization relies on technologies of power more than the soul of critical thinking.

Industries	%
Politics/Government	28
Legal	17
Education	11
Healthcare	11
Other	8
Entertainment	6
Research	6
Technology	6
Media	6
Journalism	2

**Table 5:** Industries of Internships

### 3. Unpaid Internships and Political Values

There is the idea that COVID-19 created a “new normal,” however, the pandemic simply removed the masquerade of neoliberalism. These exploitative conditions were always normal and preceded the pandemic. It is a world that students inherited and thereby embody, much like a landscape or like a compass, always pointing toward competition, always geared toward scarcity, always searching for opportunity. All of these seemingly neutral words (“hard work,” “competition,” “merit”) hold deep consequences for students’ political egos and superegos.

#### 3.1 Internship Experience

Respondents generally had a positive and satisfying internship experience with the majority (70%) believing that it was substantive, intellectually challenging, and that they were valued like an employee and a member of the team.

However, over half of respondents (53%) report that the tasks they were assigned to were mundane “busy work,” and over a third (36%) believe that their internship was not substantive.

One student is critical of the language of “busy work,” how it minimizes the work interns perform, and how the alleged “substantiveness” needs to be reflected with financial compensation or letter-grade academic credit. She cites her time interning for a non-profit:

I think it’s really funny the language that [employers] use. And the language we end up picking up while we have those internships. . . You know what, this isn’t even grunt work. This is stuff that they hate to do. Because of the labor that it takes. Because of the attention to detail. . . It consumes so much of our time. I think I’ve tried to stay away from that language because then it deprecates any argument that we have to challenge that in asking for

compensation or a letter of recommendation. . . These letters that usually come from presidents of organizations are written by interns. I thought that was really interesting because we're interns, and we're not getting paid, they're barely giving us academic credit because we're not getting that many units for this class, right? They didn't give us an A, but a P/F.

Another student who interned for a non-profit provides a dark side to the seemingly positive aspects of the internship, mentioning how the internship treated them like a valued employee, except without the actual pay:

They would constantly talk about how much they love us interns, how great our work was, but just the location of the company itself shows that they have money. They're at a beach front in [redacted]. So they have the money to pay us, or at least compensate us even a little bit. I left because I felt like I wasn't being valued. I was just being told I was valued.

	Internship was substantive.	Internship was intellectually challenging.	Internship felt like mundane "busy work."	This internship better prepared me for the workforce.	This internship treated me like an employee.	This internship made me feel valued as a member of the team.	I feel satisfied with my internship experience.
Agree	64%	68%	53%	60%	70%	81%	70%
Disagree	36%	32%	47%	40%	30%	19%	30%

**Figure 3:** Internship Experience

While the majority (64%) agreed that the internship was substantive, it did not automatically translate into a positive characteristic of the internship. One graduate likens her unpaid internship with a political campaign to an actual full-time job, without the benefits of one:

There were only two paid staff, and then me, and a bunch of interns. I was essentially playing the role of a Communications Director. I was staffing press at events, I was writing press releases, I was sending out media advisories. . . I was doing all the hard labor [of a press secretary]. I felt good. . . But then I'm like, do they actually appreciate me? Because I wasn't getting compensated.

Another student also expresses frustration with the law firm who took her on as an intern. They asked her to code a website, a service that is normally contracted and paid for:

I've basically done everything marketing wise. I've created an entirely new website for them for free. Mind you, people charge a ton of money for website development and I completely redid the website for free.

Therefore, a significant portion (70%) agree that the internship treated them like an in-expendable employee. The underside being that for all their deftness in working — whether by skillset or work ethic — they do not see concrete returns in their labor. The intern goes on to say:

All the lawyers in [redacted] — they just know that there are desperate college students that are willing to take your place anytime. They don't care. If you ask for any sort of accommodation whatsoever, they're like, 'Well, no. There's someone who wants this badder than you. We're just gonna do whatever we want.' . . . There's always going to be a student more desperate than you for that position.

To start tracing the root of political values, the survey presented respondents with two statements about the necessity of unpaid internships, and students chose the one that most resonated with them. The vast majority of respondents (79%) believe that unpaid internships are a necessary rite of passage to secure a job in that field, and are portrayed as an investment. Internships, then, are perceived to have an elastic role. A common refrain heard from internship supervisors is, “You get what you put into it,” emphasizing the neoliberal, meritocratic idea of self-transformation through an investment of one’s own hard labor. The onus of responsibility is on the intern to make the most out of their internship, however mundane, clerical, or administrative it is.

Statement	%
I believe unpaid internships are necessary in opening up future opportunities as an investment. It is equipping me with the skills I need to succeed in my career.	79
I do not believe all internships deserve to be paid because the tasks are low-level in nature, precisely because interns are prone to making mistakes. Interns are learning, not working.	21

**Table 6:** Necessity of Unpaid Internships

Just under a quarter (21%) believe that interns should not be paid, in spite of the labor put into it, because they’re learning more than they are working. In this alternative framework, interns are not worthy of a tangible benefit of a wage that is given to workers, but are instead given the intangible benefit of expertise and professional development.



### 3.2 Political Values

Respondents were given a political statement, and they were asked to choose whether they disagreed or agreed with the statement. The results show they overwhelmingly align with more progressive political values, advocating for subsidized healthcare, universal college, a higher minimum wage, greater COVID-19 relief funding, and a moratorium to freeze rent.

	Healthcare should be accessible to all, even if the government subsidizes it.	College should be free.	Minimum wage should be raised to \$15 or more.	The COVID-19 stimulus should be greater than \$1,500 and should come with more frequency.	There should be a moratorium to freeze rent due to the pandemic.
Agree	70%	81%	90%	90%	96%
Disagree	30%	19%	10%	10%	4%

**Table 7:** Political Values

Respondents are in favor of greater state intervention despite low levels of external political efficacy one can assume from their cynical, go-at-it-alone attitude.

### 3.3 Neoliberal Attitudes

Despite more progressive political values and a keen awareness of the unfair labor conditions, many respondents have fidelity to the milieu they have inherited. In other words, the neoliberal structure individuals inherited has penetrated into their deepest and most intimate subconscious.

This is evident when statements that are more political, in the sense that they address the systemic inequality in this country, are rejected. 85% of respondents believe that the political architecture of the country is fundamentally unequal and therefore others should receive help and resources to close the gap. 96% percent, an overwhelming majority, also do not view poverty as a personal failure of work ethic but a product of external factors beyond an individual's control. 89% recognize that the free market is not an unshrouded, reverent force of cool reason and neutrality, but a myth campaigned by the federal government to hide the fact that the free market is knotted in racial biases.

While respondents reject the neoliberal principles that are more visible - in the sense that the origins of the conditions of the economy and the government are able to be unveiled by a liberal education - it seems as though respondents have internalized the neoliberal value of the individual as a rational economic actor. One graduate, who also interned for a politician, explicitly calls out capitalism in forging her mindset when it came to financial risk-taking:

Working at a restaurant, I was making good money, but I was treated terribly. Working at this internship, I was respected, I was well-liked, and everyone was really nice to me, but not having money was really stressful. So I just used all my borrowed money to live. . . Kind of the capitalist mentality, 'Put in the work now and it'll pay off later.'

Statements	%
Our systems are unequal, and therefore, some people should get a boost.	85
If you work hard enough, anyone can achieve their goals.	15
Statements	%
Poverty happens because of limited opportunities. In spite of hard work, there are some factors beyond a person's control. People are not completely responsible for their level of success in life.	96
Poverty happens because someone didn't work hard enough. People are responsible for the consequences of the decisions they make, therefore they are responsible for their level of success in life.	4

## Run Me My Money

Statements	%
The primary goal of education is to learn to think critically within a multicultural society and democracy, and to challenge the institutions we live under.	70
The primary goal of education is to give you the profitable skills necessary to guarantee a good job after graduation.	30
Statements	%
I value career training and job preparation so I can have a successful career and be financially stable.	56
I value critical thinking and a career that is meaningful that helps others in society, even if it does not pay well.	44
Statements	%
The free market is not neutral. There is structural inequality that needs to be addressed by the government.	89
The free market encourages competition, which naturally leads to creativity, economic growth, and global prosperity.	11

**Figure 4:** Neoliberal Attitudes

More than half (56%) value career training and job preparation in obtaining a degree to ensure financial security, even though 70% say that the primary goal of education is critical thinking outside of the university's ability to provide workplace training and other opportunities for professional development.

The apparatus of the university under neoliberalism is “explicitly structured to meet the needs of capital” and students are therefore “more interested in obtaining the credential that will enable them to achieve the economic success they desire” (Saunders 2010, 60). Despite respondents' insistence that universities are a site of knowledge and critical thinking, they have still learned and internalized the hidden curriculum, which instructs that a degree is ultimately for meeting the needs of the market. The locus of control in a neoliberal university will always be marketability, as we have seen previously with over half of respondents (58%) citing career training or employment as the reason why they took up the internship in the first place.

#### 4. Adjusting Educational Goals in a Post-COVID World

Due to the impacts of COVID-19, students are graduating into an unstable job market. Over half of survey respondents (58%) are graduating this academic year, and will face business sectors that are restricted to stop the widespread transmission of COVID-19 and are operating from a place of scarcity and tightening the availability of jobs.

Year Expected to Graduate	
2021	58
2022	28
2023	13

**Table 8:** College tenure and expected graduation

The unemployment rate in California stabilized a little throughout 2020 compared to the initial 13% uptick in the first spring quarter, but unemployment is still at a rate of 9% (United States Department of Labor 2021). An international student at UCLA expressed her frustration with the current job market:

If Americans can't get a job, I can't get a job when I graduate. Just seeing the amount of unemployment for American citizens, my hope of getting a job in the United States has died. It was already low with the sponsorship situation. . . I always thought university was an essential stepping stone to getting a job. I just never realized how far the next stone is.

Scarcity breeds competition, and many students are self-enhancing in order to weather this period of economic turmoil. In fact, 76% of respondents are still pursuing higher education, with only 21% stopping at their Bachelor's.

Degree	%
Associate	4
Bachelor's	21
J.D (Law)	25
M.D., D.D.S., D.V.M., etc. (Medical)	8
Master's	34
Ph.D	9

**Table 9:** Highest Degree Expected

Under the free market policies of neoliberalism, welfare provision is cut and the cost of finding waged work (whether through prestigious universities or exclusive firms) makes it so that students will do anything to get ahead, even if the investment of education is getting riskier and riskier: “[Students] are having to run faster, for longer, just to stand still. Yet if all adopt the same tactics nobody gets ahead. But if one does not play the game, there is little chance of winning. This is the opportunity trap as few can afford to opt out of the competition for a livelihood” (Brown 2003). In fact, about a quarter of respondents are already entering into higher education, delaying their entry into this precarious workforce.

#### 4.1 COVID-19 and Mental Health

Many upcoming graduates are attempting to wed the romantic view of the university, securing their future with the harsh underground reality COVID-19 revealed. Nearly every respondent reports feeling stressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (98%). Similarly, respondents report feeling anxious (98%). More disturbingly, there is a large concentration of respondents reporting high levels of stress (57%) and anxiety (42%).

Stress Level	%
Very Stressful	57
Some Stress	42
Not very stressful	2
Anxiety Level	
Very Anxious	42
Moderately Anxious	42
Some Anxiety	15
No anxiety	2

**Table 11:** Stress & Anxiety due to COVID-19

Out of the list of reasons provided, a majority of respondents who answered that they felt stressed and anxious attributed it to the post-graduation job market. Lacking the “experience that employers are increasingly demanding given employers’ reluctance to provide on-the-job training” not having the networks older, more experienced workers have, and the additional disadvantage of employers assessing the “productivity potential and trainability of young applicants” by relying on “imperfect signals, such as education, race, or ethnicity,” young people are facing a hostile job market of gothic proportions (Kalleberg 2020, 265). In the United States, at the conclusion of the Great Recession in 2010, youth unemployment averaged at 15.5% (Desilver 2015). While it gradually congealed into a still elevated rate at 6.5% in pre-pandemic 2020, the COVID-19 economic downturn shot youth unemployment up to 23.5% before settling into a 12.1% (Congressional Research Service 2021).

Reasons	%
Post-graduation job market	40
Isolation from family & friends	21
Other	17
Financial insecurity	12
Physical health	10

**Figure 5:** Reasons for Stress and Anxiety

To the younger generation, the economy was never reliable. The political structures designed to provide stability in times of such turmoil were negligent at best and completely absent at worst. Instead of relying on the state, young people have instead turned to themselves to manage.



In spite of the stress and anxiety, more than half (60%) have decided not to change their educational and career trajectory. Recall that many of the respondents still want to pursue higher education as a means of self-enhancement in the increasingly competitive labor market.

## 5. Conclusion

I could not say that COVID-19 disrupted the “normalcy” of the world, but rather evinced cruelties beneath the crinolines of “business as usual.” Unpaid internships are exploitative in the sense that they use embedded marginalities, or a shadow economy of free laborers, as subsidies.

Neoliberalism is the seed that unpaid internships burst out of and is only one piece of a very self-defeating system because, as the pandemic revealed, it is ultimately not sustainable. Unpaid internships only reveal the neoliberal system to be self-destructive, asking individuals to work for free for an investment (a job and financial security) in return, yet asking the state to intervene by using financial aid to cover these costs, betraying its own principle of minimal state intervention.

Despite progressive political values, neoliberalism deftly worms its way into students’ psyches. Under the veil of education, universities under the neoliberal state are

training students to become productive workers who have few options but to subject their own children, in turn, to this schooling and vicariously support the notion of education solely for the pursuit of commerce. Critical to the philosophy of free trade and survival of the fittest, neoliberal schooling [...] trains young people to become the ‘human capital’ upon which economy-focused societies depend (Sellars and Imig 2020, 5).

Competition is the soul of neoliberal education. Competition turns students into weapons against a hostile global marketplace, fostering a scarcity mindset that does not afford space for collaboration and true criti-

cal thinking outside of a grading rubric. Because students face the high stakes of securing a “good job” post-graduation, they are not encouraged to help each other and nourish true critical thinking and creativity collectively. If competition is the soul of neoliberalism, then neoliberalism inevitably leads to its own suicide – as the inadequate responses from neoliberal governments to the pandemic have shown.

*“Run me my money. Give an apology to your interns, and change the language of the work it is you’re doing, make space for them to speak. . . Be reasonable.”*

– Sociology major who interned at a non-profit

## **Appendix 1: Methodology**

This study was conducted by Sophia Bautista, a fourth-year undergraduate student at UCLA, under the mentorship of Saba Waheed, Research Director of the UCLA Labor Center. This study was completed as a ten-week, independent directed research class under the Labor Studies department. To qualify for the study, participants had to be an undergraduate student attending a college or university in Los Angeles county that enrolled in at least five units the past academic year, was eighteen years of age or older, and had an unpaid internship in the last ten months. Altogether, the project collected 52 qualifying survey responses and four in-depth interviews, and we worked with faculty to review the data presented.

The study uses a mixed methods approach, integrating both surveys and interviews. The survey had three main sections: (1) Education/ College Experience, Finances, and COVID-19; (2) Work and Internship Experience; and (3) Political Values. The survey took roughly 14 minutes to complete and ran from February 3rd to February 12th. Surveys were distributed online through social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, and Discord). The data was entered through Qualtrics and cle-

aned and analyzed through Google Sheets.

We also collected four interviews. We developed an interview guide that touched on the college experience (relationships with faculty, the adjustment to remote learning, resources, field of study), internship experience (reasons to intern, skills, balancing that on top of school), finances (expenses, grants, parental contribution), mental health, political beliefs (government funding, the response to COVID-19), and possible solutions to the issues they've mentioned. This study also conducted an extensive literature review.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size, so it is not fully representative of L.A. County, and because it was conducted through personal networks, it is overrepresented with UCLA students, whites, and Asians.

## Appendix 2: Sample Demographics

Racial/Ethnicity	%
Asian	47
White	25
Latinx/Hispanic	19
Black	4
Middle Eastern	4
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	75
Male	21
Gender Non-Identifying	3
<b>Age</b>	
19-20	13
21-24	75
25-29	12
<b>Immigration Status</b>	
Immigrant	23
Native-born	77

**Table 1:** Sample Characteristics

Statues	%
Undocumented, AB540, DACAmented or DACA eligible, TPS	33
Formerly incarcerated	17
Military/Veteran	17
Disability or medical condition	17
Parent	17

**Table 2:** Additional Statues

Number of years enrolled in college	%
1	2
2	15
3	38
4	40
5+	6
Year Expected to Graduate	
2021	58
2022	28
2023	13

**Table 3:** College tenure and expected graduation

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Pell Grants, which means that it is subsidized and does not need to be repaid. While there are a multitude of factors that go into qualifying for Pell Grants, the individual must demonstrate exceptional financial need, and so they are most likely to be categorized as low-income. Cal Grant recipients, which is a similar program of need-based state aid, meaning they are dependents whose expected family income is in the range of \$40,000 to \$60,000 a year.

<sup>2</sup> “Pay-to-play” culture refers to relating to or denoting an arrangement in which a charge must be paid to play a game or sport.

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