College to Work

Findings from a Study of the Career Readiness Internship Program

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OVERVIEW

In recent years, the field of postsecondary education has been increasingly focused on providing students opportunities to gain work experience. Federal, state, and local governments have been working to create avenues for students to participate in internships and apprenticeships as they build their academic and workforce skills in college or other training programs. Similarly, many postsecondary education institutions have begun investing in services that help students obtain internships or other work-based learning opportunities while enrolled in college. Recent surveys of employers highlight the importance of these ventures, as many employers argue that they have difficulty finding college graduates who can demonstrate important workplace skills, such as data analysis and complex problem solving.

Despite this increased national attention on work-based learning opportunities, internship programs vary markedly from college to college, and very few mechanisms exist for evaluating the quality of the experiences they offer students. For instance, while researchers have noted the importance of providing wages to interns, the majority of internships are unpaid, making it difficult for lower-income students to participate in these opportunities. Moreover, differing expectations between student interns and employers can lead to challenges in these relationships. Finally, some internships provide limited exposure to meaningful work as companies have interns perform simple tasks that are unrelated to students' intended careers.

Hoping to overcome these challenges, Ascendium Education Group (formerly Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation and Affiliates) established the Career Readiness Internship (CRI) program in 2015. The CRI program provided funding and support to 33 colleges in four states for the development of quality paid internships for low-income students. This report presents findings from an analysis of the implementation of the CRI program at these colleges as well as student and employer perspectives of the program. Overall, the study found that colleges were successful at recruiting large numbers of low-income and traditionally underserved students into the program and providing them valuable career-focused internship experiences. Additionally, employers tended to have high regard for the program and their collaborations with the colleges. Nevertheless, colleges had difficulties maintaining and expanding the CRI program at the conclusion of the grant period, suggesting that more needs to be done to help colleges institutionalize the program.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, postsecondary education has become an increasingly important avenue for improving adults' labor market chances.[1] As the earnings of high school graduates have plummeted, colleges are increasingly being called upon to help students develop the academic, social, and critical thinking skills that are important for success in today's technologically advanced and service-oriented labor market.[2] However, far too few employers seem to be finding college graduates that can demonstrate these skills. In a 2014 survey of 400 employers, less than 40 percent of them thought that recent college graduates were well prepared to locate and analyze important information, solve complex problems, or work well with others (despite the fact that the majority of college graduates felt their skills in these areas were strong).[3] Nearly 60 percent of employers also indicated that colleges and universities needed to do more to teach these skills.

Internships have long been a tool that colleges have used to help students hone their workplace skills, and these opportunities have become even more important in recent years as employers and policymakers have become aware of the benefits of on-the-job training.[4] However, while internship programs may have proliferated, their quality can vary dramatically, with many providing students with less-than-ideal environments for developing their skills and advancing their careers.[5] Additionally, employers often expect interns to arrive with strong career-related skills, such as marketing, sales, or computer software experience, rather than developing these skills on the job.[6] Research on internships has pointed to the challenges with the intern-employer relationship, as the type of work that employers give interns does not always match well with their skills.[7] Many internships are also unpaid, which creates an equity-related challenge for low-income students who need to support themselves financially while in college — an issue that is demonstrated by lower internship participation rates among low-income students, compared with their higher-income peers.[8] Finally, internship programs, particularly those that provide wages, can be challenging to sustain and expand, thus limiting the number of students who can participate.[9]

Leaders interested in improving the quality of internships have been making strides in meeting these challenges in recent years by establishing standards for these programs and examining their outcomes.[10] In 2015, Ascendium Education Group (formerly Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation

1. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2014).
2. Carnevale, Javasundera, and Gulish (2015); Levy and Murnane (2004); National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017).
3. Hart Research Associates (2015).
4. Cahill (2016); U.S. Department of Labor (2018).
5. Koc, Koncz, Tsang, and Longenberger (2014); Cahill (2016).
6. Burning Glass (2017).
7. Woo, Putnam, and Riforgiate (2017).
8. National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017); Gardner (2011).
9. Gardner (2011).
10. National Academy Foundation (2010); Cahill (2016).

and Affiliates) created the Career Readiness Internship (CRI) program, in an effort to help colleges develop the capacity to provide more low-income students with paid internship opportunities. A three-year grant program for four-year colleges in Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin, the CRI program focused on assisting colleges with developing quality, semester-long paid internship programs for financially needy college juniors and seniors. MDRC began researching the CRI program in 2016, studying the development and implementation of the program at the 33 participating colleges through spring 2018. This report presents findings from an analysis of how these colleges implemented the CRI program and how well they were able to overcome the challenges to building a strong internship program. The key findings are the following:

- Colleges offered more than 5,700 internships over the course of CRI program grant period, with over half going to very low-income, Pell Grant-eligible students, a substantial proportion of whom were first-generation college students and students of color.

- While colleges had strong marketing campaigns to reach employers, they secured relatively few internships with for-profit employers; most internships were offered at nonprofit organizations or government agencies.

- Colleges made significant progress in overcoming many of the challenges that internship programs typically face, including improving the equity of internship opportunities for traditionally underserved students, providing hourly wages, and helping both students and employers have meaningful experiences.

- Similar to many other internship programs, colleges had difficulties maintaining the CRI program in its intended design after the conclusion of the grant period, primarily due to constrained finances. About half of the colleges discontinued the program, while the majority of the remaining colleges changed important aspects of program, such as removing the low-income requirement.

THE GOALS OF CRI WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF COLLEGE INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS

Although there is relatively little rigorous research on internship programs in postsecondary educational settings, leaders have begun building a framework for differentiating among various types of work-based learning opportunities (such as internships, transitional jobs, co-ops, and apprenticeships), as well as establishing a set of standards that these programs should aim to achieve.[11] For instance, leaders have recommended that work-based learning opportunities offered in postsecondary educational settings provide meaningful tasks to help advance interns' career goals, focus on specific learning goals that can be tracked over time, compensate for time worked, and reward the development of skills as it occurs. These standards align well with the "gold

11. Cahill (2016); Sarna and Strawn (2018).

standards" established by the National Academy Foundation in 2010 for high school internship programs.[12] (See Box 1.) Recent research has also shown that work-based learning opportunities within postsecondary educational settings have the potential to improve students' academic outcomes and labor market earnings.[13]

BOX 1

Commonalities in High School and Postsecondary Education Recommendations for Work-Based Learning

INTERNSHIP CHARACTERISTICS	HIGH SCHOOL GOLD STANDARDS[a]	POSTSECONDARY WORK-BASED LEARNING FRAMEWORK[b]
Aligns with academic preparation	✔	✔
Pays compensation	✔	✔
Aligns with students' interests	✔	✔
Sets learning goals and assesses progress	✔	✔
Provides supports for student participants	✔	✔
Provides value to employers	✔	✔
Promotes equity	✔	✔

NOTES: [a]National Academy Foundation (2010).

[b]Cahill (2016).

Studies of high school internships provide more rigorous evidence of these benefits. For instance, in a random assignment study of high school internship programs for high school seniors, researchers from the Urban Institute found that the completion of high school internships increased the college enrollment rates of young men by 23 percentage points and of middle-tier students (with grade point averages of 2.0 to 3.0) by 17 percentage points — while also helping students gain valuable workforce skills.[14] Additionally, a long-term study of high school career academies, which combined technical

12. National Academy Foundation (2010).

13. Schwartz, Strawn, and Sarna (2018); National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017).

14. Theodos et al. (2017).

career education with an academic curriculum and provided some students with internships with local employers, found that these programs had large, positive impacts on students' labor market outcomes eight years later.[15] A follow-up study revealed that these impacts were largely due to the internship component of the program.[16]

Building on these positive findings, Ascendium Education Group (Ascendium) sought to establish an internship program that would provide low-income students with quality internships that would encourage them to succeed in college and the workplace. As discussed in MDRC's initial report on the CRI program in 2017, Ascendium hoped that colleges would collaborate with employers as well as faculty and staff within their own institutions to create internships that would provide career-relevant work experiences for students. In particular, the CRI program was intended to target financially needy students, and colleges had to describe how they would recruit lower-income students. Finally, Ascendium encouraged the sustainability of the program by requiring colleges to shoulder an increasing amount of the financial responsibility in the final two years of the program. (See Box 2 for a full list of criteria for participation in the CRI program.)

Ascendium released a request for proposals in 2015 and selected 33 four-year colleges. (See the appendix for a list of the participating colleges and their characteristics.) Colleges began with a planning period in September 2015, and then implemented the CRI program from spring 2016 through spring 2018. The internships were to be offered to students during the fall and spring semesters as well as in the summer. At the close of the grant period, Ascendium hoped that the colleges and their employer partners would sustain and expand the program.

STUDY DESIGN

Ascendium partnered with MDRC in 2016 to study the implementation, expansion, and sustainability of the CRI program. In particular, Ascendium and the MDRC research team were interested in analyzing whether the colleges followed Ascendium's recommended guidelines in their implementation of the CRI program and how they built and maintained the program over time. To do so, the research team reviewed how colleges targeted and recruited students and employers and examined the role that colleges played in helping prepare both parties for the internship experience. It also analyzed the types of students and employers who participated in the program to determine whether students from different groups were equitably placed in internships. The team also sought to capture the experiences of both students and employers in the program. Finally, it gathered information about students' academic progress in college during and after their participation in the internship program.

To conduct the study, the research team drew from three data sources. First, MDRC collected and analyzed a set of eight progress reports from each of the 33 participating colleges from spring 2016

15. Kemple (2008).

16. Page (2012).

BOX 2

Criteria for Participation in the College Readiness Internship Program

- **TARGET STUDENTS WITH FINANCIAL NEEDS.** Colleges were required to provide detailed descriptions of how they would assess students' financial aid status.
- **PROVIDE WAGES.** Colleges were required to pay students at least the legal minimum wage.
- **PROVIDE PART-TIME INTERNSHIPS.** Colleges were expected to offer the internships on a part-time basis to ensure that the program did not interfere with students' academic study and that as many students as possible could participate.
- **PROVIDE MEANINGFUL WORK EXPERIENCES.** Colleges had to describe how the internships would relate to students' career interests and help them build applicable skills.
- **PROVIDE TRANSPORTATION FUNDS, WHERE POSSIBLE.** Ascendium Education Group provided a pool of money that colleges could use to pay interns' wages and to help cover the cost of their transportation to and from the worksite.
- **WORK WITH MULTIPLE DEPARTMENTS.** Colleges were required to describe how the program would work with other departments, such as their financial aid offices and human resources departments, to ensure that low-income students were recruited and supported in the CRI program.
- **INCREASE OUTREACH TO EMPLOYERS AND DEVELOP NEW INTERNSHIPS.** Colleges had to describe the internship opportunities they already offered and how they would expand them through the CRI program, including enrolling new employers.
- **ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY.** Colleges were required to pay 10 percent of the interns' wages and help cover their transportation costs in the second year of the program and pay 20 percent of their wages in the third year.

through spring 2018.[17] These reports were based on a template developed by Ascendium and were completed by college leaders. They documented key aspects of the colleges' efforts to establish new internship positions, such as how they targeted students with financial needs, how students were placed in internships, and what contributions colleges made to the CRI program. Colleges were asked to report on these activities at the end of each semester, which allowed the research team to study how their implementation of the CRI program changed over time.

17. It is important to note that the analysis of the progress reports was based on whether colleges filled out specific questions on those reports. In some instances, progress reports did not provide information on a certain topic or skipped certain questions. The research team's analyses were based on the number of responses it received for a given question and do not necessarily represent the universe of the participating colleges' practices.

Second, the research team developed two surveys for participating students and employers, respectively. The student survey asked students a series of questions about their experiences in the program and what they learned from it, such as the types of skills they developed and how well the internship aligned with their career goals. The employer survey asked employers to reflect on the types of skills and workplace behaviors that interns demonstrated, their reasons for participating in the program, and their experiences partnering with the college.

CRI program coordinators fielded surveys to students and employers participating in the program in fall 2016 and spring 2017 and then shared the aggregated information with the research team. The team did not have personally identifiable data and could not provide exact response rates. However, there were 853 responses to the student survey and 683 responses to the employer survey during the two semesters in which these surveys were fielded. Based on this and other information, the research team estimates that the overall response rate was greater than 50 percent.

Third, the research team collected quantitative data on characteristics of the internships throughout the course of the grant period. This data included measures such as the number of internships colleges developed, the types of employers who participated, the number of hours students worked, and funding provided by employers. It also tracked students' academic progress, including whether they were enrolled in college full time during the internship, whether they received academic credit, and whether students persisted or graduated in the semester following their internship. However, it is important to note that there is no comparison or control group of students with which these outcomes can be compared, making it difficult to discuss with certainty the CRI program's influence on these outcomes. The research team collected program data from each of the 33 participating colleges at the end of each semester for a total of seven semesters from spring 2016 through spring 2018.[18]

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CRI PROGRAM ACROSS THE PARTICIPATING COLLEGES

According to the colleges' progress reports, over 5,700 internships were developed over the course of the grant period and more than 5,500 individual students participated in the program. (See Table 1.) The progress reports reveal that, overall, the participating colleges tended to grow their internship programs over time, with each institution providing 173 internships on average over the course of the grant period. The actual number of internships that the colleges provided each semester varied widely, with some colleges offering fewer than 10 internships and others offering over 50. Overall, the colleges tended to offer more internships in the spring semester than the summer and fall.

While the number and type of internships that the CRI program offered were generally on par with the colleges' plans, the program reached only a fraction of the potentially eligible student population at each college. The number of students that colleges identified in their progress reports as eligible varied from college to college, ranging from fewer than 100 to over 2,500 students. Yet, of the 21 colleges that reported these numbers, the CRI program at two-thirds of them received applications

18. Data from summer semesters were also included.

TABLE 1

Internship and Intern Characteristics

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Total internships	5,730	N/A
Average internships per college	174	N/A
Average hours worked per internship		
Fall/spring semesters	137	N/A
Summer semester	162	N/A
Average hourly wages	$11.34	N/A
Average employer funding	$73.21	N/A
Intern demographics		
Total students	5,511	100.0
Pell recipients	3,261	59.2
Students of color	1,633	29.6
First generation	2,328	42.2
Internships with		
Nonprofit or government employers	3,815	66.7
For-profit employers	1,908	33.3

SOURCES: MDRC calculations based on progress reports and internship data provided by Ascendium.

NOTE: Seven schools had incomplete intern demographics data within their progress reports: Ashland University, Carthage College, Heidelberg University, Kent State University-Kent, Lakeland Community College, Metropolitan State University, and University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

from fewer than 20 percent of these eligible students. That said, the CRI program at the participating colleges did accept most of the students who applied, with the majority of them accepting 70 percent or more of their student applicants. Program leaders at the majority of the colleges were also able to place students into internships, with only a handful of colleges placing fewer than 60 percent of accepted applicants.

The CRI program at many of the colleges was successful in reaching traditionally underrepresented students. Approximately 59 percent of interns were Pell Grant recipients, which is substantially higher than the overall percentage of students receiving Pell Grants at most of the participating colleges. (See Appendix Table 1 for the percentages of students receiving Pell Grants at each college.) This means that the program at many colleges was able to reach large proportions of very low-income

students.[19] A substantial proportion of interns were students of color (30 percent) or first-generation college students (42 percent).[20] All of the colleges also documented explicit plans for how they targeted financially needy students in their progress reports. These plans generally involved CRI program coordinators working with financial aid offices to identify students who met the income eligibility requirements.

As Ascendium recommended, most internships were part-time positions. Interns worked 137 hours on average during the academic term and slightly more hours during the summer. Wages ranged from $8.00 an hour to $20.00 an hour, with most colleges paying between $10.00 and $14.00 an hour, or an average of $11.34 an hour across all internships.

Most of the internships (67 percent) were hosted by nonprofit organizations or government agencies; only 33 percent of internships were hosted by private or for-profit companies. In their progress reports, a handful of colleges explained that nonprofits and government agencies tended to be more interested in participating because they often had limited budgets and could use additional help. Employers also corroborated these statements, with 77 percent of employers naming the need for extra help as a primary reason for participating in the internship program.

HOW WELL DID COLLEGES IMPLEMENTING THE CRI PROGRAM ADDRESS CHALLENGES COMMON TO INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS?

Educational institutions have often struggled to develop large-scale, quality internship programs that provide wages and equitable opportunities to traditionally disadvantaged students. This section provides an analysis of how well the CRI program was able to meet some of the central challenges facing college internship programs across the following four key areas: (1) providing interns with meaningful work and opportunities to develop skills; (2) balancing the needs of employers and students; (3) providing equitable opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged students; and (4) sustaining and expanding the CRI program over time.

Providing Interns with Meaningful Work and Opportunities to Develop Skills

As mentioned earlier, experts have outlined several criteria for what constitutes a quality internship program. (See Box 2.) For instance, internships should relate to students' career interests and help them advance in their intended career track. Internship program leaders are expected help prospective interns prepare for their internship experiences and provide opportunities for them to reflect on their experiences and lessons learned. Interns should be compensated for their time and offered supportive services throughout the internship experience. Experts also argue that interns' contribu-

19. The annual income of families whose children are eligible for the Federal Pell Grant cannot exceed $50,000 a year, but most students who receive Pell Grants come from families making $20,000 or less per year (Scholarship.com, 2019).

20. Because seven colleges reported incomplete data, percentages are not exact.

tion be of value to the employer and help further the goals of the company or organization. Finally, it is recommended that colleges work jointly with employers to meet these criteria.[21]

While limited in their description of the CRI program's day-to-day activities, the progress reports do offer a glimpse into the efforts that colleges undertook to build quality programs. For instance, colleges discussed many attempts to work across departments to develop the CRI program, manage its day-to-day operations, and recruit students and employers. For instance, the CRI program at many colleges relied heavily on the institution's financial aid and payroll departments to ascertain students' eligibility for the program and manage payment of their wages. The CRI program staff at most colleges worked directly with faculty to recruit students into the internship program and many of them also partnered with other departments, such as advising or athletic departments, or student organizations, to get the word out about the program. Additionally, about 40 percent of the colleges noted that the CRI program received recommendations for potential employers from academic faculty and other staff.

Colleges also reported many other strategies that they used to recruit employers and students into the program. Most colleges reported heavily marketing the internship program to both employers and students through a variety of media, ranging from direct mail to radio advertisements, in an attempt to attract a diverse set of participants. About half of the colleges also mentioned playing a mediating role between students and employers, connecting them on a case-by-case basis. About 40 percent of the colleges also reported providing extra supportive services to students, such as guidance on general professionalism and office etiquette and assistance developing cover letters, résumés, and interviewing skills before, during, or after their internship placements. These descriptions indicate that a substantial proportion of the participating colleges devoted time and effort to building a strong CRI program and helping students acquire the skills needed to be successful at work.

Balancing the Needs of Employers and Students

Data from the surveys also suggest that both students and employers had valuable experiences with the CRI program. For instance, over 75 percent of student survey respondents noted that the internships were relevant to their career interests, a key indicator of a quality internship experience. (See Table 2 for results from the student survey.) Additionally, a majority of student respondents said that the internships had been helpful in refining their career interests, either by affirming their existing interests or by pushing them to consider other fields. These responses suggest that many of the internships were well aligned with students' career interests and afforded them at least some opportunities to reflect on their experiences, both of which are considered key components of quality internship experiences.

Most student respondents also noted their progress in developing many of the workplace skills valuable to prospective employers. For example, many student respondents indicated that they felt more confident in their ability to communicate effectively with others, solve problems, meet deadlines, and conduct themselves professionally. Most respondents also indicated that the internships had improved their employability by helping them build professional networks (75 percent), strengthen

21. National Academy Foundation (2010); Cahill (2016).

TABLE 2

Student Survey Results, Fall 2016 Through Spring 2017

Survey Question	Percentage of Responses
Relevance of internship for intended career	
Relevant or very relevant	78.2
Slightly relevant	18.9
Not relevant	2.9
Number of responses = 804	
Internship affirmed or changed career interests	
Affirmed interest	68.2
Changed interest	31.8
Number of responses = 738	
Expected professional uses for internship[a]	
Strengthen résumé	88.8
Expand professional network	74.9
Use job-specific skills learned during internship	74.4
Use general professional skills learned during internship	70.3
Does not expect to use internship professionally	2.0
Number of responses = 806	
Total number of responses = 853	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on survey of employers participating in CRI programs.

NOTES: Categories may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

[a]Distributions may not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

their résumés (89 percent), and learn job-specific skills (74 percent). In this regard, the CRI program appears to have provided opportunities for students to gain meaningful work experience that improved their professional skills, another important characteristic of quality internship programs.

Over 80 percent of the employer survey respondents indicated that their CRI interns possessed good or very good work skills, such as problem solving, taking the lead, meeting deadlines, and communicating effectively with others. (See Table 3.) Many employer respondents also indicated that they were willing to serve as a reference for their interns (95 percent), hire their former interns (76 percent), and host additional interns (95 percent). (See Table 4.) These responses suggest that employers felt that their interns were capable and either started the program with important workplace skills or developed them over the course of the internship.

TABLE 3

Employer Survey Results, Fall 2016 Through Spring 2017

Survey Question	Percentage of Responses
Reasons for participating in CRI[a]	
Strengthen relationship with college	63.2
Help local students	81.7
Could use extra help	76.6
Screen and train prospective employees	42.8
Number of responses = 657	
Experiences partnering with college were good or very good[a]	
College communicated expectations to us	90.7
College helped us create internships well suited to the students	75.3
College was collaborative and flexible regarding details	89.7
College was responsive to our concerns and questions	87.1
Number of responses = 677	
Has hired former CRI interns	
Yes	17.4
No	82.6
Number of responses = 518	
Based on experiences with CRI, likely or very likely to	
Host additional interns	94.8
Pay wages for interns	40.5
Serve as reference for interns	94.5
Hire former interns	76.3
Number of responses = 676	
Total number of responses = 683	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on survey of employers participating in CRI programs.

NOTES: Categories may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

[a]Distributions do not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

Employer survey respondents also reported positive experiences working with their college partners when enrolling in the CRI program. For example, three-fourths of employer respondents stated that the colleges assisted them in creating internship opportunities that were well suited to students. Additionally, 87 percent of employer respondents indicated that their college partners were good or very good at communicating their expectations, being collaborative and flexible, and being respon-

TABLE 4

Employer Survey Results, Intern Performance, Fall 2016 Through Spring 2017

Survey Question	Percentage of Responses
Intern's performance was very good or good[a]	
Knows how to follow work-appropriate conduct	94.7
Knows how to meet deadlines	86.6
Capable of being proactive or taking the lead	81.6
Can problem-solve to complete tasks	84.6
Can communicate and work effectively with others	89.1
Knows how to handle challenges	84.7
Number of responses = 871	

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on survey of employers participating in CRI program.

NOTES: Categories may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Some employers hosted multiple interns, providing separate assessments of performance for each intern.

[a]Distributions do not add to 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.

sive to concerns and questions. The progress reports also indicate that many colleges handled work traditionally done by employers, such as tracking student hours and setting up payroll mechanisms, which likely benefited the participating employers. Altogether, these comments suggest that employers and colleges collaborated to develop the internships, and that both parties supported students during their internship experience.

While many findings from the surveys point to the strengths of the CRI program, data on program and internship characteristics and from the colleges' progress reports suggest that the program encountered some challenges as well. For instance, a third of the colleges (12) reported that the program had difficulty filling open internship positions, while another 6 colleges indicated that they could not find internships that met students' interests. In one instance, a college noted that there was a high demand among employers for interns with graphic design and marketing backgrounds, and the CRI program leaders had difficulty identifying enough students to fill these positions. Conversely, a number of colleges reported that they had trouble developing internship opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, noting that there were few STEM employers in the local community or that STEM employers wanted students to work more than 150 hours over the course of the academic term. Finally, data submitted by colleges on the characteristics of the CRI program reveal that relatively few for-profit employers participated in the internship program, which suggests that many career tracks may not have been well represented.

Most colleges also did not appear to develop strong mechanisms to help students reflect on their internship experiences or to assess the skills that students learned against measurable objectives. Several colleges noted that learning contracts or agreements were developed that specified expecta-

tions for participating interns and employers. Several others noted that program leaders collaborated with employers to develop job descriptions and learning outcomes for students. However, very few colleges indicated that they followed up with students and employers to assess whether these learning objectives had been met or whether interns were rewarded for developing skills.

Finally, although 74 percent of employer respondents reported that they would be willing to hire their interns, less than half of them indicated that they were participating in internship programs to screen and train prospective employees. These responses suggest that employers may not have been looking to the CRI program to recruit new talent, and that many employers may have been unable to offer them jobs after the internship ended. This is supported by the fact that fewer than 20 percent of employers had hired former interns.

Despite these challenges, the CRI program implemented at the participating colleges overall had many of the characteristics of a quality internship program. Many colleges have faced similar challenges developing internship programs that reach large proportions of low-income students, pay wages, and provide a meaningful experience for both employers and students.[22] Thus, while there was room for improvement in how the participating colleges implemented the CRI program, they did appear to develop relatively strong internship programs that benefited participants.

Providing Equitable Opportunities for Traditionally Disadvantaged Students

The colleges made significant progress in developing programs that were equitable and reached large proportions of traditionally underserved students. As noted above, nearly 60 percent of the students who participated in internships were very low income (as determined by their eligibility for Pell Grants), and substantial proportions were students of color and first-generation college students. Box 3 describes how one college successfully used the CRI program grant to better reach and serve underrepresented students.

Paying interns wages also appears to have had a notable influence on students' ability to participate in the CRI program. One-third of the student survey respondents indicated that the wages they earned were important to their ability to participate in the program. Some student respondents reported receiving supplemental money for transportation to and from their internship placements, and nearly half of these respondents (45 percent) said that they would have been unable to get to their internships without these funds.

Students participating in the CRI program also had strong academic outcomes during and after the program. Students in over three-fourths of the internships remained enrolled in college full time while in the CRI program, and over half of the internships offered academic credit. (See Table 5.) Additionally, students in 98 percent of the internships persisted in or graduated from college the following semester. Since there is no comparison group against which to measure these outcomes, it is difficult to know for certain whether CRI influenced these outcomes. Nonetheless, it is a positive sign that many students in the CRI program remained enrolled in college and enrolled full time.

22. National Association of Colleges and Employers (2017).

BOX 3

Reaching Underrepresented Students: Metropolitan State University

The Career Ready Internship (CRI) program at Metropolitan State University did a noteworthy job of reaching the most financially needy students. Approximately 95 percent of the 279 students who participated in the program were eligible for Pell Grants. About half of them were students of color and one-quarter of them identified as first-generation college students.*

University leaders credit the CRI program grant for these results to the extent that it pushed them to ask difficult questions about how the institution's policies and practices may impede the success of low-income students, students of color, first-generation college students, and Native American/Indian students, and how they can better meet the needs of these students. This soul-searching guided their student recruitment process. Similar to the CRI program at many of the participating colleges, the program at Metropolitan State University was marketed to students through direct mail, social media, and online advertisements, as well as through the formal and informal networks of college faculty and staff. Program staff also met with university cultural coordinators, who advise underrepresented students of various linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and liaised with Federal TRiO Program advisors, who help identify and provide services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, the CRI program staff consulted with Native American/Indian faculty and staff, who provided them with resources to help them better relate to and advise Native American/Indian students. Much of the program's success in reaching a large proportion of underrepresented students can be attributed to the partnerships that leaders developed with other university departments.

* Data on first-generation college students were not collected in spring 2016.

TABLE 5

Measures of Academic Progress

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Internships in which		
Student enrolled full time	4,457	77.8
Student received academic credit	3,344	58.4
Student persisted or graduated from college the following semester	5,563	97.5

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on internship data provided by Ascendium.

The fact that a large number of traditionally underrepresented students participated in the CRI program — many of whom had quality internship experiences — is an important step forward in improving equity between low-income and higher-income students and their internship experiences. Low-income students are less likely to participate in internship programs than their higher-income peers, and low-income students who do participate in these programs tend to be placed in low-paying or unpaid internships at higher rates.[23] Moreover, recent research analyzing nationally representative longitudinal data on students beginning postsecondary education reveals that low-income students (who are disproportionately students of color and first-generation college students) more often participate in internships that are not related to their chosen fields.[24] Low-income students also tend to work longer hours — which is associated with declining grades — than higher-income students.[25] Therefore, the fact that the internships offered through the CRI program were part time may have helped benefit these students.

The good academic outcomes of students who participated in the CRI program provide another promising indicator of the program's potential to improve equity, as recent research has shown that low-income students who work traditionally have poorer academic outcomes. For instance, analyses of longitudinal data reveal that only 22 percent of low-income students who work complete a bachelor's degree, compared with 37 percent of their higher-income peers.[26] As noted earlier, this study cannot determine with certainty whether the students' participation in the internships caused their strong academic performance. That said, most of the interns persisted in or graduated from college — a substantial proportion of whom were low-income students of color or low-income first-generation college students. This represents a promising stride in helping these students learn on-the-job skills, while maintaining their academic standing and financial stability.

Sustaining and Expanding the CRI Program Over Time

A key goal of the CRI program was for colleges to sustain the program after the end of the grant period. Ascendium tried to create an incentive for them to do so by asking colleges to contribute 10 percent of the interns' wages in the second year of the program and 20 percent in the third year. Additionally, Ascendium encouraged participating colleges to develop relationships with new employers as well as increase the number of internships the CRI program offered. Ascendium hoped that these recommendations would help programs take incremental financial responsibility for the CRI program while also growing their programs over time.

As discussed earlier, the colleges were successful at expanding the CRI program during the grant period. Program data from the colleges reveal that fewer than 30 internships were offered at the majority of colleges at the start of the program. By spring 2018, nearly half of the colleges (46 percent) were offering more than 30 internships. A number of colleges also described their efforts to expand the CRI program in their progress reports, noting that promoting the program through the word of mouth and continually following up with employers helped them add new positions and recruit more students.

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23. Gardner (2011).

24. Carnevale and Smith (2018).

25. Carnevale and Smith (2018).

26. Carnevale and Smith (2018).

Participating colleges were also able to increase their financial support of the CRI program during the second and third year of the grant period. In their progress reports, a majority of colleges indicated that employers, the colleges themselves, or a combination of the two provided this financial support. Another third of the colleges reported that their contribution to interns' wages came from monies they received from donors. Program data from the colleges also reveal that employers provided an increasing amount of financial support for the CRI program over the course of the grant period. As shown in Table 6, employers helped fund very few CRI internships (less than 20 percent) in spring and summer of 2016. However, the percentage of internships at least partially funded by employers climbed to over 40 percent by fall 2016 and remained relatively stable from this point onward.

TABLE 6

Employer Internship Funding

Outcome	Spring 2016	Summer 2016	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Summer 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	All Semesters
Average internship funding per student (%)								
No employer funding	90.9	81.3	57.6	54.5	57.6	57.6	57.6	45.5
$1-$200	9.1	12.5	30.3	30.3	27.3	15.2	15.2	45.5
$200-$400	0.0	6.3	6.1	9.1	12.1	18.2	15.2	6.1
$400 or more	0.0	0.0	6.1	6.1	3.0	9.1	12.1	3.0

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on internship data provided by Ascendium.

NOTES: Thirty-three colleges participated in the CRI program. Complete data were unavailable for a limited number of colleges in certain semesters; these missing records are not included in the table.

A small number of internships were offered during winter semesters. These are combined with fall semester internships in the values.

While employers helped financially support the CRI program, their contributions were limited. For instance, 46 percent of employer survey respondents indicated that they did not contribute any money to the CRI program. Additionally, those who did contribute tended to provide relatively small amounts. As shown in Table 6, less than 20 percent of the internships offered in spring 2018 received $400 or more from the employer. The typical internship received $200 or less from the employer, which is only a fraction of the total wages most internships paid. Additionally, only 41 percent of employer survey respondents indicated that they would likely pay wages for student interns. Thus, while some employers did provide financial support, their contributions were not enough to cover the full, or even most, program costs.

The majority of employers were nonprofit organizations, which may explain in part why their contributions fell short. As mentioned earlier, a large number of employer survey respondents indicated that they were participating in the CRI for extra help. Additionally, nine of the participating colleges reported that they had offered fee waivers or lower fund-matching commitments to nonprofits participating in the program. These factors suggest that employers were not a viable source of financial support for the program beyond the grant period.

With employers providing only limited financial support, much of the costs to operate the CRI program — including sustaining the program beyond the grant period — fell on the colleges. In the progress reports, most college leaders expressed eagerness to continue the program and credited it with strengthening partnerships in the local community and sparking institutional discussions about the importance of career preparation. Colleges also described a number of ways they hoped to fund the program. For instance, many colleges mentioned working with their development departments to devise fundraising strategies or applying for local community grants.

While most colleges hoped to continue the CRI program, about half of the colleges reported that they were unable to do so. Most of the colleges that were unable to continue the program named financial limitations as a primary reason. In particular, colleges described challenges related to institutional budgetary constraints, changing personnel, and competing funding priorities. One college noted that donors were more interested in funding scholarships or programs or buildings that might be named after them. Despite these issues, many of the colleges expressed hopes that they could reinstate the program once they raised more funds.

Eighteen colleges reported that they planned to continue the CRI program. Among them, many indicated that they intended to revise the program. For instance, many leaders said that they were planning to change the eligibility requirements. Some schools said that they would double down on their outreach to students of color and first-generation college students; however, a few planned to remove the financial need eligibility requirement and make the program open to all students. Finally, seven of the colleges planned to decrease the number of internships offered each semester. In general, these colleges supported the CRI program with funding from donors (seven colleges) or from their own institutional budgets (five colleges); the other colleges did not specify the source of the funding that they would use to continue the program. Many of them are smaller (12 colleges enrolled fewer than 5,000 students as of fall 2016) or private colleges (13 are private, not-for-profit colleges).

While most of the participating colleges were discontinuing or revising the CRI programs after the grant period ended, all of them noted that the program had affected their institutional practices in at least one way or another. Most commonly, leaders reported that it had helped them strengthen their partnerships in the community (16 colleges) and their relationships with alumni (10 colleges). Some colleges (six) described a shift in institutional culture or practices as a result of the CRI program. For example, several colleges institutionalized new policies allowing students to receive credit for their internships, improved their communications across departments, or developed new approaches for supporting the success of low-income students, students of color, and first-generation college students.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings suggest that the CRI program grant helped the participating colleges build quality internship programs that reached traditionally underrepresented students. Based on responses to the student and employer surveys, the internships seem to have helped interns develop some of the workplace skills valued by employers, such as problem solving, meeting deadlines, and working well with others. Large proportions of low-income students, first-generation college students, and students of color participated in the program, all of whom tend to be underrepresented

in college internship programs. Students who participated in the internships also persisted in or graduated from college the following semester. Finally, all of the participating colleges noted that their institution had changed in one way or another as a result of the CRI program. These findings suggest that the program was valuable to all parties: students, employers, and colleges.

While the program grant helped colleges overcome many of the barriers that internship programs commonly face, some obstacles remained. One the biggest challenges for the colleges was sustaining the program after the grant period. Many colleges either discontinued the program or revised it in such way that it focused less on low-income students, inherently changing a key feature of the program. These challenges further underscore the difficulty of maintaining and expanding internship and other work-based learning programs for low-income students. The subsequent sections present a few recommendations for how postsecondary education leaders, policymakers, and funders might meet these challenges, based on the experiences of the colleges, students, and employers that participated in the CRI program.

Recruit For-Profit Companies in Nontraditional Ways

Though many colleges implemented strong CRI programs (at least in the view of students and employers), most colleges had difficulty sustaining the program due to financial constraints. Comments on the colleges' progress reports suggest that those colleges that were able to maintain the program had developed more extensive connections with for-profit companies and donors who could help financially support the internships. For instance, three of these colleges reportedly created a fund through which alumni, for-profit companies, and other donors could contribute to interns' wages. Conversely, colleges that were unable to sustain the program noted that most of their employer participants were nonprofits and that they should have invested more in recruiting for-profit companies that could have helped support the internships.

These comments suggest that internship programs may be better served if the colleges operating them enroll more businesses and for-profit companies. However, given that few for-profit companies participated in the CRI program, despite colleges' extensive marketing, colleges may need to think creatively about how to reach them. The five colleges that placed the highest number of interns with for-profit companies (over 50 percent) mentioned having made strong connections with their local chamber of commerce, which may be a fruitful avenue for recruiting employers. Another college indicated that it reached out to alumni to both sponsor paid internships and provide donations. Making good use of alumni networks might also be an effective way to both fundraise and establish potential contacts with for-profit employers.

Developing more internships with for-profit companies may also be advantageous for low-income students. Low-income students are more likely than their higher-income peers to take internships at nonprofits, and thus are less likely to be exposed to businesses and other for-profit companies — a particular challenge when considering that these students are underrepresented in STEM and other higher-paying industries.[27] Low-income students may therefore benefit from internships with for-profit employers, which may increase their exposure to different careers and help them develop the necessary workplace skills.

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27. Gardner (2011).

Invest in Internship Programs at Two-Year Colleges

Improving equity in internship opportunities may also require developing internship programs at postsecondary institutions where low-income students are most likely to be found: two-year colleges. Relatively few students at two-year colleges participate in internship programs compared with students at four-year colleges.[28] However, these schools enroll a disproportionate number of low-income students, first-generation college students, and students of color — which suggests that developing internship programs at these institutions could have an immediate impact on reaching these traditionally underserved students.[29]

However, building internship programs at two-year colleges may require somewhat different programming and outreach than at four-year colleges, as two-year college students are much more likely to be working full time, posing a potential barrier to their participation in internship programs.[30] Additional supportive services, such as financial assistance and guidance counseling, may be needed to help two-year college students take advantage of work-based learning opportunities — and allow them to cut back on the hours at the jobs they work to help support themselves financially.

Ascendium foresaw the potential of reaching out to two-year college students and in 2016 committed $2.1 million to creating CRI programs targeting low-income students at 16 community colleges.[31] From 2017 through 2018, these colleges provided paid internships to over 700 students, with students demonstrating similar positive outcomes for persistence in and graduation from school as their counterparts at four-year colleges.[32] Ascendium hopes to keep learning from these colleges' experiences in 2019.

Target Students Earlier in Their College Careers

The CRI program targeted students who were in their junior or senior year of college, and thus who were already well into their academic career and actively pursuing their chosen profession. While these students may be more seasoned, they also have less time and flexibility to explore other careers and confirm or change their paths. By focusing on students in their freshman or sophomore years, an internship program may offer students the opportunity to test out potential careers and change or confirm their chosen academic field while they still have time and flexibility before graduation. Ascendium's experiences supporting internship programs at two-year colleges suggest that students who are early on in their college careers can benefit from such programs.

A newly developed internship program at one CRI four-year college, for instance, offered freshmen and sophomores "flashternships," or intensive, short-term internships lasting one to two weeks. The college provided students small stipends to participate, with the hope that they would gain exposure to a variety of careers early on in college and become more interested in pursuing longer-term internship opportunities during their junior and senior years.

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28. Cahill (2016); Carnevale, Smith, Melton, and Price (2015).

29. Ma and Baum (2016).

30. Cahill (2016).

31. Ascendium Education Philanthropy (2016a).

32. Ascendium Education Philanthropy (2016b).

Track Interns' Learning and Measure Performance

While the CRI program implemented at the participating colleges had many of the features characteristic of quality internship programs, most of the colleges did not make a concerted effort to track students' learning and skill development during the internship. Having interns document and evaluate the skills they acquire or hone on the job can help teach them how to communicate the workplace skills they possess to future employers. Conversely, this exercise can help students see more clearly the skills they may need to develop further. Such tracking might also help colleges compare student experiences across different types of internships to determine whether the internships offer students similar opportunities and where they can be improved.

Jobs for the Future's recent report, *Making Work-Based Learning Work*, provides recommendations for developing these types of tracking systems. One program profiled in the report used a backward mapping process, in which it first defined the workplace skills that are required for entry-level positions. The program leaders then developed curricula and work-based learning opportunities in which these skills were the learning objectives. The report also suggested that employers play a role in assessing interns' competencies and growth.[33]

Additional Research on College Internship Programs and Their Effects on Student Success

Research on internship programs in postsecondary educational settings is limited, and the studies that are available at times provide contradictory evidence about the role and value of internship programs. For instance, some research suggests that unpaid internships are detrimental to students' future employment prospects, while other research suggests that students who have participated in internship programs are more likely to be hired.[34] Researchers should undertake more rigorous studies on internship programs and their impacts on student outcomes. Further research should also be conducted on how to build stronger, more sustainable internship programs that directly target and successfully recruit low-income students.

33. Cahill (2016).

34. Crain (2016); Lierman, Townsley, Watermill, and Rousseau (2017).

APPENDIX

College Characteristics

APPENDIX TABLE 1

College Characteristics

College	State	Fall 2016 Enrollment	Graduation Rate (%)	Pell Recipients[a] (%)	Students of Color[b] (%)
Loras College	Iowa	1,463	71	27	9
Simpson College	Iowa	1,543	63	27	7
William Penn University	Iowa	1,426	33	55	26
Augsburg University	Minnesota	2,531	57	45	18
Hamline University	Minnesota	2,184	59	36	14
Metropolitan State University	Minnesota	7,571	42	78	24
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	Minnesota	34,870	78	19	8
University of Minnesota-Morris	Minnesota	1,771	64	35	6
University of Northwestern-St Paul	Minnesota	3,241	63	35	6
St. Catherine University	Minnesota	3,176	59	41	18
Ashland University	Ohio	4,814	63	37	18
Defiance College	Ohio	608	42	45	16
Denison University	Ohio	2,277	80	20	16
The University of Findlay	Ohio	3,661	64	31	5
Heidelberg University	Ohio	1,123	49	47	11
Hiram College	Ohio	1,090	61	47	18
John Carroll University	Ohio	3,038	76	19	8
Kent State University at Kent	Ohio	23,684	55	32	12
Lakeland Community College	Ohio	7,997	13	50	17
Marietta College	Ohio	1,144	61	35	7
Ohio University-Main Campus	Ohio	23,585	64	26	8
Tiffin University	Ohio	2,353	34	44	14
Cardinal Stritch University	Wisconsin	1,534	46	40	33
Carthage College	Wisconsin	2,818	63	27	11
Marquette University	Wisconsin	8,238	81	18	15
Silver Lake College of the Holy Family	Wisconsin	357	44	59	21
Viterbo University	Wisconsin	1,875	46	25	4
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire	Wisconsin	10,085	68	22	4
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay	Wisconsin	6,757	49	28	6
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh	Wisconsin	12,484	53	29	6
University of Wisconsin-Superior	Wisconsin	2,367	43	28	4
University of Wisconsin-Madison	Wisconsin	30,958	85	12	7
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point	Wisconsin	8,297	63	33	6

SOURCE: Data from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Where data for multiple campuses were available, main campus data were used.

NOTES: Graduation rate is 150 percent of normal time for fall 2013 cohort.

[a]Data for Pell Grant recipients is from 2015.

[b]Percentage of students of color includes black and Hispanic students. It is based on fall 2016 enrollment data.

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2017. Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, Jessica Taketa

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ABOUT MDRC

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Founded in 1974 and located in New York; Oakland, California; Washington, DC; and Los Angeles, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff members bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-prisoners, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.