

WHEN THE COST OF WORK IS PROGRESS:

Examining the Ghastly and Gendered Exploitation of Unpaid Interns



Lexi Kayser

She/Her

Junior

Research-Intensive English & Journalism

The unpaid intern, according to Hollywood tropes, should expect to spend most of her time fetching coffee and standing in the corner of important board meetings. When the CEO can not draw a conclusion, the intern should pipe up—and with an endearing stutter and a nervous adjustment of her cat-eye glasses—save the company with a genius pitch. The intern will then be allowed her own office in the full-body-windowed high rise, and a conventionally attractive male boss will spend a copious amount of time leaning against her door frame.

And the intern is always tripping, walking awkwardly—but sexily—in her daily attire: a pencil skirt. She is wearing a pencil skirt, because more often than not, she is a woman. At least the movies got that part right.

Eighty-one percent of unpaid interns are women, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers. They are not just fetching coffee; they are working on Capitol Hill and in corporate headquarters. They do not have their own offices; many work a second job to continue affording their college apartments. And they are nervous. Of course they are nervous. They are terribly tired, financially flat and 28% less likely to get

a full-time, paid position after their internship than their paid counterparts, according to Forbes.

Underpaying entry-level workers, or not paying them at all, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is one that has been around since paid work itself came to be. Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, as well as many cities in medieval Europe, used apprenticeships to train their future workers. Britannica recalls that the family of the apprentice would often pay the craft master, who would allow the apprentice to stay and study under them for up to nine years. An apprentice was expected to sustain himself with no net income (and while actively losing money—just as modern interns pay for rent, transportation and business clothes), all for the sake of learning the craft. Even back then the practice was corrupt. Nepotism was rampant in generational businesses, and the elitist codes of many craft guilds were tough to crack.

As time progressed, so did economic systems—the simplicity of learning, working and sustaining oneself was complexified after the Industrial Revolution. Power structures became even more tightly wound as major corporations shot up like skyscrapers; the cost of living heightened, too, and in the U.S., the minimum wage did not follow closely. Work continued to be doted as a privilege, despite the fact that it is quite literally the key to survival; without the monetary compensation from a paycheck, it is virtually impossible for someone to pay for food, shelter, clothing... much less, higher education.

The Atlantic reports that in any given year, between 500,000 to 1,000,000 college students will intern for free—about



the same number of people who reside in Washington D.C. They are conveniently excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act, so despite working (sometimes part-time, oftentimes full-time) for the company, they are not legally required to be deemed “employees.” Without the official title, these all-but-employees pass right under protective legislation regarding labor. What the law called bare-bones justice for everyone else—entitlement to a minimum wage and overtime pay—is not assured to interns.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) justifies this inequity by calling it compromise. “The Test for Unpaid Students and Interns”—developed by the DOL for use in court cases—states in its first article that if “the intern and the employer clearly understand that there is no expectation of compensation,” the intern is not an employee, and is not entitled to pay.

The issue with compromise is that it often occurs between a rock and a hard place—for the unpaid intern, the lack of immediate pay is believed to be a fair trade for industry experience and a toe in the workforce door. Trevor Smith for The American Prospect reports that 90% of employers expect applicants to have had one or two internships by the time they graduate college. Yet, their love of employing former interns does not always transfer to their employment of interns themselves. A 2019 study for The Conversation revealed that for every 17 internship applications a student sends out, only one company is bound to offer them an interview; though employers expect experience, the amount of experience they are willing to contribute fills a shallow pool. Students are expected to put in the work when not only the payroll, but the roster, is printed against their favor.

The assumption is that students will choose if the dice roll is worth it for them—if the possibility of an upper-hand for post-grad employment is a fair exchange for unpaid time and labor. However, the narrative of “choice” is inherently exclusionary; it does not account for those who must make money to put themselves through school, to afford their current home, to purchase food and necessities, to save for the years ahead.

Once they have made the decision to go for the internship, many young people—women in particular—compromise not only their bank accounts, but their inherent labor value. The gender wage gap is ever-present on the unpaid internship scene. The National Association of Colleges and Employers found that students majoring in more conventionally feminine practices—such as journalism, fashion merchandising and human development—were more likely to apply for unpaid internships than students in majors dominated by white males—such as business, engineering and computer science. The ways different sexes sway when it comes to choosing a profession (although certain options may be publicly encouraged and patriarchy-enforced), is not the focus here; rather, the fact that women are more likely to accept an unpaid position nods to a disturbing gendered dichotomy.

Women’s labor has been unpaid and undervalued since long before they were allowed to enter the workforce at all. Child-rearing and keeping house were expectations bestowed upon them due to their sex; any individual, natural capability for care and concern was not fostered or explored, but trivialized. When we give little girls toy babies and give little boys toy cars, we already set the precedent; one will grow up to work for service, and one will grow up to work for wealth/capital/supportive pay. Women are not taking unpaid internships because their work is worth less, but because they are victims of a society that taught them to believe it is.

The consequences follow them into the paid workforce. Danielle Snaathorst, a previously

unpaid intern for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, ponders the relationship between internships and starting salaries in an essay for ATLAS. She states, “Un(der) paid internships put job applicants in a worse position when negotiating a salary,” citing that “when applying for positions at the United Nations, one is required to list the annual salaries from their previous positions and this affects the salary levels of the entry-level positions.” Snaathorst’s statements are revelatory of a cyclical salary displacement; when someone starts out doing the already blurred work of an intern for no pay, they are more likely to undervalue that same work when encountering it in a job description.

The hiring of women in unpaid internships is off-putting in its economic implications but plain insidious in its exploitation of vulnerability. As aforementioned, interns are not considered employees, and their lack of governmental protection trickles down to workplace conduct. For example, a 2017 study from the Fair Internship Initiative revealed that United Nations (UN) interns do not have access to the United Nations Dispute Tribunal or to the United Nations Appeals Tribunal—in other words, they are purposely and explicitly excluded from reporting structures. Treating the work of interns as disposable is an issue, but dismissing their concerns about workplace misconduct as trivial is nothing short of exploitation.

The path to fair wages for interns is being paved by those most affected; their studies, petitions and stories are amplified through organizations like Pay Our Interns, founded by two previously unpaid interns of color, and the Fair Internship Initiative, run entirely by previous youth interns of the UN. Such resounding demands have impelled large-scale changes, proving that despite what their paychecks claim, interns have power. A 2012 (female-headed) lawsuit against Vogue and Vanity Fair media-giant, Conde Nast, screeched their internship program to an irreparable halt. As recently as March of 2021, Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley took to Twitter, demanding payment for State interns.

But lasting change is both individual and corporate. It takes the men at the cherry wood desks saying, “Hey, that intern is working. Work should be paid. That is fair.” It takes the hiring manager searching “intern” on every application saying, “Hey, not everyone can afford to intern. Opportunities should be equal. That is fair.”

And it takes the student in their college advisor’s office, listening to a lecture about “experience,” to stand up and say, “Hey, I am actually worth the work I do. I will not contribute to systems of oppression by willingly submitting my labor to them. That is not fair.”

It is time for interns to take back their integrity, cash in their earned paycheck and fetch their own damn coffee.

