

Who Gets to Intern? Demographic and Institutional Predictors of Internship Participation Among International Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between senior international students' demographic characteristics, institutional contexts, and internship participation in U.S. higher education institutions. Despite universities' emphasis on preparing globally competent, workforce-ready graduates, international students may face limited access to career preparation opportunities (Calonge et al., 2023; Lin, 2023). Guided by Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory, the researchers conducted a quantitative secondary-data analysis using 2019–2020 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data. Descriptive statistics assessed trends in internship participation, while logistic regression explored predictive relationships between student demographics, institutional factors, and participation rates. Among 920 students, 78% reported completing, currently participating in, or planning an internship. Participation was highest among students from Africa/Sub-Saharan regions (92.3%) and Asia (84.6%), followed by Europe (83.2%). Regression analyses revealed no statistically significant effects of gender, nationality, institutional type, or classification on internship engagement, except for students majoring in Computer Science or Civil Engineering, who demonstrated higher participation, likely due to program-specific internship requirements. These findings indicate that international students' internship engagement is generally equitable across demographic and institutional categories but highlight opportunities for institutions to strengthen career-preparation support. The study provides evidence-based insights for higher education practitioners and researchers, supporting initiatives to enhance international student career development and experiential learning experiences. This research contributes to understanding factors influencing internship participation and offers a foundation for future studies on workforce readiness and global student engagement.

Keywords: NSSE survey, career preparation, career readiness, internships, workforce

BACKGROUND

U.S. higher education institutions emphasize preparing globally competent, workforce-ready graduates, yet concerns persist regarding international students' equitable access to career-preparation opportunities (Bound et al., 2021; Faidley, 2025; Jiaxin et al., 2024). This quantitative, secondary-data study investigated the relationship between international students' demographic characteristics, institutional type, and internship participation. Grounded in Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Experiential

Learning Theory, the study analyzed 2019 and 2020 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data using descriptive statistics and logistic regression. Among 920 senior international students, 703 (78%) reported planning, completing, or engaging in an internship, while 191 (21%) reported no participation. Descriptive analyses revealed the highest engagement among students from Sub-Saharan Africa (92.3%), Asia (84.6%), and Europe (83.2%). Logistic regression identified no statistically significant associations between gender, nationality, institution type, or classification and internship participation, except for students in Computer Science and Civil Engineering. These findings suggest that curricular structures and field-specific requirements, rather than demographic or institutional factors, may shape participation trends. The results highlight the relative proportionality of internship participation among international students while underscoring the importance of sustained institutional investment in experiential learning (Gjini, 2023). This study contributes empirical evidence to the literature on international students' career development and provides a foundation for future research examining mechanisms that promote equitable engagement in workforce preparation.

A highly skilled workforce is essential for the United States' long-term economic growth, global competitiveness, and innovation capacity (Caligiuri et al., 2024; Gjini, 2023; Kazis et al., 2007; Kholifah et al., 2025; Narayanan et al., 2010; Shindell, 2013). Higher education institutions (HEIs) thus play a critical role in preparing students to achieve academic success while also becoming globally competent and workforce-ready graduates (Duderstadt & Womack, 2003; Kuh et al., 2008; Norze et al., 2019; van der Baan et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2025). Although academic achievement is traditionally perceived as central to higher education, many students enter postsecondary education with professional aspirations and career development goals as their primary motivation (Halpern & Aydin, 2020; James, 2018; Moxley et al., 2001; Stavropoulou et al., 2025). For this reason, equipping students with the necessary skills, experiences, and networks to transition successfully into the workforce is integral to HEIs' mission (Chan, 2016; Mezghani & Turki, 2025; Vugteveen et al., 2025).

Globalization has intensified these demands by reshaping labor markets and requiring HEIs to internationalize curricula, programs, and campus environments (Acar, 2024; Enders, 2004; Friedman, 2005; Knight, 2006a, 2006b, 2012; Malika & Badr, 2024; Oliveira et al., 2024; Tavares, 2021). In this context, international student enrollment has become a strategic priority for U.S. colleges and universities, not only to enhance institutional competitiveness and revenue but also to attract global talent (Bound et al., 2015; Gjini, 2023; Knight, 2012; Lazarova et al., 2023). The impact of this trend is significant: during the 2019–2020 academic year, 1.1 million international students were enrolled in U.S. higher education, accounting for 5.5% of the total student population (IIE, 2019). Their presence contributes more than \$45 billion annually to the U.S. economy and supports approximately 500,000 jobs (NAFSA, 2020). Beyond the economic benefits, international students enrich the intellectual and cultural life of campuses, while serving as a vital source of skilled talent for the U.S. workforce (Bound et al., 2021; Cantwell, 2015; Halpern et al., 2022; Latukha et al., 2025; Nash, 2025).

Importantly, approximately 70% of international undergraduates seek to remain in the U.S. and enter the workforce following graduation (ACE, 2012; Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). However, despite their aspirations, international students often encounter significant challenges in career preparation (Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). Many HEIs primarily focus their services on transactional immigration and compliance processes rather than tailored professional development programming (ACE, 2012; Moya & Wesson, 2025; Skinner et al., 2019). Employers may also demonstrate reluctance to hire international students, often due to limited knowledge of work authorization procedures or the perception that these students are temporary sojourners (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Eland et al., 2014; Liang, 2025; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). These barriers—compounded by cultural adjustment, lack of professional networks, and difficulties in securing legal employment authorization—leave many international students underprepared for navigating the U.S. job market (Aydner & Rider, 2022; Chen & Li, 2023; Choudaha & Schulmann, 2014; Katsumoto et al., 2023; Norze et al., 2019; Spencer-Rodgers & Cortijo, 1998).

Internships have been widely recognized as a critical mechanism to bridge the gap between higher education and employment (Gjini, 2023; Gutierrez-Pulido & Orozco-Hernandez, 2025). They provide students with experiential learning opportunities, foster practical skill development, and significantly improve career prospects (Alvarez-Larrea et al., 2024; Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Gault et al., 2000; NACE, 2018). Research consistently demonstrates that students who participate in internships are more than twice as likely to secure employment within six months of graduation compared to their peers without such experience (Galbraith & Mondal, 2020; Jackson, 2024; Townsley et al., 2017). Yet, despite the well-documented benefits, international students are disproportionately excluded from these opportunities. While approximately 61% of domestic U.S. seniors report completing at least one internship, only about 10% of international seniors do so (Interstride, 2025; NACE, 2017; Yek, 2024).

This disparity is further exacerbated by structural and policy-related barriers. Although immigration regulations permit F-1 international students to pursue Curricular Practical Training (CPT) when their program requires it, access is often inconsistent and limited (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2021). Moreover, CPT

participation declined significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, with authorizations falling from 151,525 in 2018–2019 to 107,524 in 2019–2020 (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2020). This reduction has disproportionately restricted international students' access to critical experiential learning. The issue is particularly concerning given that international students are highly concentrated in fields such as civil engineering, computer science, and business disciplines, where internships are often required or strongly encouraged as part of degree completion (Amirova, 2025; Interstride, 2025; NSSE, 2019; Open Doors Report, 2020).

While prior scholarship has examined international students' cultural and academic adjustment challenges (Arthur, 2007; Popadiuk, 2008), far less attention has been given to the intersection of demographic characteristics, academic majors, institutional contexts, and their impact on internship participation. Considering the heterogeneity of international students as a population—spanning diverse nationalities, genders, and educational pathways—further inquiry into these dynamics is essential (Amirova, 2025; Bulgan & Çiftci, 2018). This leads to the need for an inquiry into international students' internship participation trends in relation to their academic level, personal, academic, and institutional demographic characteristics. Consequently, this study sought to address this gap by examining the participation rates of senior international undergraduates in internships, with particular attention to demographic (gender, nationality, academic major) and institutional (type and Carnegie classification) factors. By doing so, it advances understanding of the structural and contextual influences on experiential learning participation among international students and provides insights into how HEIs might strengthen support for their workforce readiness.

Research Questions

1. What are the internship participation rates of senior undergraduate international students based on their demographics (gender, academic major, and nationality) and institutional characteristics (type and classification)?
2. What is the relationship between senior undergraduate international students' demographics (gender, academic major, and nationality), institutional characteristics (type and classification), and their internship participation?

By exploring these questions, the study contributes to both scholarship and practice by highlighting current participation trends, identifying gaps, and informing institutional strategies aimed at ensuring that international students are fully supported in preparing for the U.S. and global workforce.

Literature Review

Internships are widely recognized as a critical bridge between higher education and the workforce, offering students opportunities to apply academic learning to real-world contexts, gain professional experience, and develop both technical and transferable skills essential for employability (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Gault et al., 2010; Gutierrez-Pulido & Orozco-Hernandez, 2025; Kuh, 2008; NACE, 2018; Schneider et al., 2024). Institutions of higher education (HEIs) have increasingly embraced experiential learning as a high-impact practice that enhances student engagement, retention, and career readiness (Davis & Pettit, 2024; Hora et al., 2020; Kuh, 2008; Stirling et al., 2017). However, access to and participation in internships are not evenly distributed among students, with significant disparities emerging across race, gender, first-generation status, and citizenship (Greenman et al., 2022; Hora et al., 2019; NACE, 2020a, 2020b). These inequities raise important questions about how institutional type and demographic factors shape opportunities for students, particularly international students, whose career trajectories are often complicated by immigration policies, socio-cultural barriers, and unique vocational needs (Dominguez et al., 2022).

Research consistently demonstrates disproportionalities in internship participation. A 2019 National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) student survey found that 71% of students who reported internship participation were White, and 74% of those internships were paid. In contrast, only 6% of Black students reported holding paid internships, and Hispanic/Latino students were more likely than any other racial group not to participate in internships before graduation (NACE, 2020b). First-generation undergraduates also reported lower participation, with 19% completing paid internships and 25% never participating (NACE, 2020b). Gender gaps compound these inequities: women undergraduates are 34% less likely than men to receive pay for their internships (Binghamton University, 2020; Parker et al., 2016; Wood, 2020; Zilvinskis et al., 2020). Among international students, disparities also exist, with women disproportionately represented in unpaid rather than paid internships (NACE, 2020b). These findings indicate that race, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape students' access to and experiences in internships, underscoring the need for deeper exploration of structural and demographic factors influencing participation.

For international students in particular, the stakes of internship access are especially high. Approximately 70% of international students express a desire to remain in the U.S. workforce following graduation (McFadden &

Seedorff, 2017; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). Yet they face unique barriers related to immigration restrictions, cultural adjustment, and institutional practices. F-1 visa holders, most international students in U.S. HEIs, are generally limited to 20 hours per week of on-campus employment and require authorization for off-campus work through Curricular Practical Training (CPT) or Optional Practical Training (OPT) (USCIS, 2020). While these mechanisms provide avenues for work, they are often complicated, inconsistently applied across institutions, and misunderstood by both students and employers (Ho et al., 2022; McFadden & Seedorff, 2017). Employers may avoid hiring international students due to misperceptions of cost or complexity, further constraining opportunities (Aksay Aksezer et al., 2023; Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Faidley, 2025).

Studies indicate that students' engagement with career preparation varies based on demographic factors such as gender, nationality, academic major, and age (Alexander & Lowe, 2025; Spangler, 2023). For example, Shih and Brown (2000) found that older international students demonstrated stronger vocational identity and career preparedness compared to younger peers, while Shen and Herr (2004) observed that students intending to remain in the U.S. emphasized internships and institutional career support as critical to their readiness. In contrast, those planning to return home often perceived career services as overly U.S.-centric and less relevant (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2018; Dominguez et al., 2022; Faidley, 2025; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). Furthermore, institutional characteristics—such as type (public/private), size, geographic location, and the concentration of international students—significantly influence the extent of resources and programming available to support career development (Deuchar, 2022; Korobova, 2012; Spangler, 2023; Tang & Zhang, 2023).

Beyond structural barriers, international students encounter socio-emotional and cultural challenges that can negatively affect their participation in experiential learning (Oduwaye et al., 2023; Soong & Mu, 2025). These include limited social networks, language barriers, financial constraints, and unfamiliarity with workplace norms (Arthur, 2016; Bound et al., 2021; Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017, 2018; Faidley, 2025; Hora, 2025; Liu, 2019; Soong & Mu, 2025; Song & Hora, 2024). Studies suggest that international students require more comprehensive and customized vocational support than their domestic peers because their career pathways may involve preparing for employment in the U.S., their home countries, or third-country labor markets (Bound et al., 2021; Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2018; Dai & Pham, 2024; Lin, 2023; Rapp et al., 2024; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Yet, existing career services often fall short in meeting these complex and diverse needs (Aksay Aksezer, 2023; Lin, 2023; Manese & Sedlacek, 1985; Popadiuk, 2010; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024).

The literature affirms the centrality of student engagement in fostering holistic development, encompassing academic achievement, co-curricular involvement, and career preparation (Bowden et al., 2019; Kuh, 2008; Li & Xue, 2023; Mazur, 2019; Weiland, 2024; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024). Within this context, internships and experiential learning are consistently identified as pivotal mechanisms that support students' transition into the workforce (Downs et al., 2024; Jachowicz, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Shen & Herr, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers, 2000; Urban & Palmer, 2014; Wang & BrckaLorenz, 2018). Despite this recognition, limited scholarship addresses the participation of senior international students in such practices, particularly in comparison to their U.S. domestic peers, or the influence of demographic and institutional characteristics on access and outcomes (Bound et al., 2021; Deuchar, 2022; Hagedorn & Mi-Chung, 2005; Korobova, 2012; Westwood & Barker, 1990; Weiner & Ghazarian, 2024; Yebei, 2011).

Emerging research highlights disparities in accessibility linked to gender, academic major, nationality, and institutional type/classification, as well as structural barriers affecting international students' engagement in internships (Hora et al., 2017; Hora et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2021; McHugh, 2017; Silva et al., 2018). Consequently, a need exists to clarify how these variables shape international students' participation, development of career-related competencies, and preparation for an increasingly competitive global labor market (Karakiraz et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Loo et al., 2017a, 2017b; C.-M. Zhao et al., 2005).

Despite the centrality of internships in workforce preparation, there is a paucity of empirical research on international undergraduates' participation in internships and the demographic and institutional factors that shape their access (Karakiraz et al., 2021). Most prior literature has focused on international students' cultural and academic adjustment (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Di Pietro, 2022; Kuo & Roysircar, 2006) rather than their transition into the workforce. This leaves a critical gap in understanding how demographic variables (e.g., gender, nationality, major) and institutional contexts (e.g., type, classification) affect international students' internship participation and, by extension, their preparedness for career success. This study sought to address this gap by examining internship participation among senior undergraduate international students across U.S. higher education institutions, with a focus on the relationships between demographic characteristics, institutional type/classification, and engagement in experiential learning. By doing so, it aimed to provide evidence that can guide institutional policies and practices to foster more equitable access to internships and enhance international students' readiness for both U.S. and global labor markets.

METHOD

The purpose of the study was twofold: first, to describe the participation rates of undergraduate senior international students in internships based on their demographics (gender, nationality, academic major [civil engineering, computer science, and business administration]) and their institutional characteristics (type and Carnegie classification). Second, gauge the relationship between students' demographics, institutional characteristics, and internship participation. The main objective was to elucidate their internship participation trends in terms of personal and institutional demographics, academic majors, and to determine which variables best predict their internship participation.

This study employed an ex-post facto, non-experimental, correlational research design, utilizing extant survey data. Ex post facto designs analyze data retrospectively, relying on information that has already been collected rather than through direct experimentation (Ary et al., 2013). Consequently, no manipulation of independent variables or random assignment of participants occurs, which underscores the non-experimental nature of the design (Creswell, 2009). Such an approach is particularly appropriate for investigating relationships among variables, as it allows researchers to explore associations without intervening in participants' characteristics or institutional contexts (Abele et al., 2013; Bennett et al., 2016). Given that the study sought to examine correlations between international students' demographic and institutional characteristics and their internship participation, the ex post facto design provided a methodologically sound framework. Hence, by leveraging secondary data and avoiding experimental manipulation, the study ensured both feasibility and appropriateness for addressing the research questions (Ary et al., 2013; Asamoah, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2012; Reys-Nickel, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on exploring the mediating role of key interacting variables of student demographics and institutional characteristics on internship participation, derived from relevant literature and research underpinned by the theories of (1) Astin's *Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) Model* (1988, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1999), (2) the *Experiential Learning Theory* (Kolb, 1984), and (3) the *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (Lent et al., 1994). Together, these frameworks conceptualize the interaction between student demographics and institutional characteristics as mediating factors influencing engagement in internships and subsequent career preparedness. This integrative approach positions internships as both developmental opportunities and institutional levers for fostering equitable student success.

Participants

The data for this study were derived from the 2019 and 2020 administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) College Student Report, developed and administered by Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research (IUCPR). NSSE, launched nationally in 2000, is a self-administered questionnaire designed to measure undergraduate students' engagement in educational practices linked to academic success and institutional effectiveness. Administered annually in the spring semester, the survey requires approximately 15–20 minutes to complete and includes 28 questions encompassing 109 items. These items capture behaviors and institutional practices that are positively associated with student learning, development, and persistence.

The target population for NSSE includes both first year and senior undergraduates from participating institutions. In 2019, approximately 294,507 students from 504 U.S. higher education institutions responded, with seniors comprising 53% of the sample. For this study, the analytic sample was restricted to senior international students (on F-1 and J-1 visas) majoring in civil engineering, computer science, and business management/administration. These students were selected because of their disciplinary representation and relevance to career pathways where internships serve as a high-impact practice.

NSSE is widely recognized as providing valid and reliable measures of student engagement and institutional quality (Pike, 2013). The survey assesses five benchmarks of effective educational practice: academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. Internship participation, the focal outcome variable of this study, is categorized as a high-impact practice under the supportive campus environment benchmark, given its documented contribution to student learning and workforce readiness (Kuh, 2008).

IUCPR provided the researcher with a customized SPSS dataset containing only variables relevant to the research questions. Access was granted under a signed data-sharing agreement, with all files stored securely on a password-protected server. The use of NSSE datasets allowed for the examination of student demographics, institutional characteristics, and their relationship to internship participation, although not all variables identified in the literature were available due to the limitations of the survey instrument.

Table 1. 2019 and 2020 NSSE Structure and Items

NSSE Question	Response Options	NSSE Original Scale	Re-Coding/Scale for Each Variable
30 What is your gender identity?	Man; Woman.	4-point scale, categorical 1 = Man 2 = Woman 3 = Another gender identity, please specify: 4 = I prefer not to respond	Dichotomous, categorical 0 = Male 1 = Female
32a Are you an international student?	Yes, No. Provided by IUCPR	Dichotomous, categorical 1 = No 2 = Yes	Dichotomous, categorical 1 = No 2 = Yes
[If answered “yes”] <i>What is your country of citizenship</i>	Provided by IUCPR	Categorical 1 = Africa Sub-Saharan 2 = Asia 3 = Canada 4 = Europe 5 = Latin America & Caribbean 6 = Middle East & North Africa 7 = Australia/Oceania 8 = Other	Categorical 1 = Africa Sub-Saharan 2 = Asia 3 = Canada 4 = Europe 5 = Latin America & Caribbean 6 = Middle East & North Africa 7 = Australia/Oceania
Institution Type/Control	Provided by IUCPR	Dichotomous, categorical 0 = Public 1 = Private	Dichotomous, categorical 0 = Public 1 = Private
Institutional type/Carnegie Classification	Provided by IUCPR	8-point scale, categorical 1 = Doctoral Universities (Very high research activity) 2 = Doctoral Universities (High research activity) 3 = Doctoral/Professional Universities 4 = Master’s Colleges and Universities (Larger programs) 5 = Master’s Colleges and Universities (Medium programs) 6 = Master’s Colleges and Universities (Smaller programs) 7 = Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts & Sciences Focus 8 = Baccalaureate Colleges—Diverse Fields	3-point, categorical 1 = Doctoral/Research Universities 2 = Master’s Colleges and Universities 3 = Baccalaureate Colleges
22a How many majors do you plan to complete? (Do not count minors)	(Open-ended) Provided by IUCPR	One; More than one	One; More than one
22b [If answered ‘One’] Please enter your major or expected major.	(Open-ended)	3-point nominal scale, categorical 1 = Civil engineering 2 = Computer science 3 = Business management/administration	3-point nominal, categorical 1 = Civil engineering 2 = Computer science 3 = Business management/administration
22c [If answered More than one] Please enter up to two majors or expected majors (Do not enter minors)	Provided by IUCPR	3-point nominal, categorical 1 = Civil engineering 2 = Computer science 3 = Business management/administration	3-point nominal, categorical 1 = Civil engineering 2 = Computer science 3 = Business management/administration
23 What is your class level?	Senior	Senior	Senior
11a Which of the following have you done or plan to do before graduation?	a. Participate in an internship (co-op, field experience, student teaching, clinical placement).	4-point scale, categorical 1 = Done or in progress. 2 = Plan to do. 3 = Do not plan to do. 4 = Have not decided	2-point scale, dichotomous, 0 = Not done (Do not plan to do; Have not decided) 1 = Done or in progress (Done or in progress; Plan to do)

Instruments

Table 1 outlines the NSSE (2019) survey items and coding utilized for data collection in this study. IUCPR was asked to scale down the comprehensive NSSE dataset to include only the survey items directly relating to this study's identified set of variables.

Procedure

For the first research question, the researcher used descriptive statistics to provide a statistical landscape of current internship participation rates/trends among senior undergraduate international students based on their demographic characteristics and the type/classification of the institution they attend. The second research question utilized binary logistic regression techniques/analyses to allow for the assessment of the strength of the relationship between the outcome, or the dependent variable (internship participation), and several predictor variables (i.e., demographic characteristics and institution type) to gauge which of those predictors has the most effect on the relationship, and which predictor can be statistically eliminated (Creswell, 2012; Ganesh, 2010).

RESULTS

This study examined the internship participation of senior international undergraduate students in three academic majors (civil engineering, computer science, and business management/administration) using data from the 2019 and 2020 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The sample included 920 respondents across diverse nationalities and institutional types. Analyses were conducted through descriptive statistics and binary logistic regression to address the two guiding research questions.

Descriptive Statistics Findings

Overall, 78% of participants reported having completed, being in progress, or planning to complete an internship, while 21% reported no intent to participate. Gender differences were minimal, with 79.1% of males and 77.7% of females reporting internship participation. By academic major, computer science students reported the highest participation rate (84.4%), followed by civil engineering (77.8%) and business management (68.2%).

Nationality-based comparisons showed substantial variation. Students from Sub-Saharan Africa (92.3%), Asia (84.6%), and Europe (83.2%) reported the highest participation rates, while students from Canada (47.4%), the Middle East and North Africa (51.7%), and Oceania (60%) reported comparatively lower levels. Latin American and Caribbean students had a participation rate of 68.5%. Institutional characteristics showed only modest variation: students at private institutions (80.7%) reported slightly higher participation than those at public institutions (77.8%), while Carnegie classifications of doctoral (79.2%), master's (77.6%), and baccalaureate (77.9%) institutions yielded nearly identical percentages.

Regression Findings

Binary logistic regression was used to examine relationships between demographic and institutional variables and internship participation. The analyses revealed no statistically significant relationship between gender, nationality, institution type, or Carnegie classification and internship participation. However, the academic major emerged as a significant predictor. Compared to business management students (reference group), both computer science ($p < .001$) and civil engineering students ($p = .001$) were significantly more likely to report internship participation.

Although some nationality categories (e.g., Canada, Latin America/Caribbean, and Middle East/North Africa) yielded statistically significant coefficients, their negative values indicated a lower likelihood of participation compared with the reference group (Asia). Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, and Oceania showed no statistically significant relationships.

When logistic regressions were stratified by major, no demographic or institutional variables significantly predicted participation within each academic field, aside from the finding that students from the Middle East/North Africa were less likely to participate in internships within computer science, business management, and civil engineering.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the high level of internship participation (78%) among senior international undergraduate students—surpassing reported rates for their U.S. domestic peers. Guided by Astin's I-E-O Model, Social

Cognitive Career Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory, the findings underscore the complex interplay between student demographics, institutional environments, and career preparation behaviors.

As seen in **Table 2**, academic major emerged as the most influential factor: international students in computer science and civil engineering were significantly more likely to complete internships than those in business management, reflecting both curricular requirements and labor market demand for STEM skills. Nationality-based variation was also evident, with Sub-Saharan African students reporting the highest participation (92.3%) and Canadian, Middle Eastern/North African, and Oceanian students reporting lower rates. By contrast, gender, institution type, and Carnegie classification were not significant predictors, suggesting relatively equitable access to internships across these dimensions.

Table 2. Key Findings, Implications for Practice, and Primary Stakeholders

Programmes	Implications for Practice	Primary Stakeholders
Internship participation rates were high overall (78%), with little difference by gender, institution type, or Carnegie classification.	Maintain broad access to internship opportunities while focusing resources on addressing gaps by academic major and nationality.	Administrators; Career Services Offices
Computer Science and Civil Engineering majors were statistically more likely to participate than Business Management majors.	Expand structured, required, or incentivized internships in non-STEM majors to narrow discipline-based disparities.	Academic Departments; Deans; Faculty Advisors
Students from Africa/Sub-Saharan, Asia, and Europe reported high participation rates; Latin America/Caribbean, Middle East/North Africa, Oceania, and Canada reported lower rates.	Provide targeted advising and resources to students from regions with lower participation, addressing cultural, linguistic, and employment barriers.	International Student Services; Career Advisors
No significant differences in participation were found by institution type (public vs. private) or Carnegie classification.	Focus less on structural categorization of institutions and more on strengthening institutional culture and career-preparation programs across all contexts.	Senior Administrators; Policy Makers
Internship participation is often tied to program/degree requirements, especially in STEM fields.	Consider expanding program requirements or strong recommendations for internships in all majors, coupled with employer partnerships.	Academic Leadership; Accreditation Bodies
International students face immigration and visa-related restrictions in accessing internships.	Train career advisors on immigration policies; strengthen institutional advocacy with policymakers and employers to expand internship eligibility and paid options.	Career Services; University Legal Offices; Policy Makers
Internships function as gateways to employment and OPT/H-1B pathways for international students.	Integrate internships into broader career readiness strategies, connecting international students to employer pipelines that support work visa transitions.	Employers; Career Services; Industry Partners

Note. This table summarizes key findings, recommended practices, and relevant stakeholders for enhancing international student internship participation.

This study found that senior international undergraduates reported relatively high rates of internship participation (78%), exceeding national averages for U.S. domestic students reported in prior NSSE and NACE surveys. Participation varied substantially by academic major and nationality, with STEM majors (computer science and civil engineering) significantly more likely than business management students to engage in internships. In this vein, a recent study reveals that international students report an average starting salary of \$80,785, a figure primarily driven by their strong representation in STEM fields (Interstride, 2024).

Gender and institutional characteristics did not significantly predict participation. These findings highlight the importance of academic program requirements and disciplinary labor market demands in shaping international students' engagement in experiential learning opportunities. At the same time, this study reveals persistent disparities by academic major and nationality, highlighting areas where institutions can intervene to ensure more inclusive access to experiential learning.

CONCLUSION

These results affirm the central role of internships in international students' academic and professional trajectories. For many, internships serve not only as degree requirements but also as critical pathways for gaining U.S.-based experience, enhancing employability, and facilitating post-graduation opportunities through OPT and H-1B visas. Gopal (2022) argued that internship participation, combined with competent institutional career and visa services, influences international students' employability. International students generally perceive strong alignment between their U.S. degrees and employment, yet they encounter greater challenges than domestic peers, including visa restrictions, employer reluctance, and limited access to internships. Despite devoting more effort to job searches, their participation in career opportunities remains significantly lower (about 25% compared to 42% for domestic students). These disparities underscore the need for targeted career services, employer engagement, and post-graduation support to enhance employment outcomes and long-term success in the U.S. workforce (Interstride, 2024).

Hence, the consistently high participation across gender and institutional characteristics suggests that equitable access is achievable; however, disparities across majors and nationalities call for targeted interventions. STEM fields benefit from structured requirements and employer pipelines, while non-STEM disciplines would benefit from intentional expansion of internship pathways. Furthermore, nationality-based differences point to the need for tailored advising and culturally responsive support, particularly for students from regions reporting lower participation. Third, the absence of institutional type and Carnegie effects indicates that localized practices—departmental cultures, advising structures, and employer partnerships—are more decisive than structural categorizations. Finally, immigration-related restrictions continue to pose barriers, underscoring the need for institutional advocacy, employer education, and integrated career services that position internships as gateways to long-term professional opportunities.

In sum, internships remain a vital high-impact practice for international students, and ensuring equitable access requires coordinated institutional strategies, programmatic innovation, and policy advocacy to close participation gaps and enhance career readiness across all fields of study.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study carry important implications for higher education institutions, career services professionals, faculty, employers, and policymakers. By utilizing nationally representative NSSE data (2019–2020), this research provides a comprehensive statistical view of international students' internship participation and its relationship to demographic and institutional factors. The study revealed proportional internship participation across gender, nationality, institutional type, and Carnegie classification, but significant variation by academic major—particularly between STEM (Computer Science and Civil Engineering) and non-STEM (Business Management) fields.

To address these disparities, higher education institutions should strategically invest in expanding structured, accessible internship opportunities in non-STEM disciplines, where participation is often optional rather than required. Administrators and faculty can use large-scale survey data to monitor engagement trends across academic programs, identify underrepresented groups, and design targeted interventions that foster equitable access to experiential learning. Career advisors and internship coordinators should receive regular training on immigration and employment regulations to better support international students in navigating internship placements and post-graduation transitions.

Institutions must also adopt a more holistic and culturally responsive approach to career preparation by understanding international students' unique backgrounds, challenges, and professional goals. Tailored career advising, strengthened employer partnerships, and coordinated institutional strategies can help close participation gaps across majors and nationalities. Furthermore, educating students on the career advantages of internships and other high-impact practices (e.g., undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning) can enhance their workforce readiness and long-term career outcomes. Employers and policymakers play a complementary role by fostering inclusive hiring practices, advocating for regulatory reforms, and expanding internship pathways for international students.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several limitations, revolving around the fact that, as a secondary quantitative analysis using NSSE data, the study relies on self-reported measures, which may be subject to response bias and offer only a snapshot of student behaviors and institutional contexts. The dataset does not capture qualitative dimensions of students' lived experiences, such as perceived barriers, support quality, or the depth and outcomes of internships.

Additionally, the focus on three academic majors (Computer Science, Civil Engineering, and Business Management) limits the generalizability of findings to other disciplines.

The study's cross-sectional design also restricts the ability to track changes in internship participation or career preparation behaviors over time. Finally, although the dataset is nationally representative, the number of participants in some nationality groups was relatively small, limiting statistical power for subgroup comparisons and potentially masking more nuanced variations.

¹Future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches that integrate qualitative data (e.g., interviews, focus groups, case studies) with longitudinal quantitative analyses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of international students' internship experiences and career development trajectories. In-depth qualitative studies can shed light on the quality of internship experiences, institutional support mechanisms, and students' perceptions of barriers and enablers.

Longitudinal research designs with repeated measures would enable scholars to examine changes in participation behaviors and outcomes over time, particularly in response to evolving institutional practices or immigration policies. Further investigation is needed to explore how participation patterns differ by gender, nationality, academic discipline, and institutional characteristics across a broader range of fields.

Additionally, future studies should examine structural and policy barriers—including geographic limitations, compensation models, scheduling conflicts, and visa/work authorization restrictions—that affect international students' internship access. Adopting validated national instruments, such as the National Survey of College Internships (NSCI) and NACE Internship Survey, could improve measurement consistency and support national benchmarking efforts.

Ultimately, advancing this line of inquiry will deepen understanding of how demographic, institutional, and policy factors intersect to shape international students' engagement in experiential learning. Such research can inform evidence-based strategies to enhance equity, improve career readiness, and strengthen the role of internships as high-impact practices in global higher education.

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