

# **Making Internships the Norm for All Students**

## **How California Community Colleges Are Building California's Future**

February 12, 2026

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### **Vision**

Every California Community College Career and Technical Education (CTE) student completes a high-quality internship that accelerates their professional growth and strengthens their opportunities for employment and career success.

### **I. Internships and the Power of Work-Based Learning**

Structured work experience as part of students' education, particularly internships, apprenticeships<sup>i</sup>, and campus-based employment, play a decisive role in shaping students' academic trajectories and long-term economic mobility. While programs differ in design and intensity, when students participate in meaningful, supervised, career-aligned work, they are more engaged academically, more confident in their career direction, and more likely to complete their educational programs.

- Students who engage in structured workplace experiences demonstrate stronger attendance, higher motivation, and better academic performance while receiving lasting labor-market benefits, particularly for young men of color.<sup>1 2</sup>
- Internships are strongly associated with improved persistence and graduation, clearer career goals, and higher rates of post-graduation employment.<sup>3</sup>
- Internships help students develop professional identity, confidence, and social capital - factors especially important for first-generation students and students of color who may have limited access to informal networks.<sup>4</sup>
- These experiences produce substantial long-term benefits and a high return on investment for both employers and students, including higher retention, reduced hiring costs, and stronger alignment between training and labor-market needs.<sup>5</sup>
- Staffing, coaching, and related services estimate that 70%-85% of jobs are filled through networking or referrals, making it critical to build networks and relationships prior to graduation, a role that internships critically fill.<sup>67</sup>

### **II. Campus-based Employment and Internships**

Similarly, on-campus student employment is another powerful, scalable, and equitable form of work-based learning available to colleges. When designed intentionally, campus employment strengthens academic success, builds career-ready skills, deepens students' sense of belonging, and creates structured pathways into professional roles. Berea College, one of the nation's federally recognized Work Colleges, offers a clear example of what is

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<sup>i</sup> Apprenticeships are typically longer, more structured with dedicated mentors, and more technical in focus. Other existing demonstration projects and Vision 2030 efforts already focus on apprenticeships. Here they are just noted as a longer, more structured work-based experience similar to internships.

possible when student employment is treated as an integrated part of the educational mission, demonstrating how campus jobs can function as a high-impact practice that supports persistence, completion, and long-term career mobility.

- On-campus employment is associated with higher persistence, stronger academic outcomes, and deeper connections to the college community, compared to off-campus employment, mitigating negative effects on student outcomes.<sup>8</sup>
- Key benefits include more flexible scheduling, supervisors who understand academic demands and calendars, and connection to campus resources, mentors, and professional networks that are often inaccessible in comparable off-campus employment, particularly for low-income students and underrepresented students of color.
- The Work College model<sup>9</sup> embeds work-based learning into the core of the college experience, with structured, supervised roles tied to learning outcomes. Students graduate with a work transcript documenting the competencies they developed, reframing employment as an integrated part of the curriculum. Students gain communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership skills that employers consistently identify as the most difficult to find in new graduates.<sup>10</sup> Work colleges have very high retention and graduation rates and minimize student debt.<sup>11</sup>

### **III. The Age of AI: Why internships matter more than ever.**[?](#)

California is leading the United States and the world into the new possibilities created by artificial intelligence (AI). AI is already reshaping how we do our jobs, and it has the potential to boost productivity, turbocharge the economy and fuel breakthroughs in areas such as technology, health, and climate change. However, we must actively guide this transition to ensure that people, communities, and businesses across the state share in the benefits of AI and that students are prepared to thrive in this transformation rather than be displaced by it.

- Most organizations have already begun to make low to moderate (39%) or large (21%) headcount reductions in anticipation of AI. Another 29% are hiring fewer people than normal in anticipation of future AI.<sup>12</sup>
- Early-career workers in AI-exposed occupations experienced 16% relative employment declines while experienced workers' employment remained stable, with stronger effects for those lacking job skills necessary to use AI effectively.<sup>13</sup>
- In this environment, 76% of companies say they are more interested in locking down experienced workers than hiring new workers<sup>14</sup>, making prior experience a much greater premium in employers hiring preferences.
- 61% of employers have increased experience requirements in the past three years.<sup>15</sup> Many "entry-level" jobs now require two to five years of experience.<sup>16,17</sup>
- This is leading to calls for new kinds of partnerships between industry and education so that graduates have a mix of education and experience.<sup>18</sup>

As AI reshapes work, deepening and incentivizing employer engagement in internships has become even more critical. AI is changing job roles faster than traditional curricula alone can keep pace, making real-time feedback from employers essential. Internships give

students exposure to how AI is actually being used in the workplace, and just as importantly, how human judgment, ethics, collaboration, and adaptability remain central. Strengthening employer partnerships now will help ensure internships evolve alongside AI, preparing students not only for today's jobs, but for the changing nature of work itself.

#### **IV. The Importance of Employer Engagement**

Colleges already work closely with employers to design programs that reflect real workforce needs, from curriculum alignment and equipment investments to guest instruction and advisory boards. These partnerships ensure that students gain relevant, up-to-date skills while employers gain a talent pipeline that understands industry expectations. Internships are one of the most powerful expressions of this engagement. California community colleges have steadily expanded internship opportunities across sectors, embedded internships directly into pathways, making work-based learning a default rather than an exception. Colleges are also innovating in how internships are structured and supported, including on-campus internships, public sector placements, apprenticeships, and partnerships with small and mid-sized employers who may not otherwise have the capacity to host interns.

- Establishing strong partnerships with employers is critical to building internship pathways, ensuring a strong connection between the work-based learning and program curriculum, and ultimately preparing students for jobs in fields that contribute to the local, regional, and state economies.<sup>19</sup>
- Employers need help finding students for internships and designing programs that provide necessary supervision and support and meet colleges' learning objectives. Community colleges are best poised to provide scaffolded support, resources, and staffing to students and employers."<sup>20</sup>
- California community colleges typically use a local campus to employer partnership models. This ensures campuses meet local employer needs but building an infrastructure to support 150,000 internships will require sectoral partnerships across multiple community colleges and employers—partnerships with multiple colleges and multiple employers across the region and state.<sup>21 22</sup>
- Establishing these partnerships will require involvement from top system leadership, including the Board of Governors, a deep understanding of the needs of sectors, and shared statewide goals.

#### **V. Planning for Success at Scale – Demonstrating the Potential at California Community Colleges**

To successfully scale internships and other college-employment experiences that lead to employment for CTE students, the California Community Colleges ideally needs to develop and stand up **two different demonstration projects**, one focused on scaling **internships with employer partners** and another focused on scaling **campus-based employment opportunities**, to help develop critical elements of statewide infrastructure necessary in the design and implementation of meaningful work-based experiences:

- **Systematization of industry partnerships.** Across our system, regions have developed strong and creative approaches to employer engagement. Many of these partnerships are built on relationships, often nurtured by individual faculty, deans, or workforce leaders who know their local industries well. Now, as employer interest grows, particularly from companies seeking to engage across multiple colleges or regions, we have an opportunity to make that engagement even more seamless and at scalable. By systematizing and better aligning how we coordinate employer engagement across colleges and regions, we can make it easier for industry to connect with us in a coherent way. This is not about replacing relationships; it is about strengthening them.
- **Development of a sector-specific approach.** Internships must be aligned to the kinds of work, employment practices, and standards of different industry sectors. Internships must be an opportunity to learn and demonstrate technical skills relevant to the students' sector of choice.
- **Leveraging what exists within and around the colleges.** Existing programs already reach a subset of community college students. Leveraging, growing, and learning from these programs makes ambitious goals for providing opportunities to all CTE students feasible. Existing programs include on-campus employment, Federal work-study, service learning/College Corps, cooperative work experience (CWE – general and occupational), apprenticeship, clinical experience or practicums, preceptorships, and expanded partnerships with employer advisory boards for career education programs.
- **Utilization and expansion of data systems.** The CCCC Management and Information System will help track participation in internship and other college-employment experiences and track their workforce outcomes to better evaluate the impact of these programs. However, building out the infrastructure to support working with, tracking, and coordinating opportunities with employers statewide will require significant efforts.
- **Establishing evidence base.** These projects will help make the case for additional funding for existing funding streams noted above, new funding streams, and critical policy change including:
  - *State and institutional policy change.* This includes establishing better funding mechanisms for infrastructure, programming, and student payment costs. Scaling internships effectively and sustainably would benefit from the reexamination and revisions of Title V, California Education Code, and financial aid policy.
  - *Federal Work-Study reform.* FWS serves ~670,000 students nationally. Despite representing 10% of all undergraduates, California community colleges received only 8,669 or 1.2% of FWS awards. Work-study reforms are needed to create more private-sector jobs relevant to students' academic and

career goals and to give community college students a fair share of funding.<sup>23</sup>

- *Jobs Tax Credits.* California could follow the lead of innovative states and offer tax credits that reimburse employers for a share of wages paid to eligible students. The Federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit suggests that well-targeted credits can increase hiring of eligible workers.
- *Skills Savings Accounts.* Congress could encourage workers, employers, and philanthropists to invest in portable accounts to fund education and training opportunities, including internships and work-based learning opportunities.

## VI. Conclusion

**Making paid internships the standard, setting an initial goal of 150,000 opportunities for career and technical education program completers each year, would operate on a vastly different scale than past efforts and would change California for the better.**

Meaningful, well-structured work-based learning is a powerful lever for improving student success and long-term economic mobility and, when deployed at scale, for reducing equity gaps in educational outcomes and post-education success. Work experience during education helps students build the skills, networks, and confidence needed to navigate both college and career and is most effective when intentionally designed, equitably accessible, and integrated with academic learning. High-quality programs provide structured supervision, opportunities for reflection, and clear connections between workplace tasks and academic or career competencies. They also offer compensation or financial support to ensure that participation does not depend on a student's ability to forgo paid work. As the United States continues to confront persistent inequities in educational attainment and labor-market outcomes, expanding access to high-quality, paid work-based learning through stronger employer partnerships, more robust data systems, and targeted investments represents a critical strategy for institutions and policy-makers for advancing both student success and economic opportunity.

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