

**Perceptions of Non-Academic Internships  
Executive Report for the  
Society for Personality and Social Psychology**

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## Scope of Work

The Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) funded the current research to explore non-academic internships. Non-academic internships might be an important resource for students looking to transition out of the academy: A student with non-academic work experience may be more competitive for full-time employment in the non-academic sector than a student without non-academic work experience. The purpose of this investigation was therefore to (a) identify existing non-academic internship programs; (b) explore perceptions of the importance of non-academic experience, and by extension, the importance of non-academic internship experience to potential employers; (c) identify factors that may facilitate or impede students' participation in non-academic internships; and (d) identify factors that contribute to social and personality psychologists' decision to leave the academy.

## Method

We developed three surveys designed for three different categories of SPSP members: SPSP graduate students, SPSP faculty, and SPSP members who work in non-academic settings. All surveys asked participants to list any information they had about on-going non-academic internships. The remaining items on each survey were tailored to each subgroup of SPSP. Invitations to participate in these surveys were distributed to the SPSP membership via e-mail, with three separate links as a function of membership status (student, faculty, non-academic member).

## Participants

**Graduate students and faculty.** We compared the demographics of our student and faculty participants ( $N = 982$ ) to that of SPSP's overall membership ( $N = 6,747^1$ ). About 15% of SPSP's overall student and faculty membership responded to the invitation to participate.

**Student participants.** Students accounted for 49.49%<sup>2</sup> of the current sample. We compared the gender and ethnicity/race our student sample against that of overall SPSP student members. Our student sample contained a greater proportion of Whites than the SPSP student membership,  $X^2(7, N = 357) = 97.17, p < .001$  (see Table 1)<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, our sample contained a disproportionate number of women (72.5% women, 25.8% men) compared to the overall SPSP student membership,  $X^2(1, N = 354) = 22.81, p < .001$ .

**Faculty participants.** Faculty accounted for 50.51%<sup>4</sup> of the current sample. Compared to SPSP faculty members overall, our faculty sample contained a disproportionate number of women (60.5%) compared to men (37.5%),  $X^2(1, N = 293) = 27.24, p < .001$ . Moreover, our

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<sup>1</sup> These estimates of SPSP membership demography were from 12/31/15. These estimates exclude undergraduate members, who were not invited to participate in this investigation.

<sup>2</sup> Not all student participants counted toward this percentage completed all questions in the survey. About 360 student participants completed the entire survey.

<sup>3</sup> All chi-squared tests compare the distribution of the current sample to the expected distribution as reported in the December 2015 SPSP membership diversity report.

<sup>4</sup> Not all faculty participants counted toward this percentage completed all questions in the survey. About 300 faculty participants completed the entire survey.

faculty sample contained a greater proportion of Whites than the SPSP faculty membership,  $\chi^2(9, N = 296) = 42.32, p < .001$  (see Table 1).

Taken together, the current sample of faculty and students was somewhat unrepresentative of SPSP members overall.

**Non-academic participants.** There was no data available on the overall demographics of SPSP's non-academic members, so we were unable to compare our non-academic participants to those of SPSP. Compared to our student and faculty samples, the non-academic sample ( $N = 140$ )<sup>5</sup> had a similar gender (64% female, 33.3% male) breakdown as the student and faculty samples. See Table 1 for the non-academic race/ethnicity identification.

Table 1. Ethnicity/race breakdown (%) of sample.

Race/Ethnicity	Student Sample	Faculty Sample	Non-Academic Sample
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0	0.7	0.0
Asian or Asian American	10.1	4.1	2.7
Black or African American	2.5	2.0	1.4
Latino or Hispanic, or Chicano or Puerto Rican	4.2	2.4	4.1
Middle Eastern or North African	2.0	0.0	0.0
Multiracial	11.5	7.8	5.4
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0	0.0
White or European American	68.6	78.4	89.5
Other	0.8	2.0	0.0
I'd rather not say	0.3	2.7	0.0

<sup>5</sup> Not all non-academic participants counted toward this percentage completed all questions in the survey. About 75 non-academic participants completed the entire survey.

## Survey Development

**The graduate student survey.** The graduate student survey assessed students' attitudes about the following: (a) career goals (particularly whether students were considering non-academic career trajectories); (b) factors that contribute to students' interest in non-academic careers, if applicable; (c) students' interest in participating in non-academic internships during the summer and/or during the school year, and whether they would be willing to participate in internships concurrently with their graduate studies; (d) students' perceived costs and benefits of non-academic internships; (e) factors that influence the feasibility of participating in non-academic internships; (f) students' perceptions of advisor support for students participating in non-academic internships; (g) students' perceptions of faculty acceptance of students pursuing non-academic career options; and (h) students' knowledge of existing internship opportunities for social/personality graduate students.

**The faculty survey.** The faculty survey assessed faculty: (a) attitudes about graduate student participation in non-academic internships during the summer, school year, and internships concurrent with their graduate studies; (b) perceptions of graduate student interest in non-academic internships; (c) interest in having students complete non-academic internships; (d) perceived costs and benefits of students participating in non-academic internships; (e) expectations about internship responsibilities (e.g., length of internship, hours worked per week); and (f) knowledge of existing internship opportunities suitable for SPSP graduate students.

**Non-academic member survey.** This survey assessed SPSP non-academic members' attitudes about (a) the extent to which a variety of factors ultimately led to their decision to find a job outside of academia; and (b) the extent to which social/personality graduate student participation in internships improves their ability to secure non-academic jobs after graduation.

## Data Analysis

We used descriptive statistics (i.e., computed means and standard deviations, frequencies) to explore nearly all attitudes about graduate student participation in internships. The one exception is that independent means *t*-tests were used to compare differences in students' and faculty's attitudes about non-academic internships and students' perceptions of faculty's support versus actual faculty support for non-academic internships.

## Qualitative Coding of Costs and Benefits of Internships

Graduate students and faculty provided open-ended responses about the potential costs and benefits to graduate students who participate in non-academic internships, and they rated the extent to which each benefit was positive and each cost was negative. After reading the entire corpus of responses, we agreed on coding schemes for the student and faculty surveys (see Appendices A-D). To establish reliability in coding the responses, two consultants manually coded the first 10%. Our coding of faculty-generated costs ( $\kappa = .89$ ) and benefits ( $\kappa = .80$ ) was reliable. Similarly, our coding of student-generated costs ( $\kappa = 0.83$ ) and benefits ( $\kappa = 0.88$ ) was reliable. The remaining responses were then divided among the three research consultants for coding.

## Results

The results are organized around the following four questions: (a) Do SPSP members support student participation in non-academic internships?; (b) Do faculty and students believe that non-academic internships help or hurt students?; (c) What feasibility concerns do students have about internships?; and (d) What factors contribute to a decision to leave the academy? In the first section, we explore students' and faculty's attitudes toward non-academic internships as well as students' perceptions of faculty attitudes toward non-academic internships. In the second section, we report student and faculty perceptions of the costs and benefits of students participating in a non-academic internship and the importance of a non-academic internship from the perspective of SPSP's non-academic members. In the third section, we report how students rated a variety of feasibility concerns. Finally, in the fourth section we report the ratings of non-academic members' and students' reasons to leave the academy.

### Do SPSP Members Support Student Participation in Non-Academic Internships?

**Student and faculty attitudes.** As can be seen in Figure 1, faculty and students' support for non-academic internships was greatest for summer internships followed by semester long internships concurrent with students' graduate studies. Faculty and students were more neutral about year-long internships concurrent with graduate studies, and taking a semester off. Faculty and students opposed taking a year off from student's graduate training to participate in a non-academic internship. In addition to asking about general support/opposition to non-academic internships, we asked how interested students were in participating in an internship and how interested faculty were in having their students complete an internship. Students and faculty were, on average, moderately interested in participating in non-academic internships themselves or having their students do so (see Figure 2).

Student support was significantly higher than faculty support for summer internships,  $t(796) = -2.18, p = .03$ , and internships concurrent with graduate training both for a semester,  $t(797) = -3.60, p < .001$ , and a year,  $t(796) = -2.83, p = .01$ , as well as general interest in internships,  $t(816) = -3.61, p < .001$ . However, these differences were small, less than half a point on the 7 point scale. In addition, faculty supported taking time off during the academic year more than students did for both a semester,  $t(796) = 3.89, p < .001$ , and a year,  $t(796) = 5.28, p < .001$ .

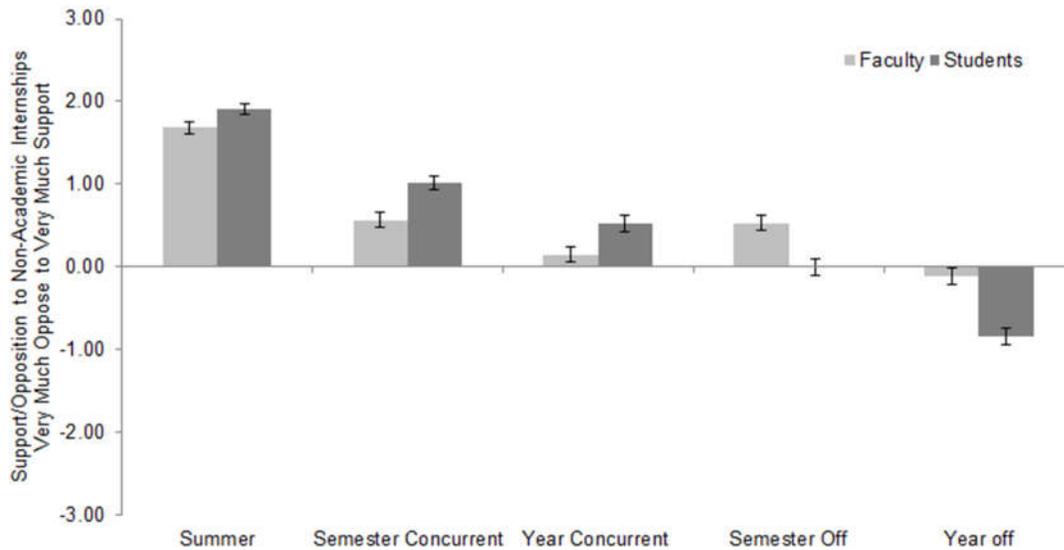


Figure 1. Student and faculty support/opposition to non-academic internships.

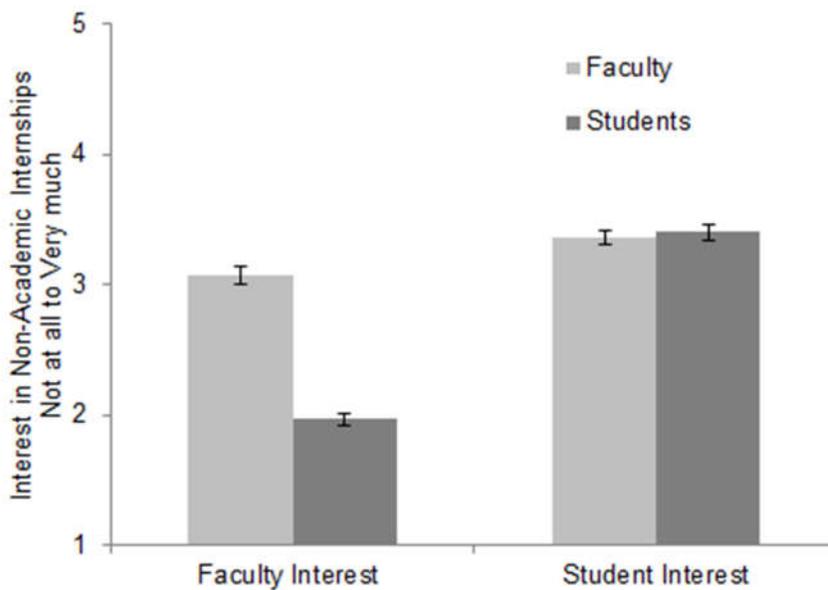


Figure 2. Perceptions of student and faculty interest in non-academic internships.

**Student and faculty perceptions of each other's attitudes.** Although graduate students and faculty had similar attitudes about non-academic internships, students did not have very accurate perceptions of faculty support for student internships (see Figures 2 and 3). Faculty perceptions of student interest closely mirrored students' actual interest in internships,  $t(814) = 0.46, p = .65$ . However, students underestimate faculty interest in having their student participate in internships,  $t(721) = 12.83, p < .001$ . Students also perceived faculty support for internships during all time periods as significantly lower than what faculty reported: semester off internships,  $t(755) = 15.33, p < .001$ , year off internships,  $t(754) = 16.62, p < .001$ , semester concurrent internships,  $t(754) = 7.68, p < .001$ , and year concurrent internships,  $t(754) = 16.62, p < .001$ . Differences in perceived versus actual support ranged from one to two scale points.

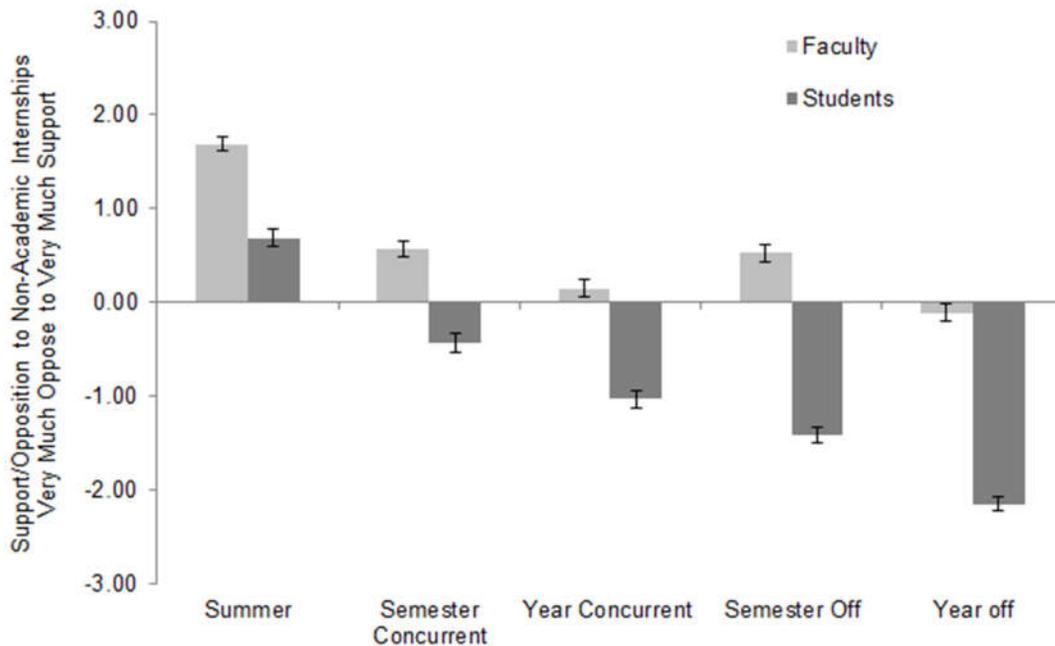


Figure 3. Student perceptions of faculty support/opposition and actual faculty support/opposition to non-academic internships.

### Do Faculty and Students Believe that Non-Academic Internships Help or Hurt Students?

Participants provided a range of potential costs and benefits to participating in a non-academic internship, and students and faculty generated similar responses. Potential benefits to participating in an internship were (a) social benefits, such as better work/life balance and the ability to work in diverse teams; (b) greater competitiveness on the non-academic job market; (c) exposure to alternative career paths and the ability to learn whether a non-academic path would be a good fit for the student; (d) improvements to academic research (e.g., new ideas, methods and skills, and access to datasets); (e) the ability to apply their work to the real world and potentially make a difference; and (f) better long-term earning potential and/or pay during the internship.

Participants also generated a number of costs, which included (a) time away from students' research, progress toward graduate program milestones, and other academic pursuits; (b) possibility of a negative academic reputation for the student; (c) loss of talented academic scholars to the non-academic sector; (d) the potential for negative internship experiences that result in no benefits to the student; and (e) dealing with the logistics of internships (e.g., moving costs, low pay, maintaining enrollment in their graduate program). See Table 2 for the frequency of each theme in the student and faculty samples and Figures 4 and 5 for mean ratings of the negativity or positivity of each theme.

Table 2. Frequency (%) of non-academic internship costs and benefit, from the perspective of students and faculty.

<b>Costs</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Students</b>
Detracts time from making progress on academic goals	58.02	50.89
Retention	11.07	2.19
Internship experiences do not benefit the student	5.79	4.39
Negative impact on student reputation	4.96	19.07
Monetary costs / logistics	4.30	10.84
Negative impact on the advisor <sup>6</sup>	3.14	
Difficult to find internship opportunities <sup>7</sup>		1.37
Students are not prepared for internship / don't have the requisite skills <sup>7</sup>		1.65
Other	7.77	6.31
Uncodeable	4.96	3.29
<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Students</b>
Preparation for non-academic paths	39.86	48.06
Exposure to alternative career paths	21.67	20.68
Improve student's research	13.61	7.87
Applying work to the real-world, making an impact	6.35	8.70
Money	3.19	5.67
Skill development <sup>6</sup>	9.03	
Social benefits <sup>7</sup>		5.64
Other	3.89	2.70
Uncodeable	2.50	0.59

<sup>6</sup> Faculty only code.

<sup>7</sup> Student only code.

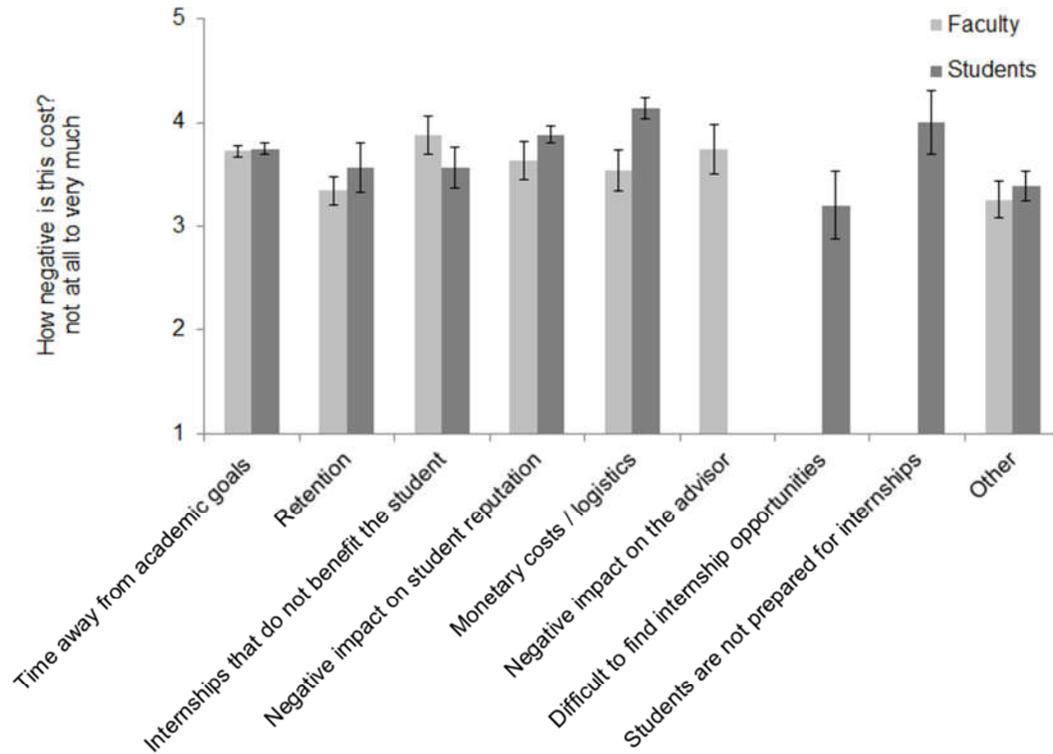


Figure 4. Student and faculty ratings of how negative each cost of participating in non-academic internships is.

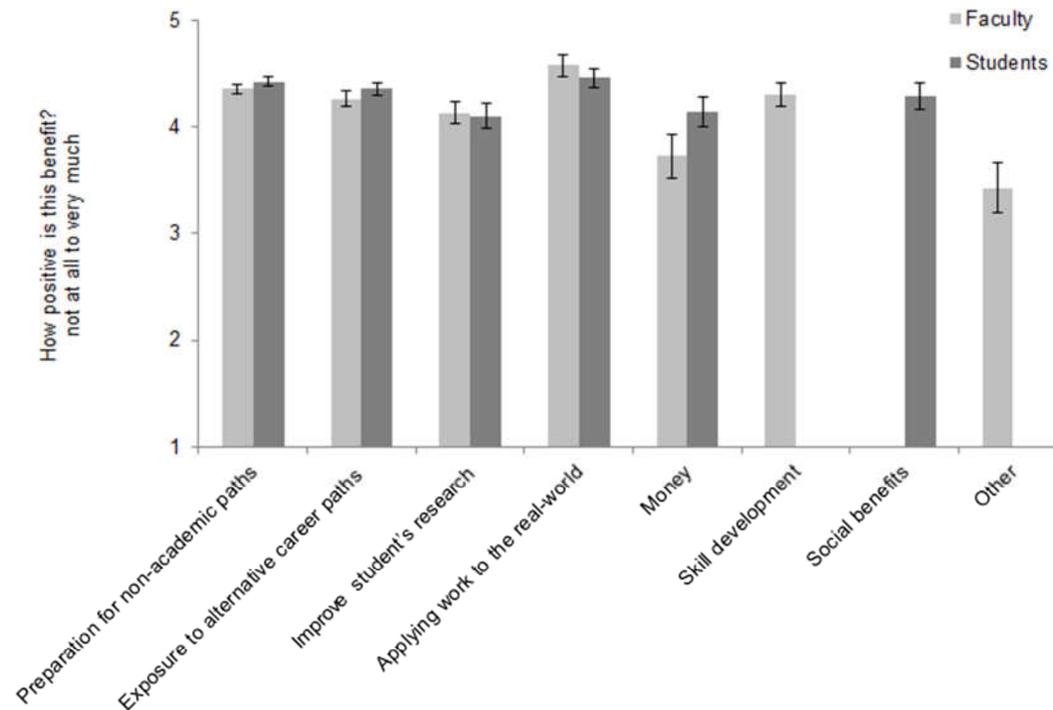


Figure 5. Student and faculty mean ratings of how positive each benefit of participating in non-academic internships is.

**Key trends in the qualitative data.** Students and faculty both acknowledged that non-academic internships could be beneficial in preparing students for non-academic careers, for example by gaining real-world experience and building professional networks. However, preparation for the non-academic job market could be detrimental to those who are not fully committed to that career trajectory. Faculty and students agreed that internships could distract students from their research and graduate school milestones. These themes in tandem suggest that students benefit the most from internships (and have the least to lose) when they are committed to a non-academic career path.

That said, many students indicated that they are not informed enough to make the decision about whether to go academic or non-academic after earning their degree. The second most frequently cited benefit by both faculty and students of internships is that they could help clarify students' career goals. Graduate students are very familiar with the pros and cons of academic careers. Participating in an internship provides an opportunity to explore how non-academic careers compare which could help students make more informed decisions about which career trajectory best suits them.

Although internships could help clarify career goals, what are the perceived consequences of deciding to stay in academia after participating in an internship? Students fear that participation in internships will signal to other academics that they are uncommitted or incompetent and that their advisors would be less invested in and supportive of them. These perceptions could ultimately undermine students' efforts to secure competitive tenure-track positions in academia. It is important to note that, although faculty reported this cost less frequently than students, about five percent of the faculty sample nonetheless mentioned it. Students' fears of a negative academic reputation post-internship may be exaggerated, but they may not be completely unfounded.

**Importance of internships in transitioning to non-academic careers.** Beyond student and faculty perceptions of internship costs and benefits, we also asked non-academic members to weigh in on their perceptions of non-academic work experience. They reported that internship experience prior to applying for a non-academic job is of the utmost importance. Specifically, 100% of non-academic members who had an internship program at their current place of employment said that participating in their company's internship program improves an applicant's odds for full-time employment, and 92.41% of the total sample of non-academic members said that participating in any non-academic internship program improves an applicant's odds of being considered for full-time employment in their organization. In short, non-academic members perceive internships to be beneficial to students interested in pursuing careers in the non-academic sector.

### **What Feasibility Concerns do Students Have About internships?**

Even among students who are interested in internships, there are several considerations that affect their willingness to pursue one. Many internship opportunities available to social and personality psychology graduate students are non-local, which means students would need to temporarily move and support themselves in a new location. Internships also require students to temporarily turn their focus away from their academic research, which could cause tension between students and faculty advisors.

Students ranked a livable wage, the duration of the internship, advisor approval, the need for relocation, the need to find housing, and the costs of moving as the most important factors impacting the feasibility of participating in an internship (see Figure 6). Permanent job opportunities at internship sites, publication opportunities, and family/partner obligations were each less important than the above, but even these factors are at least slightly important to students.

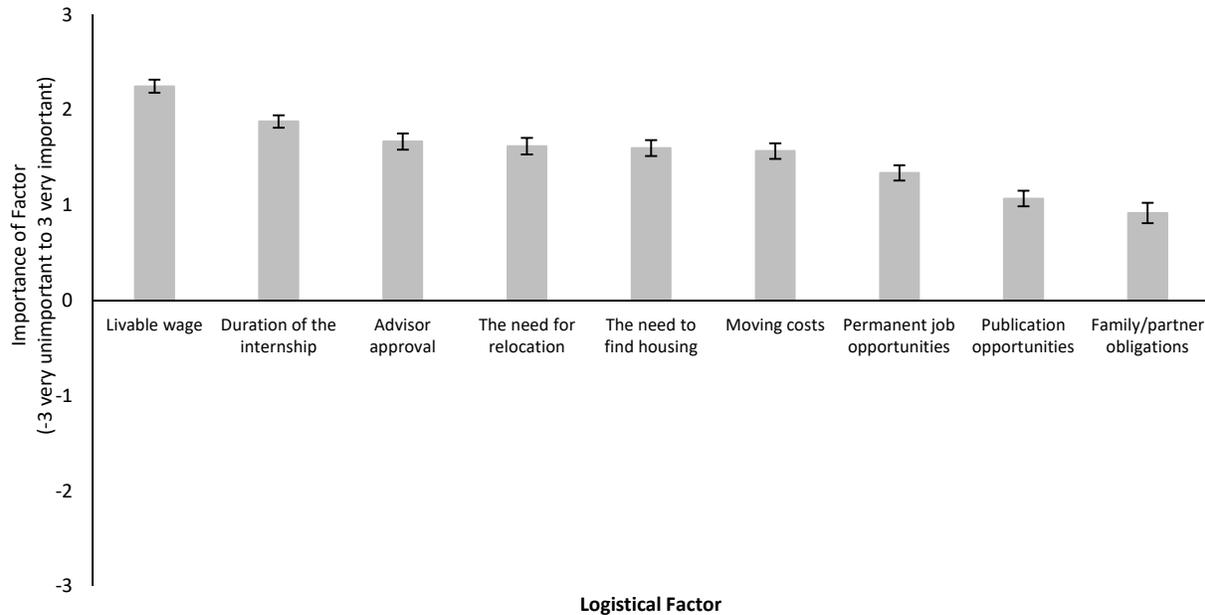


Figure 6. Importance of logistical factors that impact the feasibility of internship participation, from students’ perspectives.

### What Factors Contribute to a Decision to Leave the Academy?

The reasons why non-academic members reported pursuing non-academic careers were (in order of most to least important): the opportunity to apply their work to the real world, that there were more exciting job opportunities outside of academia, negative perceptions of the academic job market, and avoiding the pressures of “publish or perish.” Students and non-academic members rated the reasons for their interest in leaving the academy similarly. Specifically, students reported that the main reasons for their interest in going on the non-academic job market was (in order of importance): negative perceptions of the academic job market, a desire to avoid the pressures of “publish or perish,” an interest in applying their work to the real world, and a desire for greater work/life balance (see Table 3).

Table 3. Reasons for leaving academia from graduate students and non-academic members.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Non-Academic Members</b>
Negative perceptions of academic job market	3.85	3.23
Avoiding pressure of publish or perish	3.83	3.18
Interest in applying work to real-world in concrete ways	3.77	3.54
Desire for greater work/life balance	3.75	2.74
Too few academic jobs in area of specialization	3.72	2.90
Avoiding pressure of getting grants	3.33	2.69
Tempting compensation packages	3.31	3.03
Need a job in a specific geographical area	3.07	2.41
Exciting opportunities in non-academic sector	2.89	3.23
Desire for greater freedom	2.65	2.51
Opportunity to work frequently in team settings	2.56	2.46
Other	2.52	2.44

### **Conclusion**

Our study revealed the following insights:

#### **Do SPSP Members Support Student Participation in Non-Academic Internships?**

- Students are interested in, and faculty are supportive of, graduate student participation in non-academic internships, particularly during the summer
- Graduate students underestimate faculty members' support for student participation in non-academic internships

#### **Do Faculty and Students Believe that Non-Academic Internships Help or Hurt Students?**

- Students and faculty both agreed that internships could give students a competitive advantage in the non-academic job market
- Non-academics are nearly unanimous in reporting the importance of non-academic work experience--including internships--prior to applying for full-time positions
- Students and faculty are concerned about the loss of academic productivity during a non-academic internship
- Students revealed concerns about gaining a poor reputation for their participation in an internship

### **What Feasibility Concerns do Students Have About Internships?**

- Aside from the time of year and duration of the internship, students ranked receiving a livable wage, advisor approval, the need for relocation, the need to find housing, and the costs of moving as the most important factors in deciding whether they would take an internship

### **What Factors Contribute to a Decision to Leave the Academy?**

- Students express similar reasons for considering a non-academic career path as non-academic members do, including interest in applying their work in a real-world setting and their negative perceptions of the academic job market

Taken together, there are many factors that may facilitate graduate student participation in non-academic internships. At a most basic level, SPSP graduate students are moderately interested in non-academic internships and career paths. Fortunately, faculty express moderate support for students who have these aspirations. Moreover, students and faculty both acknowledge that internships provide students a competitive edge on the non-academic job market. The non-academic membership of SPSP confirmed these insights and reported that non-academic experience is an important part of a successful job applicant's resume. However, there are still potential obstacles to a student's participation in internships. Faculty's support for non-academic internships is not being perceived by their students. Similarly, students quite frequently expressed a concern for gaining a poor reputation if they participate in a non-academic internship. These results suggest either that faculty are over-reporting their support for students' participation in an internship, or that students are overly cynical about faculty's attitudes toward non-academic career paths. More open dialogue about alternative career paths could go a long way toward correcting this discrepancy.

Moreover, this report also points to several feasibility concerns that will likely be of great interest to the non-academic membership with active or future internship programs. For example, students and faculty are both more supportive of summer internships. Capitalizing on these findings might result in a stronger interest and more diverse applicant pool.

In sum, the SPSP membership is interested in, and supportive of, graduate student internship opportunities in a non-academic setting. Although there are a number of concerns that graduate student and faculty members share regarding graduate student participation in internship opportunities, they may be easily overcome. In fact, one of the biggest barriers may be a lack of effective communication between faculty and students regarding non-academic career trajectories. In general, however, all sides seem welcoming and appreciative of this future resource.

Appendix A  
Coding Scheme for Graduate Student-Generated Costs of Internships

1. Detracts time from making progress on academic goals
  - Publishing
  - Teaching
  - Milestones
  - Networking
  - Inability to balance internship work with academic commitments
2. Retention
  - Losing interest in academia, graduate program
  - Academia loses talented scholars
3. Potential for bad internship experiences
  - Being assigned grunt work when you didn't expect it
  - Not interested in research topics at internship
4. Negative impact on student reputation
  - Disapproval from advisor, other academics
  - Stigma for not being serious enough, or being a second-rate academic
  - Poor perceptions of internship experience in the job market
5. Monetary costs / logistics
  - Funding issues / not being paid on internship
  - The need to move
  - The need to find insurance for internship
6. Difficult to find internship opportunities
7. Not prepared for internship/ don't have the requisite skills
  
88. Other
99. Uncodable

Appendix B  
Coding Scheme for Graduate Student-Generated Benefits of Internships

1. Social benefits
  - Work with different kinds of people/teams
  - Better work/life balance
  - No “publish or perish” culture
  - Greater freedom
  - The culture is different
2. Helps you on the non-academic job market
  - Develop new skills
  - Get practical / applied experience
  - Build bigger professional network
  - Non-academic job market is easier to endure than academic job market
  - Gives you more options to find jobs
  - Applicants are more marketable with internship experience
  - Internship experience is necessary to obtain a non-academic job
3. Exposure to alternative career paths
  - The good and bad of non-academic vs academic jobs
  - Students can better understand career goals, do they want to stay in academia or are non-academic careers a better fit?
4. Could help your academic career/ improve research
  - New perspectives and real world applications that can inform their research
  - Access to new data (real world data) that can enhance their research
  - Non- academic partners to improve research/get grants
5. Applying work to the real-world, making an impact on the world
6. Money
  - Better pay for non-academic jobs
  - Get paid for an internship
  - Funding opportunity if they are limited at the university
  - Free up TA’s and RA’s for others
  
88. Other
99. Uncodable

Appendix C  
Coding Scheme for Faculty-Generated Costs of Internships

1. Detracts time from making progress on academic goals
  - Publishing
  - Teaching
  - Milestones
  - Networking
  - Research activities
  - More time to complete the PhD
  - Inability to balance internship work with academic commitments
2. Retention
  - Students might choose to leave their program and not complete their degree
  - Talented students will be lured away from the academy
3. Poor quality internships
  - Waste of student time if they don't learn anything valuable or decide to stay in academia
  - Students can be exploited by internship for free labor
4. Negatively impact the reputation of the student
  - Faculty advisors may not invest in students who are perceived as interested in non-academic career paths
  - Colleagues, the department, others, may see internships as a sign that the student isn't serious about research
  - If the student decides to stay in academia, hiring committees may see internships as a mark against the candidate
5. Costs to the student and logistics
  - If it's unpaid they won't have a source of income
  - No benefits (healthcare)
  - Logistical problems with enrollment, funding, and saying in a program if students take time off to do an internship
6. Negative impact on the advisor, i.e. problems with grants, decrease in productivity
  
88. Other
99. Uncodable

Appendix D  
Coding Scheme for Faculty-Generated Benefits of Internships

1. Training, Skill development, Learn how to apply skills to new areas
2. Preparation for non-academic paths
  - Real world experience
  - Make themselves more marketable
  - Learn how to collaborate with non-psychologist/academics
  - Connections/contacts/networking
  - Get a job outside of academia (because the academic job market is small and difficult)
  - Get higher paying jobs
3. Exposure/learn more about non-academic career paths/ alternatives to academia
  - The good and bad of non-academic vs. academic jobs
  - Students can better understand career goals, do they want to stay in academia or are non-academic careers a better fit?
4. Improve research
  - New perspectives and real world applications that can inform their research
  - Access to new data (real world data) that can enhance their research
  - Non- academic partners to improve research/get grants
5. The ability to apply what they have learned
  - Help society, apply social psych to improve the world
  - Communicate the value/principles of social psych to non-academics
6. Money
  - Get paid for an internship
  - Funding opportunity if they are limited at the university
  - Free up TA's and RA's for others
  
88. Other
99. Uncodable