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FROM THE
DIRECTOR OF
THE JOY LUCK CLUB

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Unpaid Interns, Complicit Colleges

By ROSS PERLIN

ON college campuses, the annual race for summer internships, many of them unpaid, is well under way. But instead of steering students toward the best opportunities and encouraging them to value their work, many institutions of higher learning are complicit in helping companies skirt a nebulous area of labor law.

Colleges and universities have become cheerleaders and enablers of the unpaid internship boom, failing to inform young people of their rights or protect them from the miserly calculus of employers. In hundreds of interviews with interns over the past three years, I found dejected students resigned to working unpaid for summers, semesters and even entire academic years — and, increasingly, to paying for the privilege.

For the students, the problems are less philosophical and legal than practical. In 2007, for instance, Will Batson, a [Colgate University](#) student from Augusta, Ga., and a son of two public-interest lawyers, worked as an unpaid, full-time summer intern for WNBC and had to scramble for shelter in New York City.

“It definitely hurt my confidence,” Mr. Batson told me. He recalled crashing on more than 20 floors and couches, being constantly short on cash and fearing he would have to quit and go home. His father, he said, felt like a failure for not being able to help him rent an apartment.

What makes WNBC — whose parent company, [General Electric](#), is valued at more than \$200 billion — think it can get away with this? In Mr. Batson’s case, a letter from Colgate, certifying that he was receiving credit for doing the internship. (Now 24, he gave up on journalism and is at a technology start-up. [NBC](#) calls its internship program “an important recruiting tool.”)

The uncritical internship fever on college campuses — not to mention the exploitation of graduate student instructors, adjunct faculty members and support staff — is symptomatic of a broader malaise. Far from being the liberal, pro-labor bastions of popular image, universities are often blind to the realities of work in contemporary America.

In politics, film, fashion, journalism and book publishing, unpaid internships are seen as a way to break in. (The New York Times has paid and unpaid interns.) But the phenomenon goes beyond fields seen as glamorous.

Three-quarters of the 10 million students enrolled in America's four-year colleges and universities will work as interns at least once before graduating, according to the College Employment Research Institute. Between one-third and half will get no compensation for their efforts, a study by the research firm Intern Bridge found. Unpaid interns also lack protection from laws prohibiting racial discrimination and sexual harassment.

The [United States Department of Labor](#) says an intern at a for-profit company [may work without pay](#) only when the program is similar to that offered in a vocational school, benefits the student, does not displace a regular employee and does not entitle the student to a job; in addition, the employer must derive "no immediate advantage" from the student's work and both sides must agree that the student is not entitled to wages.

Employers and their lawyers appear to believe that unpaid interns who get academic credit meet those criteria, but the law seems murky; the Labor Department has said that "academic credit alone does not guarantee that the employer is in compliance."

Fearing a crackdown by regulators, some colleges are asking the government, in essence, to look the other way. In a letter last year, [13 university presidents told the Labor Department](#), "While we share your concerns about the potential for exploitation, our institutions take great pains to ensure students are placed in secure and productive environments that further their education."

Far from resisting the exploitation of their students, colleges have made academic credit a commodity. Just look at Menlo College, a business-focused college in northern California, which [sold credits](#) to a business called Dream Careers. Menlo grossed \$50,000 from the arrangement in 2008, while Dream Careers sold Menlo-accredited internships for as much as \$9,500.

To meet the credit requirement of their employers, some interns have essentially had to pay to work for free: shelling out [\\$2,700 to the University of Pennsylvania in the case of an intern at NBC Universal](#) and [\\$1,600 to New York University by an intern at "The Daily Show,"](#) to cite two examples from news reports.

Charging students tuition to work in unpaid positions might be justifiable in some cases — if the college plays a central role in securing the internship and making it a substantive academic experience. But more often, internships are a cheap way for universities to provide credit — cheaper than paying for faculty members, classrooms and equipment.

A survey of more than 700 colleges by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that 95 percent allowed the posting of unpaid internships in campus career centers and on college Web sites. And of those colleges, only 30 percent required that their students obtain academic credit for those unpaid internships; the rest, evidently, were willing to overlook potential violations of labor law.

Campus career centers report being swamped; advisers I spoke to flatly denied being able to “monitor and reassess” all placements or even postings, as the 13 university presidents claim to do — their ability to visit students’ workplaces, for instance, is almost nil. They described feeling caught between the demands of employers and interns, and scrambling to make accommodations: issuing vague letters of support for interns to show employers; offering sketchy “internship transcript notations” or “internship certificates”; and even handing out “0.0 credit” — a mysterious work-around by which credit both is and isn’t issued.

Is there a better way? Cooperative education, in which students alternate between tightly integrated classroom time and paid work experience, represents a humane and pragmatic model.

Colleges shouldn’t publicize unpaid internships at for-profit companies. They should discourage internship requirements for graduation — common practice in communications, psychology, social work and criminology. They should stop charging students to work without pay — and ensure that the currency of academic credit, already cheapened by internships, doesn’t lose all its value.

To be sure, the unpaid internship is only part of a phenomenon that includes the growing numbers of temps, freelancers, adjuncts, self-employed “entrepreneurs” and other low-wage or precariously employed workers who live gig by gig. The academy should critique, not amplify, those trends.

While higher education has tried to stand for fairness in the past few decades through affirmative action and financial aid, the internship boom gives the well-to-do a foot in the door while consigning the less well-off to dead-end temporary jobs. Colleges have turned internships into a prerequisite for the professional world but have neither ensured equal access to these opportunities, nor insisted on fair wages for honest work.

Ross Perlin, a researcher at the Himalayan Languages Project, is the author of the forthcoming “Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy.”

