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Taren Mitchell

St. John Fisher University, tmitchellfleming3@gmail.com

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The Perceived Benefits, Limitations, and Effects of Virtual Internships on Obtaining Employment for Undergraduates in Business and Information Technology

Abstract

Students recognize the value that internships bring in enhancing employment prospects and increasing earnings potential in conjunction with their college degrees. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the advantages of online and hybrid work options for employers. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of virtual internships is crucial for students, employers, and institutions of higher education, as it enables them to leverage the benefits of internships, creating a talent pipeline and enhancing employment prospects after graduation. This descriptive phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of undergraduate business and technology school graduates regarding the benefits, limitations, and effects of virtual internships on employment after graduation. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants who held bachelor's degrees in information technology or business. Three major findings emerged from this study. Firstly, virtual internships provide distinct advantages to business and technology students, offering valuable hands-on experiences that foster personal and professional growth despite some limitations. Secondly, physical proximity and in-person engagement are perceived as advantageous, highlighting the importance of face-to-face interactions and collaborative energy. Lastly, virtual internships prove effective in facilitating employment attainment, as evidenced by participants securing positions within their fields of study. As society embraces a more hybrid and remote work culture, the significance of virtual internships in preparing students for the future of work becomes increasingly evident, complementing the long-recognized benefits of internships for all stakeholders involved. Three recommendations are offered: (a) implement mandatory internship programs for business and IT students to enhance job prospects and career readiness, (b) adopt a hybrid internship model, and (c) foster collaboration among institutions, employers, and career services to develop specialized curricula meeting industry needs and preparing students for the workforce.

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The Perceived Benefits, Limitations, and Effects of Virtual Internships on Obtaining
Employment for Undergraduates in Business and Information Technology

By

Taren Mitchell

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
EdD in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

W. Jeff Wallis, EdD

Committee Member

Gilbert Louis, EdD

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher University

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Dedication

This is the day that the Lord has made, and I am glad and rejoice in it. I give all the glory and honor to God because without Him I would not have made it to this day. Thank you, God, for your Grace and Mercy! Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” Thank you to my supportive, faithful, loving parents who have always supported me and continue to do so. I love you. Thank you to my husband, Zeke, my rock who supported and encouraged me from day one and my beautiful, amazing, smart, athletic, funny daughter Sydney. Sweet pea, you are the joy of my life, thank you for always encouraging me and for being the best daughter I could ever hope for. I love you to the motherland and back. Thank you to my sister Tonya for holding down our elderly parents and for being an awesome sister and mom to niece dogs River and Heavenly and to my ride-or-die dog Sophie, who sat at my feet day and night as I worked on this dissertation. I love you all. Thank you to my beautiful church family at Church of the Living God Inc., my beautiful Pastor Debra E. Morris and my Bible Institute teacher and classmate and fellow educators, Elder Kiana Washington and Dr. Nikki Josephs. Thank you for your prayers and constant support. Boldtobefree23 Cohort 13, my sisters, I would not have made it if it were not for you ladies, I COULD NOT have done this without you. Thank you for being iron and thank you for sharpening me. Rhonda, Jackie, Lashawna, Courtney, Danielle, Alina, Kashonda, Fabiola, Nicole, Nneka and Ana, you are my sisters for life. Felicia, you got this. My mentors, Dr. Judith

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Biographical Sketch

Professor Taren Mitchell has been a dedicated full-time educator for the past 11 years, contributing her expertise to the School of Business and Accounting at Monroe College. With a rich and diverse background, Taren's journey has taken her through various fields, from corporate business to the music industry before she found her true calling in academia. Taren's academic pursuits commenced at Syracuse University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in science with a degree in political science. Following her graduation, she ventured into the corporate world, gaining valuable experience in different business sectors. However, her passion for law and the desire to make a difference in the music business led her to attend Pace University Law School, where she obtained her Juris Doctor degree. In the summer of 2020, Taren joined St. John Fisher University, where she embarked on research related to the perceived benefits and limitations, as well as the effects, of virtual internships on obtaining employment for undergraduates in business and technology under the guidance of Dr. W. Jeff Wallis and Dr. Gilbert Louis. Additionally, Taren serves as a faculty advisor and mentor while actively participating in various committees.

Abstract

Students recognize the value that internships bring in enhancing employment prospects and increasing earnings potential in conjunction with their college degrees. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the advantages of online and hybrid work options for employers. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of virtual internships is crucial for students, employers, and institutions of higher education, as it enables them to leverage the benefits of internships, creating a talent pipeline and enhancing employment prospects after graduation. This descriptive phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of undergraduate business and technology school graduates regarding the benefits, limitations, and effects of virtual internships on employment after graduation. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants who held bachelor's degrees in information technology or business. Three major findings emerged from this study. Firstly, virtual internships provide distinct advantages to business and technology students, offering valuable hands-on experiences that foster personal and professional growth despite some limitations. Secondly, physical proximity and in-person engagement are perceived as advantageous, highlighting the importance of face-to-face interactions and collaborative energy. Lastly, virtual internships prove effective in facilitating employment attainment, as evidenced by participants securing positions within their fields of study. As society embraces a more hybrid and remote work culture, the significance of virtual internships in preparing students for the future of work becomes

increasingly evident, complementing the long-recognized benefits of internships for all stakeholders involved. Three recommendations are offered: (a) implement mandatory internship programs for business and IT students to enhance job prospects and career readiness, (b) adopt a hybrid internship model, and (c) foster collaboration among institutions, employers, and career services to develop specialized curricula meeting industry needs and preparing students for the workforce.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Education is often considered a direct pathway to better job opportunities and financial stability. Burning Glass Technologies and Business-Higher Education Forum (2018) found that a bachelor's degree is one of the most direct pathways to a good job, middle-class wages, and financial security. In recent years, however, workers with 4-year college degrees have found it increasingly difficult to climb the career ladder to the middle class (Healey, 2022). Despite this, studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed full-time than those without a college degree (Carnevale et al., 2011).

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the job market, the demand for certain degrees, such as business and information technology, has increased (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2021). A degree in information technology can lead to roles in a variety of industries outside of tech, such as healthcare, postsecondary education, telecommunications, and business. Among computer science graduates, a majority were employed as computer specialists. Internships have emerged as a valuable pathway for college students to gain practical insights into their chosen careers. They provide experiential learning opportunities that connect classroom knowledge with real-world application. Studies have shown that internships offer benefits for students, employers, and institutions alike, reinforcing concepts taught in the classroom and leading to valuable skills, higher starting salaries, and multiple job offers (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Gualt et al., 2010; Weible, 2010).

Traditionally conducted in person, internships have now experienced an increase in interest, with virtual options gaining attention, especially after the shift to remote or hybrid models during the COVID-19 pandemic (NACE, 2018).

Employment After College

Today, more than ever, college students are concerned about the effectiveness of undergraduate preparation for an excellent job following graduation (Gault et al., 2010; Hora et al., 2021; Sauder et al., 2018). It is apparent in an ever-changing business landscape that if graduates from business programs want to secure the high-paying jobs they expect, they must possess the essential skills that employers demand (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015).

From a financial perspective, college is a good investment if it generates future earnings that support employment that produces a higher standard of living. When students earn degrees, prospects for finding jobs improve and salaries increase. The fact remains that the higher the level of education, the higher the likelihood of full-time employment. According to a new report from NACE (2022), new college graduates from the class of 2021 outpaced their 2020 counterparts when it came to getting a job. According to the report, the class of 2021 reports that 55.3% percent of the graduating class of 2021 was employed full time within 6 months of graduation. In comparison, 53.6% percent of 2020 graduates. This can be explained in part by the fact that employers figured out remote and hybrid work arrangements, all of which benefited the 2021 graduates entering the workforce.

However, Craig (2021) suggests that institutions of higher education have been facing a crisis, with nearly half of all college students graduating into underemployment.

Underemployment poses a significant challenge for college students upon graduating with their degrees. It occurs when graduates find themselves in jobs that fail to fully utilize the skills, education, and qualifications they have acquired during their college studies. In such instances, they may be working in positions that offer compensation below what is expected based on their educational achievements, and these jobs may not even necessitate a college degree for entry. Consequently, this mismatch between their educational background and the employment they secure can lead to lower income levels, decreased job satisfaction, and restricted prospects for career advancement (Vedder et al., 2013).

Abel et al. (2014) tracked underemployment rates to measure the value of a college degree in relation to employment and financial success. Accordingly, they define underemployment as the employment of workers with high skill levels and college diplomas in low-wage jobs. Consequently, underemployment occurs when adults between the ages of 22 and 27 have completed a bachelor's degree and are overeducated for their respective positions.

According to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) (2016), the gainful employment rule issued by the Obama Administration in 2014 was established to crack down on for-profit colleges that left graduates with no meaningful job prospects and enormous student debt. The administration developed gainful employment regulations to ensure that institutions leave their graduates better off than they found them. That is, with debts that are affordable relative to their actual income. However, the cliché image of a recent college grad working as a clerk, earning

minimum wage while paying heavy student debt, is an image that describes the challenges facing young adults today (Lederman, 2018).

Ahmad and Pesch (2017), Bender (2020), and Cook et al. (2015) maintain that college students majoring in business do so partly because they believe a business degree will provide the analytical, financial, and interpersonal skills employers are looking for. Also, choosing business as a major is practical because most organizations, regardless of the industry, rely on business principles to be successful. However, not all business majors are created equal, implying that some students who major in general business studies may be more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, holding jobs that do not require a college degree.

With escalating college tuition costs, prospective students make postsecondary decisions with career opportunities in mind (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020). Students and their parents expect an exceptional education but also access to experiential learning opportunities, like internships, that will lead to high-paying jobs (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Gualt et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Rutschow et al., 2019). Consequently, secondary education is increasingly focused on providing students with experiential learning opportunities to gain work experience, especially as employers and policymakers become aware of the increased benefits they provide for college graduates, employers, and institutions of higher education.

Internships Post-Pandemic

According to NACE (2018), internships have been around for decades as a form of experiential learning that reinforces concepts taught in a classroom. Moreover, an internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates practical application in a

professional setting with knowledge and theory learned in the classroom. In a competitive environment, business internships provide students with valuable professional experience (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Prescott et al., 2020; Robles, 2012; Tepper, 2015). Also, students can learn, apply, and demonstrate transferable skills that may not be taught in the classroom but are highly beneficial in the real world. According to the Association for Advancement of Schools and Colleges of Business (AACSB), internships are crucial components of undergraduate business programs, and the benefits are well recognized (Stover, 2021). Furthermore, most students who successfully complete an internship receive a full-time job offer after graduation (Bookamp, 2022).

Work-based learning, in the form of an internship, is one of the most influential ideas in higher education and workforce development (Hora et al., 2021). Consequently, hands-on experiences in real-world contexts complement academic programs and classroom teaching. Furthermore, college internships have traditionally been in person, with students working at a local organization's office that is geographically accessible. However, since the pandemic, there has been growth in online internships, and organizations are taking advantage of developments in computing technologies and organizational skills in managing remote, team-based projects.

The Indeed Editorial Team (2022) reports that many businesses suggest that business professionals expect virtual internships to increasingly gain popularity. A virtual internship involves completing and submitting work through virtual platforms because the work placement takes place remotely. Furthermore, these internships can be completed nationally or internationally and there is little to no need to attend a physical workplace.

Hora et al. (2021) expressed several significant results from their case study to better understand the quality, equity, and access among remote internships in the United States during the pandemic from 2020 to early 2021. They found that online interns tended to have higher grade-point averages (GPA), were from upper-income families, and were non-STEM majors. Furthermore, the remote interns reported lower levels of satisfaction, a lack of professional networking, a lack of developing high skills and no chance to understand professional and organizational culture. Also, remote internships created less opportunity for students to have access and equity.

Saad and Wigert (2021) suggest that COVID-19 created a global shift in how people work, resulting in 45% of the workforce working remotely in some capacity. Accordingly, the work-from-home trend changed job opportunities for some job seekers. According to Robinson (2022), Forbes states that 25% of all professional jobs in North America will be remote by the end of 2022 and that remote opportunities will continue to increase through 2023. Moreover, college administrators and business leaders should probably rethink the workplace culture and how to prepare future graduates to work remotely in the new post-pandemic environment. The NACE (2022) states that the pandemic forced institutions of higher education to make decisions about providing meaningful learning experiences for students despite public health and fiscal constraints. Accordingly, school courses, experiential learning activities, and internships were all forced to adapt to a fully remote model or nothing at all. Glassdoor estimates that half of the in-person internships in the US were canceled in the spring of 2020 (Stansell, 2020). With businesses realizing the benefits of remote working, online internships emerged as a beneficial new approach that may reflect the future of how we work. Nevertheless, while

some companies canceled their internship programs, others worked with organizations to develop virtual experiential options (NACE, 2022).

In a NACE (2022) study, employers suggested that they were shifting to offer more remote opportunities for college students and that the shift could change entire career trajectories. Furthermore, companies have found benefits in remote interns, including a bigger talent pool of potential interns and future employees.

The Ruggiero and Boehm (2016) study reported that similar effective concepts applied to in-person internships could also be applied virtually. This included the need for learning outcomes to be articulated before creating internship training for students, mentors, and faculty. Furthermore, pre-internship meetings with faculty and mentors provided performance goals and facilitation of peer communication among students. Clear communication between the intern and mentor during the virtual internship led to completed projects and internships.

Kras and Keenan (2022), like Robinson (2022), came to a similar conclusion that there are both benefits and limitations to virtual internships, including the opportunity for students to learn and practice skills related to communication utilizing technology, professional skill development, and quick access to supervisors. In addition, the virtual internship experience, in theory, is less costly and more flexible, making it more accessible to a broader range of students and professionals. Also, increased diversity among applicants provides a means for helping employers build a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Even so, Park and Jones (2021) contend that some virtual interns reported feeling isolated, lacked self-motivation, and were easily distracted when

working from home. Furthermore, some interns said that they suffered from Zoom fatigue and did not find meaningful networking opportunities.

Employers and Interns

More than ever, employers are relying on colleges to integrate professional and career development into undergraduate business education curricula (Kosnik et al., 2013; Prescott et al., 2020; Tepper & Holt, 2015). Moreover, institutions of higher education are under increasing pressure to demonstrate a high level of employability after graduation (Plewa et al., 2015). For many college-educated students, an internship is the first step on the career path, and post-pandemic, that internship might be virtual (Burning Glass Technologies and Business-Higher Education Forum, 2018).

When employers have equally qualified candidates, they choose candidates with internship experience (NACE, 2018). An internship is a win-win for both the student and the employer (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Burning Glass Technologies and Business-Higher Education Forum, 2018; Cook et al., 2015; Gault et al., 2010; Hergert, 2009; Kim et al., 2012). Students benefit because professional work experience makes them more marketable. Employers like interns because they provide affordable workforce solutions and can lead to savings in the recruitment and selection process (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013). According to Nunley et al. (2016), interns are 14% more likely to receive a callback for a job interview. Saniter and Siedler (2014) state that interns enjoy 6% higher wages than those without internship experience.

O'Reilly-Allen and Palaschak (2018) note that both the academic community and employers have documented the advantages of accounting internships. Employers like

the fact that internship programs serve as a valuable recruiting tool. Furthermore, employers can tailor an internship to a specific type of client to build the intern's time management and communication skills. Also, interns gain valuable experience in working and getting to know clients. This experience can benefit interns and will also create a foundation for bringing on new full-time hires who are already equipped with the skills and relationships that are invaluable to an employer. Moreover, after the completion of the internship but prior to the fall recruiting process, a firm can offer a full-time position to an intern and finalize the acceptance and the offer. Ultimately, having interns makes the hiring process easier for both the student and the employer.

Accordingly, Gault (2010) looked at the relationship between students who participated in internships and those who did not in relation to marketability after graduation. The study found that undergraduates with internship experience were perceived to be better prepared, more marketable, and more employable. In addition, scholars suggest that college students seek degrees that promise employment, and colleges seek ways to increase enrollment and retention (Gault et al., 2010; Hergert, 2009; Kim et al., 2012).

Higher Education and Internships

According to Dent and White (2020), the AACSB promotes internships for business students to support experiential learning. Moreover, internships, informed by the experiential learning framework, allow students to explore career options while determining likes and dislikes (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Also, experiential learning allows learners to apply what they have been taught in the classroom to solve real-world challenges (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Gault et al., 2010).

This study is based on research that suggests the reason for the popularity of college internships is that they offer a win all the way around for students, employers, and institutions of higher education (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2012). Prior research recognizes the benefit of student internships, suggesting that they build confidence and provide exposure to different opportunities within a chosen field or industry. Such benefits include gaining new skills, realizing higher starting salaries, and fielding more job offers (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Gault et al., 2010; Weible, 2010). Also, internship programs are generally attractive to employers because they create a pipeline for future employees, provide inexpensive and free labor and free up burned-out employees to work on more high-level projects (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013; Weible, 2010).

Divine et al. (2015) discuss crucial factors marketing departments should consider when deciding on a mandatory internship program. They delve into the advantages of such programs for students, departments, and employers, emphasizing the practical experience students gain, which enhances their resumes and job prospects. Additionally, internships elevate department reputation and visibility, contribute valuable insights for curriculum assessment, and foster beneficial business connections. Employers benefit from internships by accessing skilled and motivated labor, with potential for long-term hiring. Despite challenges, like hiring an effective internship director and ensuring enough opportunities, the study underscores that the benefits of internships outweigh the obstacles, making the endeavor valuable.

O'Reilly-Allen and Palaschak (2018) maintain that creating an active accounting internship program is a win for business departments at colleges and universities. From a

reputational standpoint, internship programs increase visibility in both the business and academic communities. In addition, it is a great recruiting tool to attract students interested in a career in accounting. Also, having a solid internship program impacts school rankings typically closely followed by potential students. Moreover, interns provide valuable feedback to college faculty and administrators regarding the academic preparation of students, and accounting programs can then use that feedback to further develop their accounting curriculum.

For institutions of higher education, internship programs create improved student recruiting and institutional reputation. Furthermore, a good internship program can create networking and financial opportunities within the business community (Gualt et al., 2010; Weible, 2010). Thus, institutions are eager to show that their graduates are employable. However, the student voice in the virtual internship discourse is limited (Hora et al., 2021; Weible, 2010). The discussion about employability tends to be dominated and framed by employers with little representation of student perceptions (Hora et al., 2021; Higdon, 2016; Tymon, 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a necessary shift to remote working and learning worldwide (Woon Chien Teng et al., 2021). However, to know more about how this shift impacted internship programs, more information is needed. The Woon Chien Teng et al. (2021) cross-sectional study of two undergraduate cohorts, including students and supervisors, found that despite trade-offs between remote and on-site internships, both were viewed positively among interns and supervisors. Internships are a fundamental element in students' professional development; understanding how they perceive these experiences can provide valuable information to institutions of higher

education concerned with reputation, retention, and curriculum. Therefore, knowledge gained from the student's perspective may aid institutions of higher education and employers in developing successful virtual internship programs.

Problem Statement

College students are more concerned than ever about the effectiveness of undergraduate preparation for an excellent job following graduation (Gault et al., 2010; Hora et al., 2021; Sauder et al., 2018). Students are motivated to seek internships to secure future employment after graduation (Gault et al., 2010; Hergert, 2009; Kim et al., 2012; Tepper & Holt, 2015). Internships, informed by the experiential learning framework, allow students to explore career options while applying classroom knowledge to real-life situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Rothman & Sisman, 2016).

While the voices and interests of employers are included in the conversations surrounding virtual internships, the students' voices could be more present (Hora et al., 2021). Including the students' perceptions will benefit higher education in conceptualizing and implementing virtual internship curricula. Furthermore, as employers switch to hybrid work environments, they have come to realize the importance of remote work experience. Also, most students who successfully complete an internship receive a full-time job offer after graduation (Bookamp, 2022). As the demand for flexibility in the workplace continues to grow, employers will likely continue to create remote internship opportunities.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, employers have realized some advantages of fully online and hybrid options in the workplace (Masterson, 2021). Yet, for students, employers, and institutions of higher education, understanding what works explicitly well

with virtual internships and what does not is important as colleges design internship programs and employers depend on a talent pipeline of trained employees. Accordingly, this study explored the perceived benefits and limitations of virtual internships and their effect on employment from the perspective of undergraduate business and information technology graduates.

Theoretical Rationale

According to Kolb (1984) and Kolb and Kolb (2017), experiential learning is learning through experience. Moreover, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). The theory is based on the concept that learners learn and process information in a cycle of four phases: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. Furthermore, new experiences motivate learning new concepts, and information and knowledge are gathered through concrete experience and reflection. Students can then develop new theories and understanding, which can be applied to new situations. Although learners can enter the experiential learning cycle at any stage, each stage provides the basis for subsequent learning (Stirling et al., 2017).

Stirling et al. (2017) explain that internships provide an opportunity to apply academic knowledge to real-world problems and are pedagogically founded upon experiential learning. Also, internships have become essential to education programs, especially business schools, because they provide students with practical experience in an actual working environment. By nature, internships are experiential, allowing students to transform their concrete experiences into knowledge. Moreover, the educational advantage of hands-on experiences is widely recognized by employers and students alike

(Liang et al., 2015; Stirling, 2017). Student internships have been identified as an effective bridge between classroom learning and professional practice (Liang et al., 2015). Although commonly used in higher education, experiential learning theory has been criticized for its staged approach to learning (Stirling et al., 2017). By not recognizing that multiple learning processes may occur at one time, experiential learning theory can be seen as restrictive and linear. In addition, Stirling et al. (2017) argue that Kolb does not consider the individual learner's goals, purposes, and intentions.

Morris (2020) aimed to define and interpret the meaning of concrete experience, explaining that the experiential learning process requires both time and effort, referring to two dimensions: breadth and depth. Depth is time invested, and capacity refers to different experiences necessary for developing soft skills and social and emotional competence. Also, concrete experience is the experience of being involved in a new experience, and knowledge is then built-in context. Moreover, according to Liang et al. (2015), institutions of higher education should encourage, promote, and implement internship programs to allow students to connect new experiences with academic knowledge to problem-solving in the real world.

By engaging in hands-on experiences and reflection, students can better connect theories and knowledge learned in the classroom and apply it to real-world situations. Furthermore, the added value an internship brings to students, employers, and institutions of higher education is a product of the unique experiential learning embedded in each internship. This qualitative study aims to understand the benefits and limitations of virtual internships and their effect on the attainment of employment. The intention is that this study will further assist institutions of higher education and employers in developing

future internship programs for a rapidly changing global environment. Through experiential learning, students become more innovative as they look to apply their knowledge in actual workplace settings. Also, the internship experience is a specific application of experiential learning that bridges academic concepts and professional application.

Moreover, experiential learning theory is the theoretical lens used to guide the development of this study's research and interview questions. More specifically, through the research questions and research instrument, this study will seek to understand the congruence between the components of virtual internships and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework. The interview questions designed for this study are aligned with the experiential learning theory's idea that the best way to learn is by having experiences and progressing through Kolb's (1984) four stages to complete the cycle and, as a result, transform their experiences into knowledge.

This study uses the four-stage framework to understand if student interns perceived and grasped new information through the concrete experience, where knowledge was created through hands-on learning and the assimilation of information. The learners' direct involvement in new experiences served as the basis for reflection and analysis.

In the second phase of the framework, reflective observation of the intern's experience and well as the observation and reflection of others were explored to examine the processing of information during the internship. Reflective observation can help students gain a deeper understanding of their internship experience and identify areas for

growth and development. It can also help students articulate the value of their internship to potential employers and in job interviews.

Also, Phases 3 and 4, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, were explored to understand if virtual interns assimilated information from the concrete experience to the abstract to make predictions to understand complex problems. In abstract conceptualization, learners use their reflections and observations to identify patterns and themes and develop conceptual frameworks for understanding their experiences. This stage involves a process of reflection, critical analysis, and problem-solving.

During the active experimentation stage, individuals test their theories or models by actively applying them in new situations or contexts. This stage involves taking action and testing new approaches, techniques, or solutions based on the insights and knowledge developed through the previous stages. In this stage, learners engage in trial and error, problem-solving, and decision-making. They take risks, experiment with new ideas, and apply their knowledge and skills to real-world situations (Stirling et al., 2017).

Exploring interns' perceptions through the lens of experiential learning provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of internship programs. The study examined how the stages of the experiential learning theory aligned with virtual internship programs, facilitating informed planning and development of such programs for employers and institutions. By studying perceptions of experiential learning in the context of virtual internships, the study yielded insights to enhance the overall effectiveness and outcomes of these programs. This knowledge informed the design and implementation of virtual

internship initiatives, ensuring they aligned with the principles of experiential learning and provided meaningful experiences for interns.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to understand the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates and the perceived benefits, limitations, and effects of virtual internships on obtaining employment. The intention is that this study will further assist institutions of higher education and employers in developing future internship programs for a rapidly changing global environment.

This study was based on prior research that suggests that students participating in internships realize a benefit over nonparticipating students (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Gault et al., 2010). Such benefits include gaining new skills, higher starting salaries, and receiving more job offers. Also, employers enjoy having interns because they provide future employees with inexpensive or often free labor (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Hora et al., 2021; Kosnik et al., 2013). Furthermore, employers have found benefits in remote interns, especially since remote and hybrid work models have become a part of the new normal. Additionally, institutions of higher education can benefit from a positive reputation for producing knowledgeable graduates that will ultimately improve student recruiting and retention and provide financial opportunities for the college (Gault et al., 2010; Weible, 2010). Little is known regarding the impact of the remote modality shift on internships in higher education.

The study aimed to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by examining the perceptions of students regarding what specifically worked well and what did not in

virtual internships. This information is crucial as colleges design internship programs, students seek institutions that adequately prepare them for post-graduation employment, and employers rely on a talent pipeline of already-trained employees.

Research Questions

Students are concerned with employment after graduation from college. This study will focus on understanding to what extent virtual internships affect employment after graduation. The research questions come from the qualitative nature of this study, using one-on-one semi-structured interview questions to gather data.

The following were the guiding questions of this study:

RQ1: From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship?

RQ2: From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship?

RQ3: From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment?

Potential Significance of the Study

According to Kosnik et al. (2013), internships are a dominant form of experiential learning in business schools. Therefore, using a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach to examine the effectiveness of internship programs will lead to a better understanding of developing programs, especially virtual internships, that will better prepare and develop students to be employable after graduation. With this understanding,

business schools can develop curricula and determine the most effective internship model to meet student needs (Bhattacharya & Neelam, 2018). According to McDaniel and Van Jura (2020), institutions can direct future planning and marketing efforts to potential students and parents concerning the benefits of attending a particular institution. Furthermore, institutions can leverage high-impact practices like internships to improve retention and completion rates.

Moreover, working remotely is a skill that cannot be taught in a classroom, and with the inevitable shift to hybrid and remote work, employers realize there are benefits in remote internship programs. This is important information as colleges design internship programs, students seek colleges that will prepare them for employment after graduation and employers depend on a talent pipeline of already trained employees.

Chapter Summary

In a changing business landscape, graduates from business and technology programs want to secure high-paying jobs. As a result, students focus on institutions of higher education that give them an advantage by creating work-based learning opportunities where students can apply classroom knowledge and leverage experiential learning as work experience. For many college-educated students, an internship is the first step toward their career goals. College internships have traditionally been in person, with students working with an organization in their office. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, most in-person activities stopped, including internships.

Moreover, as employers realize that working remotely may be here to stay, they also realize that there might be a real advantage in developing sustainable remote

internship programs. In addition, institutions of higher education concerned with preparing students for a rapidly changing global workplace want internships that provide students with work-related learning experiences that offer opportunities to gain necessary knowledge and skills applicable in the real world. Listening to students about their virtual internship experience will help institutions and employers to develop and implement virtual internship programs to meet student, intuitional, and employer needs.

Experiential learning theory is the theoretical lens used to guide the research and interview questions for this study. Furthermore, this study will seek to understand the intersection between the components of virtual internships and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework. Therefore, this study aims to provide valuable insights from students to inform institutions of higher education and employers in enhancing existing virtual internship programs or developing new ones to meet future needs.

In Chapter 1, the problem at hand was introduced, research questions were presented, and the significance of the study was outlined. Moving on to Chapter 2, a comprehensive literature review is presented, covering various topics such as the benefits and limitations of internships, the theory of experiential learning, and the emergence of virtual internships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 3 delves into the research methodology, providing details about the research design, the context of the study, and other relevant information. Participant profiles are also included in this chapter. Transitioning to Chapter 4, the research findings are described. Lastly, in Chapter 5, three major findings are analyzed and discussed, along with their implications. The chapter also addresses the study's limitations and concludes with recommendations for future research and endeavors.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

This descriptive phenomenological study seeks to understand the benefits and limitations of virtual internships and their effect on employment to further assist institutions of higher education and employers in developing future internship programs for a rapidly changing global environment. This literature review is divided into four sections that review and synthesize empirical evidence. The first section reflects on the history of undergraduate business internships. The second section discusses virtual internships. The third considers the perceived benefits of internships, and the fourth section looks at perceived limitations.

Undergraduate Business Internships

Internship programs have existed for over 100 years and have become integral to college curriculums (Prescott et al., 2020; Tepper & Holt, 2015; Weible, 2010). Accordingly, current undergraduate business and accounting programs strongly recommend, and some require students to complete at least one internship prior to graduation (Prescott et al., 2020; Tepper & Holt, 2015). Rothman and Sisman (2016) revealed that internships are a realistic way for college students to envision a future career while simultaneously gaining professional work experience. Moreover, it allows business students to investigate careers of interest under the business umbrella. The literature suggests that industry professionals expect business students to enter the workforce ready, and the burden has shifted to college faculty and to prepare students

theoretically and experientially with the professional skills needed for real-world challenges (Hergert, 2009; Prescott et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the AACSB (2020) launched new standards for accreditation for its business school members. Due to economic pressures, schools shifted curricula to better prepare graduates for successful careers. Under the newly revised standards, re-accreditation by the AACSB requires schools to provide evidence of ongoing improvement in three areas: (a) innovation, (b) impact, and (c) engagement. The new AACSB directives represent a shift in business education where rigorous academics and real-world relevance are equally valued.

Prescott et al. (2020) point out that 90% of business schools offer internships to their undergraduate students in response to increased demand. What differs across business programs is the requirements, duties, and support associated with internship programs. Students taking internships often take other classes concurrently while maintaining other activities and obligations. Accordingly, students may spend more time at their internships and become distracted, leaving less time for academic work. Also, students may be required to trade between academics and career goals. The study found that college internships could hurt academic performance in the semester that contains the internship due to students' ability to balance competing obligations. Also, required internships can be costly programs for institutions of higher education.

The Weible (2010) study used the U.S. AACSB directory and emailed 653 deans requesting them to participate in an online survey regarding the advantages of offering college internships. A Likert-type scale was used to measure responses, and the results suggested that internship programs lead to a stronger connection between the school of

business and the community. In addition, 34.3% of the respondents reported that internships inspired students to open new businesses and increase the number of students hired by small businesses, creating and filling more jobs, thus perpetuating economic development. Therefore, it supports the notion that student internship programs can create economic development, directly benefiting the institution. Furthermore, the study also found that students are more likely to enroll in an institution with an internship program than without.

The literature points out that business schools offer internships to their undergraduate students in response to increased demand and significant benefits (Prescott et al., 2020; Weible, 2010). Institutions with internship programs report improved reputation, increased student recruitment, and additional funding as positive effects (Weible, 2010). Furthermore, many institutions are including economic development, recruiting, and reputation as essential and necessary considerations relevant to the continued success of their programs, especially as the pool of incoming high school students continues to decline. However, Prescott et al. (2020) point out that the impact of college internships on academic performance may have a negative effect and that the benefits may outweigh the burdens, including clarity in career trajectory.

Virtual Internships

Kras and Keenan (2022) maintain that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted institutions of higher education to rethink in-person internship programs. For many, remote internships are a novel idea that needs more development. Accordingly, a qualitative study of human services students and field operators reported that participants had an overall positive view of remote internships. The study also concluded that remote

internships were beneficial, not only during the pandemic, but they may have significant value in the future. Some benefits associated with virtual internships are new skill acquisition, more flexibility, improved communication skills, and increased diversity among applicants. Additional benefits include the elimination of commuting, professional work attire, and the ability to intern from any location. However, this study also suggests some challenges accompanying remote internships. One such challenge is that for the experience to be successful, student interns need a high level of autonomy and the ability to work without direct supervision.

Additionally, virtual interns might feel isolated and lack self-motivation.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the participants of this study concluded that even though the pandemic forced many human services programs to modify their fieldwork offerings, institutions of higher education should continue to develop and explore virtual internships as a tool to meet the needs of both students and clients.

The Park and Jones (2021) study explored the virtual internship practices of hospitality and tourism students who attended a 4-year college in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The study participants were students in a 12-credit academic course that included 400 hours of supervised practical experience at an approved student-selected site. However, the program pivoted to remote internships, and student interns used a variety of platforms and tools, including Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, GoToMeeting, e-mail, and online chats to complete tasks and communicate with supervisors and coworkers. Interns also reported that they were more engaged in planning and coordinating events and participated in more research and social media marketing activities, which were efficiently completed remotely. The study used a mixed-method

approach, and the standardized open-ended interview questions focused on four main sections: overall experience, structure, requirements, and learning outcomes. Survey questions using a 5-point Likert scale were also administered to site supervisors. The similarities and differences between on-site and virtual internships were identified through structured interviews. One of the noticeable differences was that most sites required interns to have personal computers with high-speed internet access to be eligible for internship positions. The availability of supervisors also created a challenge. Supervisors were not always readily available, and interns were expected to learn more independently. However, it was also noted that virtual internships provided unique networking opportunities, including online events and webinars. Overall, most student interns indicated that they had a positive experience.

Moreover, the perceptions of intern site supervisors were even more positive. The majority responded that it was easy to manage interns virtually. Although a few site supervisors indicated that it was difficult to instruct and train students on specific tasks and found it challenging to provide constructive feedback. Ultimately, the study reported that 55% of student interns were satisfied with the virtual internship, and 85% of site supervisors were satisfied with the process (Park & Jones, 2021).

Looking at student learning outcomes, students revealed that they understood the importance of soft skills such as self-discipline, time management, organization, and critical thinking skills. It was also observed that interns with better digital and technology skills performed tasks more efficiently. Moreover, with so many companies implementing hybrid arrangements, virtual internship opportunities will likely persist post-pandemic.

Baker and Fitzpatrick (2022) studied virtual internships during the summer of 2018 at a large U.S. Midwestern university. A phenomenological approach was used to understand the lived experiences of 10 students participating in a fully remote internship 8-12 hours per week over 10 weeks. This study focused on student perceptions of virtual internships. Accordingly, in this study, students reported concerns about the lack of exposure to office dynamics as a drawback to remote internships. Perhaps the most exciting finding was that the supervisor-supervisee relationship emerged as the most remarkable component. Students reflected on their appreciation for the level of communication and support shown by supervisors.

However, several students reported time management and work-life balance challenges. Moreover, many students finished their internships with a firmer grasp of the necessary professional skills applicable to any career. This study concluded that institutions of higher education and employers should design virtual internship programs that train and support students and supervisors and create a positive work-life balance.

All in all, Baker and Fitzpatrick (2022), Kras and Keenan (2022), and Park and Jones (2021) demonstrated that COVID-19 brought significant challenges to everyday life and institutions of higher education. These changes continue to impact many aspects of the learning environment, particularly for courses that contain experiential learning components. Accordingly, virtual internships offer some of the same experiences and benefits as in-person internships; however, initial feelings are mixed, and some students are apprehensive. Participant responses suggest that students found benefits to remote internships, including flexibility, professional skill development, more access to supervisors, work-life balance, opportunities outside of the immediate geographic region,

and increased diversity among interns. Some of the challenges reported by interns included anxiety about communication and feedback, lack of exposure to office dynamics, lack of personal motivation, feelings of isolation, heavy dependence on technology, not enough networking opportunities, Zoom fatigue, and prolonged screen time.

Perceived Benefits of Internships

Cook et al. (2015) point out that participating in an internship offers numerous advantages. It allows students to gain real-world experience in their chosen field, enables employers to assess potential employees' suitability within their organization, and enhances the university's reputation by providing well-trained individuals and fostering connections with businesses. In Cook et al.'s (2015) longitudinal case study, perceptions of interns remained relatively stable over a 20-year period. The study involved 816 interns who participated in a self-response survey administered in a controlled setting between 1992 and 2012. The data were collected from the same company that hired all interns over 10 years. The study focused on two variables, project completion and student satisfaction, aiming to identify elements of student satisfaction based on their perceptions.

The results revealed a positive response rate of 87%, indicating that students highly valued their internship experiences. Participants reported that internships positively impacted their social and interpersonal skills, enhancing their ability to work effectively with others in real-world work settings. Moreover, interns felt that the internship facilitated personal growth and maturity.

However, when asked about the internship's influence on making coursework more relatable to the work environment, the trend showed a downward shift. The case study concluded that interns' perceptions remained relatively unchanged over the 20-year span. Additionally, the study found that classroom instruction had not seen significant changes during the same period.

Bielecki et al. (2018) studied whether students can increase their likelihood of academic success if they participate in at least two high-impact experiences during their undergraduate program. Undergraduate students from several majors were sampled. They concluded that female students were more interested in internships and service-learning courses than males. Furthermore, female students had a higher interest level in high-impact experiences than males. Ultimately, the study found that gender-specific high-impact initiatives specifically attuned to gender are needed to increase participation rates. Ultimately, the study found that institutions of higher education should offer gender-specific high-impact initiatives to maintain significant interest and participation among students.

To gain additional insight into the internship experience, McDaniel and Van Jura (2020) researched the relationship between high-impact practices and how they affect student retention and completion. The study suggested that high-impact practices, including participating in an internship, studying abroad, researching with faculty, and conducting community-based projects, were all associated with an increased likelihood of student graduation within 4 years. However, students of color participated at a lower rate and thus did not benefit from the experiences that increased the likelihood of graduating on time.

According to Tepper and Holt (2015), internships are widely believed to expose students to the practical side of a discipline and provide relevant work experience. Students seek internships to gain relevant and realistic hands-on work experience, improve job skills and receive offers for future employment. Even when there is no potential for post-graduation employment from the host employer, students still expect to gain valuable contacts through networking and relationships. Moreover, this study found that internships could provide students with invaluable practical experience and skills.

Baker (2013) conducted a longitudinal analysis to determine which computer skills are essential for entry-level accountants and whether some skills are more important than others. The computer skills examined included accounting software, databases, e-mail or internet, programming, spreadsheets, and word processing. To properly gauge the relative importance of the skills, student GPAs were also included. Baker found that accounting faculty must teach students specific computer skills relative and applicable to the type of accounting work the student will do. In other words, the importance of computer skills for entry-level accountants depends on the area in which the accountant works. Furthermore, the research examined pre-internship students who had not yet entered the profession and post-internship students who had. Ultimately, the study concluded that, at a minimum, educators need to develop different computer skill sets for students based on their areas of interest. Simply put, computer skills are more important for post-internship students in tax than for those in audit and computer, internet, Excel, and Word skills are necessary for all practicing accountants.

In Hergert's (2009) analysis of students' perceived value of internship programs, the study looked at the internship experiences of 114 students. The internships varied in

format, especially with hours and pay; however, most received college credit. Students were asked to rate their internship on a 5-point Likert scale on the extent to which their internships were structured. Students were also asked how the internships were integrated into existing academic programs. The mean score was 4.1, indicating that students generally perceived their internship experience as applicable. The results further showed that perceived value was aligned with the internship structure and specific demographic characteristics. The findings held that older students received a more significant benefit due to greater maturity and preparation. In addition, the study concluded that students valued the internship experience greatly and suggested that they realized a substantial benefit, especially when educators successfully integrated the experience with the student's academic background.

Gualt et al. (2010) also examined internship participation using a 5-point Likert scale that was administered to 185 employers of 392 undergraduate business interns. The perceived value of the internship experience was measured by the degree to which employers perceived the internship experience to produce better-skilled interns who learn faster and have greater productivity and job satisfaction. Furthermore, employers were asked about the likelihood of rehiring their interns in the future and their willingness to show preference in hiring. The findings regarding internship placement are consistent with earlier perception-based research suggesting that interns are better prepared to enter the job market and enjoy meaningful choices in securing full-time job offers and higher pay. Also, employers were more likely to offer higher compensation to prior interns. More specifically, the benefits are many, and business educators are wise to include experiential education in their curriculum.

Using a quantitative methodology, Sauder et al. (2018) argued that there is a significant positive relationship between internship satisfaction and perceived learning regarding personal and career development. Furthermore, students who participated in an internship prior to the capstone internship had a higher level of satisfaction with their job duties than students with no prior internship experience. Participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in senior-level capstone classes from 13 sports management programs. The survey was sent to 395 students with 172 responses. Eighty-six percent of participants were White, and 12.9% were Black or African American. The survey consisted of three sections: demographics, current capstone experience, and early internship experiences.

The study found that internship satisfaction should be examined using the following factors: supervision, duties, work environment, and academic assignments (Sauder et al., 2018). These factors were surveyed using a 5-point rating scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The results based on the satisfaction elements suggest that students were delighted with their capstone internships. In addition, they also indicated relatively high levels of perceived learning in both personal and career development. Also, students with greater satisfaction with “duties at the internship worksite” were expected to have higher perceived learning in the personal development study, concluding that overall, students were delighted with their capstone internship and real-world experiences. The results were dependent on the number of prior internship experiences completed. One of the most noteworthy findings in this research was that although there were no significant differences in total internship satisfaction between students with zero or two prior internship experiences, students with two or more

semesters of early internship experience had significantly higher satisfaction levels with their on-site internship duties. One explanation for these findings is that those students with prior experience had a better understanding of their duties and desired duties for subsequent internships. Moreover, the results suggested that those interns with previous experience were given more substantial job assignments.

Theoretically, these findings align with the experiential learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). The learning is ongoing and allows for continuous learning and the transference of experiences to other contexts, ultimately finding greater satisfaction with their duties (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Bender (2020), Sauder et al. (2018), and Cook et al. (2015) stated that students experienced perceived benefits and reported internships as valuable in providing real-world experience. Bender (2020) looked at the perceptions of 24 senior interior design students after completing a required summer internship for three credits. The findings showed that students believed the internship was a valuable learning activity and prepared them to enter the professional world.

To gain additional insight into what motivates students to participate in internships, Bhattacharya and Neelam (2017) surveyed 110 MBA students in a mixed-method self-administered questionnaire. The MBA interns participated in an 8-week internship after completing their first year of business school. In addition, they were provided with a faculty and industry mentor. Here, the objective was to look at the phases of an internship from the perspective of both the intern and supervisor. Furthermore, this study looked at the variables that determine the quality of the internship experience. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 interns and their mentors after the internship.

The Bhattacharya and Neelam (2017) study explored various stages of internships. In the first stage, the design stage, prospective interns expressed their expectations of high-level experiential learning and future employability from the internship. However, they also felt apprehensive due to the lack of information about the internship. In the subsequent stage, the interns reported that better monitoring of social exchanges would increase the perceived value of learning. During the evaluation and feedback stage, the quality of the tasks assigned to the interns significantly impacted the mentor's satisfaction with their performance, which, in turn, influenced future employability with the company. The study concluded that enhancing the perceived value of internships in terms of the learning experience and employability aspect can positively impact business design curriculums.

In the Tepper and Holt (2015), Cook et al. (2015), and Bender (2020) studies, students realized a perceived value in practical experience, transferable skills, and real-world application. Interns improved their social and interpersonal skills, strengthened their resumes with knowledge, and gained a broader view of their desired careers. In addition, student interns reported that when they had a mentor, there was an increased value in learning, more support, and a higher perceived value of education.

Ahmad and Pesch (2017) argue that business schools must understand how to use internships and other experiential learning activities to cultivate skills and competencies for the next generation of business leaders. In this study, undergraduate and MBA students were surveyed to assess their understanding of skills employers thought were most important for new graduates to possess and the skills that most needed improvement. When implemented correctly, internships can improve skills and career

preparation while offering mutually beneficial outcomes for students, employers, and higher education institutions. In this study, data were used from the 2013 SCSU College Job Outlook Survey, and the voluntary and anonymous survey was distributed to seven different upper-division management classes. Data were collected from 2,543 undergraduates, and the results suggested that regarding the “important to possess” variable, MBA students were unaware that their views differed from the skills employers thought were more important to possess, including honesty/integrity, strong work ethic, interpersonal skills, professionalism, developing creative solutions, and thinking analytically. For the variable “need to improve,” there were many skills that undergraduate business students thought they needed to improve upon more than employers felt they needed to. Furthermore, employers also gave lower scores than undergrads and grads in communication, leadership, and interpersonal skills. One interpretation of these findings suggests that undergraduate business students will be more proactive in enhancing the skills they think they need to improve and may exceed employers' expectations.

However, Robles (2012) contended that knowledge of specific technical skills is equally important to employers. In this study, 90 business executives received a 5-point Likert-type scale survey to measure the strength of importance of each attribute. The study points out that employers want new employees to have hard and soft skills. This study examined the soft critical skills employers want from new employees so that business educators can integrate those skills into the curriculum. Here, 45 business communication students enrolled in two business communications courses and interviewed two executives each semester for their final project. After the interview, the

students gave the executive a thank-you letter and an evaluation survey. The survey asked executives to evaluate student performance and to list the 10 most critical soft skills they wanted new employees to possess. Ninety executives responded and identified 10 crucial soft skills, including integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, professionalism, positive attitude, teamwork, flexibility, and work ethics.

Executives overwhelmingly indicated that integrity and communication were the top two soft skills that needed to be identified. Moreover, the study found that although all the soft skills appeared necessary, not all were perceived by executives as equally important.

Stewart et al. (2018) contended that soft skills are most valuable in today's job market. The study looked at the level of preparedness of recent college graduates, both from the perspective of the college graduate and employers. The survey was given to 214 college students at a 4-year university in the Northeastern United States. Participants were asked to rank their soft skills on a Likert scale in the 20-question study. The study concluded that most college graduates are confident in their soft skills competencies. However, the soft skills in which college graduates feel competent are the same skills in which the employers felt the graduates fell short.

Adamczyk et al. (2021) investigated the usefulness of internships at Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI). This study looked at the value of a structured internship, concluding that structured internships appear to have some value, including increased interaction with faculty outside the classroom, confidence in verbally expressing ideas, and class presentations. However, students from HSIs and MSIs (minority-serving institutions) generally need to contribute to their households while attending college financially. Hence, unpaid internships that require several hours of unpaid work at a

separate internship can be costly and unrealistic. Using regression analysis, they found several positive benefits for students, including more confidence in making presentations and more interaction with professors outside the classroom, which led to networking and exposure to additional opportunities. Overall, structured internships were a value add to those students who participated.

Robles (2012), Ahmad and Pesch (2017), and Stewart et al. (2018) all agree that employers deem work experience during college to be essential for recent college graduates looking to enter the workforce. Robles (2012) maintained that knowledge of specific technical skills is equally important. Stewart et al. (2018) found that soft skills were most valuable. Ahmad and Pesch (2017) suggested that employers thought that some of the skills that needed improvement were professionalism, honesty, and analytical thinking. In the final analysis, internships aid students in learning and development by providing opportunities to build and apply essential skills while gaining a better understanding of themselves.

This research contributes to the existing literature on the benefits of participating in a college internship. More specifically, the literature has indicated that internships can make students more marketable to employers. Furthermore, interns gain insight into various careers and better understand what it takes to succeed in their chosen field. Also, students can improve upon the essential skills employers are looking for, including social, technical, and interpersonal skills. Moreover, interns can make valuable connections while strengthening their resumes. Finally, the research identifies specific factors employers can utilize when designing internship programs that will benefit both the intern and the host.

Perceived Limitations of Internships

While the research reflects the many benefits of internships, it is also essential to identify some challenges with implementing and sustaining an internship program. Accordingly, Kosnik et al. (2013) explain that it can be challenging to create consistent academic value in internships because some internship experiences do not follow through to subsequent stages of the experiential learning cycle, including reflective observation and conceptualization. Unless the internship integrates a well-structured reflective component to transform the internship experience into knowledge, the cycle is incomplete and, hence, ineffective.

Prescott et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study of 2,370 undergraduate business students enrolled at a private liberal arts university in the United States. In this study, they looked to identify the academic effects of college internships on academic performance. They found that most students completing an internship often take other classes concurrently. The primary focus of this study was to determine if there was any educational effect on students taking an internship while completing other courses during that same semester. The study concluded that college internships hurt academic performance in the semester that contained the internship. Moreover, although the students rebounded academically in subsequent semesters, the improvement was too small to offset the initial decline. Thus, higher education institutions may decide between academic success and job placement.

Strayhorn (2020) also measured the influence of internships on academic performance. More specifically, they looked at Black business students attending HBCUs (historically Black colleges and universities). Using mixed methods, they asked: “Are

there differences in Black business majors' academic performance at HBCUs comparing internship students with non-internship same-race peers"? (p. 575). Moreover, "What is the relationship between internship participation and academic performance"? (p. 575). The sample consisted of 376 Black undergraduates attending 40 HBCUs during the 2016-2017 school year. Approximately 66% were first-generation students, and over one-quarter had participated in an internship. The dependent variable was college grades, and the independent variable assessed whether a student had participated or was currently enrolled in an internship while in college. The results suggested that grades and GPAs do not vary between Black business majors at HBCUs with internships. Furthermore, it is worth noting that there was no statistical difference in grades between Black business majors at HBCUs with or without taking an internship. Moreover, internships may provide graduates with a competitive advantage in the job market, and Black business majors' grades did not suffer due to internship participation.

Internships have been described as a win for students; however, some students suggest they are also full of unknowns. Accordingly, interns may have to undertake undesirable tasks while trying to learn the job (McHugh, 2017). Additionally, McHugh (2017) indicated that the value of the internship was lower for students with unpaid internships. Prescott et al. (2020) and Strayhorn (2020) discussed the balance between academics and internships and the fact that students may suffer academically at the expense of the internship.

Tepper and Holt (2015) studied internships' perceived benefits and limitations. More specifically, they discuss the current legal challenges involving unpaid internships in the private sector. Unpaid interns interning with for-profit organizations must comply

with the Fair Labor Standards Act. This is because interns are considered employees and are entitled to minimum wage and overtime. Under the Act, interns are afforded certain protections; thus, employers of interns do not have to pay minimum wage. However, the courts have used different standards to assess whether an unpaid intern is an employee. Most apply a totality of the circumstances test and conclude that if the primary beneficiary of the arrangement is an intern, then the intern is not considered an employee. More specifically, for-profit employers must pay their employees unless the intern benefits more than the employer. Thus, the argument can be made that unpaid internships provide valuable opportunities, while others maintain the practice as an excuse to exploit free labor.

In McHugh (2017), the findings indicate that the value of the internship was lower for the students reporting unpaid internships in contrast to those students in paid internships. This study explored internship design and content regarding compensation, supervision, task clarity, and autonomy. A snowball sampling technique was used to survey 99 students enrolled in undergraduate management classes at a university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Respondents were asked if they had ever held an unpaid internship. In terms of internship outcomes, the findings suggest that internship compensation is positively related to job pursuit and overall internship satisfaction. Also, job pursuit intentions from host employers were more significant for those students participating in paid internships. These findings are noteworthy because employers hosting unpaid interns may not realize they are forgoing potential talent. Moreover, the results suggest less mentoring, less developmental value, and lower job pursuit associated with unpaid internships. Further evidence indicates that unpaid interns have a higher

potential for intern neglect. These findings reaffirm the economics regarding benefits associated with unpaid internships and echo the results of Tepper and Holt (2015) regarding matters of exploitation and fairness.

According to McHugh (2017), the host employer provided mentoring and additional support to interns even if the organization could not afford to pay. There are a few conclusions that could be drawn from this study. First, paid internship programs enhance employers' ability to retain interns to fulfill positions. Second, paid internships may have reputational benefits for colleges, family, and friends. Third, assigning a mentor to work with and supervise interns increases interns' experience by providing a supportive environment.

In Blau et al. (2020), the results contend that women are more likely to have unpaid internships than men. Both internships and co-ops offer students the opportunity to gain work experience in their prospective careers. Here, the sample consisted of senior business students from a large urban Mid-Atlantic college. Students were encouraged by their advisors to complete a voluntary online Senior Student Satisfaction Survey. A sample of 579 students showed significant differences between paid versus unpaid internships and co-ops. Most notably, female students were more likely to have an unpaid internship, and there was also a strong relationship between paid internships and students living on or near the main campus.

A NACE (2016) position paper found that students with paid internships had a higher percentage of job offers than their unpaid counterparts. Also, the unpaid interns were more likely to work towards self-employment after graduation. It is important to note that according to Tepper and Holt (2015), students who participated in unpaid

internships complained that they rarely led to jobs and that training was nonexistent. Moreover, the work assignments that the interns were tasked with had little to nothing to do with their field of study or career goals.

The findings of Tepper and Holt's (2015) study indicated some disadvantages and challenges to implementing and sustaining an internship program across college campuses. In addition, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, as many colleges' unique circumstances and challenges include time commitment, logistics, location, and staff cost. Unpaid internships create obvious concerns about exploiting students. It is possible that interns who work without compensation are being taken advantage of. Moreover, there is a fairness aspect to consider, as many students may be unable to afford to participate in an unpaid internship due to family financial constraints and obligations. Scholars suggest that paid interns may have an advantage over unpaid interns because unpaid internships rarely lead to full-time employment. Moreover, the value of the internship was lower for the students reporting unpaid versus paid.

As remote work becomes more popular, its implications for productivity and collaboration are being examined. Accordingly, there is a growing interest among researchers in exploring the impact of physical proximity on on-the-job training and feedback for software engineers. In a study conducted by Emanuel et al. (2023) on software engineers at a Fortune 500 firm, the influence of physical proximity on on-the-job training and feedback was examined. The findings indicated that engineers who worked in the same building as their teammates received 21% more online feedback on their code compared to those with distant teammates. Ultimately, the study concluded

that physical proximity plays a crucial role in on-the-job training, feedback provision, and overall learning outcomes for software engineers.

Hart et al. (2017) investigated the factors that influenced audit interns' commitment and long-term intentions to work in public accounting. They measured the organization and professional commitment of 127 audit interns prior to the start of the busy tax season. The study found that both organizational and professional commitment declined because of the internship experience. Furthermore, the expectations and commitment of accounting majors were unrealistic, and the time commitment and heavy workload during the internship, specifically during tax season, were associated with the decrease in organizational commitment. There was also a significant decrease in interns' long-term intentions to work in public accounting because of the internship experience. On the other hand, the study noted that interns who completed assignments perceived as challenging and interesting and had positive experiences with co-workers reported increased organizational commitment. Also, positive intern experiences were reported when employers assigned varied and simpler tasks.

Virtual internships, despite their numerous benefits, also present some limitations that need to be addressed. Kosnik et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of incorporating a reflective component in internships to ensure the complete experiential learning cycle and maximize their academic value. Prescott et al. (2020) found that internships can have a negative impact on academic performance during the semester they are undertaken, although students tend to recover in subsequent semesters. Strayhorn (2020) observed that internship participation did not affect the academic performance of Black business majors at HBCUs, suggesting that internships can provide a competitive advantage

without compromising grades. Additionally, concerns were raised about the exploitation of unpaid interns and the need to ensure fairness and proper compensation (Tepper & Holt, 2015). By addressing these limitations, institutions can enhance the effectiveness and fairness of virtual internships.

Chapter Summary

The literature on internships suggests that they provide beneficial opportunities to employers, students, and institutions of higher education. Internships have become standard features on college campuses, providing opportunities for students to apply knowledge with work experience. However, there are also limitations with internship programs, including unpaid internships, lack of support, lack of structure, unrelated task assignments, and lack of autonomy. Moreover, the onset of COVID-19 prompted educational programs to rethink the structure of in-person internship programs. For many, virtual internships were a novel idea that needed to be quickly developed and implemented.

In addition, there are several benefits that arise from completing an internship. The student gains valuable real-world experience in their chosen profession, while the employer gets the chance to assess a potential employee's fit within the organization. In addition, the university enhances its credibility by producing highly trained individuals and facilitating connections with various organizations. Furthermore, there are some obvious benefits to virtual internships, including flexibility, improved communication, and increased diversity among internship applicants. However, with benefits come limitations, including low levels of autonomy and inability to work without direct supervision. Thus, the literature suggests that virtual internships will continue to grow

after COVID-19. Developing a more robust understanding of the student perception as an intern working in a remote environment is critical to experiential learning programs and for institutions of higher education and employers that want to develop and incorporate virtual internship programs. Therefore, this study examined the benefits and limitations experienced by undergraduate business and technology graduates who participated in virtual internships, aiming to understand their perspectives and provide valuable insights for institutions of higher education and employers. In addition, the findings aim to inform the development of virtual internship programs that effectively meet the needs and expectations of students. Chapter 3 outlines the study's research methodology approach.

In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to the research methodology, providing insights into the chosen research design, the contextual background of the study, and the profiles of the 10 study participants, highlighting their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

This descriptive phenomenological study sought to understand the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates and the perceived benefits, limitations, and effects of virtual internships on obtaining employment. Studies suggest that college students seek degrees that promise employment, employers seek to invest in organizational success, and colleges seek to increase enrollment (Gault et al., 2010; Hergert, 2009; Kim et al., 2012).

This study was based on research that suggests that the reason for the popularity of college internships is that they offer a win all the way around for students, employers, and institutions of higher education (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2012). Internships, informed by the experiential learning framework, allow students to explore career options while determining likes and dislikes (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). In addition, experiential learning will enable learners to apply what they have been taught to solve real-world challenges (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Gault et al., 2010). Accordingly, the literature explains that students participating in internships realize an advantage over nonparticipating students. Such benefits include gaining new skills, higher starting salaries, and fielding more job offers. Moreover, internship programs are generally attractive to employers because they create a pipeline for future employees and provide inexpensive and sometimes free labor (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013). For institutions of higher

education, the benefits of internship programs can be significant. In addition, to improve student recruiting and institutional reputation, a good internship program can create networking and financial opportunities within the business community (Gault et al., 2010; Weible, 2010). Nevertheless, there are still limitations to internship programs, primarily virtual internships. There is concern that the jobs graduates land are low-paying and are not worth the expense of a college education (NAICU, 2016). Accordingly, the Obama Administration developed employment regulations to keep in check the high debt-to-earnings ratio for newly graduated undergraduate college students (NAICU, 2016).

It is noted that most students who successfully complete an internship receive a full-time job offer after graduation (Bookamp, 2022). However, what remains to be understood is whether students perceive the internship experiences as providing a benefit to attaining employment after graduation (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013). This study seeks to fill the gaps by generating new evidence about virtual internships amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic brought considerable interest to all virtual modalities due to the cancellation of in-person events (Hora et al., 2021). However, little research exists on the quality equity and access among virtual internships during the pandemic period of 2020 to 2022. With a better understanding, institutions of higher education can improve internship programs, students will be prepared for employment after graduation and employers will have a talent pipeline of already-trained employees after graduation.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design that allowed participants to express their opinions by using their words, emotions, and expressions to describe their experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Using a descriptive approach, the researcher focused on gaining a deeper understanding of student experiences with virtual internships during a global pandemic, asking semi-structured, open-ended questions to allow the participants to share their thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, the descriptive design allowed for straight description of a poorly understood and relatively unexplored phenomenon (Kim et al., 2017). Undergraduate business and technology students' perceptions surrounding the benefits and limitations of virtual internships in obtaining employment is a poorly understood phenomenon and therefore, suited for a qualitative descriptive design.

A qualitative design was appropriate when obtaining a detailed understanding of an issue that can only be explained by speaking directly with individuals and allowing them to share their stories. Also, qualitative research intends to explore phenomena in their natural setting. Three to 10 participants are the recommended sample size for participants for semi-structured interviews with a phenomenological approach. The data collection focused on semi-structured, one-to-one, in-depth interviews with 10 alums of bachelor of business and technology programs who participated in a virtual internship to generate a comprehensive understanding of their perceptions and shared lived experiences. In addition, interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed using the same platform (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) stated that with semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, seven stages should be followed to suggest a research design: creating

themes, designing, interviewing, transcription, analysis, verification, and reporting. This research design gave undergraduate business and technology alums who were virtual interns a voice to communicate their lived experiences surrounding benefits, limitations, and employment.

Research Context

The context of the study focused on alumni who attended both public and private universities and colleges in New York State. Notably, these participants graduated from their respective institutions and were part of a unique time frame between 2020 and 2022, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, organizations and institutions of higher education experienced significant changes, leading to a shift to hybrid or fully remote learning and work setups.

Amid this ever-changing work landscape, employers encountered the challenge of swiftly adapting their operations to conform to the new workplace norms. As remote work became the prevailing practice, internships were also required to undergo a transformation. Initially anticipating traditional in-person internships, students soon realized that virtual internships were the sole feasible option amid these uncertain times. Additionally, employers had to quickly adjust their internship programs to accommodate remote work arrangements and ensure business continuity.

It is important to highlight that all participants in this study graduated with a bachelor's degree in business or information technology and engaged in a virtual internship that was directly related to their respective majors. In addition, the study ensured that all participants met the eligibility requirement of being 18 years or older. The study's focus on this specific age group of graduated alumni was intended to collect

insights from individuals who had already undergone virtual internships, enabling them to reflect on their experiences.

Research Participants

Ten participants were selected, and their interviews were scheduled in order of their responses. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: (a) undergraduate business or technology major, (b) graduated with a bachelor's degree between 2020-2022, (c) participated in a virtual internship, (d) graduated from a 4-year college or university located in New York State, (e) were currently 18 years or older, and (f) willing to participate in the study.

All participants 100% ($n=10$) identified as first-generation college students. In addition, 100% ($n=10$) were born outside of the United States, 50% ($n=5$) were women participants and 50% ($n=5$) were men. In addition, 80% ($n=8$) were accounting majors and 30% ($n=3$) were information technology majors. The 10 participant descriptions follow.

Participant 1

Participant 1 earned a bachelor's degree in accounting and subsequently pursued a master's degree. Participant 1 completed two internships at the same firm, one in pursuit of an undergraduate degree and the second internship in conjunction with the master's in accounting. A first-generation college student, Participant 1 was not born in the United States. Notably, at the time of the interview, the participant was working in the accounting field at the same firm as the internship.

Participant 2

Participant 2 completed a bachelor's in accounting and a master's in accounting. Participant 2 is a first-generation college student and was not born in the United States. At the time of the interview, the participant was working at the same organization where they completed their virtual internship and is a mentor to incoming interns.

Participant 3

Participant 3 completed a bachelor's in accounting and a master's in accounting. Participant 3 completed a total of two internships between undergraduate and graduate school. P3 was not born in the United States and is a first-generation college student. Participant 3 was not offered a position at this firm upon the completion of the internship but, at the time of the interview, was currently working full-time in the field of their major.

Participant 4

Participant 4 completed a bachelor's in accounting and was working on a master's in accounting at the time of the interview. Participant 4 is a first-generation college student who was born in the United States and completed a total of two internships. Participant 4 was offered a full-time position with the large firm at the conclusion of the internship beginning in early 2024.

Participant 5

Participant 5 completed a bachelor's in computer information systems. Participant 5 is a first-generation college student and was not born in the United States. Participant 5 did not receive an offer from the organization where the internship was completed.

However, at the time of the interview, Participant 5 was working in the field of their major.

Participant 6

Participant 6 holds an undergraduate degree in accounting and a master's in accounting. Participant 6 was not born in the United States and is a first-generation college student. Participant 6 did not receive an offer from the organization where the internship was completed. However, at the time of the interview, Participant 6 was working in the field.

Participant 7

Participant 7 graduated with a bachelor's in information technology and software systems. Participant 7 was not born in the United States and is a first-generation college student. Participant 7 did not receive an offer from the firm where the internship took place but, at the time of the interview, was working in the field of their major.

Participant 8

Participant 8 graduated with a bachelor's in accounting. At the time of the interview, Participant 8 was pursuing a master's degree in accounting. Participant 8 was not born in the United States and is a first-generation college student. Participant 8 received a job offer where they worked as an intern, pending completion of the master's degree.

Participant 9

Participant 9 graduated with a bachelor's in accounting. At the time of the interview, they were pursuing a master's in accounting. They were not born in the United

States and is a first-generation college student. Participant 9 was asked back to the firm where they participated in the internship.

Participant 10

Participant 10 completed a bachelor's in computer information systems.

Participant 10 is a first-generation college student and was not born in the United States.

Participant 10 did not receive an offer from the organization where the internship was completed. However, at the time of the interview, Participant 10 was working in the field of their major.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

Phenomenological interviews were conducted with qualifying participants, aiming to explore the benefits, limitations, and post-graduation employment prospects of virtual internships for business and technology majors. Furthermore, interviews are a prominent data collection method in phenomenological research because of their effectiveness in exploring and understanding life experiences. For this study, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom audio conference and transcribed using the same platform. This method aligns with the scholarly recommendations of Brinkman and Kvale (2015), allowing researchers to pose thought-provoking open-ended questions, thereby unearthing a wealth of rich, detailed data to enhance the study's depth and rigor.

The advantage of using interviews is that they draw a vivid picture of participants' experiences, which leads to an understanding of shared meanings of the phenomenon. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to deviate from the interview questions and ask participants follow-up and clarifying questions about statements made during the interview (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015).

The study utilized 17 open-ended interview questions. In addition, there were approximately six interview questions corresponding to each of the three research questions, ensuring a direct alignment with the research objectives. To ensure the validity of the interview questions, the data collection instrument underwent evaluation, and the interview questions were pretested and reviewed by a small panel of peers with 3 decades of combined experience in higher education. The panel's valuable feedback and recommendations led to necessary modifications to the interview questions (Appendix).

Procedures Used for Data Collection

The study involved 10 undergraduate business and technology alumni who obtained a bachelor's degree in business or technology between 2020 and 2022 from both public and private 4-year colleges or universities within New York State. After obtaining all required approvals from the necessary Institutional Review Boards, the recruitment flyer was circulated to alumni of institutions of higher education in New York State through a nonprofit organization that works with employers and interns. In addition, Monroe College provided a letter of support, and the recruitment flyer was circulated to business and technology alumni.

To ensure a purposeful selection, the study sample was chosen using a purposeful sampling method through an introductory email that posed the inclusion criteria questions and involved intentionally selecting participants who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation and were best suited to provide insight into the research questions. As members of the study population responded to the recruitment flyer and met all criteria, confirmed via email, informed consent forms were emailed, and interviews were

scheduled in the order of response. In total, 15 responses were received, and 10 participants met the criteria.

After meeting the established criteria, all participants were sent an introduction letter and informed consent form, along with the Zoom link, upon scheduling the interview. The interviews were conducted using Zoom audio and later transcribed by the Zoom transcription service. Before starting each interview, the researcher explained the informed consent form and addressed any participant questions. The interviews had an approximate duration of 60 minutes.

The interview transcripts are all password-protected, and all data are stored in a secure, locked, and password-protected file on a dedicated computer, each with unique passwords. To safeguard participant identity, pseudonyms (Participant 1 through Participant 10) were assigned and actual names not included. The selected participants were emailed a \$25 gift card in appreciation for their participation.

Procedures Used for Data Analysis

Zoom transcribed interviews were read fully and analyzed. In addition, data from the transcripts were segmented and organized according to the aligned research question. The data were then organized and analyzed into codes and segmented into categories that developed into themes. The in-depth coding process consisted of a hybrid blend of emergent, emotion, value, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2021).

Internships, traditionally conducted in person, have seen an increase in interest, with virtual options gaining attention, particularly due to the shift to remote or hybrid models during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, institutions of higher education and employers need to understand undergraduate business and technology graduates'

experience with virtual internships so that, in the future, they can create and develop meaningful virtual internship programs that meet the needs of students, institutions, and employers.

The qualitative design was chosen to understand the perceptions of virtual interns. With this approach, the researcher focused on gaining a deeper understanding of student perceptions of virtual internships on obtaining employment after graduation. Through the lens of the four stages of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, this study intends to add to the body of knowledge related to virtual internships in the post-pandemic era. Open-ended questions were used for semi-structured, in-depth interviews via Zoom. This allowed themes to be developed through the lived experiences of undergraduate business or technology alums who participated in virtual internships with similar experiences. Zoom transcripts were carefully analyzed and coded into meaningful categories. Through a process of close reading and immersion in the data, categories and significant themes emerged. During the emergent coding process, emotion and value codes were employed to identify the feelings and emotions described by participants (Saldaña, 2021).

During the axial coding cycle, codes were organized and grouped into categories. After categories were developed, selective coding was employed. Selective coding was used to connect categories and develop themes. The emerging themes helped to represent the study's major findings. The coding process was iterative and was repeated to derive code categories and themes. Member checking was used for participant validation to ensure the validity and credibility of results and was performed through the inclusion of follow-up questions to participants to verify responses. Also, member checking was used as a validation strategy to minimize researcher bias in the findings (Saldaña, 2021).

Data Analysis and Findings

Each phase played a vital role in the analysis and interpretation of the data. In the first phase, known as open coding, the transcripts were carefully read and analyzed. This process involved breaking down the text into meaningful units and assigning codes that captured the essence of the information. Open coding facilitated the exploration and identification of initial patterns, themes, and ideas that emerged from the data. During the second phase, axial coding aimed to organize and group the codes into categories. Connections and relationships between different codes were established, seeking to understand the underlying structure within the data. Axial coding further refined the analysis and revealed deeper insights and patterns. Lastly, in the final phase, known as selective coding, the axial codes were consolidated to form overarching themes. This involved identifying the most significant and representative codes and integrating them into meaningful themes that captured the central ideas and findings of the data analysis.

Throughout this iterative process, the categories were continually refined along with the themes that emerged from the analysis. The following steps were used to analyze the data.

1. Open coding. During this stage, a hybrid technique was employed, which included both emotion and value coding, enabling the researcher to analyze and interpret participants' data and capture their authentic words and expressions.

2. Axial coding. This stage involved a process of aligning and grouping the codes into categories. This step aimed to identify relationships and associations between the codes, revealing the underlying structure of the data.

3. Selective coding. During this stage, the data were synthesized and condensed to form categories that eventually evolved into meaningful themes. This process followed an iterative approach, continuously refining the emerging categories and themes throughout the analysis process.

Probing questions were utilized to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences. Furthermore, each interview was conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed by Zoom. Seventeen interview questions were aligned with the three research questions and theoretical framework. The first three prompts were utilized to gather demographic information. While some of the questions may appear repetitive, they provided the participants with the opportunity to provide extended responses and examples and to think critically about their beliefs, values, and perceptions. The questions gradually shifted from day-to-day experiences to the benefits, limitations and challenges, and current and future application in the context of their current or possible future employment. Furthermore, participants were invited to offer recommendations for employers and higher education institutions in the design of internship programs. Table 3.1 presents the research questions aligned with interview questions.

In this study, peer debriefing was utilized as a method to ensure data accuracy and gain valuable perspectives. Feedback was sought from a professional colleague with over 20 years of experience in the subject matter and who remained entirely independent and unbiased. Through this collaborative examination, critical feedback was obtained to ensure the methodological soundness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 3.1

Research Questions Aligned with Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
1. From the perception of undergraduate business school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship?	1. Describe your day-to-day tasks at your internship. 2. Describe the specific career skills you utilized, applied, or learned during your internship. 3. What were the most significant benefits of participating in a virtual internship from your perspective? 4. Did the virtual internship meet your expectations? Please explain. 5. Do you believe virtual internships are as valuable as in-person internships? Why or why not?
2. From the perception of undergraduate business school graduates, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship?	6. What do you believe are the most significant differences between virtual and in-person internships? 7. Did you feel like you had sufficient support from your supervisor or team during your virtual internship? Please discuss. 8. Can you describe any limitations or challenges you experienced during your virtual internship? 9. How did you overcome these limitations or challenges? 10. Do you believe employers view virtual internships differently than in-person internships? 11. Did you keep a journal or notebook where you reflected on your observations or thoughts? If so, please discuss.
3. From the perspective of undergraduate business school graduates, what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on obtaining current or future employment?	12. Can you describe how your virtual internship experience has impacted your current or future employment opportunities? 13. How do you think virtual internships will impact the future of internships and employment? 14. How have you applied your insights, beliefs, and knowledge from your virtual internship to future current or will apply to future situations? 15. Please describe your feelings about the level of preparation the virtual internship provided for you in your current employment or in future employment. 16. What would you suggest or recommend to the host employer that would make the virtual internship more beneficial? 17. After completing a virtual internship, did you develop any new theories or ideas that you tested that you will now apply to your current or future employment?

Chapter 4 provides a thorough analysis of the results and findings presented, and Chapter 5 discusses the major findings, implications, recommendations, and potential avenues for future research that can be derived from these findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The literature points out that a successful internship program is a win-win for students, employers, and institutions of higher education. Students are given the chance to gain real-world experience, applying their classroom knowledge and skills to practical situations. Employers, in turn, can establish talent pipelines, while institutions of higher education gain credibility by providing businesses with highly trained individuals and fostering valuable connections and contacts with various organizations (Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Tepper, 2015).

In addition, students realize the benefit that in-person internships bring to enhancing employment prospects and augmenting earnings potential in conjunction with their college degrees. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the advantages of online and hybrid work. However, it is important for students, employers, and institutions of higher education to gain deeper insight into virtual internships as the world shifts from in-person to remote or hybrid opportunities. Understanding the intricacies of virtual internships holds significant value for all stakeholders. As a result, a better understanding of virtual internships becomes significant for students, employers, and institutions of higher education (Saad & Wigert, 2021).

Divine et al. (2015) emphasize that despite challenges in hiring an effective internship director and ensuring enough opportunities, the benefits of internships outweigh the obstacles, making the endeavor highly valuable. Additionally, Cook et al.

(2015) point out that completing an internship offers numerous advantages. It allows students to gain real-world experience in their chosen field, enables employers to assess potential employees' suitability within their organization, and enhances the university's reputation by providing well-trained individuals and fostering connections with businesses.

Furthermore, studies suggest that internships offer college students the opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing them with valuable hands-on experience that significantly increases their marketability and improves their chances of landing jobs after graduation (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Prescott et al., 2020; Tepper & Holt, 2015). By engaging in internships, students can tackle real challenges and acquire practical skills that enhance their employability (Gault et al., 2010; Hergert, 2009).

Traditionally, internships are in person and face-to-face. However, due to the impact of COVID-19, employers had to adapt and shift towards a virtual internship platform. Considering this shift, this phenomenological study aimed to explore the perceptions of undergraduate business and technology graduates regarding the benefits, limitations, and effects of virtual internships on employment after graduation. The study relied on a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of virtual interns.

Research Questions

Chapter 4 presents the research questions and the findings that emerged from participant interviews. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship?
2. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship?
3. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment?

Research Question 1

Data were collected to answer Research Question 1: What are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship from the perspective of undergraduate business school graduates? Analysis of the interview findings uncovered four overarching themes. Four distinct themes emerged from the responses: (a) increased professional development, (b) professional acculturation, (c) career readiness, and (d) navigating new work experiences. These themes were derived from 13 categories, which were generated from participant codes. The categories include (a) skills acquisition, (b) exposure to the work environment, (c) opportunity for advancement, (d) opportunities for collaboration, (e) flexibility, (f) organizational support, (g) career preparation, (h) self-reliance, (i) surprise and satisfaction, (j) disappointment, (k) appreciation, (l) uncertainty, and (m) recognition and belonging. These themes and categories helped in understanding the perception of virtual internships and their benefits.

Research Question 1—Theme 1: Increased Professional Development

The theme of increased professional development emerged from three categories: (a) skills acquisition, (b) exposure to a work environment, and (c) opportunity for advancement. Participants perceived virtual internships as valuable opportunities to acquire essential skills, gain insights into real-world work environments, and leverage these experiences for career advancement. In addition, these categories captured participants' perceptions about their transition from seeing themselves as students to envisioning themselves as interns in a professional environment. Table 4.1 presents the code categories and the first of four themes that emerged from interview questions related to Research Question 1. The first theme highlights increased professional development as a perceived benefit of participating in a virtual internship.

Table 4.2 illustrates the frequency of the four categories that created the theme of increased professional development. The categories that created the theme are skills acquisition, exposure to work and opportunity for advancement.

Categories of skills acquisition, exposure to work, and opportunity for advancement emerged from codes that described the benefits and importance of gaining skills, being exposed to actual tasks (both technical and soft skills) and having the chance to advance as benefits of virtual internships in which they participated. Exposure to work was deemed important by all participants (100%, $n=10$).

Participants perceived virtual internships as valuable opportunities to acquire essential skills, gain insights into real-world work environments, and leverage

Table 4.1*RQ1 Theme 1—Increased Professional Development: Codes Categories and Themes*

Codes	Categories	Theme
Time management, Microsoft Excel, auditing, QuickBooks, sequel codes data analytics, managing time wisely, teamwork, communication, problem solving, auditing, tax returns.	Skills Acquisition	
Exposed to tools, doing real-world stuff, insight into how it is to work virtually, exposure to the heavy lifting that is done, the opportunity to put all the theory that I learned from school into practice, learning how to work virtually, it prepared me for such a time as this, it gave me a lot of insight into how to work virtually.	Exposure to Work Environment	Increased Professional Development
A taste of remote work more opportunities to meet other people from other countries, I was offered a full-time position at the end of my internship, I had a lot of job offers, I used a lot of tools from the internship.	Opportunity For Advancement	

experiences for career advancement. Also, exposure to real-world work and the opportunity to interact with professionals in various roles contributed to professional growth and development. Moreover, the virtual internships provided a platform for participants to recognize and seize opportunities for career advancement, further enhancing their professional journey. This theme highlights the transformative impact of virtual internships on the professional growth and readiness of undergraduate school graduates.

Table 4.2*Increased Professional Development: Categories and Frequency of Identified**Participants*

Categories	Participants										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Skills Acquisition	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	8
Exposure to Work	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Opportunity for Advancement	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	8

Note. The table illustrates three categories that emerged from interviews in response to Research Question 1, Theme 1.

Skills Acquisition. Several participants mentioned industry-specific skills, such as Excel, CSS, and SQL, that they learned and utilized during their virtual internship.

These skills were specific to accounting or information technology. Participant 2 stated:

They essentially assigned us to perform various basic and miscellaneous tasks, such as arranging meetings with clients and handling any financial errors that came to our attention and a significant portion of our responsibilities involved what they referred to as “rolling forward” previous work papers . . . reviewing and updating the prior year’s balance before adding this year’s additions and subtractions.

In addition, Participant 2 added, “I thought I was pretty good at Excel. I had no idea that Excel could be used for so many functions.” Participant 10 commented:

So, one of my top skills that I used for my internship was time management. My other skill was teamwork and working out a schedule where we met every day at

4:00 using Teams. That worked because of our school schedule. We learned CSS and CML in class and I used them to build the website. The others knew those applications a little better than me, but they showed me a few new things.

Continuing the discussion, Participant 8 expressed, “I had the chance of interning during what we call busy season, and my primary focus was on tax-related assignments. I learned the importance of being empathetic, but mostly, I’ll say communication skills.”

Expanding on this, Participant 9 added, “Okay, so I believe that my knowledge of Microsoft Excel was the most significant aspect of my virtual internship experience.”

Furthermore, Participant 3 revealed that:

I didn’t engage in tax preparation directly. Instead, I focused on handling extension forms to extend tax returns. My tasks involved accessing each client’s online portal to gather their tax information and documents. I would then enter this information, which was later reviewed by a supervisor. Finally, I prepared the actual form for the tax extension.

Also, Participant 7 discussed specific skills stating, “SQL, so that was like the main thing like writing codes, because, as a data analyst, you have to know how to extract data. So that was like a major part of the internship or the technique that I used a lot during that time.” Furthermore, Participant 6 described the specific tasks they were assigned:

So, I had the task of allocating transactions for different restaurants. I had to do the proper accounting classifications in QuickBooks, and I had to prepare the sales tax for the restaurants. I was responsible for posting checks and allocating them.

Participant 4 revealed, “I worked on like just the basic tie-outs, you know. So essentially, it is matching what the company says they have as a function of auditing.”

In addition to the identified benefits, virtual internships were also recognized for the value they provided in terms of developing essential soft skills, particularly in networking with fellow interns and current employees with the prospect of securing a permanent position. Reflecting on this, Participant 8 emphasized the significance of connecting with others and time management, stating, "Connecting with others and time management was crucial for me, particularly since I had classes simultaneously." Furthermore, Participant 10 stated, “My other skill was teamwork, working with them and showing that our ideas were good, and we were connected.” Participant 7 further explained, “So, I’m just basically building skills at this point and problem solving. I would say is the biggest thing that I was working on, how to problem solve by myself.” Also, Participant 1 added, “I would say it impacted me in a way that basically helped me develop my personal and professional skills.”

Exposure to Work. Participants reported that exposure accounted for significant overall benefits of professional development opportunities. This exposure encompassed various aspects, including exposure to virtual work environments, professional situations, and new skills. Engaging in virtual internships allowed participants to adapt to the evolving landscape of modern work practices, equipping them with essential skills for navigating virtual team interactions and online project management. Additionally, the exposure to a virtual work environment enabled participants to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of self-discipline and time management, essential attributes in the context of remote work scenarios. Through this exposure, participants

developed a heightened sense of adaptability and resilience as they navigated the challenges and opportunities unique to virtual work settings. Participant 2 shared their perspective, stating:

I would say experiential learning was most important because you learn certain things in a classroom setting but then it's quite different in the working world, so that for me was a highlight because my coursework exposed me to a lot of areas and the Excel skills I used the most. I thought I knew Excel, but at the internship, I learned so many new ways to use it in the accounting field. I think I really zoned in on Excel.

Building upon that, Participant 7 revealed:

I would personally say my internship experience was phenomenal. I got multiple offers based on this. I don't have a lot of experience in the IT world, and this is something that employers highly value when applying for jobs. Experience is a major part of getting hired.

Adding to the discussion, Participant 9 expressed their thoughts, stating:

So, I got to see those different perspectives. But I think yeah, maybe having a little bit more exposure to the heavy lifting that is done. However, during the downtime of the healthcare group, I got to work with another group, specifically the cannabis group and the affordable housing group.

Participant 8 revealed that “it was the opportunity to put all the theory and all that I had learned from school into practice, and maybe see problems that I would not think of as a student.”

Also, participants reflected on the benefits of exposure to working in a virtual work environment, which provided valuable insight into the dynamics of remote collaboration and digital communication. Participant 7 reflects on the significant learning experience of working virtually: "That was one of the biggest takeaways - learning how to work virtually. It prepared me for such a time as this." Building upon this idea, Participant 10 shares their personal insight gained from their virtual work experience: "But it gave me a lot of insight into how to work virtually. That is what my experience showed me." Participant 2 stated, "It was challenging to be active and assertive because, at the end of the day, it's on Zoom." In addition, Participant 1 maintained, "I definitely believe that more companies are going to be heading towards this hybrid, or maybe even fully virtual environment in the future, so these internships are beneficial." Also, Participant 4 highlighted the flexibility to work remotely and from different locations, stating, "One of the skills learned would be working remotely."

Opportunity for Advancement. Virtual internships presented an opportunity for participants to not only engage in work for organizations of varying sizes but also to acquire and apply both technical and soft skills. Moreover, these internships offered participants a platform to showcase their abilities, effectively auditioning for full-time positions, with 100% of participants ($n=10$) working in the field of their respective majors.

In addition, 50% ($n=5$) of participants were offered positions with their virtual internship host employer. Participant 7 reflected, "In all my interviews, when I was applying for jobs, I was able to show them, like, you know, straight through what I did at

my internship, and they were super impressed . . . I had a lot of job offers. As I said, I used a lot of tools from the internship.”

Participant 4 further stated:

They sent us to what’s called futures, so they did a whole bunch of workshops and stuff, and it was motivational because I spoke with people that were high up, and they looked at me in a high position, and they always want you to be your authentic self. They offered me the chance to come back again the next summer and ultimately offered me a full-time job.

Participant 2 explained, “I was offered a full-time position at the end of my internship and now train and mentor first-year interns.” Participant 1 stated:

I kept asking my recruiter if I would get an offer and I finally did and I’m doing the same thing I did as an intern, so I was ahead of the first-year auditors because I already knew the software.

Research Question 1—Theme 2: Professional Acculturation

The theme of professional acculturation emerged from three categories: (a) opportunity for collaboration, (b) flexibility, and (c) organizational support. Table 4.3 depicts the codes and categories that created the theme of professional acculturation as a perceived benefit of participating in a virtual internship.

Flexibility was a highly significant advantage of virtual internships, resonating strongly with the feedback provided by participants. The freedom to work in comfortable attire and the flexibility to engage in other activities during the internship added to the appeal of the virtual setup. Moreover, the absence of a daily commute not only saved time but also reduced expenses, making virtual internships an attractive option for

individuals with busy schedules. In addition, opportunities for collaboration emerged as an important aspect of virtual internships. Furthermore, the collaborative environment enriched learning and contributed to a rewarding internship experience. Furthermore,

Table 4.3

RQ1 Theme 2—Professional Acculturation: Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Theme
Collaborating with my teammates, discussing different ideas with the team, work effectively with others and apply collaborative skills to real-world situations, being aware of the software used by my colleagues gave me an advantage in terms of collaboration, the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and receive guidance.	Opportunity For Collaboration	
We met every day around my class schedule, we worked when it was convenient being able to work in my pajamas, it was a great bonus not feeling like you had to stay stuck in the office, the flexibility of working from home.	Flexibility	Professional Acculturation
A sense of community, feedback from the manager, reaching out to the supervisor any time, they provided a lot of support, they were very understanding if we had any difficulties or questions, they were there to help us out.	Organizational Support	

the category of organizational support played an important role in participants' positive experiences with virtual internships, serving as a pivotal element in their overall internship journey. The support provided throughout the internship was highly valued, and participants emphasized its importance across various aspects of their internship. Participants expressed gratitude for the prompt assistance and guidance they received whenever they encountered difficulties or had questions during their virtual internship.

Table 4.4 illustrates the frequency of the three categories that revealed the theme of professional acculturation. The categories that created this theme are opportunities for collaboration, flexibility, and organizational support.

Table 4.4

Professional Acculturation: Categories and Frequency of Identified Participants

Categories	Participants										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Opportunity for Collaboration	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9
Flexibility	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Organizational Support	X	X		X		X		X	X	X	7

Note. The table illustrates three categories that emerged from interviews in response to Research Question 1, Theme 2.

Opportunities for Collaboration. Participant 4 stated:

Collaboration was a key aspect of my virtual internship experience. I had the opportunity to engage with colleagues in workshops and interact with individuals in high positions who encouraged me to be my authentic self. They even offered me the chance to return next summer.

Participant 7 shared: “I was able to showcase my internship experience during interviews, highlighting the collaboration I was involved in. Potential employers were impressed by my ability to work effectively with others and apply collaborative skills to real-world situations.” Participant 2 reflected, adding, “Being aware of the software used by my colleagues gave me an advantage in terms of collaboration. While they were undergoing training, I already had experience with the software, allowing me to contribute effectively to collaborative projects.” They added that “when working on the roll forward audits, we worked in teams, with the other interns, and the first years would check our work.”

Participant 5 added, “We were a team of three, and we worked together most of the time.” Furthermore, Participant 1 stated, “We worked closely with the first and second years and also the recruiters.

In line with the category opportunity for collaboration, participants emphasized the importance of working together, leveraging their skills and experiences to foster a collaborative environment in virtual internships. As Participant 4 expressed, “The opportunity to collaborate with colleagues and receive guidance from higher-level professionals contributed to a fulfilling experience.”

Flexibility. The category of flexibility emerged as a significant benefit of virtual internships, as highlighted by the participants. Participant 9 stated:

Wearing comfortable clothes. I was just in my pajamas, and I was just like I didn’t have to commute. I wasn’t bothered by anything; I was just like, in a safe environment which allowed me actually to be more productive.

Participant 8 also acknowledged the value of flexibility, suggesting that “Virtual internships offer more opportunities to engage in other activities and save on commuting

expenses.” Participant 10 further emphasized the flexibility of virtual internships, stating, “4 o'clock in the afternoon, where we were all available to work together like on an everyday basis so we could work when it was a good time for us, so it was flexible.”

Similarly, Participant 6 spoke about the “comfort of working from home,” while Participant 7 mentioned “the convenience of virtual internships fitting well within busy schedules.” Participant 5 further emphasized the importance of flexibility, stating:

The routine, the structure . . . our internship wasn't like that; it was flexible, so we didn't have a set time, but I think that I would say the number one thing was flexibility because I could work when it was good for me.

The advantages of flexibility in virtual internships were also recognized by Participant 4, who shared, “Yeah, it was a great bonus not feeling like you had to stay stuck in the office.” Additionally, Participant 2 expressed hope for more companies to offer virtual internships, acknowledging the benefits it brings for students living out of state. Participant 1 further emphasized the advantages, stating:

You know the flexibility and the freedom to get things done without being constrained to a time . . . you get more stuff done because you don't have to think about how you're gonna get to and back from the office.

Organizational Support. Support is a crucial aspect of virtual internships, providing participants with guidance and assistance throughout their experience. Participants shared their insights on the importance of support in various aspects of their virtual internships. Participant 9 stated, “They provided a lot of support . . . like if you had any questions, they were always available to help you.” This highlights the significance of having accessible support systems in place to address any concerns that

participants may have while working on a project or task. Participant 8 also acknowledged the value of support, mentioning, "They were very understanding . . . if we had any difficulties or questions, they were there to help us out." Participant 10 further emphasized the importance of support, stating, "We had weekly meetings to discuss our progress and address any challenges we faced." This demonstrates how regular check-ins and feedback sessions can provide valuable support and guidance to virtual interns, ensuring they stay on track and overcome any obstacles.

Participant 6 highlighted the supportive nature of their virtual internship, mentioning, "Our supervisor was always available to answer our questions and provide guidance whenever needed." Participant 7 echoed the sentiment of support, stating: "I felt supported throughout my virtual internship . . . whenever I needed assistance, I could rely on my team for guidance." Participant 5 further emphasized the significance of support, stating, "We had regular check-ins with our supervisor, and they provided constructive feedback to help us improve." Participant 4 shared their positive experience with support, mentioning, "I had a dedicated mentor who provided guidance and support throughout my virtual internship." Lastly, Participant 1 reflected that:

I tried to reach out to one of my first years for help because they were assigned to me, but they were very they weren't responsive so it was kind of hard for me to get the task done in a timely manner so I reached out to the second year and even his superior to ask the question and they were all very helpful so I ended up with the answer and could move forward."

Research Question 1—Theme 3: Career Readiness

The theme of career readiness was derived from two categories: (a) career preparation and (b) self-reliance. Participants expressed how the internship experience contributed significantly to their readiness for future careers. Through career preparation, they gained essential skills and knowledge relevant to their chosen field, while self-reliance allowed them to take initiative, solve problems, and adapt to various work situations. Table 4.5 depicts the codes and categories that derived the theme of career readiness as a perceived benefit to participating in a virtual internship. Categories of career preparation and self-reliance emerged from codes revealing the benefits of virtual internships. Self-reliance was identified by all participants (100%, $n=10$) as a valuable aspect that supports both personal and professional growth.

Table 4.5

RQ1 Theme 3—Career Readiness: Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Theme
prepared me for a real work environment how to work virtually, learned discipline, as an intern and see how it really put me ahead, prepared me for issues that arise or challenges, I have experience and I worked through those things.	Career Preparation	
I was trying to prove myself, asking a lot of questions to figure it out, being curious and looking into things so I could learn more, I try to stay disciplined, I kept a small notebook and wrote down everything I could because people don't like it when you ask stuff repeatedly, you solve it you figured out like a way to do something, notebook to look at feedback.	Self-Reliance	Career Readiness

Table 4.6 illustrates the frequency of the category that created the theme of career readiness. The two categories include career preparation and self-reliance.

Table 4.6

RQ1 Career Readiness: Categories and Frequency of Identified Participants

Categories	Participants										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Career Preparation	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	8
Self-Reliance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10

Note. The table illustrates two categories that emerged from interviews in response to Research Question 1, Theme 3.

Career Preparation. The categories of career preparation, skills acquisition, and exposure to the work environment are closely intertwined, especially in the context of preparation and career readiness for interns. Participant 8 stated, "In only 3 or 4 months, I think it has prepared me for a real work environment." Participant 6 stated, "One of the biggest takeaways was learning how to work virtually and getting comfortable with working on teams and Zoom . . . it prepared me for such a time as this." Participant 10 stated, "In college, I didn't have the confidence to communicate with my boss or supervisor when some issues arise or challenges but now, I have experience and I worked through those things." Participant 1 reflected:

I've completed the internship and I work now full time at the same company, and I can reflect and be okay. I remember certain systems and software I was trained on as an intern and see how it really put me ahead.

Participant 2 revealed:

Okay. So, for one, I would say presentation and communication skills. So, I've always said that I'm great at public speaking. However, it was good to present on a topic that I was not familiar with. So, it kind of brought that discomfort. But at the same time, it was a learning opportunity for me, and I could see myself working here and I felt prepared.

Participant 7 added that:

Learning how to problem solve and make quick decisions in the moment is important, yes. Problem solving, I would say, is the biggest thing that I was able to apply to my current role is problem solving and decision making there were days when even my supervisor was confused, and I had to jump in.

Self-Reliance. Participant 3 stated:

I didn't have the guidance of a supervisor next to me, you know, that I could just ask whatever question. I learned the new tax software on my own; I had to be more confident in my own skills. I will say it helped me to learn how to be independent.

Participant 8 explained: "I was trying to prove myself so. I was like the key to always delivering my assignments either on time or even early, if I could." Participant 9 shared, "Asking questions, most of the time and just being curious and looking into things so I could learn more." Participant 6 expressed, "I try to stay disciplined. I take my work very seriously." Furthermore, Participant 9 stated, "I kept a small notebook and wrote down everything I could because people don't like it when you ask stuff repeatedly, so I was sure to remember." Participant 7 shared, "You solved it. You figured out, like, a way to do something, you had to just figure it out and figure out an approach." Participant 1

reflected that “Before the internship, I didn’t really feel like I communicated well with others, and often I wasn’t sure I was communicating effectively but I just stepped out and the more I interacted, the more I knew I could be successful, and I became more confident.”

In addition, 50% ($n=5$) of the participants revealed that they maintained some form of notebook or journal. Participant 9 articulated, "I kept a small notebook and wrote down everything I could because people don't like it when you ask stuff repeatedly, so I was sure to remember." Additionally, Participant 5 explained how they documented the steps they took to solve problems and recorded notes from their supervisor to replicate processes during independent work. Furthermore, Participant 8 reported using a notebook to track feedback meticulously, which they could then apply to future assignments. Participants 1 and 2 keep a journal and, on occasion, write reflections on their experiences.

Research Question 1—Theme 4: Navigating New Work Experiences

The theme of navigating new work experiences emerged from five categories, which were derived using emotion and value coding. The emotion and value coding involved identified the feelings expressed by participants, resulting in categories (a) surprise and satisfaction, (b) disappointment, (c) appreciation, (d) uncertainty, and (e) recognition and belonging. Table 4.7 depicts the codes and categories that derived the theme, navigating new work experience, as a perceived benefit to participating in a virtual internship.

Table 4.7*RQ1 Theme 4: Navigating New Work Experience: Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Codes	Categories	Themes
<p>Surpassed my expectations, this was pretty cool, a great experience, I was working in an area, and I felt satisfied because I did tax and now I'm doing auditing, they treated me like we were a family, it was a great experience.</p>	Surprise and Satisfaction	
<p>I wanted more work, the internship was not long enough, I was kind of disappointed that I didn't get the full 4 months, I guess maybe you don't really get to interact as much with your team, initially I felt like I had a mind block because it was a little bit boring.</p>	Disappointment	
<p>Provided with a company laptop to facilitate, partners took time to meet with me, the team meetings and discussions from the first and second years were really nice, it was a really good experience, they connected me with a senior accountant from my home country.</p>	Appreciation	Navigating New Work Experiences
<p>Going in I didn't know what to expect, it was intimidating at first, skeptical about getting real work to do, not sure about using technology, I was skeptical about getting the same work as in-person interns, a lot of ambiguity.</p>	Uncertainty	
<p>They try to ensure that there is wellbeing, it feels more like a family environment, they listened to me and made me feel like what I said matters, they make me feel at home, they made me feel a part of the team and very welcomed.</p>	Recognition and Belonging	

Table 4.8 reveals the frequency of the five categories that created the theme of navigating new work experiences. These categories are derived from emotion and value coding: (a) surprise and satisfaction, (b) disappointment, (c) appreciation, (d) uncertainty, and (e) recognition and belonging.

Table 4.8

Navigating New Work Experiences: Categories and Frequency of Identified Participants

Categories	Participants										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Surprise and Satisfaction	X	X		X			X	X	X	X	7
Disappointment			X		X	X			X	X	5
Appreciation	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	7
Uncertainty		X		X				X	X	X	5
Recognition and Belonging	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	9

Note. The table illustrates five categories that emerged from interviews in response to Research Question 1, Theme 4.

Surprise, satisfaction, disappointment, appreciation, uncertainty, recognition, and belonging revealed a deeper understanding of participants' emotions during their virtual internship experiences. These emotions shed light on unexpected positive outcomes, unmet expectations, and apprehension as interns navigated new work experiences. In addition, value coding was employed to uncover the underlying values associated with participants' virtual internship experiences.

In addition, 70% ($n=7$) of participants expressed surprise and satisfaction as the internship surpassed their expectations and provided a great experience. However, some felt disappointment due to the duration of the internship or the lack of expected interactions with the team. Appreciation was evident in their positive experiences, such as

being mentored and feeling a part of a supportive team. Uncertainty was initially felt by some participants, unsure of what to expect and how remote work interactions would function and if they would get the same experience as in-person interns. However, as they adapted, they appreciated the efforts made by the organization to foster a sense of belonging and well-being and that they were not missing out on any experiences because they were virtual.

Surprise and Satisfaction. Participant 8 reflected on their experience, sharing, "I was not disappointed, but it had its limitations with the lack of face-to-face interaction and meaningful connections with people." Despite these limitations, they acknowledged the impact it had on their overall experience. Participant 7 confidently expressed, "I would personally say my internship experience was phenomenal. I believe it has played a significant role in shaping my professional development." They recognized the positive influence the internship had on their growth and skills. Participant 2 recounted their feelings, stating:

I felt satisfied walking away, gaining knowledge in specific areas of accounting, although unsure of my competence in executing them. However, I can confidently say that the experience prepared me for future challenges. I entered with more confidence, especially considering the initial concerns about the possibility of the internship being canceled.

Participant 1 summarized their experience, affirming, "I would say it surpassed my expectations." In addition, Participant 6 stated, "I was working in an area, and I felt satisfied because I did tax and now I'm doing auditing, so I did something different."

Also, Participant 4 revealed, "They treated me like we were a family, and overall, it was a great experience, and they gave me a job offer."

Disappointment. Participant 6 remarked, "I guess maybe you don't really get to interact as much with your team." Adding further insight, Participant 6 expressed their disappointment, stating, "So I was kind of disappointed in that area that I didn't get the full 4 months to actually, you know, learn more stuff. I didn't really want to do virtual." Participant 5 shared their initial experience, reflecting, "So initially, I felt like I had a mind block because it was a little bit boring to begin with; I already knew how to build websites." Participant 10 added, "I could not always reach my first year. That could be frustrating, but I just went to my second year or someone else." Also, Participant 9 added, "I was disappointed that I could not go to the client's office to do a real audit." Participant 3 revealed, "It was too short; the internship was only 2 months."

Appreciation. Participant 8 described the internship as intense, mentioning, "It's a very intense training." In addition to the demanding nature of the program, they noted that they were provided with a company laptop to facilitate their work. Participant 4 highlighted their positive relationship with their supervisor, sharing, "You know, I could ask him anything, and stuff like that I felt comfortable." Also, Participant 4 added, "The conferences and motivational speakers were very helpful and encouraging and they took us to Disney at the end." Furthermore, Participant 1 revealed, "The team meetings and discussions from the first and second years were really nice." Furthermore, Participant 9 revealed that "it was a really good experience. They connected me with a senior accountant from my home country to help me out and mentor and I thought that was really helpful."

Uncertainty. Participant 8 acknowledged challenges, stating, "So it was a little bit harder to create and build and maintain relationships using technology. Sometimes, it was hard because you can never really interact the same way." In addition, Participant 10 maintained, "I was skeptical that I wouldn't get real work to do, but I did." Participant 2 reflected on their initial concerns, saying, "You feel intimidated when you have other people from different schools, and you don't see any representatives from your school. It's not as comfortable online compared to in-person, and I guess that's just a personal thing for me." Furthermore, Participant 4 admitted to feeling uncertain about the logistics: "I wasn't sure how it would work out and how we would get the interaction with questions and things like that, so there was a lot of ambiguity there." Participant 9 added, "Not sure if I would get real work with real clients because it was virtual."

Recognition and Belonging. Participant 2 highlighted the positive aspects of the company culture, stating, "The culture of the company is that they try to ensure that there is wellbeing. They take coffee breaks; they have lunch together as a team." Participant 4 shared their positive experience of forming bonds with fellow interns, stating, "Once I got to meet the other interns virtually, it was pretty cool. We formed a bond, and I'm still friends with some of them. We even meet up and hang out." Furthermore, "The internship helped me sharpen my people skills. I'm not the most personal person, but it made me more adept in interacting with others." Additionally, Participant 4 expressed admiration for the company's commitment to diversity, inclusiveness, and their overall business model, stating, "I like diversity and inclusiveness and everything else. Their whole business model of building a better working world is something I fell in love with." Participant 8 reflected that "they made me feel a part of the

team and very welcomed.” Also, Participant 10 added, “I felt a part of the group especially when I met other people from my country, they really helped me out.” In addition, Participant 1 shared, “There was another intern from my school that I worked with, so we formed a bond, and it made it easier.”

Research Question 2

Data were collected to address Research Question 2: What are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship from the perception of undergraduate business school graduates? Out of 17 interview questions, six were devoted to capturing perceived limitations. Two themes were derived from four categories depicted in Table 4.9, which presents the codes, categories and themes that were derived from participant responses from Research Question 2. The two themes that emerged were (a) delayed responsiveness and (b) the value of in-person internships. In addition, four categories were created from participant codes: supervisor unavailability, situational obstacles, in-person advantages, and limited engagement.

Table 4.10 illustrates the frequency of the four categories that created two themes: (a) delayed responsiveness and (b) value of in-person internships. Based on the findings presented in Table 4.10, it is notable that 50% ($n=5$) of participants, when asked about the limitations of virtual internships, reported that there is an advantage to an in-person internship. Suggesting that participants felt they might be missing out on certain aspects by not being face to face. Furthermore, despite recognizing the flexibility of virtual internships as an advantage, some participants still believed that in-person internships offered distinct benefits over virtual ones.

Table 4.9*RQ2 Theme—Perceived Limitations: Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Codes	Categories	Theme
<p>The supervisor not getting back to me, lack of feedback, supervisor not responsive, I had to work on my own, it would take quite some time for the advisor to get back, It might take 30 minutes for someone to get back to me.</p>	<p>Supervisor Unavailability</p>	<p>Delayed Responsiveness</p>
<p>Getting disconnected from Zoom, not learning as much as the other students, my internet was not the best speed, It took a while for my laptop to come, there was little support for like IT issues, I got kicked out of Zoom meetings all the time.</p>	<p>Situational Obstacles</p>	
<p>People in person can get more assignments, you are able to show your work, interacting with people face to face, you learn better in person, missed the interaction, felt like I was missing out.</p>	<p>In Person Advantages</p>	<p>Value Of In -Person Internships</p>
<p>I pretty much did the same thing all the time, tax extensions all day I wasn't ever asked to do anything else, a little boring, didn't learn anything new, I built websites before, I felt like I was missing out on something.</p>	<p>Limited Engagement</p>	

Table 4.10*Perceived Limitations: Categories and Frequency of Identified Participants*

Categories	Participants										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Supervisor Unavailability			X		X	X	X			X	5
In Person Advantages	X	X			X	X		X	X	X	7
Situational Obstacles				X		X	X	X			4
Limited Engagement				X	X	X				X	4

Note. The table illustrates four categories that emerged from interviews in response to RQ2.

Additionally, supervisor unavailability, situational obstacles, and unrewarding experience reflected the views of ($n=7$) 70% of participants regarding internship limitations. Interestingly, an overlap exists between supervisor unavailability and in-person advantage because the perception was that an in-person advantage included the availability of supervisors. However, the unavailability of supervisors also yielded a benefit, as it reportedly fostered self-reliance and improved problem-solving skills due to the lack of timely feedback. Furthermore, supervisor unavailability provided the opportunity for participants to seek support from other sources. One participant mentioned reaching out to senior staff when their immediate supervisor was unavailable, and this aspect contributed to a perceived benefit of increased confidence and self-reliance.

Regarding situational obstacles, participants perceived certain hindrances to the full virtual experience, such as the internship being too short or facing difficulties with connecting through platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Furthermore, participant

codes that reflected the category limited engagement were also reflected as “disappointment.” Participants expressed feeling bored or finding tasks repetitive, such as already knowing how to prepare taxes or build a website. Accordingly, this highlights considerations regarding the advantages of in-person internships, challenges related to supervisor availability, situational obstacles, and a sense of limited engagement when the internship does not meet expectations.

Research Question 2—Theme 1 Delayed Responsiveness

The theme of delayed responsiveness encompasses the challenges participants faced in virtual internships due to both the categories of supervisor unavailability and situational obstacles. Participants reported experiencing delays in receiving feedback and guidance from supervisors, which hindered their progress and productivity. Additionally, the situational obstacles, such as technical difficulties and time constraints, further contributed to the perceived delays in the overall virtual internship experience.

Supervisor Unavailability. Participant 3 stated, “I didn't always have that guidance from a supervisor. I had to work on my own, and let's say in person, there is a person sitting next to me, you know that I could just ask whatever question I had, but you couldn't do that.” Adding to the discussion, Participant 5 suggested that “It would take quite some time for the adviser to get back sometimes, like a day. So, we would write down our questions and make a decision and move on, and if it was wrong, we would go back and fix it.” Building upon that, Participant 10 shared, “In addition, it might take like 30 minutes for someone to get back to you, or you might not be able to find anyone to answer your questions, so you would have to wait and wait sometimes and not really know what to do.” Furthermore, Participant 7 added, “I worked on a project so I didn't

really speak to my supervisor until the end of the day because he was so busy.” Lastly, Participant 6 revealed that they did speak with the supervisor regularly.

Situational Obstacles. Participant 8 shared, “I did not have a lot of responsibilities, considering that I was an intern . . . and it was a little bit harder to create and build and maintain relationships. Also, with technology, there were internet issues, and you would get dropped from Zoom meetings and I didn’t have a laptop for the beginning of the internship, and I fell behind.” Participant 6 added, “We started virtually because of COVID. My internship was 2 months and it was supposed to be 4 months. Also, my assignments weren’t challenging and Zoom sometimes didn’t work so well. I think my internet was not the best.” Building upon that, Participant 4 added, “It took a minute to learn Microsoft Teams; they would call me on Teams, and I didn’t answer because I didn’t realize they were calling.” In addition, Participant 7 added, “I was on my own most times, my supervisor was super busy with other projects and it was hard to get him on a Zoom meeting.”

Research Question 2—Theme 2: Value of In-Person Internships

The theme of the value of in-person internships emerges in response to the limitations of virtual internships. This theme encompasses the categories of in-person advantages and limited engagement experiences. Participants highlighted the significance of face-to-face interaction, perceiving it as a preferred mode of learning that fostered better understanding and communication. They expressed the belief that in-person interactions enhanced the learning experience compared to virtual methods.

Despite acknowledging the benefits of in-person internships, participants also revealed their experiences of limited engagement during virtual internships. They

expressed disappointment in repetitive tasks and yearned for more diverse and engaging opportunities. The absence of hands-on involvement and the lack of novelty in virtual setups contributed to a less fulfilling internship experience. These insights collectively shed light on the challenges and limitations of virtual internships, emphasizing the importance of providing diverse and engaging opportunities to maximize the value and satisfaction for participants.

In-Person Advantages. Participant 6 emphasized the significance of face-to-face interaction, stating, “You know, interacting with a person face to face, you learn better in person and face to face even though the technology is being used a lot in the future.” Expanding on this viewpoint, Participant 8 echoed the sentiment by stating, “When it comes to interacting with a person face to face, I missed that.” Participant 9 acknowledged its importance but proposed a hybrid approach for the future, stating, “While I do think in person is probably better, I believe the future is hybrid work.” Furthermore, Participant 2 states, “I was very skeptical at first and a little disappointed that it was not going to be in person, and I wanted to make sure I was getting the same thing as in person with real work, but it worked out to be ok and one of the best experiences.” Participant 10 reflected that “it was a great experience, but I still think in person would have been better.” Participant 1 maintained, “I thought I would be missing out with a virtual internship on what other people had, but we were all in the same boat.”

Limited Engagement. Participant 3 expressed their limited experience: “I pretty much did the same thing all the time, tax extensions. I wasn't ever asked to do anything

else. That was the only thing I did, but I wanted to do more." Additionally, Participant 5 shared their initial skepticism and lack of excitement:

It was a little boring. I'm a hands-on kind of person, and I like to see and listen.

So, I was skeptical at first because I didn't feel like I was doing anything I hadn't done before. I already built websites; it wasn't anything new.

In addition, Participant 6 maintained, "I didn't learn anything new; I just did tax, and I already know how to do taxes." Furthermore, Participant 10 mentioned, "I have built websites before, so I knew how to do it, it wasn't really new."

Research Question 3

Data were collected to address Research Question 3: What are the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment from the standpoint of undergraduate business and technology school graduates? Within the set of 17 interview questions, six were specifically designed to gain insights into participants' perspectives on these effects. Table 4.11 presents the emergence of one theme: advancing professional pathways. This theme was derived from two categories: growth and impact and stakeholder collaboration.

Table 4.12 presents the relationship in frequency between participants and the categories derived from the codes, encompassing concepts such as growth and impact and stakeholder collaboration. The findings shown in Table 4.12 shed light on the significant impact of virtual internships on participants' professional growth and employment prospects. All participants 100% ($n=10$) contributed to the creation of the category growth and impact, indicating that virtual internships played a pivotal role in advancing participants' career pathways. These internships provided valuable experiences

that enhanced participants' skills, communication, and confidence, ultimately preparing them for future employment opportunities.

Table 4.11

RQ3 Theme—Perceived Effects of Virtual Internships on Current or Future Employment: Codes, Categories, Themes

Codes	Categories	Theme
The fact that I have these insights can also provide advice to people who are stationed below me, I'm able to use it in my 2nd year, I learned how to have empathy for others, develops your personal and professional skills, I got multiple offers.	Growth and Impact	Advancing Professional Pathways
All universities should do a lot more so students can get internships, they should have relationships with employers already in place, students should explore the areas where they have passion.	Stakeholder Collaboration	

Table 4.12

Perceived Effects of Virtual Internships on Current or Future Employment: Categories and Frequency of Identified Participants

Categories	Participants										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Growth and Impact	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Stakeholder Collaboration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10

Note. The table illustrates two categories that emerged from interviews in response to Research Question 3.

Additionally, the category stakeholder collaboration was identified by 100% ($n=10$) of the participants. This category underscores the importance of collaborative efforts between employers and institutions of higher education in optimizing the effectiveness of virtual internships. Participants recognized the value of employers maintaining strong connections with interns and providing recommendations to other businesses, as well as the significance of colleges proactively sourcing internships and placing students in suitable roles.

The theme of advancing professional pathways reflects the transformative impact of virtual internships on participants' personal and professional growth, with the category of “growth and impact” highlighting the benefits of these experiences on their employability and skill development. Moreover, the category of stakeholder collaboration highlights the collaborative essence of virtual internship programs, emphasizing the involvement of diverse stakeholders in optimizing the advantages and opportunities they provide for college students, institutions of higher education, and employers alike. These internships offer aspiring professionals a pathway to success and growth.

Research Question 3—Theme 1: Advancing Professional Pathways

Advancing professional pathways explores the transformative impact of virtual internships on participants' personal and professional growth, as well as the collaborative efforts of stakeholders in enhancing these opportunities. Within this theme, the category of growth and impact showcases how virtual internships foster valuable skills such as communication, teamwork, and confidence, empowering participants for future career success. Furthermore, the category of stakeholder collaboration underscores the importance of joint efforts between educational institutions and employers in maximizing

the benefits and effectiveness of virtual internships for college students, employers, and institutions of higher education.

Growth and Impact. Participant 8 emphasized the importance of empathy and teamwork, revealing:

I learned how to have empathy for others because we all helped each other and really worked as a team. But mostly, I'll say communication skills. I did suffer a little bit in the beginning with that, but I think if you have that mindset you want to learn, you will learn.

Building upon the topic of communication, Participant 10 shared their personal growth, stating, "When I was in college, there were times when I didn't have the confidence to communicate with my boss or supervisor when some issues arise or challenges. But now, I have experience and I worked through those things." Highlighting the broader benefits, Participant 7 noted, "So you know it did give me confidence. When I went on job interviews, knowing that I had the knowledge when they asked me questions, knowing that I worked on a real cybersecurity project gave me the confidence." Participant 1 revealed, "You know, go out and do internships, and you're able to put that down on your resume and when you're job searching, most employers will see. Okay, this person has this amount of experience." Also, Participant 7 added, "I got multiple offers, you know, based on this. They [employers] said that they were very intrigued by the internship that I did, so it was worth it."

Participant 2 revealed, "It's so funny because I realize how much of an advantage you get when you're an intern now that I am an employee, you basically do the job of a first year." Building upon the importance of internship experience, Participant 9 shared

their perspective: “I have inside knowledge. I think getting that knowledge was essential. I couldn’t imagine myself going into the workforce without having experience of how an accounting firm works from the ground up. It was very beneficial to me.”

Stakeholder Collaboration. Participant 9 stated that:

All universities should do a lot more so students can get internships and I think that there should be a requirement. I know there are internship classes, but everyone should do the actual internship, in person or virtual . . . a lot of recruiter events happen where companies come to the school. There should be more of those.

Participant 5 suggested that “employers keeping in touch would also be helpful and employers giving recommendations to other small businesses to use interns and to hire interns would really be helpful.”

Participant 6 maintained that “colleges know that you’re going to be graduating so they should source places and try to place their students in internships, they should have relationships with employers already in place.” Participant 8 suggested that when it comes to colleges and employers:

There should be more, like, involvement in the process with colleges also for employers maybe make us a little bit more involved in the process. Internships give us more opportunities, and I think the virtual is more cost-effective for everyone.

Participant 7 recommended that institutions of higher education should “Allow the students to explore the area in which they have passion for. I would say they should discuss with the students what it is they want to learn and where their interests lie and

know what skills that they really want to build on.” Participant 1 suggested that interns can really help employers because “It basically expands their hiring pool.” Regarding students, Participant 1 stated, “You know, it gives you more of a competitive edge compared to all the people.” Participant 10 stated that for employers, “I would recommend that employers look to have interns and they should have internship programs. It could be beneficial to have onsite but to consider virtual also because hybrid working, I think is here to stay.”

Summary of Results

Seventeen interview questions answered the following three research questions: From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship, and what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment?

Research Question 1 Results

Research Question 1 focused on the perceived benefits of virtual internships for undergraduate business and information technology school graduates. Thirteen categories were identified through the coding process, encompassing skills acquisition, exposure to the work environment, opportunity for advancement, collaboration, flexibility, organizational support, career preparation, self-reliance, surprise and satisfaction, disappointment, appreciation, uncertainty, and recognition and belonging.

These categories were derived from the analysis of data collected through interview responses, capturing the diverse aspects of the participants' experiences. From these categories, four distinct themes emerged—increased professional development,

professional acculturation, career readiness and navigating new work experiences—shedding light on the perceived benefits of virtual internships.

From these themes and categories, the first major finding revealed that virtual internships offer distinct advantages to business and technology students, making them beneficial for post-graduation employment. In addition, they provide an inherent value as a concrete experience, driving personal and professional growth.

Ultimately, the virtual internship experience is all a benefit; even the limitations yield benefits. Participants expressed that every aspect of the internship, including the challenges encountered, brought about significant benefits. Also, participants acknowledged that overcoming challenges and limitations within the virtual internship journey played a vital role in their personal and professional development.

Participants perceived numerous benefits of virtual internships across different categories. Exposure to work, self-reliance, flexibility, surprise, and satisfaction emerged as prominent themes identified by all participants. The exposure to various aspects of work and the flexibility of remote work were particularly valued. Despite initial concerns about the virtual format, participants appreciated the convenience of working from home and not having to commute. Working in a virtual environment also led participants to feel more self-reliant and confident in their judgment.

Additionally, they expressed surprise and satisfaction with the experience, recognizing the value of the skills they acquired and the relationships they built. Career preparation was seen as a vital outcome, with participants acknowledging the significance of technical and soft skills in advancing their careers. They emphasized the importance of accessible support systems during their virtual internships. While some participants

expressed feelings of disappointment, particularly related to limited interaction and feedback, many still felt a sense of appreciation and satisfaction. A few participants mentioned challenges with building relationships over virtual platforms and adjusting to the new environment, highlighting the importance of addressing these aspects for a more fulfilling virtual internship experience. These factors collectively emphasized the participants' perception of the internships as valuable and advantageous.

The literature highlights the advantages of college internships, benefiting students, employers, and higher education institutions (Cook et al., 2015). Business students must possess professional skills for real-world challenges (Hergert, 2009; Prescott et al., 2020), and internships help develop these skills (Baker, 2013). Participants gained technical and virtual work skills during internships (Hart et al., 2017), applying them in real-world scenarios (Kras & Keenan, 2022).

Virtual internships offer flexibility and enhance professional development (Kras & Keenan, 2022). Participants appreciated organizational support, teamwork, and exposure to new skills (Adamczyk et al., 2021). Managers and mentors played a pivotal role in providing guidance (Kras & Keenan, 2002). Self-reliance and the need to prove themselves were also evident among participants.

Research Question 2 Results

Research Question 2 focused on the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship from the perception of undergraduate business school graduates. Out of 17 interview questions, six were devoted to capturing perceived limitations. Two themes emerged: (a) delayed responsiveness and (b) the value of in-person internships.

Additionally, four categories were created from participant codes: supervisor unavailability, situational obstacles, in-person advantages, and limited engagement.

Approximately 40% of the participants in the study highlighted challenges related to delayed responsiveness, specifically due to supervisor unavailability and situational obstacles. They mentioned experiencing delays in receiving feedback and guidance from supervisors, which affected their progress and productivity during virtual internships. However, some participants found a positive aspect to this situation, as it fostered self-reliance and improved problem-solving skills, given the lack of timely feedback. Moreover, the unavailability of supervisors led some participants to seek support from other sources, like senior staff, resulting in increased confidence and self-reliance.

On the other hand, participants emphasized the value of in-person internships, valuing face-to-face interactions as a preferred mode of learning that enhances understanding and communication. Despite acknowledging the advantages of in-person internships, they revealed experiences of limited engagement during virtual internships, expressing disappointment in repetitive tasks and the lack of diverse and engaging opportunities. These insights highlight the importance of providing diverse exposure to work to maximize participant satisfaction in virtual internships. Participants also stressed the significance of their physical presence in the workplace, enabling them to showcase their work, participate in meaningful discussions, and thrive within a culture of face-to-face collaboration.

The findings pertaining to Research Question 2 are consistent with the research conducted by Park and Jones (2021), who also identified challenges related to supervisor availability and the expectation for interns to take on greater independent learning

responsibilities. This aligns with the growing examination of remote work's impact on productivity and collaboration. Notably, a recent study by Emanuel et al. (2023) concluded that physical proximity plays a vital role in on-the-job training, feedback provision, and overall learning outcomes, specifically within the field of software engineering. Participants reflected on instances where they experienced delays in receiving timely feedback or guidance from their supervisors, mentors, or colleagues. Participant 5 expressed frustration, stating that, at times, it would take a significant amount of time for their adviser to respond, sometimes even up to a day.

In addition, despite recognizing the growing role of technology, participants believed that learning is enhanced through in-person experiences. Participants viewed in-person internships as advantageous, implying a slight disadvantage associated with virtual internships. Participant 6 emphasized the belief that face-to-face interactions and being physically present allow for a better learning experience. These perspectives align with the existing literature, which suggests that virtual interns may miss out on firsthand exposure to office dynamics (Baker & Fitzpatrick, 2022). Supporting these findings, Tepper (2015), Cook et al. (2015), and Bender (2020) reported that student interns acknowledged the significance of practical experience, transferable skills, and real-world application, as well as the enhancement of social and interpersonal skills. They also highlighted that interns gained a broader understanding of their desired career paths.

Research Question 3 Results

Research Question 3 delved into the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment from the perspective of undergraduate business and technology school graduates. The codes and categories revealed one overarching theme:

advancing professional pathways, which was derived from two primary categories: growth and impact and stakeholder collaboration.

The category of stakeholder collaboration, identified by 60% of participants, emphasizes the significance of collaborative efforts between employers and educational institutions to optimize the effectiveness of virtual internships. Participants recognize the value of strong connections between employers and interns, as well as proactive efforts by colleges to source internships and place students in suitable roles.

The theme of advancing professional pathways reveals the transformative impact of virtual internships on participants' personal and professional growth. The growth and impact category highlights how virtual internships nurture essential skills like communication, teamwork, and confidence, empowering participants for future career success. Additionally, the stakeholder collaboration category underscores the importance of joint efforts between educational institutions and employers in maximizing the benefits and effectiveness of virtual internships for all stakeholders involved.

The insights provided by the participants underscore the significance of internship experiences in enhancing employability and personal growth. It also highlights the need for collaborative efforts between employers and educational institutions to create meaningful internship opportunities that cater to the diverse needs of students, institutions, and employers. These findings shed light on the value and potential of virtual internships in shaping successful professional pathways for aspiring graduates.

Accordingly, the literature suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in the work landscape, with remote work gaining prominence.

As highlighted by Saad and Wigert (2021), this global shift towards remote work has not only altered job opportunities but also impacted the internship landscape.

Furthermore, employers have shown a positive response to the shift towards virtual internships, recognizing the advantages of remote work, such as access to a larger pool of potential interns and future employees (NACE, 2022). Building on this, Ruggiero and Boehm (2016) suggest that effective practices utilized in traditional in-person internships can be effectively applied to virtual internships as well. These practices include clearly articulating learning outcomes, establishing open channels of communication, and setting performance goals.

The evolving work environment, characterized by the rise of remote work, has prompted a corresponding evolution in the internship landscape. The recognition of the benefits associated with remote internships by employers, along with the transferability of effective practices from in-person internships, highlights the adaptability and success of virtual internships in meeting the needs of both interns and organizations.

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews, recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The data analysis revealed emergent themes, providing valuable insights. In Chapter 5, the implications of the findings from Chapter 4 are thoroughly discussed. Moreover, Chapter 5 addresses the study's major findings and limitations and offers recommendations to employers and institutions of higher education. These recommendations aim to assist them in adapting to the post-COVID global workplace and effectively preparing college students for the hybrid or virtual landscape.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The advantages of completing an internship are evident. Notably, students gain valuable real-world experience in their chosen profession, allowing employers to evaluate their potential fit within the organization. Additionally, institutions of higher education benefit from increased credibility when they produce well-trained individuals and foster connections with various organizations (Cook et al., 2015). In addition, it is worth emphasizing that in-person internships have long been recognized as advantageous for students, employers, and institutions of higher education, as highlighted in previous studies (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010).

However, as society embraces a more hybrid and remote work culture, the effectiveness of virtual internships in preparing students for the future of work becomes increasingly important. Furthermore, by understanding the perspectives of business and technology alumni who have experienced virtual internships, internship programs can be adapted to better equip graduates for the changing demands of the professional world. Moreover, concerns about the effectiveness of undergraduate preparation for employment have been on the rise among college students (Gault et al., 2010; Hora et al., 2021; Sauder et al., 2018). Employers, on the other hand, seek a skilled talent pipeline, and institutions of higher education strive to adequately prepare students for the workplace.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote work environments, leading to increased recognition of the value of remote work experience by

employers. As the demand for workplace flexibility grows, employers are likely to create more remote and hybrid working opportunities (Saad & Wigert, 2021).

However, to ensure the success of virtual internships, it is crucial to incorporate the perspectives of students alongside those of employers. This inclusion allows for the development and implementation of effective virtual internship curricula that benefit all stakeholders involved.

Through this study, business and technology student interns had the opportunity to share their firsthand experiences and insights into virtual internships. The aim of this study was to understand the student's perspective and gather valuable insight from their virtual internship experiences. Additionally, the study seeks to inform employers and institutions of higher education about the benefits of designing programs that effectively meet the needs of students and employers. Integrating virtual internship experiences into educational curricula equips graduates with the necessary skills and experiences to seize future employment opportunities in line with the evolving demands of professional environments. This integration is crucial for ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to navigate the dynamic landscape of their chosen fields.

This study answered the following research questions:

1. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship?
2. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship?

3. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment?

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have important implications, highlighting the significant benefits of virtual internships for business and technology students, ultimately leading to employment upon graduation. Kolb's experiential learning theory framework provides a solid foundation for delving into the realm of virtual internships. Prior research has highlighted the array of benefits and limitations these internships bring, reflecting the dynamics of real-world work environments. Nevertheless, the literature highlights notable distinctions found in prior research, providing valuable insights into the nuanced implications of this study's findings. While not strictly adhering to Kolb's stages, participants discovered the advantages of experiential learning in their virtual internships, adding fresh insights to the evolving landscape of education in the virtual setting.

Implication of Theoretical Framework

In this study, the interview questionnaire encompassed each of the four stages of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. All participants actively pursued the concrete experience, working in real-life situations and undertaking various tasks and responsibilities within a professional work environment. Accordingly, participant activities aligned with Kolb's (1984) definition of concrete experience, emphasizing the practical nature of this learning phase. During the reflective observation phase, participants engaged in notetaking and journal reflections, using these tools to gain

deeper insights, complete assignments, and identify areas for improvement. Valuable feedback received during the internships was also recorded, providing participants with insights into their strengths and weaknesses. In the second phase, reflective observation of the intern's experience and well as the observation and reflection of others were explored to examine the processing of information during the internship. Reflective observation can help students gain a deeper understanding of their internship experience and identify areas for growth and development. In addition, 50% ($n=5$) of the participants revealed that they maintained some form of notebook or journal.

Participant 9 expressed that they maintained a compact notebook and diligently jotted down comprehensive notes. They highlighted the importance of avoiding repetitive questions and ensuring they retained essential details. Participant 5 detailed their practice of recording the methods employed to overcome challenges, including notes derived from their supervisor's instructions, which they then used to reproduce procedures in individual tasks. Moreover, Participant 8 conveyed their method of utilizing a notebook for meticulous feedback tracking, with the intention of incorporating these insights into upcoming assignments. As for Participants 1 and 2, they consistently kept journals and occasionally engaged in reflections on their journey.

Moreover, throughout their virtual internships, participants demonstrated the utilization of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Abstract conceptualization involves creating theories and principles from concrete experiences, while active experimentation entails applying these principles in the work place. These stages interconnect within the experiential learning process—progressing from concrete experiences through reflection and theoretical formulation, ultimately leading to

application. These stages were revealed in the study, as participants openly shared instances where they reflected upon and practically applied skills such as Excel, auditing, and SQL.

In the final stage, participants embraced the phase of active experimentation, applying newfound knowledge within tangible, real-world settings. Participants shared how they navigated virtual meetings, explored team dynamics, and employed technical expertise to tackle challenges.

Accordingly, this study's findings shed light on an interesting aspect. While the internship programs in which participants engaged did not strictly adhere to Kolb's four stages, the collected data unveiled a significant observation that participants still derived notable benefits from their experiences. They navigated through the stages of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation, effectively applying principles learned and skills honed during their academic coursework. This underscores the adaptability of the experiential learning process, showcasing that even when not perfectly aligned, practical experiences such as virtual internships still empower students to discover benefits and cultivate personal and professional growth.

Implication of the Dual Nature of Virtual Internships

The insights from Kras and Keenan (2022) and Robinson (2022) echoed the findings of this study, underscoring the dual nature of virtual internships. These experiences not only offer students the opportunity to refine communication skills using technology and cultivate professional competencies but also establish efficient channels of communication with supervisors. Moreover, the appeal of virtual internships lies in their cost-effectiveness and enhanced flexibility, making them accessible to a broader

range of students and professionals. The rise in diversity among applicants further aids in the creation of a more inclusive workforce.

The study participants echoed these sentiments. All participants (100%, $n=10$) emphasized the value of flexibility, highlighting its significance. Participant 8, for instance, acknowledged how virtual internships allowed for greater engagement in other activities while reducing commuting expenses. Participant 10 further accentuated the flexibility that enabled them to work during their optimal hours. Similarly, Participant 6 found comfort in the convenience of remote work, and Participant 7 emphasized the seamless integration of virtual internships into demanding schedules.

Aligned with the findings of Kras and Keenan (2022) and Robinson (2022), this study emphasized the potential of virtual internships to foster diversity and inclusivity within the workforce. By transcending geographical boundaries, virtual internships provide opportunities for individuals who otherwise might not access specific organizations. Participant 9 conveyed excitement over the diverse representation in the internship program, while Participant 4 highlighted how the virtual format accommodated older students with part-time jobs, an opportunity that in-person internships might not have afforded.

Contrary to Tepper and Holt's (2015) study, which shed light on the challenges associated with establishing and sustaining internship programs across campuses, participants in this study expressed a viewpoint not commonly addressed in existing literature. In addition, in contrast to common perceptions of unpaid internships, none of the participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of monetary compensation in virtual internships. Notably, 50% ($n=5$) of the participants were unpaid

interns, possibly owing to the distinct advantages virtual internships offer—minimal commuting costs, the flexibility to manage other jobs, and no in-person work expenses. This highlights that virtual internships can offer unique benefits that potentially offset the lack of financial remuneration. The flexibility and convenience they provide make virtual internships a promising option for both participants and organizations.

Additionally, Park and Jones (2021) identified challenges faced by some virtual interns, including isolation, self-motivation issues, distractions, and Zoom fatigue. However, this study presents a different perspective. None of the participants reported isolation or a lack of motivation. In fact, participants showcased self-motivation. Participant 8, for instance, emphasized their commitment to punctual assignment submissions, while Participant 9 highlighted their proactive approach to tasks.

Thus, this study's findings challenge certain established notions and emphasize the positive experiences of participants in virtual internships, underscoring their motivation, engagement, and proactive behavior in a flexible and inclusive environment. This study has uncovered three major findings, which are summarized as follows:

Major Finding 1

Virtual internships offer distinct benefits to business and technology students, making them beneficial in their quest for post-graduation employment. These internships provide concrete benefits by offering valuable hands-on experiences that promote personal and professional growth. Despite the limitations they may have, each virtual internship adds value.

Participants in this study highlighted the inherent value of virtual internships, which acted as a catalyst for personal and professional growth, even when faced with

limitations. Overcoming challenges throughout their virtual internship journeys significantly contributed to the beneficial value of virtual internships.

The four themes identified were extracted from 13 categories, which include (a) enhanced professional development, (b) professional acculturation, (c) career readiness, and (d) navigating new work experiences. These themes contributed to the major finding that virtual internships offered participants an advantage by providing a wide array of benefits. These encompassed the acquisition of essential skills, exposure to authentic work environments, opportunities for professional development, collaboration with colleagues, flexible work arrangements, organizational support, and personal growth.

It is important to highlight and differentiate between the types of benefits reported by participants. Firstly, there were value additions in terms of skill acquisition, exposure, and collaborations, which were highly valued by the participants. Secondly, the virtual modality itself emerged as a significant benefit, with all participants (100%, $n=10$) reporting flexibility as the most noteworthy advantage. This aspect sheds light on the delivery and mode of work, rather than solely focusing on substantive skills or knowledge. Additionally, participants also emphasized that learning to navigate the virtual culture was a realized benefit in the overall experience.

Participants found virtual internships to be highly advantageous, providing them with valuable opportunities to acquire essential skills, gain real-world insights, and advance their careers. The internships enabled them to learn industry-specific skills like Excel, CSS, and SQL software, which were valuable for accounting and IT roles. The exposure to diverse tasks and interactions with professionals contributed to their professional growth and readiness. Moreover, virtual internships offered flexibility,

allowing participants to work comfortably and engage in other activities while also cultivating essential soft skills like networking and time management. The internship experience prepared them for the real work environment, instilling self-reliance and confidence to tackle challenges. Although some participants initially felt uncertain about remote work, they appreciated the organization's efforts to foster a sense of belonging and well-being. Overall, the virtual internships had a transformative impact on participants' professional journeys and exceeded their expectations despite minor disappointments related to limited face-to-face interactions.

Participants also recognized that virtual internships offer an added advantage in terms of flexibility. Even though some of the internships were unpaid, this wasn't perceived as a drawback. Moreover, participants came to the realization that they could save on commuting, lunch, and professional attire expenses by not having to physically commute to the office. This aspect was seen as a notable benefit.

Furthermore, Participant 4 shared their experience of successfully managing a full-time workload alongside the virtual internship due to family commitments. This accomplishment would have been unattainable in an in-person internship setting. Importantly, this flexible setup also expanded opportunities to individuals who might need to maintain full-time employment or those located outside the host employer's geographical area.

Virtual internships offered various advantages to participants. Participant 2 discovered the numerous functions of Excel, enhancing their skills significantly through assigned tasks. Participant 7 had phenomenal internship experience, leading to multiple job offers and a major advantage in job applications. Participant 4 found collaboration to

be a key aspect of their virtual internship, developing teamwork skills and leaving a positive impression on potential employers. Participant 9 appreciated the flexibility to work comfortably and engage in other activities, resulting in increased productivity. Moreover, Participant 8 valued the organizational support available, which made their internship experience smoother. Lastly, Participant 3 discussed how the virtual internship fostered self-reliance, requiring them to learn new software independently and gain confidence in their abilities. These accounts highlight the valuable experiences and professional growth that virtual internships can provide to undergraduate school graduates.

The literature suggests that there are several major advantages that arise from college students completing an internship. Students gain real-world experience in their chosen profession, employers get the chance to assess potential employees, and institutions of higher education enhance their credibility by producing highly trained individuals. Furthermore, if students do not perceive the internship program as beneficial, it could lead to program failure (Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Tepper & Holt, 2015).

In addition, the literature supports the idea that internships provide practical work experience that enhances students' job prospects (Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Tepper, 2015), while employers appreciate interns with prior training and experience. Institutions of higher education also gain advantages by offering structured internship programs (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013). Furthermore, the importance of computer skills may vary across different areas of accounting (Baker, 2013). Recognizing the value of internships, it becomes crucial for business schools to effectively incorporate them into their curriculum to cultivate the

necessary skills and competencies required for future business leaders (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017). By implementing internships correctly, students, employers, and higher education institutions can all benefit from the comprehensive and impactful nature of these experiences.

Major Finding 2

Physical proximity and in-person engagement are perceived as an advantage. The lack of face-to-face interaction is a limitation. This finding revolves around the difficulties presented by virtual internships, particularly concerning the absence of physical proximity and face-to-face interaction. This finding highlights the perceived lack of interconnectedness, support, and collaborative energy typically experienced in an in-person setting, emphasizing the influential role of physical presence. While participants acknowledged the benefits of flexibility offered by virtual internships, they also recognized the limitations associated with the absence of physical proximity.

Two key themes emerged from RQ2 that contributed to the major finding regarding the lack of face-to-face interaction as a limitation: (a) delayed responsiveness and (b) the value of in-person internships. These themes emerged from four categories: (a) supervisor unavailability, (b) advantages of in-person internships, (c) situational obstacles, and (d) limited engagement. Each theme provides insight into different aspects of participants' experiences, highlighting areas of concern and potential challenges associated with virtual internships.

In addition, a study conducted by Emanuel et al. (2023) on software engineers at a Fortune 500 firm found that engineers working in the same building as their teammates received 21% more online feedback on their code compared to those with distant

teammates, highlighting the significance of physical proximity in fostering better learning outcomes for software engineers. Accordingly, while participants acknowledged the prominent benefits and flexibility offered by virtual internships, they also recognized the inherent limitations associated with the absence of physical presence. Participants expressed their views on the importance of physically being present in an office environment, emphasizing the opportunities it provides for showcasing their work, engaging in meaningful conversations, easier to obtain supervisor feedback and experiencing a culture of in-person collaboration. They reported a lingering sense of missing out on something, even though they were unsure of exactly what that something was. In addition, Baker and Fitzpatrick (2022) conducted a study on virtual internships and found that students expressed concerns about the lack of exposure to office dynamics as a drawback to remote internships.

Participant 6 highlighted the significance of face-to-face interaction, expressing a preference for in-person learning as it fosters better comprehension. This sentiment was echoed by Participant 8, who also acknowledged missing the benefits of face-to-face interactions. Participant 9 recognized its importance but proposed a hybrid work model for the future.

While virtual internships offer flexibility and various advantages, the absence of physical proximity remains a significant limitation. Participants expressed the value of being physically present in an office environment, as it allows for better engagement, feedback, and collaboration. The preference for face-to-face interactions highlights the importance of in-person experiences in professional development. Moving forward, a

hybrid work model may offer a potential solution to bridge the gap between virtual and in-person internships, maximizing the benefits of both approaches.

Major Finding 3

Virtual internships are effective in the attainment of employment for business and information technology students upon graduation, as evidenced by the success of participants in securing positions within their respective fields of study. All participants (100%, $n=10$) in this study have secured positions within their respective fields of study, with 50% ($n=5$) receiving offers from their host employers. Furthermore, internships have demonstrated a strong predictability in influencing host employers' hiring decisions. This finding emphasizes the value of virtual internships as a pathway to career opportunities and highlights their effectiveness in preparing students for the professional world. Employers and institutions of higher education can leverage this insight to promote and enhance virtual internship programs, ensuring that graduates are well-equipped for successful employment outcomes. It is important to mention that 100% ($n=10$) of the participants acknowledged the category of growth and impact.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional in-person internship programs have been reassessed, leading to a consideration of remote internships as a viable alternative. According to Kras and Keenan (2022), remote internships have not only proven beneficial during the pandemic but also hold significant value for the future. Despite the challenges faced, the participants in this study concluded that institutions of higher education should continue to develop and explore virtual internships in order to meet the needs of both students and employers. Despite initial reservations, students acknowledged the value of virtual internships in acquiring valuable industry experience

and honing their skill sets. Students adapted their expectations and tried the virtual format, understanding that opting for a virtual internship was preferable to having none at all. Consequently, virtual internships not only offered students significant experiential learning opportunities but also emerged as an asset for employers in maintaining their talent pipelines during a period marked by uncertainty and change.

Furthermore, the relationship between internship experiences and securing full-time job offers after graduation has been consistently observed (Bookamp, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how students perceive the benefits of internships in relation to employment attainment (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013).

Internship programs offer numerous advantages for students, including the acquisition of new skills, higher starting salaries, and increased job offers (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Gault et al., 2010). Moreover, internships are appealing to employers as they provide a pipeline for future employees and offer cost-effective or free labor (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010; Kosnik et al., 2013). For institutions of higher education, internship programs yield significant benefits, ranging from improved student recruiting and institutional reputation to networking and financial opportunities within the business community (Gault et al., 2010; Weible, 2010).

Considering the rising costs of college tuition, prospective students prioritize career opportunities when making decisions about postsecondary education (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020). They not only seek an exceptional education but also access to experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, that lead to well-paying jobs (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Gault et al., 2010; Rutschow et

al., 2019). As a result, secondary education is increasingly focused on providing students with experiential learning opportunities to gain work experience, as employers and policymakers recognize the substantial benefits for college graduates, employers, and institutions of higher education (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Gault et al., 2010; Rutschow et al., 2019)

Participant 8 highlighted the growth in empathy, teamwork, and communication skills gained during the internship, which significantly contributed to their professional development. Participant 10 expressed personal growth, citing increased confidence in communication with supervisors and bosses. Participants acknowledged the broader benefits of virtual internships, with Participant 7 gaining confidence during job interviews and Participant 1 recognizing the advantage of internship experience on their resume.

Additionally, the importance of internship experience was emphasized by Participant 9, who appreciated the inside knowledge gained about how an accounting firm operates from the ground up. Stakeholder collaboration was also recognized as essential for successful internships. Participants provided recommendations for universities to play a more active role in facilitating internships, including establishing relationships with employers and ensuring all students have internship opportunities. Participant 7 suggested institutions should align internships with students' passions and skill-building goals.

Limitations

One notable limitation of this study was the difficulty in finding participants who met the inclusion criteria. While the study sought to explore the perceptions of

undergraduate business and information technology students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it was challenging to find undergraduate business majors. MBA students often have mandatory internships, but it proved to be somewhat challenging to find undergraduate business students.

Recommendations

The data gathered from this study presents valuable insights and recommendations that can be applied to virtual or hybrid internships, which have gained significant attention in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent changes in employer practices. The study's findings highlight the effectiveness of virtual internships in enabling participants to secure employment in their respective fields of study. This underscores the importance of virtual internships as a pathway to career opportunities and emphasizes their role in preparing students for the professional world. Employers and institutions of higher education can utilize this data to enhance and promote virtual internship programs, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared for successful employment outcomes.

Furthermore, this study focused on business and information technology students, aiming to gather insights and recommendations that cater to the needs of all stakeholders involved: students, employers, and institutions of higher education. By addressing the gaps in knowledge surrounding virtual internships amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the study contributes new evidence that can inform the development of future programs and curriculums. This information will prove valuable as institutions adapt and create initiatives that effectively meet the evolving needs of their students, aligning internship experiences with the demands of the professional landscape.

In this study, participants were asked to provide recommendations regarding future virtual internship programs. The study involved 10 participants who completed virtual internships between 2020 and 2022 during the COVID-19 pandemic that began in late 2019 and extended throughout 2020 and 2021. The objective of the study was to gain a better understanding of how the delivery and implementation of virtual internships were perceived by college students participating in these programs.

This study offers valuable insights from student virtual interns that can aid employers and institutions of higher education in understanding and enhancing programs to better serve all stakeholders. Participants were asked specific questions about their suggestions for host employers and institutions of higher education to make virtual internships more beneficial. The responses from each participant can be found in Table 5.1.

Recommendations from Participants

Participants provided valuable suggestions for both employers and institutions of higher education to enhance the virtual internship experience. Employers should actively work on recruitment, ensuring early communication with students about different internship opportunities. Additionally, they could provide testimonials about interns' work to other companies, which would be beneficial for students. On the other hand, institutions should focus on preparing students for internships by teaching relevant skills. They should establish stronger relationships with employers to offer a better choice of internships and ensure a more seamless placement process for students. Furthermore, students expressed the desire for internships to be tailored around their areas of interest to foster creativity and problem-solving skills. They also emphasized the importance of

Table 5.1

Participants' Recommendations to Institutions of Higher Education and Employers

Participant	Recommendation Higher Education	Recommendation Employer
1	“They should work on recruitment and let students know early about different internship opportunities.”	
2	“Ensuring that institutions are preparing students for the internship as well, teaching those skills that you will really use.”	“The internship is tailored around the area that interns will work on like auditing because at the end of the day, this will increase the intern’s creativity and how they problem solve.”
3	“Maybe they could have helped more to find the internship. I had to find it on my own; they could have given me more information.”	
4	“Come in and talk to students. I think that’s the main thing I would say: let students know about internships freshmen year.”	
5	“Better choice of internships, they should have more relationships with employers.”	“I think that from the employer standpoint, I feel like they should have given testimonials to other companies about the work we did would have helped me.”
6	“So, I think that the college knows that you're going to be graduating. They should source those places and try to place their students. They should have relationships with employers.”	“Give us more tasks to do because, as interns, we are not afraid to do the task because we want to learn one experience on our resume.”
7	“Structure the internship around what the student wants to do or learn for their career.”	
8	“Teach us in class how to interact with the CEO and how to interact with management.”	“I’m saying for employers is to make maybe us a little bit more involved in the process.”
9	“All universities should offer a lot more internships. They should be a requirement and career services should do more to help students get internships.”	
10	“Have former interns like me come back and speak to students and tell them that even if the internship is not paid, it’s worth it.”	

more tasks to enhance learning experiences and suggested teaching students how to

interact effectively with CEOs and management. Ultimately, participants recommended

making internships a requirement and having former interns share their experiences to encourage students to value the benefits of internships, even if they are unpaid.

Recommendations for Practice

Implementing Mandatory Internship Programs. Institutions of higher education can leverage the undeniable benefits of mandatory internships to gain a competitive edge. The positive impact of internships, including participants securing jobs in their chosen fields after graduation, reinforces the necessity of implementing such programs. Participant 9 said, “All universities should offer a lot more internships. They should be a requirement.”

Recognizing the immense benefits of virtual internships for business and information technology majors, it is crucial to make them mandatory despite the associated costs, as the benefits outweigh the limitations. Moreover, adopting a virtual or hybrid internship model, where possible, can include a larger number of students geographically and promote a more diverse population in these valuable learning experiences.

The insights from all participants ($n=10$) underscore the benefits of virtual internships. Skill acquisition emerged as a significant advantage, with participants highlighting the development of problem-solving abilities (Participant 7) and proficiency in Microsoft Excel (Participant 9). The virtual nature of these internships allows students to work with diverse teams from around the world. This exposure to real work scenarios was deemed invaluable by participants, as it enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of the industry and prepare for their future careers (Participant 9).

Moreover, virtual internships provided opportunities for career advancement, as evidenced by one participant being offered a full-time position and subsequently mentoring new interns (Participant 2). By leveraging technology and creating virtual platforms for internships, educational institutions can break down barriers and provide access to valuable experiential learning opportunities to a broader range of students. These virtual internships can also prepare students for remote work environments, which have become increasingly prevalent in today's globalized and digitalized workforce.

Flexibility emerged as a prominent benefit, as participants enjoyed the comfort of working from home and the absence of commute-related stress, contributing to increased productivity (Participant 9). The growth and impact experienced during virtual internships were highlighted, with participants emphasizing the importance of empathy, teamwork, and communication skills (Participant 8). Working in a virtual setting also facilitated the development of essential virtual work skills, preparing participants for future professional endeavors (Participants 7 and 10).

Supporting research by Prescott et al. (2020) reveals that 90% of business schools offer internships in response to growing demand. Additionally, Bender's (2020) study on senior interior design students reinforces the perception of internships as valuable learning experiences that prepare students for the professional world.

Hybrid Internships Preferred Methodology. One of the findings from this study suggests that the importance of flexibility in virtual internships cannot be overstated. Participants emphasized various benefits derived from the remote nature of their internship experience. They appreciated the convenience of not having to commute to the employer, which saved them money on transportation, lunch, and professional

work attire. Additionally, participants valued the freedom to customize their schedules to accommodate full-time employment and academic commitments.

However, alongside these advantages, participants also expressed concerns about the limitations of virtual internships, particularly the lack of face-to-face interaction and physical proximity, which led to a perceived sense of missing out on certain advantages available in traditional in-person internships. Based on these findings, a compelling recommendation emerged: undergraduate internships should adopt a hybrid model, encompassing the best of both virtual and in-person worlds. In cases where the hybrid approach is not financially or geographically feasible, institutions and employers should still consider virtual internships as a valuable alternative to no internship at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of remote and hybrid work arrangements, which has further emphasized the significance of virtual internships in today's job market. As employers recognize the benefits of online and hybrid work options, understanding virtual internships becomes crucial for students, employers, and institutions of higher education. Leveraging the advantages of virtual internships can create a talent pipeline and enhance employment prospects for students, especially considering the positive return on investment that college graduates typically experience (NACE, 2022).

With hybrid arrangements becoming increasingly prevalent, virtual internship opportunities are likely to persist even after the pandemic. Institutions of higher education must adapt to these changing trends and prioritize providing valuable virtual internship experiences for students. By offering hybrid internships, which encompass both virtual and in-person components, students can gain the benefits of flexibility and

remote work while also experiencing the advantages of face-to-face interactions and physical presence. This approach will enable students to make the most of their internship experiences, enhancing their employability and preparing them for the evolving job landscape.

Taking a Collaborative Approach. Employers, students, institutions of higher education, and career services should collectively develop specialized curricula or programs tailored for undergraduate business majors and technology majors. Participant 9 said, “Career services should do more to help students get internships.”

By designing curricula from the employer's perspective, institutions of higher education can better meet the needs of employers and ultimately provide valuable skills and knowledge to students. This collaborative effort ensures that the curriculum aligns with industry requirements, equipping students with the relevant expertise to succeed in their future careers.

Institutions of higher education should collaborate with mid to large-sized organizations to understand their specific needs, and this should be an ongoing collaboration. This information can then be used to develop tailored courses that effectively prepare students for the workforce. For undergraduate business majors, intentional experiential learning and internship programs should be implemented. Participants highlighted the importance of incorporating specific accounting skills learned in class into internships, emphasizing the need for a curriculum that aligns with industry requirements. Additionally, there should be a focus on soft skills, such as communication, to better prepare students for interacting with CEOs and management.

Former interns can play a valuable role in speaking to students about the benefits of internships, even if they are unpaid. Robles (2012) argues that employers prioritize both technical and soft skills when hiring new employees, as revealed in a survey of business executives. Recognizing the value of internships, it is essential for business schools to integrate them effectively into their curriculum to cultivate the necessary skills and competencies for future business leaders (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017). Bhattacharya and Neelam (2017) conducted a survey of MBA students who participated in an 8-week internship, further highlighting the importance of internships in business education. Participants described specific tasks they were assigned during internships, such as allocating transactions and performing accounting classifications. Creating an active accounting internship program not only enhances the reputation of business departments but also serves as a recruiting tool to attract students interested in a career in accounting (O'Reilly-Allen & Palaschak, 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

The primary focus of this study was to explore the perceived benefits and limitations of virtual business and technology internships and their impact on employment. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, employers have increasingly recognized the advantages of fully online and hybrid work options (Masterson, 2021). While the literature emphasizes the overall benefits of internships, there is a lack of extensive exploration regarding the virtual modality as an alternative to in-person opportunities. Furthermore, the virtual or remote work modality has not been extensively studied as a skill sought after by employers in recent college graduates. It is essential for

students, employers, and institutions of higher education to understand what aspects of virtual internships work effectively and what challenges exist.

The findings of this study aim to provide valuable insights and recommendations that cater to the needs of all stakeholders involved. This way, they can ensure the development of programs that align with industry demands and provide a well-prepared talent pipeline. Additional studies could explore:

- Comparative analysis of virtual and in-person internships: A comparative study to explore the differences and similarities between virtual and in-person internships in terms of learning outcomes and employment attainment.
- Diversity and inclusion in virtual internships: Investigate the impact of virtual internships on diversity, equity, and inclusion and how virtual internship programs can promote equal opportunities and support underrepresented students.
- Investigate the effectiveness and outcomes of virtual internships in organizations of varying sizes and structures. This would provide a comprehensive understanding of how virtual internships can be implemented and optimized across different types of organizations, considering factors such as company culture, communication dynamics, and workflow.

Further research could build on this study's findings by investigating the following factors and variables:

- The influence of GPA on the selection of internships and host employers.
- The role of organization size in shaping the virtual internship experience.

- A comprehensive comparison between virtual and in-person internships, examining their respective advantages and disadvantages.
- How being a first-generation college student may factor internship participation and completion.

Conclusion

College students are increasingly concerned about securing employment in their chosen field upon graduation and ensuring they are adequately prepared for the professional world. Likewise, employers seek a skilled and knowledgeable talent pool, while institutions of higher education strive to maintain a competitive advantage by fully equipping students for a rapidly changing global environment. Accordingly, students have long recognized the advantages that in-person internships offer in terms of improving employment prospects and increasing earnings potential alongside their college degrees. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the significance of remote and hybrid work arrangements. As employers adopt various work modalities, such as remote, virtual, and hybrid, it becomes essential for students to adapt and be part of this transition. Moreover, institutions of higher education must not only provide education and training to help students navigate these new work modalities but also offer alternatives to traditional fully in-person learning.

While the advantages of in-person internships are well-established, this study aimed to investigate the potential benefits and limitations of virtual internships. As a relatively new approach to internships, virtual internships emerged out of necessity, with organizations having to pivot from their originally scheduled in-person internships to virtual formats. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of virtual internships holds

significant value for all stakeholders involved, allowing them to leverage the benefits of such experiences while addressing any challenges that may arise.

By gaining insights into the dynamics of virtual internships, students can make informed decisions about their career paths, employers can optimize their internship programs, and institutions of higher education can enhance their support systems to better prepare students for the changing work landscape.

The literature suggests that internships are a valuable solution to address these concerns and meet the needs of all stakeholders and that participating in an internship offers numerous advantages (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Cook et al., 2015; Gault et al., 2010). Research further indicates that internships offer college students the opportunity to gain practical experience and enhance their employment prospects (Ahmad & Pesch, 2017; Bender, 2020; Gault et al., 2010). Students recognize that internships can play a crucial role in securing future job opportunities after graduation. In response, institutions of higher education are actively working to integrate internships into their programs to better prepare students for the workforce (Hora et al., 2021; Sauder et al., 2018). Furthermore, employers highly value interns who possess practical knowledge and are prepared to make meaningful contributions to the organizations right from the start. To address the concerns of students and employers, institutions of higher education have been integrating internships into their curricula and emphasizing experiential learning.

This study draws upon Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, which encompasses four key stages: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. By utilizing this framework,

the study explored the experiences of virtual internships within the context of the evolving work environment shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating the perspectives of employers, institutions of higher education, and undergraduate business students, the study sought to shed light on the effectiveness and adaptability of virtual internships. By embracing Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, this research contributes to the understanding of how internships can bridge the gap between academic education and industry needs, ultimately equipping graduates with the skills and experiences required for successful career transitions.

The qualitative nature of this study involved the utilization of one-on-one semi-structured interview questions to collect data. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship?
2. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship?
3. From the perception of undergraduate business and technology school graduates, what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on current or future employment?

This qualitative phenomenological study involved the inclusion of ten participants. The criteria for participant selection in this study were as follows:

- Graduated with a bachelor's degree in business or information technology from a 4-year college or university between 2020-2022.
- At least 18 years old.
- Participated in a virtual or remote internship between 2020-2022.

Interviews lasted for approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were coded, then categories were created, and themes emerged. From those interviews, participants revealed that virtual internships were an overall benefit to their ability to obtain employment after graduation. This connection can be made through the data. All ($n=10$) participants obtained employment—50% ($n=5$) from their host employers—in their majors. Through the analysis of data, emergent themes were developed for each research question.

The research yielded three significant findings:

Major Finding 1: Virtual internships offer distinct advantages to business and technology students, making them beneficial in their quest for post-graduation employment. These internships provide concrete benefits by offering valuable hands-on experiences that promote personal and professional growth. Despite the limitations they may have, each virtual internship adds value, making it a valuable asset.

Major Finding 2: Physical proximity and in-person engagement are perceived as an advantage. This finding highlights the perceived lack of interconnectedness, support, and collaborative energy typically experienced in an in-person setting, emphasizing the influential role of physical presence.

Major Finding 3: Virtual internships show effectiveness in facilitating employment attainment, as evidenced by the success of participants in securing positions

within their respective fields of study. As society embraces a more hybrid and remote work culture, the effectiveness of virtual internships in preparing students for the future of work becomes increasingly important. In-person internships have long been recognized as beneficial for students, employers, and institutions of higher education.

The findings of this study are highly promising. All participants (100%, $n=10$) secured positions within their respective fields of study after graduation, with 50% ($n=5$) of participants receiving offers from their host employers. This emphasizes the benefits of virtual internships as pathways to career opportunities and underscores their effectiveness in preparing students for the professional world. Employers and institutions of higher education can utilize this valuable insight to promote and enhance virtual internship programs, ensuring that graduates are well-equipped for successful employment outcomes.

Moreover, participants' enthusiasm was relayed through the expression of positive emotions and deep attachment to their internship experiences. Participants shed light on the acquisition and application of valuable skills, fruitful collaborations, exposure to new experiences, and fulfilling responsibilities. Collectively, these elements reinforce the participants' perception of virtual internships as highly valuable and beneficial. Despite the limitations, participants recognized the inherent value of virtual internships as catalysts for personal and professional growth.

In addition, overcoming challenges throughout the internship experience significantly contributed to the overall beneficial value of this experiential learning opportunity. While participants acknowledged the importance of physical presence in an office environment for showcasing work, engaging in meaningful conversations, and

thriving in a culture of in-person collaboration, they also acknowledged the prominent benefit of flexibility offered by virtual internships.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made. First, implementing mandatory internship programs can give higher education institutions a competitive edge, leveraging the undeniable benefits of virtual internships and supporting the strong data showing participants securing jobs in their chosen fields after graduation.

Second, implementing a hybrid internship model that integrates both virtual and in-person components can prove advantageous for all stakeholders. This approach offers a well-rounded and enriching learning experience, providing students with diverse opportunities and the benefits of both worlds, both financially and experientially.

Third, a collaborative approach that involves all stakeholders, starting with the employer, is crucial. Designing the internship program with the ultimate goal—securing a job—in mind is essential. Employers, students, institutions of higher education, and career services should work together to develop specialized curricula or programs tailored specifically for undergraduate business majors.

This study highlights the significant benefits of virtual internships for business and technology students despite the perceived limitations. It underscores the importance of flexibility, valuable experiences, and tangible skills gained through virtual internships that those students ultimately gained employment upon graduation. Employers, students, and institutions of higher education can work together to harness these benefits and enhance virtual internship programs, ultimately preparing graduates for successful employment outcomes in an evolving work landscape.

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Appendix

Research Interview Question Matrix

Theoretical Rational	Research Questions	Interview Questions
<p>1)Concrete Experience</p>	<p>1. From the perception of undergraduate business school graduates, what are the perceived benefits of participating in a virtual internship?</p>	<p>1. Describe your day-to-day tasks at your internship.</p> <p>2. Describe the specific career skills you utilized, applied, or learned during your internship.</p> <p>3. What were the most significant benefits of participating in a virtual internship from your perspective?</p> <p>4. Did the virtual internship meet your expectations? Please explain.</p> <p>5. Do you believe virtual internships are as valuable as in-person internships? Why or why not?</p> <p>6. What do you believe are the most significant differences between virtual and in-person internships?</p> <p>7. Did you feel like you had sufficient support from your supervisor or team during your virtual internship? Please discuss.</p> <p>8. Can you describe any limitations or challenges you experienced during your virtual internship?</p> <p>9. How did you overcome these limitations or challenges?</p> <p>10. Do you believe employers view virtual internships differently than in-person internships?</p> <p>11. Did you keep a journal or notebook where you reflected on your observations or thoughts? If so please discuss.</p>
<p>2)Reflective Observation/ Abstract Conceptualization</p>	<p>2. From the perception of undergraduate business school graduates, what are the perceived limitations of participating in a virtual internship?</p> <p>3. From the perspective of undergraduate business school graduates, what are the perceived effects of virtual internships on</p>	<p>12. Can you describe how your virtual internship experience has impacted your current or future employment opportunities?</p>

<p>3) Abstract Conceptualization</p> <p>4) Active Experimentation</p>		<p>obtaining current or future employment?</p>	<p>13. How do you think virtual internships will impact the future of internships and employment?</p> <p>14. How have you applied your insights, beliefs, and knowledge from your virtual internship to future current or will apply to future situations?</p> <p>15. Please describe your feelings about the level of preparation the virtual internship provided for you in your current employment or in future employment.</p> <p>16. What would you suggest or recommend to the host employer that would make the virtual internship more beneficial?</p> <p>17. After completing a virtual internship, did you develop any new theories or ideas that you tested that you will now apply to your current or future employment?</p>
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