The Price of Unpaid Internships

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Obtaining unpaid summer internships is increasingly popular among undergraduates, who feel pressure to accumulate as much work experience as possible during college to improve their chances of securing a good job after graduation. Some students are willing to accept unpaid internships because they anticipate these experiences will enable them to gain insight into the inner-workings of a particular field, learn professionally valuable skills, and expand networking opportunities. Others are compelled to saturate their resumes with unpaid internships due to feelings of anxiety and desperation related to job insecurity in the current economy. These are just some of the factors that have contributed to the considerable growth of unpaid internships in recent years. According to estimates by the Intern Bridge research firm, undergraduates currently undertake over 1 million internships annually, half of which are unpaid (Greenhouse 2013). Reports published by Intern Bridge suggest that 70-75 percent of students at four-year colleges now undertake one or more internships, which is at least double the amount in the early 1980s (Perlin 2011: 26). This upsurge has raised concerns within the media, federal government, and Supreme Court regarding the potential for the illegitimate exploitation of unpaid interns, as well as the biased nature of unpaid internships against low-income students who cannot afford to work without pay. Furthermore, the rising popularity of arrangements in which students receive college credit for internships has generated public scrutiny and discord within certain academic institutions about the educational significance of internships, or lack thereof.

The Legal Standing of Interns: Underpinning and Implications
The legal status of unpaid internships is grounded in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), the federal law that defines and protects the rights of American workers (Perlin 2011: 62). Braun (2010) explains that the FLSA is a national statute administered by the Wage and Hour Division (WHD) of the Department of Labor (DOL) requiring employers to pay employees the federally mandated minimum wage. The original version of the FLSA broadly defined employ as “to suffer or permit to work,” and did not address the status of interns (US DOL). The Supreme Court helped to establish a basis for determining whether an intern qualifies as an employee with the Walling versus Portland Terminal Co. case in 1947. In this case, the Court ruled that the trainees were not legitimate employees entitled to minimum wage, because they obtained an advantage from the training program, and their work did not benefit the railway company or displace regular employees (Braun 2010).

This decision influenced the development of the WHD’s six-factor test to ascertain whether people are eligible employees for the purposes of FLSA (Braun 2010). A trainee is not considered an employee or entitled to monetary compensation if all of the following six criteria are fulfilled—training is comparable to educational instruction; the trainee is the primary beneficiary of the work; the trainee does not substitute for regular staff; the employer does not obtain an immediate advantage; the trainee is not automatically guaranteed a job after the training; and the employer and trainee agree that the trainee will not receive wages (Braun 2010). Due to persisting uncertainty among courts about how to properly apply this test, the DOL released “Fact sheet #71” in April of 2010 to clarify the Federal Labor Department’s stance on unpaid internship programs (Braun 2010). This set of guidelines applies the six-factor
test to the context of internships in for-profit organizations. Thus, in order to avoid violating the FLSA expectations, unpaid internship programs must meet all criteria—relationship must be educational, benefit the trainee, not displace hired employees, provide no immediate benefit to the employer, guarantee no permanent position, and not contemplate payment (Burke and Carton 2013: 112).

Since the Fact Sheet was released in 2010, federal courts have enforced these requirements in various cases involving unpaid interns at for-profit companies, especially in the entertainment sphere. The first major case began in 2011, when Wesleyan alumni Alex Footman '09 and Eric Glatt '91, who interned without pay for the film “Black Swan,” sued the production company, Fox Searchlight Pictures, claiming they legally deserved to be paid under the FLSA (Brill 2013). U.S. District Judge Pauley ruled in favor of Footman and Glatt, on grounds that the studio failed to provide them with an educational experience, assigned them to perform chores of paid employees, and reaped the benefits of this labor, and thus should have compensated them with minimum wages (Greenhouse 2013). This case set a precedent about the rights of unpaid interns for ensuing suits filed on behalf of unpaid interns against Harper’s Bazaar, the Charlie Rose show, NBC Universal, and Conde Nast (Outten & Golden LLP).

As a measure of further clarification, the DOL Fact Sheet offers supplementary recommendations for employers to follow to protect themselves against lawsuits involving accusations of illegitimacy. However, upon close examination these stipulations are vague and illogical. For example, internships should resemble educational rather than occupational experiences, in which the intern does not
perform “routine work of the business on a regular and recurring basis,” to ensure the employer does not derive benefit (US DOL). Thus, the guidelines unreasonably place contradictory demands on unpaid interns to learn something educational without making productive contributions to the organization. Since employers legally cannot derive advantage from the activities of unpaid interns, they may feel compelled to assign unpaid interns to perform random tasks that do not entail career preparation, prohibiting interns from receiving significant, instructive experiences. Hence, paid interns report greater positive experience than unpaid ones, while unpaid interns report feeling exploited as free labor and not assigned meaningful work, according to a study by the National Association of Colleges & Employers, or NACE (Burke and Carton 2013: 107). In addition, although none of the criteria require an intern to receive college credit, the guidelines assert than internships are often viewed as educational in cases where colleges exercise oversight and provide credit. Thus, a myth has proliferated that “an internship with school sponsorship that awards academic credit is less likely to be accorded employee status” (Burke and Carton 2013: 113-114). In order to continue to not pay interns for their labor, employers believe they have an incentive to require prospective interns to obtain academic credit in order to be hired, and often formulate their intern policies based on this belief.

As a result, universities experience pressure to create policies for offering students academic credit for unpaid internships so that students can satisfy company requirements. It is peculiar and arguably ironic that institutions of higher education are now expected to certify academic credit for unpaid internships where students are legally prohibited from performing productive work. Perhaps this explains why all of
the Ivy League schools, and some liberal arts schools such as Swarthmore College, have chosen not to provide academic credit for internships (Brill 2013). Other colleges have taken advantage of the opportunity to charge students sizeable fees in return for granting partial, albeit official academic credit. For example, Muhlenberg College charges students $1,393 to receive credit for an internship (Brill 2013). Other schools have managed to create systems of accreditation for unpaid internships that are more affordable; for example, Oberlin College charges students $50 for the equivalent of a quarter credit (Brill 2013).

This arrangement between the Federal Department of Labor, the legal establishment, employers, and universities—which perpetuates the existence of unpaid internships, on top of placing a burden on student interns to pay for credit in many cases—raises sociological as well as ethical concerns. Primarily, this generates a system of class reproduction, whereby competitive unpaid internships are exclusive to wealthier students who can afford them, reinforcing future professional advantages for these students. Meanwhile, students with socio-economic disadvantages, who may be exempt from academic credit fees but still unable to afford to accept unpaid internships in the first place, experience restricted access to high quality job positions after graduation as a result from their barred access to internships while in college. A key factor perpetuating this system of class reproduction is the increasing demand from employers for prospective employees to have internship experience, thereby driving students to seek as much intern experience as possible when applying for jobs. For example, the 2010 Job Outlook survey conducted by NACE found that 75%
of employers prefer job candidates with relevant work experience, and over 90% prefer to hire interns who have worked for their organization (Harris 2013).

Despite the bureaucratic and financial burdens placed on students by the current structure of unpaid internships, statistical documentation of the internship explosion suggests that a considerable portion of undergrads consider it worthwhile to accept unpaid internships anyways. A survey-based study conducted by NACE found a record 63% of 2013 graduates had completed an internship (Harris 2013). The following literature review explores different sociological frameworks that help illuminate the advantages that students gain, in theory and in practice, from undertaking unpaid internships.

**Literature Review**

John Dewey’s model of experiential learning can be used to justify the theoretical purpose of internships from a pedagogical standpoint. Dewey (1916) advocates for schools to adopt a model of experiential learning—“an instructional approach based on the concept that ideal learning occurs through experience” (Burke and Carton 2013: 102). In contrast to the traditional educational system that expects students to memorize facts in isolation from their experience, an experiential learning system is entirely based on the consideration of students’ experiences in order to create activities that apply to these experiences and meet their personal needs (Dewey 1916). Overall, Dewey claims that experiential learning helps prepare students for future application of the material and expands future experiences.

Internships are typically discussed using the rhetoric of experiential learning—providing individuals with an opportunity to engage in recurring, hands-on learning,
develop knowledge and skills relevant to their anticipated future profession, and apply these skills and knowledge in a practical environment. Burke and Carton (2013) further identify two types of beneficial knowledge that can be enhanced through internships—skills and abilities knowledge, and task and environmental knowledge. They reference eight practices identified by the National Society for Experiential Education to ensure genuine learning outcomes: authenticity, reflection, monitoring and continuous improvement, assessment and evaluation, intention, preparedness and planning, orientation and training, and acknowledgement (Burke and Carton 2013). Based on these principles, Burke and Carton (2013) conclude that, “valid internships should preserve the integrity of the learning process by measuring learning outcomes, providing feedback on those results, and permitting the student to digest, or reflect on the experience in the context of educational goals” (104). If employers were expected to provide this type of supervision, it would make internships less appealing because it would require their paid employees to devote considerable time and energy to monitor interns. In her study of music industry internships, Frenette (2013) documents frustration from employees about being expected to take time out of their busy schedules to supervise interns, especially since they aren’t rewarded for undertaking an “educator” role. Due to lack of reflection about what tasks to delegate, lack of trust that interns are competent or committed enough to handle major responsibilities, and the perceived low status and temporary nature of the intern position, staff prefer to delegate the easiest tasks to interns (Frenette 2013). Fortunately for employers, the FLSA guidelines do not advise employers to adopt an academic structure akin to the principles outlined by Burke and Carton (2013) to
internship programs to ensure they are legitimately educational. Instead, the guidelines inadvertently encourage employers to fulfill the criterion of educational training through mandating that the intern receive college credit.

Shifting liability onto universities, who may, as Perlin (2011) argues, derive a convenient revenue stream from internships, functions primarily to protect employers and financially benefit universities, who may save money from this arrangement because “it is cheaper to certify than instruct” (Harris 2013). Meanwhile, this arrangement blatantly fails to assure that unpaid interns actually receive “serious, substantive, academic experiences” (Perlin 2011: 85). Perlin asserts, “employers get free labor, thinking they can hide their practices behind a registrar’s stamp, and schools earn a nice chunk of change. Everybody wins except interns and their families, and those who can’t afford to play the game” (Perlin 2011: 86). Perlin’s (2011) line of reasoning here is limited because it does not acknowledge that professors and other personnel representing a university might “lose” within this system that fails to provide adequate scholastic experiences to students. This limitation of Perlin’s (2011) research aside, this essay acknowledges that many unpaid internships under the 2010 FSLA guidelines systematically operate counter-productively to their ostensible purpose of extending individuals’ educational experiences through situational learning.

Through perpetuating a myth that unpaid internships are intrinsically educational so long as the intern receives college credit, and prescribing that employers cannot benefit from the work of unpaid interns, the FSLA guidelines permit employers to delegate menial, sporadic projects to interns, leaving students unprepared with
technical skills and abilities, or human capital, necessary for future professional experiences. As previously noted, Frenette (2013) confirms that perceived low status, incompetence, and the temporary nature of the arrangement provokes the assignment of mundane tasks to interns in the music industry. Thus, Becker’s (1964) theory that educational experiences provide students with human capital in the form of skills and training, which enables them to be more productive workers and earn higher incomes, does not seem to adequately reflect the way in which many unpaid internships operate.

Collins’ (1979) discussion of the “credential crisis” establishes a more persuasive theoretical framework for understanding the way in which internships transmit professional advantage through sending signals to employers that are unrelated to technical skills earned. Collins (1979) suggests that a job applicant’s educational credentials function as exclusive status symbols, used by employers to determine whether that applicant is qualified for the job. Thus, higher education in and of itself reproduces class inequalities; since the cost of attending elite schools is so expensive, access to prestigious educational credentials is inherently biased in favor of well-off individuals and against poor ones. Mitchell, Armstrong, and Erum (2008) describe institutions of higher education as “sieves” used to sort and stratify populations, bestowing students with admissions tickets to a certain class status.

According to Collins (1979), as the requirements for obtaining respectable, entry-level jobs have increased since the 1960s, a credential crisis has ensued, causing people to strive to complete more advanced levels of schooling to obtain the proper credentials for entering respective professional fields. As more young people attend
college, society loses confidence in the value of the college degree. Thus, the college degree becomes less valuable, and businesses expect job candidates to have new types of credentials, such as masters’ degrees.

The expansion and occupational function of internships can be situated within the self-perpetuating cycle whereby credentials become more accessible, devalued, and then replaced with new ones. Just as the desire to obtain high-paying jobs has motivated students to attend more advanced schooling, this aspiration prompts students nowadays to undertake as many internships as possible. In short, this essay characterizes internships as a sought-after credential in today’s economy, supposedly providing applicants intangible, non-technical, advantages when seeking future long-term employment.

Here, it is useful to situate internships within the erosion of stable employment in the contemporary American labor market. Hacker (2006) notes that the traditional employment relationship propagated the assumption that adults could reasonably expect to hold permanent, full-time jobs with stable incomes and sufficient insurance benefits. However, this economic safety net has been eroded alongside the proliferation of contingent, or precarious forms of employment (Hacker 2006). Employers’ increasing preference for contracting temporary, freelance workers for limited amounts of time reflects a larger pattern within American society, whereby insurance risks are increasingly shifted from employers and the government, onto employees and families (Hacker 2006). Similarly, Smith (2001) documents a widespread trend of temporary employment that has become entrenched in US society, where workers who desire permanent employment enter the workforce
through temporary positions, where they assume greater risks for less compensation. Internships, as a form of unpaid temporary work, may be seen as an extreme expression of this tendency.

Frenette (2013) argues that uncertainty and flexibility play a fundamental role in maintaining the intern economy in the music industry. This is particularly true in cultural industries, which are the worst abusers of intern labor according to Frenette (2013). Drawing on Becker’s (1982) theory of the oversupply of potential workers in the business side of cultural industries, and Bielby and Bielby’s (1994) theory of the unpredictability of the success of cultural products, she establishes that companies within the creative industries seek to minimize uncertainty by redistributing risks downward “in the form of low salaries and temporary work arrangements” (Frenette 2013: 6). Through conducting interviews and observing interactions between staff and interns at a major record label, she finds that employers often take advantage of the ambiguity of the intern role to obtain a source of free labor, youthful energy, information and ideas, and a pipeline of qualified candidates (Frenette 2013). Dishearteningly, she finds that despite music interns’ willingness to assume the financial burden of training in the hopes of becoming hired, “Most interns do not gain music industry employment” (Frenette 2013: 9)

Informed by research about temporary employment, this essay locates the unpaid internship as the ultimate embodiment of contingent, unpredictable employment—employers establish provisional working arrangements for their own convenience and are able to maintain a sustainable supply of individuals who are eager to accept these
opportunities, hopeful of acquiring a credential that will improve their chances of landing sacred, future jobs.

Lastly, theories about the transmission of social and cultural capital within families, professional settings, and educational institutions provide a useful framework for understanding the functional value of internships. Social capital entails making connections with the right people, rather than acquiring specific skills or knowledge, or emitting status signals. For Putnam (1995), social capital, which encompasses trust, reciprocity, and norms, functions to facilitate civic engagement and democracy. In contrast to Putnam’s conception of social capital, Bourdieu (1984) recognizes the potential for social networks and relations to enable people to advance their interests and reproduce inequality. This essay adopts a critical view of social capital, recognizing the role of families, occupational settings, and university career centers in activating social connections to help young adults obtain access to internship opportunities, which in turn provide these students with more social capital and future employment opportunities in the form of networking and references.

Bourdieu (1984) also explores the concept of cultural capital, or the accumulated preferences, practices, and other social assets elites use to distinguish themselves as superior in relation to non-elites, and “fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (7). This essay explores the role of family culture in transmitting advantages, such as access to and success during internships. In her original study of elementary school children, Lareau (2003) finds that middle-class parents aim to stimulate the intellectual and social development of their children through engaging in the “concerted cultivation” process. Concerted cultivation, which
involves organizing a child’s leisure activities, prioritizing the development of reasoning skills, and instilling a sense of entitlement, provides children with an advantage in school; these children learn to make positive impressions during interactions with authority figures and engage in negotiation to pursue their own preferences (Lareau 2003). Furthermore, middle-class parents actively intervene on their child’s behalf in school (Lareau 2003). By contrast, working class and poor parents, who face pressing financial burdens, tend to facilitate the accomplishment of natural growth of their children, which features less intervention in their children’s schooling, draws distinct boundaries between adults and children, and lets children organize their own free time (Lareau 2003). These children tend to express constraint and discomfort negotiating with authority figures (Lareau 2003).

In her follow-up study of these children in young adulthood, Lareau (2011) finds that social class and corresponding child-rearing practices continue to play an important role in high school experiences, transition to college, and options in the work world. In particular, she highlights class differences in the types and amount of information parents have and interventions they make on behalf of helping their children succeed (Lareau 2011: 264). While middle-class parents use their extensive, detailed knowledge about the high school course selection and college application process to successfully manage their children’s academic trajectories, poor parents have less success complying with expectations to monitor and intervene in their children’s institutional lives due to their lack of awareness about the inner-workings of these complex systems (Lareau 2011: 265).
This essay categorizes internship experience as an organized activity valued by higher-class families as a means to help their children secure future professional and economic advantages. This essay further recognizes that high social class not only provides economic support, but also transmits “invisible” cultural resources and repertoires to children, preparing them to land internships, succeed throughout these experiences, and maintain professional advantages in the future. Lareau (2011) confirms that higher-class parents are more able and likely to use their own social networks and economic resources to build professional connections and arrange entry to prestigious internships for their children to build their resumes (280). Drawing on Lareau’s (2011) research about the powerful and long-lasting effects of class origins and corresponding cultural practices, this essay embraces Perlin’s stance that, “for well-to-do and wealthy families seeking to guarantee their offspring’s future prosperity, internships are a powerful investment vehicle, an instrument of self-preservation in the same category as private tutoring, exclusive schools, and trust funds” (Perlin 2011: 162).

In order to establish a connection between high familial cultural capital and success within the unpaid internship sphere, this essay draws on evidence of the role culture plays in labor market sorting and stratification. Rivera (2012) proposes that hiring is a process of cultural matching between candidates, evaluators, and firms. After conducting 120 interviews with employers, Rivera (2012) concludes that employers seek candidates who are not only competent in terms of technical skills, but also culturally similar to themselves in terms of leisure pursuits, experiences, and self-presentation styles. Frenette’s (2013) documentation of the lack of clear, formal
sorting mechanisms for entry in creative industries suggests that unofficial sorting practices, such as attentiveness to applicants’ cultural capital, is likely a prevalent practice used by employers when differentiating between applicants.

While Lareau (2011) and Riviera (2012) emphasize the function of familial cultural capital within the educational and professional realms, Bourdieu (1984) recognizes that the higher education establishment itself operates within the framework of displaying cultural capital and status. According to Bourdieu (1984), a primary mode of distinction employed by universities is exuding an essence of ineffability, which “refuses to be contained in any definition” (24). Using Bourdieu’s logic of ineffability, this essay investigates the implications of internships undertaken for credit on institutions of higher education.

By situating internships within their legal, pedagogical, industrial, social, and cultural contexts, it becomes apparent that unpaid interns currently lack effective consideration from the legal, business, and academic sectors. The current law permits the business sector to legitimize exploitative, unpaid internships through redirecting educational accountability onto universities, which may have a stake in the continuation of unpaid internships due to financial incentives and a need to meet families’ demands that internships be certified as educational via credit; internships remain popular because they function as a valuable credential in the labor market; the economic recession, and inherent nature of creative industries in particular, facilitate an industrial reversal in which employers deflect insecurity onto individuals through instruments such as internships; and communal networks and shared culture of wealthier students position them to desire and acquire competitive internships,
reinforcing future occupational disparities between themselves and their lower-class counterparts, and creating a continuous supply of unpaid internship candidates.

Informed by theories of experiential education, credentialing, economic risk shift, and the transmission of social and cultural capital, this literature review has established how internships, while portrayed as an opportunity for future individual growth for all, structurally propagate the social exclusion of disadvantaged students from professional success, as well as undeserved short-term experiences, albeit valuable future opportunities, for privileged students. After examining these theoretical concepts individually, it is useful to observe how they manifest in a particular type of institution—a liberal arts college. The rest of this essay will specifically explore the role of the liberal arts university in the structural arrangement between the federal government, courts, employers, and families that perpetuates unpaid internships. Wesleyan University serves as a case study to examine how a liberal arts institution responds to a controversial issue that originated due to economic and legal conditions outside of the university, in a manner that attempts to appease various factions with incompatible interests within the institution.

A Case Study of Internship Accreditation at Wesleyan

Education in the Field

The movement to establish the current system\(^1\) for giving Wesleyan students general academic credit for internships did not gain momentum until after the DOL

\(^1\) “Current system” refers to the procedure in place during the Fall 2013 semester, when this essay was written. Since the time of the original study, the process for accrediting internships undertaken by full-time students in the fall, winter, spring, and summer has been changed and the fee has been removed.
released the 2010 FLSA guidelines, causing many employers to require interns to receive college credit in order to be hired. Previously, Wesleyan students could present an internship proposal to a faculty member in their major department, who would evaluate whether to award students credit for internships that would count towards their majors on a case-by-case basis. This decentralized system, known as “Education in the Field,” created a considerable extra workload for individual faculty members, many of whom did not feel comfortable validating certain internships, especially those in the for-profit sector, as intellectually engaging experiences worthy of educational credit. In her study of Wesleyan University, Valentino (2010) found that professors from departments with less vocational application, such as Art History and German Studies, were more willing to offer students credit for internships, whereas faculty from the Economics and Film departments firmly refused to grant students credit for internships.

The case of Film exemplifies the double bind that certain departments, and the University more generally, may find themselves in. It is widely presumed that Film is one of the best majors to undertake at Wesleyan in terms of getting hired after college. Film students graduate with precious social capital in the form of a rich network of supportive alumni known as Wesleyan’s “Hollywood mafia,” whom they can connect with and get jobs. Wesleyan’s Film studies website echoes this sentiment, asserting, “alumni frequently continue to work together long after they have left Wesleyan [and] offer internships and entry-level positions to recent graduates” (Film Studies). While the public presumption of this connection between Wesleyan’s Film department and the film industry attracts prospective students and
prestige, it simultaneously jeopardizes the Film department’s effort to maintain an analytically rigorous reputation that is concerned with “studying film history and analyzing films, rather than creating them” (Valentino 2010: 34). Through emphasizing its underpinning within the “liberal arts tradition of cultural, historical, and formal analysis,” Wesleyan’s Film department distinguishes itself from vocationally oriented film programs and reaffirms its high status (Film Studies). Valentino (2010) posited that faculty from disciplines like Film that are perceived as applicable to specific professional careers must spend a lot of energy socializing students into a liberal arts vision of these majors, characterized by non-instrumentality and non-substantiveness. She defines substantivism as “a cumulative process of capital acquisition,” and instrumentalism as “the pragmatic function of education as a means to an end” (Valentino 2010: 5).

The concepts of non-instrumentality and non-substantiveness are derived from Bourdieu’s (1984) discussion of the ways in which universities claim distinction and commercial appeal through placing a “high value on general culture and increasingly refus[ing] scholastic measurements of culture (such as direct, closed questions on authors, dates and events)” (23). Bourdieu (1984) establishes that the general curriculum adopted by liberal education institutions reflects elite resistance to rationalization and codification of knowledge, and “an inclination and aptitude for practice without a practical function” (54). Based on Bourdieu’s (1984) discussion of the non-substantive and non-instrumental aesthetic disposition of elite universities, Valentino (2010) argues that Wesleyan departments such as Film refused to accredit internships through the Education in the Field system because they viewed
internships as a substantial threat to the values of unquantifiable, ineffable knowledge and “knowledge for knowledge sake” fundamental to the liberal arts vision of the majors. This scenario exemplifies the larger dilemma that liberal arts schools like Wesleyan face, to preserve a non-vocational cache while also facilitating students’ access to pre-professional instruments such as internships.

External and Internal Pressures for Reform

By the 2012 spring semester, high-level Wesleyan administrators, including President Michael Roth, Provost Rob Rosenthal, and Senior Associate Provost Karen Anderson, seriously recognized the need to centralize Wesleyan’s system for accrediting internships, primarily to prevent students from experiencing barriers to for-profit internship entry due to inability to receive college credit, according to Anderson. In addition to these external legal and economic pressures, administrators were aware of complaints from professors regarding the moral and bureaucratic burden placed on them to assess the credit-worthiness of internships. Faculty opposition to assuming the responsibility of advising internships for credit is evident in the faculty forum circulated by the Educational Policy Committee (EPC), discussed in detail later.

Aside from considering the needs of students and professors, some administrators who were active in formalizing Wesleyan’s current internship accreditation system viewed this as a way to facilitate the provision and accreditation of structured, educationally beneficial service-learning experiences. At this point, Wesleyan’s service-learning course cluster, which now includes almost 40 classes from a variety of disciplines ranging from Film to Environmental Science, had
existed for several years. The first course was offered in 1998 and the Service Learning Center was established in 2003 (Self Study 2012: 37). The Service Learning Center website (2013) defines service learning as a form of “experiential education,” intending to enhance students’ understanding of course material through activities outside the classroom, which simultaneously provide a “service to the community,” followed by “structured reflection” inside the classroom. Administrators working to consolidate internships—namely Provost Rosenthal, who formerly served as Wesleyan’s Service Learning Director—recognized the powerful pedagogical potential of service learning practices in conjunction with theoretical literature and reflection.

Professor Rosenthal’s optimism about the academic value of service learning is confirmed by research conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999). In response to skeptics who suspect service learning is an unfounded pedagogical fad, Eyler and Giles (1999) identify the unique intellectual impact of service learning using student interviews and surveys. They find that service learning enables students to forge personal, emotional connections to abstract intellectual issues, fostering an academically useful connection between affective and cognitive development (Eyler and Giles 1999: 10). In addition, students who engage in service learning acquire information that can be applied in new situations, and the ability to make sense of complex, multi-faceted problems (Eyler and Giles 1999: 15). Through placing students in contexts where their assumptions are challenged and providing structure to confront challenges, service learning generates advanced critical thinking and problem-solving capacities (Eyler and Giles 1999: 16). They highlight that service learning coupled with
thoughtful reflection can transform the way students perceive service and society, and provide students with the foundations for effective citizenship (Eyler and Giles 1999: 17).

During a recent homecoming forum entitled “From Classroom to Community and Back” moderated by Professor Rosenthal, several professors responsible for overseeing service-learning courses echoed the sentiments of Eyler and Giles (1999) that students often learn information better through applying it in a practical setting. Similarly, student speakers agreed that practical fieldwork—namely, collecting and studying soil samples, creating and implementing lesson plans and science enrichment activities for elementary school children, engaging in a philanthropic grant-making project, and serving as community health center research assistants—has enhanced their understanding of concepts presented in the classroom. Professors and students continually emphasized the role of these courses in facilitating a reciprocal relationship with the community, involving giving and getting. With respect to the latter, students acknowledged that it was refreshing to be in a class where they could “learn practical skills, which doesn’t happen so often at Wes.” Additionally, students revealed that learning what it’s like to work in a real world setting had inspired them to pursue a career in that field.

A service-learning class, which provides students with the opportunity to reflectively learn through engaging in practical fieldwork, mirrors the structure of an internship in an ideal circumstance. For this reason, it logically follows that the initiative to centralize and endorse internships emerged “as part of Wesleyan’s engagement initiative,” designed around “placing academic study in experiential
contexts” (Self Study Report 2012: 37). This push towards civic engagement has fueled the recent developments of the Albritton Center for the Study of Public Life (CSPL), Patricelli Center for Social Entrepreneurship, and the civic engagement certificate. Wesleyan’s Self Study Report undertaken as part of its reaccreditation review in August 2012 discusses internships within the overarching section about the Albritton Center, which, “when fully implemented… will teach students to translate the liberal arts into action through service learning courses, volunteer work, [and] internships… Likewise, the Center will also teach students to translate their work of social engagement back into the liberal arts” (36). Through this cycle of application and reflection, the structure of these engagement initiatives is depicted in a liberal arts light. In an interview I conducted with Professor Rosenthal, he referenced the connection between experiential service learning and internships, explaining that the push for a coherent system to accredit internships was conceived as a part of the conscious philosophy of “engaged university” he and President Roth were advocating. These remarks could be seen as an effort to counter the threat to ineffable, liberal learning posed by internship accreditation, by framing internships in accordance with the institution’s liberal arts mission.

Valentino (2010) documents the proliferation of the “service ideal” at elite universities after higher education became massified with the creation of land-grant state universities, the cooperative education movement, and the community college movement. As postsecondary education became more accessible, Valentino (2010) argues that elite schools sought to distinguish themselves and maintain superior status through incorporating community service into academic study, in order to signify
learning as non-instrumental and display high standing. I add that within the competitive realm of elite universities, students themselves have appropriated the ideal of community service into an instrumental form of tradable currency, which they can use to saturate their resumes and distinguish themselves when applying for jobs.

Valentino (2010) argues that the codification of knowledge that ensued alongside expanded access to higher education further threatened the status of elite schools. In response, these colleges adopted liberal education as the basis for their curricula, which involves exploring many areas of knowledge instead of training for a specific career. Historically, liberal education to foster general intelligence has been contrasted with progressive education for practical utility in debates about the structure and function of public high schools.

Original advocates of liberal education, such as Charles Eliot and William Torrey Harris, argued that all children, regardless of their location in the socioeconomic hierarchy, have a high capacity for intellectual growth and thus deserve equal access to common academic knowledge (Ravitch 2000). Having access to versatile intelligence will enable all students to develop important life skills such as critical thinking, leadership, and self-discipline, which will help them access higher education, financially rewarding jobs, and a foundation for political participation and citizenship (Ravitch 2000).

Alternatively, advocates of the Progressive Education Movement, such as G. Stanley Hall, criticized liberal education for being elitist. Supporters of this movement argued it’s a waste of time and public funds to impose liberal education on
students planning to enter the manual labor force. Instead, education should serve a practical utility for a student’s future life and the nation’s industrial growth (Ravitch 2000). According to Ravitch (2000), these “progressive educators” misinterpreted Dewey’s argument about the need for children to understand applications of material, appropriating it to justify the merits of a vocational curriculum. They advocated a differentiated curriculum, reserving the academic track for students planning to attend college, and providing students who do not plan to attend college with a non-academic curriculum (Ravitch 2000). Practical training would more adequately meet the immediate needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and simultaneously contribute to the emerging industrial order (Ravitch 2000).

Valentino’s account of the adoption of liberal education at the private university level significantly deviates from Ravitch’s account of the democratic intention of liberal curricula in public high schools. Following Bourdieu’s (1984) logic of cultural capital, Valentino argues that avoiding practical courses, and embracing common learning that can be applied to any future endeavor, has enabled elite universities to radiate non-instrumentality and ineffability. This ironically suggests that schools like Wesleyan adopted a non-instrumental liberal education precisely as an instrumental strategy to maintain superior status. Just as the Progressive Education Movement re-appropriated Dewey’s experiential education argument to fulfill utilitarian ends, Valentino’s research raises the possibility that liberal arts colleges re-appropriated the rhetoric that liberal education maximizes equality and democracy in order to serve the purpose of elevating their status (akin to Bourdieu’s (1984) vision of cultural capital).
As previously noted, through interviewing Wesleyan professors in 2010, Valentino confirms resistance to substantive and instrumental tendencies, which threaten the boundary that distinguishes Wesleyan from inferior schools. She argues that internships were seen as an incursion to Wesleyan’s boundaries, because their vocational and replicable nature collides with the central function of liberal arts schools to signify eliteness. Overall, she argues the introduction of work into academia attacks the liberal arts mantra of non-instrumentality and ineffability. She presumes that Wesleyan is reluctant to accredit internships because the act of offering credit as reimbursement for internships codifies internship experiences into a definable entity, destroying the non-substantive, ineffable character of Wesleyan’s credit structure.

Valentino’s (2010) analysis is invaluable for establishing a theoretical framework to explain the fundamental conflict between internships and a liberal arts college. However, it is limited because it considers professors to be the primary and solely interested party representing the attitudes and values of a liberal arts institution. Her analysis does not consider alternative and powerful interested parties within Wesleyan University; it does not recognize the University itself as an amalgamation of contradictory parts beyond professors. In order to expand research on the sociological implications of internship accreditation at the liberal arts level, it is useful to analyze the debate among major players within Wesleyan with strong and competing stakes in the internship controversy—namely, administrators representing Academic Affairs, Educational Policy Committee (EPC) members, the faculty, the
Office of Finance, the Career Center, and the current internship course coordinator, Professor Krishna Winston.

**Introduction of CSPL 493**

In February of 2012, two years after Valentino conducted interviews with professors about Education in the Field, Associate Provost Anderson from Academic Affairs submitted a proposal to the EPC chair, Economics Professor Joyce Jacobsen, for Albritton’s Center for the Study of Public Life (CSPL) to offer a course in which students could earn .25 credit on a pass/fail basis for paid and unpaid internships. The faculty director of Albritton would serve as the course coordinator, determining whether to approve enrollment requests and whether to pass students based on fulfillment of an agreed-upon learning contract with specified learning outcomes (Anderson 2012). The proposal indicated that the course would be included in overall tuition during fall and spring semesters; however, during the summer tuition would be one quarter the cost of a full credit summer session course. It is noteworthy that summer courses cost less than fall and spring semester courses. This information about cost was included for the EPC’s reference; however, it was not subject to EPC approval.

Professor Jacobsen created a digital forum in order to “give faculty a chance to weigh in on this proposal, as it represents a new type of course at Wesleyan” (Jacobsen 2012). Some faculty members expressed reluctant support for the proposal because it “minimizes the shame we faculty should feel about supporting the practice [of giving credit for life experience]” (Responses 2012). Similarly, one faculty member remarked that the proposed system would “allow us in ECON to remain
pure,” indicating that Economics faculty members view the accreditation of internships as contaminating the intellectual integrity of their department (Responses 2012). These sentiments align with Bourdieu’s (1984) account of opposition to instrumental and substantive experiences within elite universities. Other professors expressed relief that the proposed system transfers the responsibility onto someone with the “expertise” to better assess whether an internship is credit-worthy (Responses 2012). Lastly, some faculty members supported the proposal because it seemed reasonable to grant .25 credit for internships given that students can already receive .25 credit for gym classes, which lack a connection to academia.

At the same time, faculty expressed confusion about the types of internships that would be covered under the CSPL course, and how to ensure these experiences met Wesleyan’s academic standards. One faculty member advocated the importance of “making really sure students are actually learning something, and not just providing subsidized labor for companies,” if students are paying tuition and receiving academic credit for internships (Responses 2012). Concerns were raised about the impracticality of expecting the internship coordinator, who is also responsible for directing Albritton, to be able to single-handedly monitor the intellectual adequacy of internship content. Faculty expressed opposition to the concession of academic standards that takes place with the accreditation of “work that is not passing through the quality control of tenured faculty” (Responses 2012). A faculty member who expressed strong opposition to the larger trend occurring at Wesleyan, “in which more and more credits are going to be awarded for work that falls outside the aegis of academic departments and programs,” admitted that it is
pointless to further postpone the initiative to centrally accredit internships, which has passed through the EPC many times over the past five years (Responses 2012).

According to minutes from the following EPC meeting, Professor Jacobsen characterized faculty response as “one-third favorable, one-third grudgingly accepting, and one-third opposed…After a brief discussion of the educational value of internships—one committee member stressed the importance of experiencing the environment of a workplace—the motion passed with one abstention” (Minutes 2012). The CSPL internship course appeared for the first time in Wesleyan’s online course catalogue in the summer of 2012. The course description outlined the expectations listed in the proposal, adding that the learning contract must be signed by the work supervisor, the internship must be 40 hours minimum, and Paul Gagnon, an administrator in the Career Center who has since left Wesleyan, must approve the internship before students may enroll. There was an enrollment limit of 35 with 27 seats available, indicating that only 8 students enrolled. At this time, all students enrolled in the course, regardless of financial aid status, paid the $700 credit free, suggesting that Wesleyan received $5,600 for administrative overhead of the course.

The following year, enrollment of the summer 2013 internship course, CSPL 493, increased to 57 students. This enormous growth is presumably related in part to increased awareness of the course, and in part to the rising popularity of internships due to the credential crisis (Collins 1979) and the shift from stable to precarious

2 The Wesleyan University registrar would not officially confirm this number because her office does not have the staff available to provide student projects with data.

3 I obtained this statistic through revisiting a mass email from August 9, 2013 sent to all 57 students enrolled in the summer 2013 course, including myself.
employment in today’s economy (Hacker 2006). Professor Krishna Winston, a
tenured faculty member in German and Environmental Studies, the Dean of Arts and
Humanities, and newly appointed Service Learning Director, became course
 coordinator of CSPL 493. In an interview I conducted with her, Professor Winston
revealed that after she accepted the Service Learning Director position, she was
informed she would also be responsible for administration of the internship course
and the civic engagement certificate. Professor Winston spent many months
attempting to improve the structure of the course to make it less complicated and
cumberson for students. She decided to replace the learning contract—which
resembled a lengthy term paper, where students were expected to write about their
internships in relation to their specific majors—with a 500-word report where
students can reflect about what they learned in a more open-ended way. Instructions
for enrollment, necessary internship description and completion forms to be
completed by the work supervisor, and instructions about the student’s reflection now
appear on the Career Center website. The fee for students on financial aid to obtain
credit during the summer was removed; however, students who do not receive
financial aid are still charged $700, a quarter of the cost of a full credit summer
session course. Professor Winston estimates half of the students in the summer 2013
class receive financial aid and half of them do not, suggesting the University received
roughly $19,950 for administrative overhead for the course. This indicates that
Wesleyan collected about four times as much money in the summer of 2013 as in the

4 As of January 19, 2014, Wesleyan no longer charges full-time matriculated students for internship
credit, regardless of their financial aid status.
summer of 2012. Professor Winston revealed that she does not receive the money collected for student internships. She is concerned about the growing number of internships each summer, because there is a limit to how much she can do to monitor this procedure.

Financial and Symbolic Function of Credits

In addition to waiving the fee for students on financial aid, Wesleyan has added an audit notation alternative, which acknowledges the internship completion on a student’s transcript but does not award credit or carry a tuition fee. According to Anderson, the decisions to waive the fee for students on aid and include an audit notation option were formulated in order to do everything possible to help students satisfy company requirements without paying for credit, especially for students who genuinely cannot afford to pay. This indicates that the administration was concerned about the issue raised by Perlin (2011) that charging additional fees for unpaid internship credit intensifies the system of class reproduction generated by the existence of unpaid internships in the first place. Anderson revealed that while working to make the system more affordable, Academic Affairs had to ensure that these amendments did not violate an overarching university principle enforced by the Office of Finance, that all Wesleyan credits necessarily have an identical, pre-designated tuition fee, established each year by the Board of Trustees.

Representatives from Academic Affairs, the EPC, the Career Center, and the Office of Finance have all asserted that it is not acceptable to give away Wesleyan credits for free under this overarching policy, with the exception of students on
financial aid.\textsuperscript{5} Upon close examination, this is not universally true. There are two obvious exceptions to this rule. First, students are not given a refund if they fail a course, revealing that Wesleyan maintains the right to collect tuition without granting credit in certain situations. This suggests it is not the credit, but rather the opportunity to enroll in a class and potentially receive credit, that corresponds with an economic value. However this is not unanimously true either; if a student enrolls in a course load that exceeds 4 credits during fall or spring semester they are not charged a higher tuition rate. This demonstrates that Wesleyan is willing to “give away” extra credits without charging additional fees, because tuition at Wesleyan is based on per-semester cost, not per-credit cost. Since summer internships (which are much more common than fall or winter internships given Wesleyan’s location) fall outside of the fall or spring temporal cycle, they are not included in the yearly tuition package; they are priced independently.

The notable implication of the principle commanding the financial pricing of credit at Wesleyan is that regardless of the structure or content of the course, the quality or quantity of work performed by students, or the mode of evaluation used by the teacher, all Wesleyan credits are equivalent in terms of price value, and in terms of counting towards graduation. The dual function of Wesleyan credit as both instrumental in a financial sense, and expressive in a symbolic sense, raises an interesting theoretical question about how the value of academic credit within the context of the liberal arts is constituted by producers (the University) and understood

\textsuperscript{5} Wesleyan’s removal of the fee for internship credit effective in 2014 suggests that after some time and consideration, University administrators decided to make it tolerable to defy this principle and give away credit for free.
by consumers (the students). Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani (2011) describe the complex process in which products acquire significance unrelated to their immediate functional value, based on associated inter-subjective socio-cultural meanings, and become vehicles for communicating symbolic value (297). In turn, socially desirable symbolic meanings, which provide consumers with opportunities to express identity and status, help determine the economic worth of that product (Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani 2011: 298). The framework of symbolic consumption is relevant for understanding how the expressive benefits of a liberal arts diploma influence the economic logic of pricing the “product” of a semester’s worth of credit in these institutions. Acquisition of symbolic value provides organizations with an opportunity to charge premium prices and maintain loyal customers, who are willing to pay in order to appropriate the cultural meanings associated with the producer (Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani 2011: 311). It has been established that as a liberal arts school, Wesleyan bases much of its expressive appeal on a claim of value based on an ineffable essence.

At the same time, a Wesleyan education is expected to provide graduates with instrumental benefits related to economic capital, in the sense of real-world employability. This sense of economic realism has presumably influenced the development of Wesleyan’s Cardinal Internship program—an enterprise coordinated by the Career Center that uses outreach via alumni and parents to cultivate internships exclusively for current Wesleyan students. This initiative transmits instrumental advantages to students in the sense of functionally getting a foot in the door of an industry, as well as expressive advantages in the form of exclusive social and
institutionalized cultural capital. Similarly, pragmatic concerns related to marketability have evidently triggered Wesleyan’s decision to accredit internships through CSPL 493.

The conflicting constructions of value of a Wesleyan education poses a dilemma for University representatives, who are responsible for imbuing the product they are selling with culturally relevant signs that perpetuate a demand for this product. Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani (2011) recognize that symbolic capital can represent a constraint for producers, who must conform to certain institutionalized expectations in order for their products to be considered authentic (312). “Sustaining symbolic capital over time… requires producers to systematically design and communicate products in ways that are consistent with the meanings consumers ascribe to them” (Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani 2011: 304). Internship accreditation threatens Wesleyan’s preservation of symbolic capital, because its instrumental and substantive core is inconsistent with the ineffable cultural significance that students attribute to the liberal arts and seek to identify with, in order to display status. In order to obscure the inconsistencies between the economic and symbolic expectations placed on the school, Wesleyan employs certain tactics when portraying initiatives such as internships in its Self Study Report (2012). Ostensibly to underplay the substantive, instrumental spirit of internships, the Report locates internships in the context of civic service, and frames its endeavor to “increase opportunities for students to pursue internships in conjunction with academic courses” as a method to pursue the goal of “energizing Wesleyan’s distinctive educational experience” (43). In strategically framing internships in the context of liberal arts values such as
service, academic rigor, and distinction, the Self Study Report exemplifies Ravasi, Rindova, and Stigliani’s (2011) idea about producers’ use of advertising and branding to disseminate favorable representations of a product, incite consumers to interpret the product in light of the status they want to identify with, and symbolically consume it (301).

**Pedagogical Implications of CSPL 493**

It is apparent that CSPL 493 deviates from all other courses offered at Wesleyan in various ways. The primary impetus originates from legal and economic circumstances outside of the University, the content of the work performed is completely outside of the control of the University, the work involved in evaluating students is unlike any other course, most obviously because there is no physical interaction between the professor and students at any point, and there is no communication whatsoever among students enrolled in the course.

In the faculty forum, professors repeatedly compared an internship credit course to a gym course. One professor wrote, “If people kick remind them that we give .25 credit for gym” (Responses 2012). Another remarked, “I guess if they can get .25 for strength training, this is not completely out of line” (Responses 2012). Anderson and Jacobsen explained that the accreditation of internships was rationalized in part because the accreditation of fitness courses created a precedent that it can be educationally worthwhile for students in a liberal arts setting to learn skill sets such as team-building which are typically not provided in traditional Wesleyan classroom settings, yet provide a potential “to transform the lives of students” (Athletics). As mentioned previously, service-learning courses set a similar
precedent that performance of activities outside of the classroom can be a mechanism for students to gain a deeper understanding of material presented in the classroom.

Upon close examination, the internship course has very little in common with gym or service-learning courses. With a service-learning course, there is a clear and close connection between the course material and the fieldwork. These courses often involve assigned readings, academic research to be completed according to rigid deadlines, continuous discussion among students guided by the professor about the relationship between theories and fieldwork, and structured analysis in the form of final projects, papers, and presentations. With a gym class, the connection to academia is absent and the credit is worth the minimal quarter. However, Wesleyan still hires an instructor to provide students with skills, monitor students’ attendance and effort, and collect mandatory assignments such as fitness goals. Furthermore, students develop a relationship with the instructor and other students who are enrolled in the course.

On the contrary, CSPL 493 is a virtual course, which does not convene in person at any point. For instance, I received credit for my summer 2013 internship without meeting the course coordinator or a student in my “class.” With the CSPL 493 course, Wesleyan outsources the task of provision of skills and evaluating students’ performance to employers. Professor Winston explained that the purpose of reviewing the description and completion forms submitted by the work supervisor is to discern how the student performed and what types of meaningful contributions the student made from the employer’s point of view. This is paradoxical given that unpaid interns are legally discouraged from contributing productively to an
organization, to ensure that “the employer that provides the training derives no immediate advantage from the activities of the intern” (US DOL). However, due to her inability to monitor the actual content of a summer internship, Winston revealed that is left to judge whether the experience is meaningful through gauging whether the company is satisfied with the work done by the student, and through examining whether the student engaged in the educational process of critical reflection in writing the report afterwards.

Professor Winston recognizes that while some students put specific academic skills to use during internships, such as performing lab work for a pharmaceutical company, many students participate in internships that are not applicable to their academic major or their scholastic interests. She recognizes that many students seek internships as pre-professional ventures that will make them marketable. This demonstrates that Professor Winston shares certain views held by Career Center Director Sharon Castonguay, and Associate Director for Jobs & Internships, Jim Kubat, regarding the common purpose of internships. In my interview with Castonguay and Kubat, they explained that from their point of view, students should do internships that will be externally viewed positively on their resumes, enable them to build networks, explore a potential future career path, and/or gain exposure to the real world. Castonguay believes the fundamental purpose of internships is to assist students career-wise. In order to accomplish the mission of “facilitating personal exploration for career decision-making,” the Career Center is dedicated to helping students gather as much information as possible about what is involved in an internship. This way, students will go in with a clear sense of what they will be
expected to do and make the most of their internships. One resource coordinated by
the Career Center is the WesID database, where students post information about
internships they have completed to provide future students with first-hand
information.

Recognizing that the value of internships often lies in the eye of the beholder,
the Career Center has a very expansive philosophical view on internships. The staff
avoids filtering internships according to their own value judgments, and remains
committed to marketing as many opportunities as they become aware about. This
outreach process is mostly reactive; new internship opportunities typically come from
big for-profit companies actively seeking interns as a mechanism to recruit future
employees, and non-profit organizations that need additional labor and want a
pipeline of youth applying for jobs in the future. Castonguay and Kubat emphasize
that it is crucial to avoid vetting these opportunities and give students the freedom to
decide for themselves if they want to apply. Through maintaining an expansive view
when posting internships, and helping students understand what they’ll be doing in an
internship, the Career Center advances their primary agenda of “making sure
students are doing internships so they are employable, not so they are educated”
(Castonguay 2013). Castonguay’s perspective, which seems to be influenced by
external economic pressures related to credentialism, precarious labor, and extensive
competition in the contemporary job market, fully abandons the rhetoric of
ineffability and “engaged University” commonly used in public representations of
Wesleyan. Castonguay’s unique stance on internships sheds light on the competing
perceptions and values held by different parties within Wesleyan, which reflect the
contradictions inherent in a liberal arts college’s need to offer non-vocational cultural and symbolic benefits, as well as practical economic and social capital.

Like Castonguay, Winston acknowledges that during internships students often learn skills or knowledge and make contacts which might be professionally useful in the future, but not necessarily valuable for their Wesleyan education. Thus, Winston recognizes that it is unrealistic to expect students who are getting coffee on a movie set, for example, to be able to draw direct connections between their internships and theoretical material they have been exposed to in Wesleyan classes.

As an educator responsible for overseeing a course that encompasses so many different types of internships, Professor Winston views her central task as ensuring critical reflection takes places following the internship. Winston explains this often takes the form of articulating a newfound understanding of how a given industry functions, whether this exposure was beneficial, and whether this career field is something a student wants to pursue. These types of insights align perfectly with the “career exploration and decision-making” that the Career Center wants students to obtain through internships. As long as the student expresses these insights in a formal, thoughtful reflection, demonstrating critical thinking skills, Winston can certify the experience—which features content that is outside of her control—with her professional approval and the student will receive credit.

For Winston, this official reflection is the primary, academically relevant component of the process that validates this course from an educational standpoint. In contrast to internships undertaken to get a foot in the door without a formal reflection mechanism, internships certified through CSPL 493 are understood as educationally
relevant, regardless of the content of the experience, because they ensure that students apply critical intellect to these experiences afterwards. Furthermore, Winston explained, “the disconnect between majors and internships is not problematic if we think of liberal arts education as preparing students to think critically, tackle topics they are not familiar with, get out of their comfort zone, and derive intellectual benefits from whatever they end up doing” (Winston 2013). One might see Winston’s effort to apply a liberal arts philosophy to the benefits students obtain from a fundamentally vocational experience, as an attempt to reconcile the institution’s contradictory mission to provide students with both symbolic and instrumental capital, and to reconcile in her own conscience her compulsory participation in the implementation of a system she has not chosen to institute.

Professor Winston’s conviction that the educational value of an internship experience “is not inherent in the experience but depends on what a student brings to it in terms of critical intelligence” differs from the rationale behind internship accreditation described by many other Wesleyan personnel implicated in the system. It differs from the pedagogical value of internships advocated by a member of the EPC who “stressed the importance of experiencing the environment of a workplace” (Minutes 2012). Winston’s attempt to tie internships to the Wesleyan education also does not align with Anderson’s insistence that the course exists primarily to help students satisfy the requirements of employers, who demand credit as a legal cover. In this way, it is inferred that there may be a disconnect between the intention of the Academic Affairs representative who drafted the proposal, the interpretation of EPC members who passed the proposal, and the implementation of the course by Professor
Winston. Winston’s emphasis on the educational significance of open-ended reflection following an internship differs from the pedagogical justification of service learning, in which students directly utilize cognitive skills and gain educationally worthwhile knowledge during their experiences in the field (Eyler and Giles 1999). It also diverges from the philosophy behind accreditation of physical education courses, which advance the liberal arts mission of challenging the body to master skills, “develop healthy, energetic, and well-balanced lives,” and fulfill the human potential (Wesmaps). Perhaps most strikingly, Winston’s account of the educational value of critically reflecting about an experience that might be irrelevant to a student’s education fundamentally differs from Dewey’s vision of the cooperative, reciprocal, experience-based learning process, which inherently expands future experience in itself.

**Concluding Analysis**

In sum, although CSPL 493 departs significantly from the traditional pedagogical structure of all other courses at Wesleyan, it qualifies as a course that is worthy of credit for different reasons depending on the person being asked. For some administrators and faculty members, it is creditable because of the precedents established by the accreditation of experience outside of the classroom with gym and service learning. For a member of the EPC responsible for passing the proposal, experiencing a workplace itself has “educational value,” perhaps due to the premature, mistaken assumption that the course would only approve internships which require students to apply academic skills in manner that resembles Dewey’s experiential education model. The current course coordinator upholds that an
Internship is educationally meaningful as long as a formal critical reflection component is involved. She suggested that the Office of Finance was eager to accredit the course because they “visualized thousands of dollars coming in as a result.”

Finally, the Career Center staff members, who have the least influence over the pedagogical or financial structure of CSPL 493, perhaps have the greatest stake in a system that accredits all internships and involves a minimal amount of bureaucratic or financial hassle for students, to accomplish their mission of ensuring students are employable. Thus, internship accreditation has triggered the exposure of contradictory notions of value within Wesleyan related to finance, pedagogy, philosophy, and reputation.

Because CSPL 493 qualifies as a course that grants credit due to the inconsistent and sometimes contradictory reasons mentioned above, it automatically falls within the command of the University’s across-the-board pricing policy. Although it is evident that CSPL 493 does not fulfill basic principles governing the provision of credit of all other Wesleyan courses that carry a tuition charge, Anderson explained that it did not seem promising to ask the Board of Trustees if it would be possible to reduce the $700 price for students trapped into applying for summer credit to satisfy company requirements—there was simply no expectation that the Board would bend the policy for the case of CSPL 493.⁶

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⁶ In response to my inquiries about the policy change and whether the Board was involved, President Roth’s Chief of Staff said, “Wesleyan’s regular policy is to charge for the credits it awards. In the particular case of credit for internships, President Roth decided to make an exception and waive the fee for a combination of reasons: internship experiences usually happen off-campus and without the involvement of Wesleyan faculty, and Wesleyan has been promoting such experiences and he didn’t want cost to prevent students from taking advantage of them.” This suggests that President Roth executed the 2014 policy change on his own, based on information that has been available since the formulation of the initial policy in 2012.
Through examining how Wesleyan has handled the issue of internship accreditation, it is apparent that the role of the liberal arts institution in the structural arrangement that sanctions the preservation of unpaid internships is reactive rather than causal, and accommodating to both conflicting external and internal interests, rather than rigid. In an attempt to appease lawmakers and employers outside of the university, and students and parents, faculty members, administrators, the finance office, and the career center representatives within the university, liberal arts colleges risk compromising long-held standards about intellectual rigor, the function of education for versatile intelligence rather than utility, and principles of distinction such as non-instrumentality and ineffability. The agreement among the course coordinator and representatives from the Career Center about the pre-professional purpose of internships is striking because it suggests education for utility is permeating through mindsets of educators in the liberal arts university, due to structural economic and legal conditions outside of the university. The alleged opportunistic attitude of the Office of Finance with respect to this course suggests financial demands within a university may also have a powerful influence on this infiltration of utilitarianism in the liberal arts sphere. The Self Study Report (2012) suggests that in light of financial challenges related to managing debt, the endowment, and financial aid affordability, it has become an uphill battle to “work within a sustainable economic model while maintaining core values” (89).

Ultimately, the Wesleyan case study demonstrates it is over-simplistic to assume a liberal arts university has a coherent, opportunistic stance about internship accreditation. Liberal arts institutions are faced with the challenge to handle
internship accreditation in a way that balances the myriad of incompatible stakes and values held by parties within the institution related to money, pedagogy, philosophy, and reputation, as well as the contradictory demands of students, parents, and employers. Overall, the study offers critical insights into the complicated position of the liberal arts establishment amidst shifting legal, business, social, and cultural norms.
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