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# Discourse Tokens of Value and the Coordination of Internship Labor: Analyzing How Employers Talk About College Internships

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes how employers use discourse to ideologize the value of college internships—a historically emergent form of contingent, temporary, educational labor which has rapidly become a major feature of both higher education and labor relations in the United States (Frenette, 2015). The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with employers (n=38) in firms and organizations across a range of sectors who supervise and coordinate the work of college student interns from two public universities and two technical colleges located in different economic regions within the same U.S. Midwestern state. Using the anthropological theory of value (Graeber, 2001), we develop an analysis of how employers use discourse to ideologize and coordinate internship labor. Employers use three discourses of value to ideologize 1) the individual intern as the primary beneficiary of the internship (*entrepreneurial discourse of value*); 2) the organization or firm as the primary beneficiary of the internship (*corporate efficiency discourse of value*); and 3) the community, industry, or society in general as the primary beneficiary of the internship (*community service discourse of value*). The article develops the concept of a *discourse token of value*—discursive forms that (like cash) mediate value—as a central concept of the analysis of emergent forms of education and labor.

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## Introduction

Internships and other forms of work-based learning have become both a central policy focus and an increasingly common feature of the US labor market since the 1990s as a panacea to the boom-bust pattern of the capitalist growth cycle (Frenette, 2015; Perlin, 2012). Internships have been represented as a win-win-win for students, for educators, and for employers (Knemeyer & Murphy, 2002), and have also become a central focus of higher education and workforce development policy (e.g., National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Research has measured the benefits of college internships to students, including improved academics (Binder et al., 2015), refined career goals (Taylor, 1988), increased employability (Nunley et al., 2016), and improved wages (Saniter & Siedler, 2014). However, raced, classed, and gendered barriers to internship participation may reproduce or amply social inequalities (Hora et al., 2021; Wolfgram et al., 2021). Research also indicates that the intern's ambiguous employment status may entail exploitative labor conditions (Curiale 2009; Frenette 2015). Relatively neglected in the research literature, however, is analysis of the discourses, ideologies, and values associated with college internships—that is, on the production of the culture of the internship economy that forms of the context of internship as an emergent form of labor (Frenette, 2013; Wolfgram & Ahrens, 2022). This paper addresses this gap in the research literature by asking: How do employers use discourse to ideologize and coordinate the value of internship labor?

To answer this question, we present evidence from a discourse analysis of interviews with employers (n=38), which illustrates how they use discourse to ideologize the value of internship labor. Our analysis indicates that employers represent internships as labor, profit, and other forms of value that benefit the firm or organization (a *corporate efficiency discourse of value*), as a source of marketable and deployable entrepreneurial skills and experiences that benefit the intern (an *entrepreneurial discourse of value*), and as charitable or community service that benefits the community, industry, or society in general (a *community service discourse of value*). We draw on anthropological theorizing of value (Graeber, 2001), and discourse analysis (Gee 2011, and others) to develop a conceptual framework that clarifies role of discourse to ideologize the value of college internships. We argue that a social-educational theory that clarifies the relations between schooling and the production of society requires the incorporation of a theory of value because communication and acquisition of values motivates learning, labor, and careers (Graeber, 2001; 2013).

## The College Internship: The Rise of Contingent, Temporary, Educational Labor

The historic rise of the internship economy in the United States involves a coordination of large-scale socioeconomic changes such as the impact of the Great Recession, political changes such as the de-unionization of the U.S. labor force, legal changes such as the deregulation of the internship labor role, and changes in the politics and goals of higher education (Frenette, 2015).

Frenette (2015) has documented how the legal ambiguity of the employment status of internships permitted in U.S. law—in contrast with the clear legal employment relations mandated for apprenticeships by the Fitzgerald Act of 1937—coupled with post-Great Recession demographic and economic changes has led to the rapid rise of the internship as a form of informal, temporary, contingent educational labor. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 would have provided some legal protections and employment relations for unpaid interns, but a series of interpretations, guidance, and rulings issued by the U.S. Department of Labor has added increasing ambiguity to the status of the internship labor relations (Bergman, 2013). The employers we interviewed had both paid and unpaid internships, though a few of their unpaid interns received stipends from their college. The legal status of the intern work role in firms and organizations included temporary or term-delimited employment status, independent contractor status, and non-status interns; i.e., the common situation of interns lacking any legal status or formal employment relationship whatsoever. The interns in these programs participated in these work relations both as part of for-credit academic programs and independently, without the academic supervision and regulation required in such programs.

A distinctive feature of internship labor—in contrast with other forms of contingent labor (Kalleberg, 2000)—is that the goals of the intern role are ostensibly educational. Institutions of higher education in the United States have come to play a major role in arranging and managing internship opportunities for their students (Frenette, 2015) and play a key role as a hub of resources, connecting students to firms and organizations in different sectors, and mediating their transition process (Stevens et al., 2008). Faculty play this mediating role of gatekeeping employers' access to students and students' access to firms through internship, as do career services staff who cultivate relationships with employers for the purposes of facilitating student internships and post-graduation employment (Damaske, 2009).

One economic function of the internship work-role is to fill labor shortages with underpaid or unpaid internships, to perform labor which regular employees find menial or uninteresting, and to provide temporary labor in industries with a seasonal or intermittent workflow (Kalleberg, 2000). For example, Chan et al. (2020) document the use of college internships by Foxconn in China to meet labor needs imposed by the rapid ups-and-downs of the global iPhone production cycle. Foxconn can rapidly increase production to meet quotas by employing (unbenefited, uninsured) student interns on the production line and then dismissing them after the production quotas are met. The students are required by government colleges to intern, during which they often suffer under unhealthy and exploitative working conditions. It is the contingent and temporary nature of the internship role which allows Foxconn to capture their labor, meet production quotas, and maximize profit, and it is the "educational" nature of the internship role that compels student to submit to this regime of labor exploitation to satisfy the graduation requirement (and college teachers to recruit and supervise their "internship"). While the situation of Foxconn in China is both extremely and transparently exploitative, research on employer perspectives of internships in the United States indicates that employers often view interns as a source of low-cost labor (Bailey et al., 2000) used to accomplish "back-burner" low-priority work (Maertz Jr. et al., 2014). Thus, the legal ambiguity of internships in US law and labor

policy—under the ideological guise of "educational experiences" (Frenette 2015)—has normalized internships as a contingent and temporary labor role, which is often unpaid or underpaid and lacks any financial or other benefits of regular employment relations (Curiale, 2009).

Furthermore, the contingent, temporary, and *in situ* setting of internships provides employers with an up-close and practical yet relatively low-cost and low-risk opportunity to review and select interns for regular employment (Maertz Jr. et al., 2014; Zhao & Liden, 2011) and provides an ideal setting to observe interns' social skills (Rosenbaum & Binder, 1997). This permits employers to base hiring decisions on "fit" rather than credentials and other criteria (Hora, 2020). The setting also provides employers with the opportunity for anticipatory and explicit socialization of workplace norms (Dailey, 2006), as well as the development of skills, habits, and dispositions associated with neoliberal company culture (Wolfgram & Ahrens, 2022). Because internships are a low-cost, low-risk, and efficient rationalization of the process of reviewing and selecting "new talent," college internships have become a central feature of the corporate hiring pipeline in the United States (Bailey et al., 2000; Moss-Pech, 2021).

## Conceptual framework

Talk about "values" is a central preoccupation among most people who care about and pursue education and careers—yet despite its ubiquity, the concept of value is an often-untheorized feature of education research. In a classic anthropological definition of the culture concept, Geertz (1973) describes culture as both a "model of" reality and as a "model for" reality. The framing of culture as a conventional representation (i.e., "model of") of reality—otherwise termed "discourse," "epistemology," "cosmology," or "ideology"—has had a major impact on educational theory (Burner, 2020). And yet, how reality in such settings *should* be understood and experienced (i.e., the "model for" reality)—in other words, "values"—has been neglected in social studies of education, excluding the philosophy of education which has focused on clarifying the impact of cultural values on higher education's aims (Brighouse & McPherson, 2015). This neglect of "value" as a heuristic is surprising because anthropology—specifically anthropological theories of value—and education theory share a common analytical focus: how socialized persons are produced, of which values are a key part (Graeber, 2001; 2013). We thus introduce the concept of a *discourse token of value* as an analytical tool for critical discourse-focuses analysis of education.

### Ideological Theories and Discourse Tokens of Value

The anthropologist Klyde Kluckhohn (1951) defined "values" as cultural "conceptions of the desirable." David Graeber (2001) defined values as symbolic forms of what is culturally desirable, good, moral, and worthy of pursuit; as he explains, "The desirable refers not simply to what people actually want—in practice, people want all sorts of things. Values are ideas about what they *ought* to want" (p. 3). Such conventions are thus normative in nature, which is perhaps why it has been philosophers of education rather than social scientists who have considered the importance of values that underlie the project of higher education, arguing that educators and

leadership must articulate and coordinate educational practices, policies, and resources in support of the realization of those values (Brighouse & McPherson, 2015).

Critical discourse analysis (Gee, 2001; Fairclough, 2001; Mullet, 2018) studies the role of discourse in representing and creating what some have termed *a regime of value* (Appadurai, 1988), and others *a universe of value* (Graeber, 2001), constituted by value concepts, language, and objects, and by the social-materials relations that produce and mediate value. Discourses or representations of theories of value are ideological in nature in that they are deployed by social actors to authorize and produce a cultural context for value within which productive social relations and activity are coordinated (Eagleton 1991).

Discourse is part of a lager social-material process which constitutes the culture, medium, and relations which motivate action and come to represent what is good and desirable in highly particular ways (Gee, 2011). Because value is constituted by signs that are mediated by objects and discourse, which themselves are mediated social relations (Munn, 1992), the hermeneutics of value requires a theory of signs (or semiotics) which accounts from how signs of value both represent value but also become the particular forms of value itself (i.e., Geertz's "models of" and "models for" analysis; Geertz, 1973).

Value is symbolized by what Graeber calls value-tokens (2001); either as a sign of the relative presence or absence of a value, as a sign of the relative ranking of values, or (as in the particular case of the money form) through proportionality of value (Graeber 2001; Turner 1979). In capitalist societies, money is a primary value-token; but there are at least three important ways that discourse can function as a value-token (i.e., as a *discourse token of value*). Discourse, for example, can be used to represent the presence or absence of value-producing skills or personal qualities embodied in persons, in which "skills" represent the presence of marketable qualities of labor (Urciuoli, 2008). In addition to the discourses signaling of the presence of value, discursive representations of data and quantifications of social relations can map relations or hierarchies of value, as in management and audit cultures where accounting and management techniques are used to particularize value (Shore & Wright, 2015). Thus, discursive-numerical and -graphical representation of relative amounts of value establishes a particular hierarchy of value. In addition to forms of value in market labor exchange relations—that is, the presence/absence or hierarchy of values—there is the value that cannot be alienated through market relations. Thus, discursive representations of qualities which are not reducible to the money form can signal value as well: for example, "love" as a value-token motivating unpaid caregiving (Graeber, 2001); examples include, the role of discursive representations of "fame" or "respect" motivating reciprocal public displays of deference (Munn, 1992); or the value accrued to companies through discursive representations of philanthropic generosity and "community service" (Dolan & Rajak, 2016).

Importantly, discourse tokens of value may serve as authentications of value, authoritatively signaling the presence or absence of value (Irvine, 1989). In this way, discursive representations of value motivate social activity. Thus, value and its authentic representation bring culture and society into existence.

## Methodology

### The College Internship Study

The College Internship Study is a longitudinal, mixed methods study underway at 14 colleges and universities in the United States. Institutions in the study include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), community colleges, and regional comprehensive Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The study draws upon survey data, focus groups, interviews with students, and interviews with educators and employers who supervise student interns to investigates the barriers, experiences, and outcomes associated with college internship participation (Hora et al., 2022). Here, we draw on the employer interviews conducted at two community colleges and two regional comprehensive PWIs collected in one Midwestern state to study how employers understand, represent, and utilize the value of college student internships and of internship labor.

### Research Sites

Table 1 provides the institutional populations of the four research sites. Site 1 is a community college located within the state's populous and racial diverse urban center, which serves high proportions of racially minoritized and first-generation college students. The city and surrounding region can be characterized as a post-industrial economy, with only about 15% of the workforce in manufacturing but about 25% in educational services, health care, or social assistance industries, and a larger corporate sector dominated by finance, insurance, and real estate industries. Site 1's academic programs support this regional economy, with business-related programs, STEM, health professions, and social services professions being the most popular degree programs. Site 2 is also a community college, located within a mid-sized city that also contains the state's public flagship university. Healthcare, social assistance and education comprise roughly 30% of the workforce, with about 10% each in scientific and technical services, in retail, and in manufacturing. Site 2's major academic programs include nursing, other health professions, and various IT programs. Site 3 is a regional public comprehensive PWI (with 80% of students identifying as White), located in a region of the state with several small cities and a broader industrial base, including automobile manufacturing, plastic packaging, as well as aviation. Common academic programs at the school include nursing, liberal arts & sciences, education, business, and psychology. Site 4 is another regional public comprehensive PWI (with 60% of students identifying as White, and 20% Hispanic identified students being the largest minority), located within a rural setting but within the commuting zone of small cities and two major metropolitan areas. Manufacturing makes up the industry employing the largest percentage of people at about 20%, followed by health care and social assistance (16%) and accommodation and food services (8.0%). The most common degrees at Site 4 include business, psychology, and criminal justice; the institution is known for its program of outreach and community engagement with nonprofit organizations in the nearby area.

Together, these four sites capture the range of regional economies that host interns and the types of relationships employers establish between their organizations and local institutions.

***Table 1*: Student Demographics for Research Sites**

| | Demographics* | Site 1 | Site 2 | Site 3 | Site 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Total** | | 4,651 | 4,027 | 8,541 | 3,143 |
| **Gender** | Male | 53% | 50% | 41% | 45% |
| | Female | 47% | 50% | 59% | 55% |
| **Race** | American Indian or Alaskan Native | 1% | 1% | 1% | 0% |
| | Asian | 7% | 5% | 4% | 4% |
| | Black | 24% | 5% | 2% | 8% |
| | Hispanic | 19% | 13% | 6% | 17% |
| | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| | White | 40% | 67% | 81% | 64% |
| | Other** | 9% | 9% | 6% | 7% |
| **First-gen college** | Yes | 49% | 50% | 44% | 60% |
| | No | 51% | 50% | 56% | 40% |

*The data of the populations are approximations to conceal the identity of participating institutions. The sources of population-level data are the institutions' own public data digests.
**Other includes multi-ethnic, unknown, international, and those labeled other.

**Data Collection Procedures and Research Sample**

This study employed a three-tiered system of snowball sampling to connect with employers who host students as interns from the four institutions. First, key persons in career advisory positions provided the research team with contacts for employers working with their students. The second method involved connections to employers provided by leadership and advisors interviewed as part of the larger college internship study. Finally, interviews with employers provided additional employer contact information from within the company. Collectively, these recruitment tactics produced interviews with 38 employers and offered insight from a range of companies and industries.

As part of the recruitment process, the researchers emailed the employers informing them about the research and requesting their participation. One additional follow-up email was sent if employers were nonresponsive. An interview was scheduled at a time and place based around the convenience of the employer; interviews were conducted both in person and over the phone.

Prior to the start of the interview, participants reviewed an information sheet, were given an opportunity to ask questions, and verbally consented to participate in the research. The employers involved in this study did not receive money or any other incentive for their participation.

Aside from one case in which two employers from the same company were interviewed simultaneously, the interviews involved one-on-one meetings in person or online and lasted roughly 30–40 minutes. The interviews covered five major characteristics of internship programming: recruitment, work design and supervision, socialization, assessment, and relationship to formal employment. Questions were about the specifics of the internship program within each individual industry, employer involvement and proximity to interns, and the employers' broader perceptions of interns and internships. Questions ranged from "Can you describe your internship program?" to "Is there a mode for internship feedback or evaluation at your company?" Employers described the benefits or drawbacks of hosting interns, and attributed value to the interns' contributions to the team, the firm or organization, or even the industry or field.

Employers working with student interns from the four sites represent a total of 26 different firms and organizations (see Table 2). The range of corporate employers included insurance, consumer products such as software and health products, management consulting such as tax, accounting assistance, safety and compliance, and economic development. Other employers included public & government services (3), hospitality (3), nonprofits (3), educational services (2), and employment agencies (2).

***Table 2:*** **Organizations Represented by Employers Hosting Interns**

| Organizations | Amount |
|---|---|
| Insurance | 4 |
| Consumer Products | 5 |
| Management Consulting | 2 |
| Safety & Compliance | 1 |
| Development | 1 |
| Public & Government Services | 3 |
| Hospitality | 3 |
| Non-Profits | 3 |
| Educational Services | 2 |
| Employment Agencies | 2 |
| **Total** | 26 |

Employer oversight of interns depended significantly on the structure of the internship program at any given company or organization. Program structure across these 26 sites varied greatly, running the gamut from minimal structure with only one or two interns during any given year, to a well-oiled machine complete with internship-specific guidelines, progress reports, projects, and social events. Some companies employed more than 100 summer interns. In smaller organizations, the employer working with interns could serve as the recruiter, organization head,

and direct supervisor, while larger companies split these roles across a team of individuals. Table 3 provides information regarding employers' work-role in the internship program.

***Table 3:*** **Employer Professional Proximity to Interns**

| Employer Demographics | Amount |
|---|---|
| Direct Internship Supervisor | 12 |
| Unit Director/Department Head | 8 |
| Internship Program Coordinator/Recruiter | 10 |
| HR Director | 3 |
| Internship Placement Broker | 5 |
| **Total** | 38 |

Direct internship supervisors worked with interns in a variety of ways, often training, supervising, and providing feedback on a weekly or even daily basis. Unit directors or department heads, as well as owners of small firms, designed projects for interns, provided mentorship, and coordinated the role of the internship program within the labor and hiring strategy of the department, firm, or organization. Unlike direct supervisors, however, these unit directors or department heads were typically not involved in the day-to-day work tasks of their interns. In these cases, these employees might manage interns from a distance and oversee their broader activities, address questions, review feedback, and offer check-ins and any additional constructive criticism. However, in instances where an organization head functioned as a direct supervisor, these employees were counted as direct internship supervisors.

Internship program coordinators and recruiters could function together and/or separately depending on the structure of the internship program. In some cases, those recruiting talent also broadly coordinate the internship program. In other cases, employees discussing internship programs at their organization were mainly involved in overseeing broader recruitment and therefore were familiar with the structure and elements of the internship. Human resource directors mainly dealt with human resource-related tasks specific to interns, including the interview process, training, and feedback/evaluations. Finally, distinct from the other roles, internship placement brokers worked in intermediary roles where they coordinated placements between interns and particular organizations.

Of the 38 employers who worked with interns, 19 identified as female, 17 identified as male and two were not identified. An overwhelming majority of employers interviewed were white (34). Only one of the 38 employers identified as Black, one identified as Asian, and two were unidentified.

### Analytic Procedures

We first segmented the interview transcripts based on question/answer sequences in the interview protocol, as well as features of the internship process addressed within the literature (e.g., recruitment, training, work-task design, feedback, etc.; see Sweitzer & King, 2013). Next,

we conducted a round of open coding of the transcripts to identify major themes across employers and the mechanisms and terminology by which they prescribed value to internships (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This round of analysis involved identifying conceptual similarities between and among themes (often called axial coding; Saldaña, 2015), which led to the identification of three larger patterns in how employers value internship labor: entrepreneurialism, corporate efficiency, and community service.

Coding based on these three themes required further analysis drawing on tools of Critical Discourse Analysis, as developed James P. Gee (2011) and others (Gable & Wolf, 1993; Mullet, 2018; Saldaña, 2021). Critical Discourse analysis identifies how units of discourse—words, phrases, and larger linguistic structures such as narratives—are a component of larger social processes involving culture, ideology, and power relations. Gee (2011) addresses the integration of language, action, interaction, beliefs, and values and the use of symbols, tools, and objects to address the ways language is used as a tool for discourse analysis. With this mode of analysis in mind, we then analyzed the transcripts coded by these three themes (Mullet, 2018). Furthermore, as part of our analytical procedure, we utilized an iterative process of reviewing texts by annotating recurrent words, themes, and concepts, and identifying how the discourse features both connect to the social context of the text's production and produce an argument about the social world (Fairclough, 2001). We engaged this process of annotating, contextualizing, and interpreting multiple times, while simultaneously compiling an analytical memo that integrated our discourse analysis of the online documents with our larger research question regarding how employers use discourse to ideologize and coordinate internship labor.

## Findings: Three Ideological Theories of Value

Internships produced value for three primary beneficiaries: the organization or firm (i.e., corporate efficiency discourse of value); the individual intern (i.e., entrepreneurial discourse of value); and the community, industry, or society in general (i.e., community service discourse of value). It was often the case that the employers interviewed for this research employed all three theories of value. It was also the case that employers in different sectors tended to emphasize particular discourses of value, even as they drew upon other discourse of value as well. For example, corporate professionals might highlight the individual intern as the beneficiary, hospitality industry professionals might highlight the company as the beneficiary, and nonprofit sector professionals might highlight the community as the beneficiary.

### Corporate Efficiency Discourse of Value

Employers at firms and organizations dedicate financial resources, personnel, and material resources (technology, office space, etc.) to hosting internships, and their discourses about internships articulate the forms of value that are produced as a consequence of this "investment." One source of value is that internship programs are used to establish a hiring pipeline to attract, select, and recruit new employees (Moss-Pech, 2021). Employers from large and midsized firms interviewed in this study employed internship programs as an alternative to other forms of recruitment such as recruiting new hires on campus directly through traditional and social media job postings or through professional hiring firms. They highlighted that engaging interns in team

projects gives supervisors multiple opportunities to assess prospective employees technical and social skills, and to gauge their personality and cultural fit with the worksites' existing staff. Such internship programs also often provide fun social and peer-boding actives—movie night, sports events, community services competitions, and more—in order to socialize interns into the company culture and court new interns as prospective employees.

The corporate efficiency discourse of internships represents the company or organization as the beneficiary of value. This value is objectified and measured through audit cultural logic (Shore & Wright, 2015), appropriating a cost-benefit logic from accountancy and management discourse. Such a discursive logic involves a quantification of value, measured with new hire rates, retention rates, and the economic value of interns, their labor, and of interns who transition to regular employment. For example, for an internship that involves selling insurance and financial products, internship supervisors were professional sales staff who guided interns through a series of activities in which they identified their own social networks through school, work, family, and other communities, producing a list of 200–300 individuals. Then the interns "should create their marketing plan around who might be an ideal clientele and an ideal target market for them to grow their client base and grow their practice." Through this process—which transforms social relations into tabulations, lists, spreadsheets, graphs, and marketing plans—the intern's social relations are objectified as an "ideal target market" (or a "natural market") to sell the company's insurance and financial products. Calculated against this objectified market for the firm's products produced through the internship program, the internship coordinator (a full-time position) emphasized that the program constitutes a major investment for the firm:

> Fiscally, it's a huge investment. We sponsor them to earn their state licenses. We pay agent dues. We pay staff to do their admin work. We pay for their phone, their, you know, printing, their office space that a normal business owner would have to pay on their own…. We're providing all of that. And again, knowing that 1 out of 3 students are going to join us who are seniors and 1 out of 8 students are going to join us if they're juniors. That's a lot of front-end, you know, fiscally a large responsibility in addition to all that mentoring, training, and support, and manpower that goes into onboarding and supporting those students.

Thus, the audit cultural logic of corporate efficiency prioritizes the quantification of costs and benefits to the firm, for example through representations such as new-hire ratios; 1:3 senior interns and 1:8 junior interns are retained as a result of the substantial investment of financial and personnel resources in the program. Measures of productivity and the retention and career trajectory of former interns are other examples of this audit cultural discourse: "About 1 intern is about comparable to 3 full-time advisors on productivity. So, they meet with more people; they help more people; they make more money than our traditional full-time advisors who start after college." The internship coordinator concluded, "Fifteen percent of our leadership are former interns" through their excelling in sales.

An internship broker at an employment firm who provides interns for manufacturing, supply chain management, and retail firms reflects this audit cultural logic of the cost-benefit corporate efficacy discourse about internships:

> At the supply company I contract for, for example, when they bring in interns, they intend to hire them. So, they're investing a lot of time and resources to developing these interns, giving them a great experience and having them learning the work, and I think their retention rate from interns is like pretty high, 60 or 70%, from an intern to an employee. So that's great in terms of a recruitment cycle. And they do that on an annual basis. It works.

Thus, audited against the expenses of recruitment and training, employers use internships to recruit, review, select, and onboard new employees as part of their recruitment cycle, and they provide audit cultural efficiency rationalities in the forms of measurable outcomes, such as retention rates. A key feature and cost of this internship recruitment cycle is the "investing a lot of time and resources to developing these interns, giving them a great experience and having them learning the work." Internship supervisors and coordinators at large firms describe the importance of providing "fun" for the interns as a key feature in retaining them for future employment. As one employer at an IT firm explained, "We try to make it really fun. You know, we took then on a cruise once. We try to make fun outings. We, so we try to give them as much cultural experience of what our company could be like."

The investment in "fun" for interns also provides a "branding opportunity," as a human resources director at a manufacturing firm explains:

> Having interns is awesome in that, you know, with us having a great program the students go back to college and they tell all their friends hopefully [laughter] about their experience. So we have had numerous students directly come up or through, you know, the intern at that school and say, "oh, so-and-so told me about your program and it sounds awesome. It sounds like a company I would love to work for." So not only are interns new talent, but they're a branding opportunity for us.

In addition to a recruitment cycle with a high retention rate, employers describe various "returns on investment" in internship programs, including access to information about niche markets, such as youth and generational cultures like the characteristics of "the millennial shopper … it is easy for interns to create that lens for us;" diversifying the staff in firms or industries with a problematic reputation for a lack of gender or racial diversity; and if the intern is not successfully recruited, providing needed temporary labor and filling vacancies until a regular employee can be recruited.

A second source of value is that internship programs provide labor to firms and organizations which is free or low-cost and contingent. Internship supervisors in government, non-profits, and small firms often draw value from the free or low-cost interns who provide temporary labor for time-delimited projects or to meet seasonal labor demands. As one supervisor at a small design firm explained, "The interns are helping to fill positions, whether it's just very temporarily, or for the summer, or for half a year." Interns may have academic

backgrounds that decrease the costs associated with training short-term or seasonal labor. For example, a small tax firm employs interns from an accountancy program from one of the technical colleges in this study to meet the increased and temporary labor demands of the tax season. As the owner explained, "Once you have that accounting background, things will fall into place very easy, and you don't need a lot of training." Employers who value temporary and contingent intern labor deploy a logic and discourse of corporate efficiency, balancing the costs of training interns with skills and procedures particular to the work against the labor value added by the intern's work.

In sum, a discourse of value that employs an audit cultural logic of corporate efficiency compares the "costs" of an internship program ("investments" in human, financial, and material resources) with the "benefits" (number of long-term quality hires, lower recruitment and training costs, profit, and access to needed low-cost contingent labor to meet temporary labor demands).

**Entrepreneurial Discourse of Value**

Some employers depict their internship program as a distinctive "entrepreneurial internship" activity and form of labor upon which entrepreneurial qualities are predicated: "entrepreneurial internships" are "a really immersive, engaging, innovative process," as one internship broker explained of the corporate internships he helps to facilitate. The symbolic forms of value produced through the "entrepreneurial internship" are learned personal capacities, represented as objectified and marketable "skills." As an employer as a marketing firm explained, "The goal is to build entrepreneurial skills that are also indicative of soft skills development, meaning your creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication skills." These terms, as argued by Urciuoli (Urciuoli, 2008), reference an ideal worker's personal qualities as a sign of the intern's value as laborer, but they also semiotically index the cultural totality within which such value operates -- in this case, the regime of value of corporate entrepreneurialism which celebrates individual exploration, creativity, innovation, and newness (Graeber, 2013).

The language used to describe "entrepreneurial internships" articulates an explicit contrast to normative internship, characterizing "entrepreneurial internships" as "nontraditional," "nontypical," "innovative," and "a totally new form of internship," which is "hands-on," "challenging," "collaborative," and "diverse." As one employer stated, "There is a stark difference between a traditional internship program and what we are putting together." This internship coordinator at a firm in the finance sector labeled such "traditional internships" with the mocking term "gopher-ships."

> So as opposed to being a clock-in, clock-out job, where you have a direct manager, someone micro-kind-of-managing and watching you all the time, they're very independent and self-driven. And so it's a very nontraditional internship program. They are not someone's assistant.

She explained that traditional internships "are a little bit more structured and there's less pressure on them and less personal and professional development," whereas her internships are "career focused and provide more hands-on, challenging opportunities to grow." Another employer

described an internship in their accounting firm as "a really immersive, engaging, innovative process," involving "a lot of freedom."

In contrast, traditional, normative internships are represented in such entrepreneurial discourses of value as monotonous, highly structured, and subordinating. Descriptions of "traditional internship" work tasks involve "getting coffee," "doing busy work," "being micromanaged," "being told what to do"— whereas entrepreneurial internships involve a variety of "innovative" and "really dynamic" activity types, such as "critical path projects," "innovation sprints," "skills accelerators," "creating your own work." The term "intern" is itself sometimes replaced by jargonistic categories such as "consultants," "innovations fellows," and the "talent." Repetitive and monotonous aspects of internship labor is described as "continuously iterat[ing] upon those skills;" working with spreadsheets is "leveraging data;" giving a presentation is "pitching their concept;" receiving feedback from supervisors is "collaborating;" doing what supervisors direct is "iterate upon that feedback;" and planning your work tasks for a shift is "driving the direction of your work." Meeting with mentors is "entering-up to different mentors."

Qualities of these interns include being "independent and self-driven," "resilient," able to "overcome adversity" and being able to "manage and run your own schedule and your own motivation." Entrepreneurial representations also characterize interns as "standing, moving, and talking," "engaging all day," and "having face-to-face conversations" rather than "sitting behind a desk … and then you leave." Normative internships are represented as involving supervision by an "internship supervisor," which is stigmatized as "handholding," "micromanagement," "training," "educating," and "telling them what to do." There are no entrepreneurial internship supervisors, only "mentors," "coaches," "guides," "partners," "colleagues," "stakeholders," and "project managers;" who, rather than direct and supervise, "onboard," "empower," "develop," "encourage," "share," "make opportunities to grow," and "provide resources." One employer did not like to use terms such as "supervision" and "training" to characterize his work with interns, preferring the concepts of "inter-management" and "team management," which involve "making mutually beneficial connections" and "organization relationships between the communication streams."

**Community Service Discourse of Value**

A third discourse of value deployed by employers is to represent internship programs as a form of "community service" which benefits the community or industry but which also indirectly promotes goodwill and their reputation (which can indirectly benefit future business in the community and the recruitment of new employees). There are several different kinds of "community" represented as the primary beneficiary of value of internship programs—including the community of students, the industry or profession, colleges and universities and other educational institutions in the region, and the greater community in general.

One key way that employers represent their internship programs as a form of community service is to highlight the value received by students who are part of "the greater community," who themselves do not become employees of the firm. In terms of the corporate rationality of economic efficiency, such interns are not part of the "return on investment" in the internship

program (i.e., they do not become regular value-producing employees). Thus, the discourse around their internships is re-framed as a form of "community service." An internship supervisor at a finance firm explained the philanthropic motivations of their internship program:

> We do not have the program set up to breed financial advisors by any means. We understand that of the 3 seniors that are here, only 1 is going to join us. So the intention is not to kind of, you know, assume that every student is going to become an advisor. The overall mission is to kind of just continually improve and support whichever area we're in, so in my particular situation, it's the greater metro community of our city….We want every student to leave, whether it's joining our company or joining a different industry or company, a different, better version of themselves than when they joined us. We want them to grow personally, professionally. We want them to do very, you know, create a vision to understand where they're going, grow in a lot of areas, like we were talking about, drinking out of a fire hose, that they wouldn't have had they not taken on the internship. So that's like our overall mission.

Thus "the mission" of the internship program is to provide value to the community in general. The graphic metaphor that the internship supervisor employs, that their interns are "drinking out of a fire hose," highlights the generous and overflowing flood of value received by the interns and thus the wider community.

Internship supervisors and coordinators and others involved in internship programs highlight this direction of value toward the intern and community as the beneficiary. "They're doing great work for the community and for the students as well as the academic and corporate clients that they serve." Internship coordinators "provide materials," "make connections," "give resources," "build relationships," "facilitate communication," "help them…grow," "make opportunities available," "help [interns] meet their goals," "supporting those introductions and that process" [of building community connections]"—in sum, "all we are doing is providing value." The time and emotional and financial support that firms and organizations provide to interns is thus represented as a philanthropic gift.

Corporate internship coordinators also represent their on-campus recruitment work as a form of community service to educators and to students, and to higher education in general. For example, one internship coordinator describes the value she provides to colleges and the general community, by provided professional development training on campus.

> So we have a lot of different sponsorship agreements and a lot of binding agreements, so they're more just, like, them asking us to come in to help and things like that with student orgs, with professors, instructors, athletic coaches, different groups, associations, Greek life. And often, I have a list of different things that we chat about, and I pretty much say, you know, what would you like help on? I have the manpower. I have the time. I have the money. Where does your group, organization have need? And how can we as a company help provide value to that need to fill in some of those blanks? So not only can we help the school, we can help the greater community in the area, but then, from that, I will

> genuinely, face-to-face, meet some students who are excited about learning more of the [internship] opportunity.

To facilitate the "service" to the students and staff of the colleges and universities area, the internship coordinator has created over a dozen "professional development presentations" on topics such as resume reviews, interviewing skills, marketing yourself professionally, financial plan for college students, time management skills, women in leadership, sales skills, and so on. "So we teach a lot of students, alongside the professors, sales skills, marketing, and [professional] development." The firm also provides financial support to preprofessional student organizations, to fund training and participation in national collegiate business, sales, and marketing competitions; and to "either provide money or manpower to be judges, so to help teach their students." While the recruitment work of the internship program provides value to the college and community, it also creates a context in which the internship coordinator can interact face-to-face with potential recruits: "Through those events, I will then find, identify, and then bring on qualified candidates for our Internship Program."

"Service" to communities is represented as a key value outcome of internships for government, nonprofits, and educational internships. For example, the supervisors for a court reporting internship program in the county court system described their additional work to supervise and train interns as a way to promote the court reporting profession as an interesting, rewarding, and important profession to a new generation of students. Likewise, an internship supervisor at a college Disability Servies Department describes her work to train interns in Computer Aided Real-Time Transcription (known as CART Transcription), as a way to encourage students into a profession that involves supporting the learning of students with disabilities. Importantly, the beneficiary of this value is not the particular organization or department—as a hiring pipeline to recruit new talent, for example—but the profession as a generalized community, as well as potentially larger communities through future service to the justice system as a court reporter or to students with disabilities as a CART transcriptionist. In the case of court and CART transcription, interns require extensive training, supervision, and feedback, and their interns' transcription work simulates the court and CART transcription work of the supervisor—so their internship labor does not contribute directly to the workload.

## Discussion

Our goal in this article was to contribute new insights into how employers use discourse to value and coordinate college internship labor. There are some limitations of our study that we want to recognize. The first pertains to the small number of institutions in the study (four), and the small sample size of employers (n=38) representing 27 firms and organizations, which precludes generalizations to the fields of higher education or employment more generally. Such claims are also untenable given the nonrandom selection of students who self-selected into the study. While the interviews with employers provided rich data for this analysis, the study would have benefited from additional detail and discursive evidence from ethnographic accounts of behavior. This would have provided deeper insights into the nature of employers' discourse and coordination of internship labor. In the remainder of this article, we highlight key findings from

our study and how a discourse-analytic (anthropological) theory of value can inform education research and theory.

The empirical findings highlighted in this paper are that we documented how employers deploy three ideological discourses of value—corporate efficiency, entrepreneurialism, and community service—in the representation and coordination of internship labor for firms and organizations in a Midwestern state. This tripart finding reflects research on employer perspectives on internships which emphasize their roles as low-cost labor and as a hiring pipeline (Bailey et al., 2000; Maertz Jr. et al., 2014), and as a way to signal philanthropic corporate motivations, such as showing "commitment to their communities" and "contributions to the general well-being of their towns and neighborhoods" (Bailey et al., 2000:42).

Additional research, informed by critical perspectives, on how employers conceptualize, represent, and coordinate corporate and other internships is both needed and timely. Internships have not only become a ubiquitous feature of labor in the 21st century (Frenette, 2015; Perlin, 2012), but they are also ideologically distinctive among the forms of contingent labor characteristic of that economy (Kalleberg, 2000). Internships are particular in that they draw legal sanction (Bergman, 2013) and cultural authority (Wolfgram & Ahrens, 2022) as a form of educational labor, in which students—in exchange for their unpaid or low-paid and irregular labor—are represented as the primary beneficiary of the internship. Higher education institutions play a major role as a hub of resources needed to coordinate the internship economy (Stevens et al., 2008) and in the authentication an internship's educational status—at the same time as they market their internship programs as a competitive advantage to their students' career development within the competitive economy of higher education (Einstein, 2015). Research on the discursive and social-institutional processes involved in the ideological framing of internships as an (legal, ethical) form of educational labor is needed to document and theorize the role of internships is the emergent economy. Areas for future research on the discursive construction of internships could focus on the role of education theory, and policies and practices, as well as educators, advisers, and educational leadership in the production and coordination of internship value and labor. What role do institutions of higher education play in the coordination of internships as a new form of labor? And how is contingent, potentially exploitable labor represented as "educational?"

In addition to the relevant empirical findings featured in this article, we have developed the concept of a *discourse token of value* as an analytic tool for critical research on education, which highlights how employers organize discourse to represent and coordinate the value of college internship labor for firms and organizations. In particular, we have also documented a discursive-ideological process—the production of ideological theories of value through the deployment of discursive value tokens—in the coordination of the culture college internship economy. This culture of value has been described in the anthropological literature as a regime (Appadurai, 1988) or universe of value (Graeber, 2001). We argue in this article that discourse tokens of value not only represent value, but they mediate and authenticate (i.e., produce) value in society (Irvine, 1989; Turner 1979).

The research suggests that discourse can function as tokens of value in three primary ways (Graeber 2001; Turner 1979). One, discourse can signal of the presence/absences of value, as in the use of skills discourse (Urciuoli, 2008); for example, employers ideologize internships as benefiting interns with marketable entrepreneurial skills (an *entrepreneurial discourse of value*). Two, discourse can signal hierarchies of value, as in the use of audit cultural discourses and practices (Shore & Wright, 2015), in which quantifications map relative amounts of value; for example, employers ideologize internships as benefiting companies and organizations with cost/benefit ratio, hiring and retention data, and quantifications of profit which signal relative value to companies or organizations (a *corporate efficiency discourse of value*). Three, discourse can signal inalienable value forms of value, as in discourses of corporate goodwill and responsibility, philanthropic generosity, and service to the community (Dolan & Rajak, 2016), in which employers ideologize internships as benefiting the community in the form of gifts of "service" to increase the goodwill and reputation of the company (a *community service discourse of value*).

This analysis suggests that research and theory on the relationship of education and the economy could benefit from closer attention to the discourse processes deployed to coordinate, ideologize, and value emergent forms of labor—because it is within such discursively constructed cultures of value that new forms of education and labor are realized and made meaningful.

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