

Internship Needs Assessment Working Group - Full Report

September 2024

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1. Executive Summary

Cal Poly Humboldt's transition to a polytechnic institution necessitates a strategic expansion of internship and experiential learning opportunities. This report, compiled by the Internship Needs Assessment Working Group, examines the current state of internships at our university and proposes strategies for enhancement.

Key Findings

- Internships are crucial for student success, serving as high-impact practices that improve retention and graduation rates.
- Current internship offerings are diverse but fragmented, creating navigation challenges for students, faculty, and external partners.
- Equity and access, particularly for underrepresented and low-income students, must remain in focus.
- Data across different campus entities is siloed due to differences in the systems used.

Recommendations

- Create a centralized, user-friendly landing page for internship information
- Develop a comprehensive outreach and education program for stakeholders.
- Implement a unified data management system or explore connecting existing systems.
- Expand paid internship opportunities to enhance equity and access.
- Foster closer collaboration between academic departments, central offices, and external partners.
- Develop a clear organizational structure identifying roles and responsibilities as related to internship programming (planning, coordination, data management, etc.)

Short-term Action Plan (AY '24-'25), (See Section 5)

- Establish quarterly meetings of key stakeholders
- Create a landing website for internships to ease navigation
- Offer faculty professional development workshops
- Expand internship opportunities in Engineering and Computer Science
- Discuss how to improve data collection and sharing practices

The short-term actions outlined here can proceed without additional resources and can lay the foundation for a strategic, long-term expansion that will require institutional investment.

Long-term Vision (See Section 6)

Develop a comprehensive, financially supported institutional strategy to offer a wide array of experiential learning experiences to all students, solidifying Cal Poly Humboldt's position as a leading polytechnic institution.

2. Introduction: Our Working Group And Defining “Internships”

This report summarizes the findings of the "Internship Needs Assessment" working group, which convened during the Spring 2024 semester. Initiated by the Associate Dean of the College of Natural Resources and Sciences, who serves as the Principal Investigator on an NSF "Enabling Partnerships to Increase Innovation Capacity (EPIIC)" grant, the group's primary objective was to enhance the university's capacity to offer internships, with a particular emphasis on Engineering and Computer Science programs.

The working group aimed to

- Evaluate the current organizational structure, policies, and practices
- Identify gaps in existing programs
- Explore new opportunities for expansion

While the group initially focused on specific areas, our findings align closely with the broader recommendations proposed by the Sponsored Programs Foundation regarding hands-on experiences for students, as discussed further in “Long Term Vision and Recommendations”.

The working group comprised a diverse array of stakeholders, representing key entities involved in internship programs across campus:

- Primary internship resources
 - Career Development Center
 - Center for Community Based Learning
- Academic representatives:
 - Faculty from Engineering, Computer Science, and Art departments
 - College of Professional Studies Student Placements & Community Engagement Specialist
 - Associate Deans from all three academic colleges
- Major on-campus providers of internship programs:
 - Sponsored Programs Foundation
 - COMPASS/Indian Natural Resources, Science and Engineering Program (INRSEP)
 - Library

This diverse composition ensured a comprehensive perspective on internship opportunities, including those funded by external sources, and facilitated discussions on expanding access across various disciplines.

2.1. *Internship Needs Assessment Working Group Membership*

Academic Colleges

Sherrene Bogle, Computer Science Faculty, NSF EPIIC co-PI

Eileen Cashman, Chair, School of Engineering

Beth Eschenbach, School of Engineering Faculty, EPIIC co-PI

Bella Gray, Student Placements & Community Engagement Specialist, CPS

Heather Madar, Associate Dean, CAHSS

Bori Mazzag, Associate Dean, CNRS, EPIIC PI

Dale Oliver, Chair, Computer Science

Justus Ortega, Associate Dean, CPS

Berit Potter, Art Faculty, Museum and Gallery Practices Certificate Program

Shannon Rocha, 2023-24 CSU STEM VISTA Intern with Engineering

Library

Cyril Oberlander, Dean

Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL)

Stacy Becker, Community Partner Coordinator

Kelly Fortner, Student Support Coordinator

Mark Wicklund, Interim Director (through May, 2024)

Emily Worm, Director (as of May, 2024)

Career Development Center

J.d. Garza, Interim Director

Ann Johnson-Cruz, Employer Relations Coordinator

Consultation

Nievia Bueno Watts, Director, COMPASS/INRSEP

Kacie Flynn, Sponsored Programs Foundation

2.2. Defining internships and experiential learning

One challenge in writing a coherent narrative about experiential learning opportunities at Cal Poly Humboldt is the large variety of experiences offered to students, and the lack of consensus on the definition of the terms used to describe these experiences. A case in point, our group came together to discuss “internships” and we quickly realized the difficulty in coming up with a concise and accurate definition that included all the experiences we offer under this title. For the duration of our working group, we sidestepped the issue and included all experiences we were familiar with in our discussions. This allowed us to come to a consensus on some joint priorities, however, it is clear that to make meaningful progress in implementing a coherent campus-wide strategy, we will need to develop a common language and agree on some definitions.

While this may seem like semantics, there are very important differences in the implementation and administration of different types of internships such as paid and unpaid internships or curricular and non-curricular. Many of the administrative differences reflect important differences in the university’s liability. Unfortunately, to successfully navigate the services, one must understand these differences - a requirement that presents a significant barrier to students, staff, faculty and external partners. An immediate need we identified is an approach to help users navigate the services without needing to understand the underlying administrative differences. A short-term approach to this is to create a centralized way to communicate the opportunities to all stakeholders, i.e. internship portal, together with a professional development campaign to educate faculty and staff on how to identify opportunities. A longer-term approach to this will have to involve a careful review of the organizational structure that prioritizes the user experiences.

For this report, we use the word “internship” very broadly to honor how various offices and departments currently use the term.

The CSU definition of an internship ([EO 1064](#)) is as follows. *“An internship formally integrates the student's academic study with practical experience in a cooperating organization. It is an off-campus activity designed to serve educational purposes by offering experience in a service learning, business, non-profit, or government setting. For this executive order ‘internship’ does not include teacher preparation placements or clinical placements such as for nursing, counseling, physical therapy or occupational therapy. An internship site is the organization at which the internship takes place.”* While this definition offers clarity, it does not fully align with how the term is used across our institution. This discrepancy further underscores the need for a shared understanding of internships within our specific context at Cal Poly Humboldt.

To address the terminology challenge, the Center for Community Based Learning has compiled a comprehensive [list of definitions](#) for various types of experiential learning. Finalizing precise definitions is still a topic of active discussion. While this report does not delve into the specifics of these definitions, we acknowledge their value as a foundation for future campus-wide discussions on clarifying our language. Instead, we focus on explaining why such clarification is crucial for the effective organization, management, and administration of experiential learning opportunities across Cal Poly Humboldt.

There are different ways internship opportunities can be categorized. One is to distinguish between non-curricular professional or career internships that do not count for academic credit and internships that are curricular-based, and offer academic credit, called “academic internships”. Academic internships are closely tied to the curriculum and, at Cal Poly Humboldt, are typically offered as “482” courses. In addition to the experience of the internship, these courses may provide students with preparation for the experience, as well as an opportunity to reflect on how the experience connects with students’ other learning in the major.

Academic internships can be very faculty labor intensive, requiring front-loaded faculty support to assist students in finding internship sites. For high-unit majors, such as various engineering majors, there is a barrier to including more units in the program in the form of 482 courses. Professional or career internships are not closely tied to the curriculum, often take place in the summer and, for many disciplines (such as engineering and computer science), they are paid. These opportunities can provide an apprenticeship in the profession, as well as networking opportunities, professional contacts and work experience.

Another criterion in categorizing internships is whether internships engage with off-campus partners or are offered as on-campus opportunities. Again, these arrangements have significant implications for student access (e.g. the ability to find transportation to an off-campus location; and being able to negotiate hours that work with academic schedules), as well as liability. Often, there is an equity dimension as well, with low-income students (many of whom are also from underrepresented groups) having less access to transportation and having a higher need for paid experiences.

Regardless of other criteria, options exist for internships that are paid and unpaid (following labor laws). Unpaid service opportunities can help students gain relevant experience in their field of interest, connect them with local professionals, and often lead to employment with the organization beyond the semester of internship. Many faculty and staff believe that ideally students should be paid for the valuable work they provide to businesses and organizations. In our local area, there is a limited amount of paid opportunities available for students, due to a variety of factors including limited resources, particularly in the case of nonprofit and grassroots organizations. Our campus also has disparate avenues for connecting students with opportunities which can create challenges to increasing the number of students participating in

paid internships. Considering the limited availability of paid internships in the Humboldt region, Cal Poly Humboldt can be instrumental in cultivating creative pathways toward paid internships through grants, donor funding, and industry partnerships. (See “Models, Organizational Structure and Staffing” in Section 6.1).

Additional terminology is also used, to further delineate experiences that have specific attributes, such as service learning, or clinical placements, or practica. Often, there are disciplinary requirements tied to specific types of experiences (e.g. clinical experiences for Nursing or Social Work and paid industry internships for Engineering). These distinctions are clearly important from an operational perspective, as described above, because of their requirements of different administrative policies and procedures. However, from the perspective of students seeking professional experiences to enhance their academic learning and career readiness, the terminology is often confusing and presents obstacles to accessing services. This problem is widely recognized on campus, and there is consensus that it is crucial to move toward providing easier, more transparent access to students, regardless of the specific type of internship/experience they seek.

It is also important to acknowledge that “internships” do not encompass all of the valuable experiential learning opportunities that students may want to access. Research experiences offered by individual faculty members, research institutes, and departments are common in STEM, as are other forms of engagement; for example, volunteering, offered through the Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S.) and paid year-long service fellowships through College Corps. Many programs offer capstone courses/experiences, field trips, labs, and many other opportunities that incorporate hands-on learning into the core academic curriculum.

Offering a comprehensive slate of services including all of these experiential learning opportunities will be an important hallmark of a mature polytechnic institution that Cal Poly Humboldt aspires to be. Currently, we are not aware of a strategic approach to build out such a comprehensive structure, although the need for it is widely recognized. Developing such a comprehensive strategy should be a long-term goal of Cal Poly Humboldt, however, the scope of that work points beyond the work of our Internships Needs Assessment Working Group. When this larger campus conversation takes place, it will be important to incorporate lessons learned from our work and engage with some of the key stakeholders from our group.

Our goals were shorter term, focused on improving the navigation of the currently offered services, and increasing the communication and collaboration between currently existing offices. The detailed recommendations to achieve this are discussed in Section 5. “Challenges, Opportunities, and Action Plan”.

3. Why focus on internships?

Internships are a crucial component of a comprehensive and impactful academic experience in higher education. As Cal Poly Humboldt transitions into a fully developed polytechnic institution, the strategic integration of internships into our academic programs becomes essential. This report, compiled by our campus internship working group, explores the current state of internship offerings at Cal Poly Humboldt and proposes immediate, shorter-term strategies for their expansion and enhancement without institutional reorganization or infusion of resources.

3.1. *Internships to support student success*

Recognized as a high-impact educational practice, internships bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) defines an internship as "a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting." This integration aligns perfectly with our polytechnic educational philosophy, which emphasizes hands-on, applied learning. Because of their focused learning environment and their ability to connect classroom learning with career exploration, internships have the potential to benefit individual students as well as academic programs and departments.

Internships offer multifaceted benefits to student learning (Kuh, 2008). In addition, students also benefit from additional aspects of internships connecting the classroom with career development.

- **Intensive, immersive learning:** Internships can accelerate learning by enhanced engagement, demanding effort and focus and continuous feedback for rapid growth.
- **Real-World Experience:** Internships provide a hands-on opportunity to apply classroom knowledge in a professional setting. This practical experience can enhance problem-solving skills, communication abilities, and industry acumen. This provides students with Contextual learning, enhancing understanding and retention of academic concepts
- **Professional networking opportunities:** Internships offer a chance to connect with professionals in the field, build relationships, and potentially secure future job offers.
- **Career Exploration:** Internships allow students to explore different career paths and industries, helping them identify their interests and passions. It can also lead to valuable networking opportunities.
- **Resume Boost:** Internships add weight to a student's resume, making them more attractive to potential employers. The experience and skills gained can differentiate them from other candidates.
- **Skill Development:** Internships can help students develop essential soft skills like teamwork, time management, and adaptability, which are highly valued by employers. Such experiences can provide students with exposure to diversity, broadening their perspectives.

Internships not only benefit the learners but departments and programs can also gain from offering internships.

- **Enhanced Student Learning:** Internships provide a valuable supplement to classroom learning. By applying theoretical knowledge in practical settings, students gain a deeper understanding of their field.
- **Improved Job Placement:** Students with internship experience are often more employable and have a higher chance of securing jobs after graduation. This can improve the department's reputation and placement rates.
- **Industry Partnerships:** Internships can foster partnerships between the department and local businesses, leading to opportunities for research collaborations, guest lectures, and job postings.
- **Curriculum Refinement:** Feedback from students and employers on internships can help departments identify areas where the curriculum may need to be updated or improved to better meet industry needs.
- **Alumni Engagement:** Internships can strengthen connections between the department and its alumni, fostering a sense of community and alumni support.

These characteristics make internships a potent tool for improving student retention and graduation rates by providing tangible connections between academic work and future careers.

3.2. Equity and access: Bridging the opportunity gap

As a Hispanic Serving Institution with a diverse student population, Cal Poly Humboldt has a responsibility to ensure equitable access to high-impact practices, including internships. Research shows that underrepresented students - including first-generation, low-income, and racially or ethnically diverse students - are less likely to participate in internships or feel supported in these experiences.

This disparity is particularly concerning given the significant role internships play in shaping career trajectories. To address this gap, we must intentionally design our internship programs with equity and access at the forefront. Key strategies include:

- Offering paid internships to reduce financial barriers
- Providing flexible internship formats, including remote and short-term options
- Incorporating robust mentorship and support structures
- Adopting skills-based selection criteria vs selection based on prior experience
- Offering structured academic internship courses to support students

By implementing these practices, we can ensure that our internship programs serve as a tool for equitable professional development, rather than perpetuating existing disparities.

3.3. Internships: A Cornerstone of Polytechnic Excellence

As Cal Poly Humboldt evolves, expanding and enhancing our internship programs takes on added significance. While some of our programs already excel in connecting academic preparation with career opportunities, we need to strategically embed these practices across all our offerings.

The importance of this work is underscored by the current post-graduation outcomes of our students. According to the [College Scorecard](#), the median earnings of Cal Poly Humboldt graduates (\$48,000) lag significantly behind those of our sister institutions at San Luis Obispo (\$91,000) and Pomona (\$72,000). Closing this gap requires a concerted effort to increase the career readiness of our students, with expanded and enhanced internship services playing a key role.

Developing a comprehensive strategy to embed experiential learning experiences, including internships, into all of our programs will enhance the practical skills and career readiness of our graduates, strengthen connections between our academic programs and industry partners, improve post-graduation outcomes for our students and solidify our reputation as a leading polytechnic institution.

3.4. Moving forward

Enhancing our internship programs represents an important opportunity to improve student outcomes, address equity gaps, and fulfill our mission as a polytechnic institution. This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of our current internship landscape and offer strategic recommendations for its expansion and improvement.

It is crucial that we approach this work with intentionality and a commitment to equity. By doing so, we can ensure that Cal Poly Humboldt continues to provide a transformative educational experience that prepares all our students for success in their future careers, regardless of their background or circumstances.

By strategically investing in our internship programs with intentionality and a commitment to equity, we can:

- Elevate the educational experience of all our students
- Address systemic inequities in access to career-building opportunities
- Strengthen our position as a leading polytechnic institution
- Contribute to the economic vitality of our region and beyond

Through these efforts, we can ensure that Cal Poly Humboldt continues to provide a transformative educational experience that prepares all our students for success in their future careers, regardless of their background or circumstances.

4. Internships and Experiential Learning at Cal Poly Humboldt

There is a long history and strong institutional roots of internships, service learning, volunteerism, student research, and other experiential and hands-on learning opportunities for students at Cal Poly Humboldt. Campus organization supporting service learning and internships changed quite a bit over the years. Below, we give an overview of the institutional landscape of the offices that offer internships, including the two key, centralized offices, the Career Development Center and the Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL). It is also important to acknowledge the intertwined history of these two offices. A brief timeline of this history follows.

The Service Learning Center and the Career Center were separate entities (2000-2016) with distinct missions and programming, reporting to the same supervisor. With the advent of the Chancellor's Office Executive Order 1064: Student Internships policy in 2011, the Service Learning Center became the Center for Service Learning and Academic Internships (CSLAI), to support both of these curricular experiences. The Career and CSLAI centers later merged with the Academic Advising Center under one director as the Center for Community Based Learning and Academic and Career Advising Center (2016-2022). This organizational structure facilitated dynamic collaborations, for example, the development of the Career Curriculum Integration Program for academic programs, a comprehensive perspective on advising that connected academic learning to career pathways, and other collaborative efforts between the CCBL and Career Services team to support internships. Under the current organizational structure, the Career Development Center (CDC) is housed in Enrollment Management, while the CCBL and Academic Advising Center are part of Academic Affairs. The separation of services described here acknowledges distinct workflows and processes within these offices, however, as noted above, it creates barriers for clients of these offices, whether they are students, community partners, faculty, or staff.

These challenges are described in greater detail below in Section 5.

4.1. *Campus centers and offices offering internships*

4.1.1. [Center for Community Based Learning](#) (CCBL)

The CCBL is the center for supporting service learning, community-based learning, and academic internships at Cal Poly Humboldt. The center also houses the [College Corps](#) program that offers paid service fellowships at community organizations focused on three priority areas: education, food insecurity, and climate change.

Students participating in service learning and academic internships supported by CCBL receive academic credit for their experiences. Depending on course structures, academic coursework and/or reflection activities may be included.

Community-based learning helps deepen students' understanding of the curriculum by connecting it with real-world scenarios, increase student retention and helps students succeed on their career paths after graduation. In addition to the positive impact on student learning, the work of CCBL benefits community partners who receive assistance with their projects and faculty who can increase the relevance and depth of the classroom experience.

The CCBL primarily supports internships where students are earning academic credit, whether the internship is paid or unpaid. Currently, approximately 12% of reported academic internships are paid. Students in academic internship courses usually work with external partners. Because of the associated academic course structure and the academic credit students receive for these experiences, the university assumes liability for the students, per EO 1064, with substantial risk management requirements. The CCBL has well established processes for supporting faculty with the administrative aspects of these courses, such as incorporating best practices and pedagogy into the course, as well as supporting risk management requirements - from student placements reporting to labor intensive site approvals with legal MOU-type contracts established with community partners.

The CCBL manages the [S4](#) database, a CSU-wide database to track internships, service learning, and practicum experience site placements. This database is a place to find approved community partner sites for service learning and academic internship courses, and for students to report their community placements. The database also provides a platform to track year over year data on student activities in service learning and academic internships courses.

4.1.2. [Career Development Center](#)

The Career Development Center (formerly part of the Academic and Career Advising Center) plays a crucial role in preparing students for successful professional lives by bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application. Its work in facilitating paid internships provides students with valuable experiences that complement their academic studies and prepare them for future careers. The Career Development Center facilitates paid internship opportunities, primarily offered by external partners. These internships provide students with hands-on experience and financial compensation. Key benefits include practical skill development, industry knowledge acquisition, and professional network building. Research shows that students with paid internship experience often receive more job offers and higher starting salaries.

Paid internships through the center typically feature structured work environments mirroring real-world settings. They often include mentorship programs pairing students with experienced

professionals, allowing for valuable guidance and insights. Students usually work on substantive projects that contribute to the host organizations' goals, providing meaningful work experience. Regular feedback sessions and professional development workshops are also common components, enhancing the overall learning experience.

The center's administration focuses on building relationships with potential internship providers. This involves identifying opportunities that align with academic programs and student interests. The staff works to establish internship programs that benefit both host organizations and students. Once opportunities are secured, the center actively advertises positions to students through various channels, including email, social media, and career fairs.

To manage this process, the Career Advising Center uses [Handshake](#), a comprehensive platform for posting and managing job and internship listings. Students can search for opportunities and submit applications through this system. However, Handshake is currently not used optimally. The platform's search functionality and user interface could be enhanced to better serve students and faculty, making it easier to find relevant opportunities. Improving the utilization of Handshake represents an opportunity to further enhance the center's effectiveness in connecting students with valuable internship experiences.

4.1.3. [Library](#)

The Library Scholar Internships program offers students a unique blend of professional development and academic enrichment. As paid, on-campus positions, these internships provide students with project based learning opportunities and financial support while allowing them to gain practical experience in a convenient location. The program's structure enables students to seamlessly integrate their internship duties with their academic schedules, fostering a holistic learning environment.

Key features of the library internships include exposure to various aspects of library operations, information management, and scholarly communication. Interns may find themselves involved in diverse projects, from organizing special collections to supporting digital initiatives. This hands-on experience not only builds practical skills but also deepens students' understanding of the crucial role libraries play in academic and research environments. Furthermore, the opportunity to work closely with experienced library professionals provides interns with valuable mentorship and networking opportunities, potentially opening doors for future career prospects in library science or related fields.

While data collection is taking place for these internships, the specific information gathered includes; learning agenda, periodic check-in emails with google form questions, and culminating reflection. How might this data be shared within the university system, beyond the library and donors remains uncertain. Importantly, data collection for the Library Scholar Internships is not currently integrated with the other two systems used on campus (S4 and Handshake).

4.1.4. [COMPASS/INRSEP](#)

INRSEP, the Indian Natural Resources, Sciences and Engineering Program is part of [COMPASS](#), an umbrella organization dedicated to supporting student success, particularly for underrepresented groups in STEMM fields. Its comprehensive approach includes offering a wide range of programs, such as mentoring, academic support services, research opportunities, professional development workshops, and more. These programs collectively aim to create a supportive and inclusive environment for students throughout their academic journey.

COMPASS facilitates various internship and research opportunities for students. These internships are externally funded through a variety of grants. This funding structure allows the internships to be paid positions, providing students with both financial support and valuable professional experience. The grant-funded nature of these opportunities comes with specific eligibility criteria tailored to the goals of each particular program or funding source. Consequently COMPASS staff collect and manage different types of data for each program to ensure compliance with grant requirements and to track student participation effectively. This data might include academic performance metrics, demographic information, or specific skills and experiences relevant to each opportunity. The variability in eligibility criteria and data collection needs across different COMPASS programs presents a unique challenge: while these internships and other opportunities offer valuable and diverse experiences for students, their specialized nature makes them less amenable to integration with a standardized campus-wide internship database.

4.1.5. [Sponsored Program Foundation](#)

The Sponsored Programs Foundation (SPF) at Cal Poly Humboldt is a non-profit auxiliary organization that plays a crucial role in administering externally-funded grants and contracts for the university. Established in 1952, SPF's primary mission is to provide comprehensive pre- and post-award grant services to the campus community. In addition to managing research grants, SPF facilitates a variety of externally funded internships and paid research opportunities for students. These programs are designed to enhance students' academic experiences, support their involvement in research, and contribute to their overall success and future pursuits. As with other grant-funded initiatives, SPF collects specific information on these student internships and research opportunities as required by the funding agencies. However, this data collection process is not currently integrated with campus-wide systems like S4 or Handshake.

Notably, SPF has developed a user-friendly landing site, the [Engagement Hub](#), where faculty and students can search for various opportunities. This platform serves as an inspiration for a proposed centralized internship portal, showcasing the potential for improved accessibility and integration of internship information across campus.

4.2. *Other Campus Structures Supporting Internships*

In addition to these main campus structures, there are a number of other ways internships are supported on campus. Several departments with programs relying on internships and practicum placements have faculty or staff serve in internship coordinator positions. Examples include the Social Work's Director of Community Placement & Practicum Education or the School of Education's Credential Program Coordinators. Most of these programs are in the College of Professional Studies, and in response to the administrative needs, the College has created a Student Placement & Community Engagement Specialist position to provide community partner and faculty support for its programs that do not neatly fit into the EO 1064.

Driven by its active External Advisory Board, The School of Engineering has taken significant steps to enhance internship opportunities. A dedicated subgroup of this board has conducted extensive research on internship and cooperative learning programs at various universities, including interviews with campus representatives. Their efforts culminated in a comprehensive report outlining diverse models for providing undergraduate engineering students with direct, paid work experience. This thorough analysis lays a strong foundation for developing enhanced internship programs within the School of Engineering, potentially serving as a template for other departments across campus.

Finally, in the last couple of years, CSU STEM AmeriCorps VISTA members have been hosted by the Center for Community Based Learning ('21-'22, '22-'23), School of Engineering ('23-'24 AY) and by the College of Natural Resources and Sciences ('24-'25 AY) to assist with expanding the number of internships.

5. Challenges, Opportunities, and Action Plan

Our analysis has revealed three interconnected areas that demand our attention: the navigation of services, our institutional organization, and our approach to data management. The work proposed in our “Shared vision” addresses these challenges or proposes progress toward the opportunities we identified. This section summarizes our current state and the immediate actions we can take. These actions will be supported by the 3-year EPIIC grant but will need institutional support to maintain momentum and to contribute to long-term institutional solutions.

5.1. *Current Challenges*

5.1.1. Challenge #1: Navigation of internship opportunities

The current internship landscape at Cal Poly Humboldt presents a complex and often confusing array of options and processes, creating significant challenges for students, faculty, staff, and external partners to navigate effectively.

Students at Cal Poly Humboldt are keen to gain real-world experience, but many struggle to navigate the numerous and varied internship opportunities available. The wide range of internship types, each with specific eligibility criteria, can be overwhelming. To address this, we've identified the need for a comprehensive, user-friendly database where students can easily search and filter opportunities based on their individual needs and interests.

Financial considerations are also a significant factor for many of our students. Unpaid internships, despite their potential benefits, are often not feasible options. This highlights the importance of expanding our paid internship offerings. At the same time, we recognize that valuable elements such as mentorship and structured reflection are not automatically included in all paid opportunities. As we develop our internship programs, we need to ensure these crucial components are integrated, regardless of the internship's payment status.

The fragmentation of our internship services, combined with periodic capacity issues in our central offices, has created challenges for our faculty and staff. There's a clear need for consistent outreach and professional development about available services. The varied requirements across programs and the often complex paperwork involved in setting up internships have led to frustration and, in some cases, disengagement from the process. Streamlining these processes and providing clear guidance could significantly improve faculty and staff engagement with internship programs.

Similarly, our external partners, who are crucial to the success of our internship programs, often find it difficult to identify the appropriate campus contacts when they have opportunities to offer. This uncertainty can lead to missed connections and lost opportunities for our students and the university. Establishing clear communication channels and points of contact for external partners is essential to maximize internship opportunities.

5.1.2. Challenge #2: Institutional Organization

The gradual development of our internship services has resulted in an organizational structure that may not be using our resources as effectively as possible.

Key Considerations

- There is likely some overlap in functions across departments, suggesting potential for streamlining.
- Many departments have developed specialized internship structures to meet their specific needs. While these adaptations have been beneficial, they may be limiting our capacity for expansion.
- Programs that have invested significantly in their own internship systems may be hesitant about reorganization, highlighting the need for a carefully considered, long-term strategy.
- Transitioning from our current decentralized state to a more integrated and expanded system will require sustained funding and a clear vision for the future.

5.1.3. Challenge #3: Improving Data Collection and Management

The lack of a unified data management system is a significant barrier to efficiently tracking, managing, and promoting internship opportunities. The lack of integration of data collection creates a potential barrier for students, who may need to navigate multiple systems to access and manage their internship opportunities. Enhancing and standardizing data collection and management practices across all internship programs could provide valuable insights into the overall effectiveness and impact of these opportunities. Moreover, integrating data across the existing campus systems could streamline the process for students, ultimately benefiting campus departments, faculty, administrators, and future interns by creating a more cohesive and accessible internship ecosystem.

Key considerations

- Multiple databases serving different goals are in use across different campus centers, with minimal integration between them.
- The diverse reporting requirements of different offices make it challenging to implement a single, comprehensive platform.
- The absence of a centralized, searchable database makes it difficult for students to explore and find relevant opportunities.
- Further investigation is needed to determine how we can achieve effective data sharing and centralization of relevant information.

While these challenges are significant, they also present important opportunities for improvement and innovation. By addressing these challenges, Cal Poly Humboldt has the opportunity to significantly enhance its internship programs. We can create a more accessible, efficient, and impactful system that better serves our students, faculty, and community partners while advancing our mission as a polytechnic institution.

5.2. *Opportunities & Action: Shared Vision For AY '24-'25*

By addressing the challenges above, Cal Poly Humboldt has the opportunity to significantly

enhance its internship programs. We can create a more accessible, efficient, and impactful system that better serves our students, faculty, and community partners while advancing our mission as a polytechnic institution. Our working group came to consensus on a set of short term goals to address our challenges.

- **Quarterly meetings of stakeholders:** The Internship Needs Assessment Working Group enjoyed the conversations and there was a sense that while the approaches may be different in the different offices, all of us believe in the transformative power of offering students experiences in which they can apply their learning and connect with their career goals. The group decided that we would meet regularly to maintain a dialog and to strengthen the collaboration between the various offices.
- **Landing site:** Create a landing website for internships through the main Cal Poly Humboldt website similar to the [Engagement Hub](#). The purpose of this website will be to have a single webpage that can serve as a portal for students, faculty, staff and external partners interested in internships. The website will have tiles for each office, with a short description of the services they offer and a link to their homepage. The content and look of this website will be designed by interested stakeholders. A similar website is Cal Poly Pomona's website for the [Office of Academic Innovation](#). This website curates a variety of experiential learning opportunities for students and ways for faculty to get involved.
- **Faculty professional development:** To improve faculty and staff knowledge about internships, the CCBL will partner with the EPIIC PI and the Center for Teaching and Learning to offer a series of faculty workshops on internships. Some presentations will focus on general knowledge about internship opportunities on campus, how they are administered and what it takes to develop them, and other presentations will highlight currently existing internships tied to specific disciplinary areas.
- **New internship opportunities:** Engineering and Computer Science faculty will be doing outreach to industry partners to establish new connections and expand the number of internships available to engineering students and students in computing. This is an EPIIC grant-specific goal that will benefit the entire institution. Beyond the EPIIC program, expand existing grant-funded paid opportunities such as the AmeriCorps College Corps program, the Business 482 Internship program supported by the Smullin Foundation, and the summer Biology 482 pre-med shadowing internship supported by the Humboldt Del Norte Medical Society and funded by the California Department of Health Care Access and Information (HCAI).
- **Data collection and data sharing:** Continue discussions of current practices and gather more information both on user (student, faculty/staff) needs and the capabilities of our current platforms. Formulate a plan for a unified data sharing and management approach.

6. Long-term vision and Recommendations

Cal Poly Humboldt is at an exciting point in its growth, with a unique opportunity to significantly impact our students' lives through expanded hands-on learning experiences. To fully realize this potential, we recognize the need for a long-term institutional strategy that is both comprehensive and financially supported. This strategy will be crucial in making the structural changes necessary to offer a wide array of experiential learning offerings, including internships, to all students.

6.1. *Models, Organizational Structure and Staffing*

The development of this strategic plan should involve broad campus engagement and a thorough examination of various successful models. We explored several promising approaches:

- **Cooperative Learning Model.** The School of Engineering has shown enthusiasm for a cooperative learning model, leading us to examine [MECOP](#), a nonprofit organization that embodies the principle of "Student focused, industry driven, paid internships designed to enhance education through real-world experience." MECOP's robust and self-sustaining model, which partners with multiple universities and over 140 companies, offers valuable insights for our own program development.

- **Centralized Experiential Learning Hub.** Drawing inspiration from Cal Poly Pomona's [PolyX program](#) and [Office of Academic Innovation](#), we see the potential in creating a centralized location for a broad array of experiential learning opportunities, including research experiences. This approach could significantly enhance accessibility and coordination of opportunities for students. Depending on the model we envision, it will be crucial to carefully map out the organizational structure and staffing needs. This process should mirror the thorough work completed by the Sponsored Programs Foundation on their own organizational chart in which key positions are identified even if the position is not yet fully funded and/or the organization does not have need for a full time staff yet. A well-designed structure will guide expansion efforts and help focus our growth in the most effective directions.

6.2. *Alignment with Institutional Goals*

Our vision aligns closely with the recommendations put forward by the Sponsored Programs Foundation in their research infrastructure planning.

- Investing in appropriate space & technology upgrades necessary to provide hands-on learning experiences
- Designing an organizational structure that makes sense for a polytechnic university
- Supporting hands-on learning experiences for students, including assistance in finding these opportunities
- Measuring the impact of research experiences on students

Longer-term effort will also contribute to our institutional goal of increasing student recruitment into specific career paths, reporting to the Chancellors' Office about graduates career placements and, generally, to increasing retention and graduation rates at Cal Poly Humboldt.

6.3. *Recommendations – Themes To Consider*

As Cal Poly Humboldt develops its next, comprehensive strategic plan, the following areas have emerged as potential topics for discussion and exploration. Our recommendation is to explore the following themes.

- **Centralized Coordination.** How might a centralized office or virtual platform for coordinating all internship and experiential learning opportunities improve accessibility and navigation for students, faculty, and external partners?
- **Data Management.** What would be the benefits and challenges of implementing a unified

data management system that could accommodate diverse reporting needs while providing a centralized, searchable database? Are there existing examples from other higher education institutions?

- **Sustainable Funding.** What innovative funding approaches, such as industry partnerships, grants, or alumni engagement, could support the expansion of paid internship opportunities?
- **Partnership Development.** How can we enhance and expand our network of partnerships with local, regional, and national organizations to increase the number and diversity of internship opportunities?
- **Curriculum Integration.** What are the best practices for embedding internship and other experiential learning opportunities more deeply into program curricula across different disciplines?
- **Impact Assessment.** How can we effectively measure and demonstrate the impact of internships and other experiential learning opportunities on student success, career readiness, and post-graduation outcomes?
- **Professional Development.** What kinds of training and support would be most beneficial for faculty and staff involved in facilitating internships and other experiential learning opportunities?
- **Scalability and Access.** How can we ensure that expanded internship and experiential learning opportunities are accessible to all students, regardless of their background or field of study?

These discussion points are not exhaustive but represent areas that our working group believes warrant careful consideration in any future strategic planning process. They are intended to stimulate thoughtful dialogue and collaborative problem-solving as we work towards enhancing our internship and experiential learning offerings.

As we engage in these discussions and planning processes, we remain excited about the potential to make a significant difference in our students' lives. Each new experience we create gives a student the chance to explore their interests, learn new skills, and prepare for their future career. This work goes beyond just meeting educational goals – it's about creating new opportunities, building connections, and helping our students achieve more than they thought possible.

7. Conclusion

Cal Poly Humboldt stands at an exciting point in its growth, with a unique opportunity to significantly impact our students' lives through expanded internships and experiential learning experiences. This report has identified key challenges in navigating opportunities, optimizing institutional organization, and improving data management. By addressing these challenges through our shared short-term vision and long-term strategic planning, we can create a more accessible, efficient, and impactful internship program.

As we move forward with our plans for AY '24-'25 and beyond, we're not just enhancing our educational offerings – we're transforming our students' lives, building stronger connections with our community, and solidifying Cal Poly Humboldt's position as a leading polytechnic institution. Each new internship opportunity represents a chance for a student to explore their interests, develop crucial skills, and prepare for their future career.

Realizing this vision will require ongoing collaboration, commitment, and investment from all stakeholders – students, faculty, staff, administration, and our community partners. Together, we can create a comprehensive internship program that goes beyond meeting educational goals, opening doors to new opportunities, and empowering our students to achieve more than they thought possible.

As we embark on this journey, we're shaping the future of our students, contributing to the vitality of our region, and building a more resilient future for Cal Poly Humboldt.