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# Introduction

## In a Lonely Place

Sitting at the only occupied table of a nondescript Chinese restaurant near her office, about two years after she graduated from college, Rita tells me about her career path. She recounts that barely a year into college she found herself thinking, “Oh my god, I need a job lined up before I graduate!” An English major aspiring to establish a career in the publishing industry, Rita attempted to secure an unpaid internship in the field in hopes it would help her land a job after college. She became discouraged, however, after being repeatedly turned down because she lacked experience. In the wake of these rejections, Rita padded her résumé with fictional gigs and exaggerated claims of software proficiency. In her sophomore year, to her surprise and delight, she obtained an unpaid internship at a boutique music magazine in Manhattan. As she reflects on her subsequent internship experience, Rita no longer seems delighted; instead, she voices a complaint common among unpaid interns: “I didn’t learn a whole lot of anything at my internship.”

An internship is, by definition, a practical educational experience. According to popular conceptions and some academic research, doing work under the guidance of employee supervision allows interns to develop skills, gain relevant experience, and build professional networks. For college students, internships ideally complement classroom learning and help them transition into a

career. While historically this type of experience was largely limited to vocational fields (e.g., apprenticeships in the skilled trades) and the professions (e.g., medical residency), the intern economy has expanded dramatically in recent decades and internships are now prevalent in nearly every sector of the economy.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while generations of teens and young adults used to work as lifeguards or camp counselors in the summer sun, college students today are more likely to seek office experience as interns. According to the best estimates, in the last few years, nearly two-thirds of US students graduating with a bachelor's degree held an internship during college, compared to only 17 percent in 1992.<sup>2</sup> In the race to become employable, students perceive securing highly competitive internships as crucial to bolstering their education and launching their careers.<sup>3</sup>

As Rita and dozens of unpaid interns from the cultural industries explain in our interviews, however, these arrangements are problematic introductions to the world of work—they often provide little valuable training and are unlikely to lead directly to a job. In this book, I delve into the complexities of internships as an expanding institution, examining the roles of the three key actors—employers, educators, and interns—and demonstrating who benefits and who suffers, and why, within this changing landscape of work and education.

Rita's story epitomizes many of the pitfalls of the intern economy. She says that on a typical day as an intern she would complete filing duties and write as many as fifteen one-page album reviews, which were published in the magazine without attribution or credit. To make matters worse, her supervisor, who spent most of her time on the phone, rarely acknowledged Rita, let alone offered any guidance. Rita recalls, "I thought she was busy. I didn't want to bother her and ask her to do something else." The social chasm she witnessed between employees and interns led her to feel isolated at the office. This feeling was reinforced by the office layout. Laughing, Rita explains that rather than sitting near her supervisor in the busiest area of the office, she was

given an undesirable cubicle far from the action—her desk was at the opposite end of the floor, directly under a vent pushing out uncomfortably cold air, and she sat in relative darkness because of the malfunctioning fluorescent lighting. Feeling lost and hopeless, she often hid in the bathroom, sometimes for an hour at a time, to cope with her monotonous duties and avoid her supervisor, who seemed annoyed at the very sight of her. Once she had replenished her courage, she would head back to her desk.

As the weeks passed and the situation did not improve, Rita found herself with nowhere to turn for advice. Her parents, who worked as a bus driver and home cook, offered little guidance. Neither of them had ever been an intern or held a job in an office environment. Her college, part of the City University of New York (CUNY), did not offer much help either. Rita received course credit for the internship, but her department had canceled the weekly seminar in which students formally reflected on their experience and received feedback, instead pointing students to a web page with tips for interns. When I interviewed the department's internship coordinator, he says he asked to cancel the seminar meetings so his students, who were mostly from working-class backgrounds, could spend more time networking at their internships, which he believes will allow them to better compete with interns from more privileged backgrounds—students enrolled at schools such as Columbia and New York University—if a job becomes available. Eventually, a friend offered Rita some encouragement, suggesting that she just try to stick it out at the internship, in case things improved.

As she chronicles her intern experience, Rita describes a turning point: after working up her courage, she asked her supervisor for more work assignments, sheepishly inquiring, “Hey, sorry, can you, just one second . . . Do you need me to do anything?” As Rita cautiously asserted herself rather than solely passively awaiting assignments, the way a student waits for a professor to outline a clear and detailed curriculum, her supervisor and the other

magazine employees slowly began to notice her. She continued to do good work, built trust with the employees, and started receiving better assignments. Eventually, she realized that her supervisor had never disliked her but was just busy and distracted by other responsibilities. For the next year and a half Rita balanced her full-time studies, multiple part-time jobs (including an overnight stint at a pharmacy), and twenty to thirty-five hours of intern duties per week. She was exhausted, had almost no free time, was barely scraping by financially, and at times cut corners at school, but her persistence paid off. When we talk, she is twenty-three years old and has been a paid employee at the same magazine for nearly three years.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the tables have turned—she now oversees several interns every semester.

Now it is Rita's turn to complain about interns, although she does so with mixed feelings. Like her previous supervisor, she assigns the easiest tasks possible. Yet she still finds supervising interns frustrating, saying, "It takes up time." She describes supervising unserious, untrustworthy interns at the expense of fulfilling the duties of her stressful job. Still, Rita works to ensure her interns have a better experience than she did: "I remember exactly what it was like," she reflects, and "I don't want kids to hide in the bathroom."

Rita tries to connect with her interns more frequently, starting each week by speaking with them casually (mostly sharing their respective weekend experiences) and while she assigns low-level tasks similar to those she completed as an intern, she offers more explicit instructions and clearer timelines and does her best to offer public credit for their work. She laments the way her fellow employees, particularly those several years into their careers, continue to ignore the current interns and treat them as interchangeable. In her opinion, this treatment is problematic because even the best interns are ignored: "I've had interns who are really on their shit [competent], and they still get the same 'I'm not acknowledging you' thing. It kind of upsets me . . . to watch my intern get snubbed." Nevertheless, when Rita talks about Conor, a

star intern who eventually landed a paid job at the company, she says she does not call any of her interns by name, explaining:

RITA: You earn your name. You're "intern!" [*laughs*] Now he's Conor. He was there for a year, and I called him "intern" [*laughs some more*].

AF: No, you didn't!

RITA: I did! I totally did.

AF: You don't call all your interns "intern."

RITA: I do! It's kind of like hazing them because they won't question it. Nobody questions it! I'm waiting for somebody to come up to me and say, "Actually my name is so and so." I'll totally respect it! But they're like, "OK, thanks Rita" and they get back to work. And I'm [*thinking*], "Why don't they [*say anything*]?"

My responses were prompted by my disbelief that Rita refuses to call interns by their names, thereby playfully yet explicitly treating them as interchangeable, contrary to her stated goal of improving their experience in the office.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, although interns are technically only one step away from becoming paid employees, the status difference between these two groups is significant and, consistent with a form of hazing, this power dynamic creates fertile ground for employees to tease or make fun of interns without imminent retaliation.<sup>6</sup>

Rita's struggles, triumphs, and transitions encapsulate many of the tensions inherent in the intern economy. How did someone who urgently sensed the need to intern, and felt lucky to secure a position, become disengaged so quickly? Why would someone who initially fumbled in the dark as an intern before making the most of the experience now view interns primarily as a source of annoyance? Further, if internships are now a mainstream component of higher education, why would a school not do more to ensure that students have a constructive experience? More broadly, this book concerns how aspirants break into an industry, and how employers and educators produce and reinforce these

pathways. In the coming chapters, I analyze data from participant observation at two music industry companies and over 120 interviews with interns, employees, and educators to answer these questions.

I find that internships are part of a breaking-in system that is rife with ambiguity. This book argues that the three key actors engaged in the intern economy—employers, educators, and interns—have not resolved the fundamental challenges inherent to internships. Notably, employers are neither trained nor greatly rewarded to educate; higher education institutions are ill-equipped to oversee learning in the workplace; and students sink or swim without receiving much guidance. Importantly, students bear the largest burden in navigating the breaking-in system. Because of these challenges, almost every internship begins in a state of ambiguity with all parties working at cross-purposes. There is little consensus about what interns should be doing and what benefits they should get from their experience, which often leads to disappointment and reproduces inequality. This ambiguity is especially pervasive in unpaid internships, which represent nearly half of the internships in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

## Making Sense of the Intern Economy

While internships have only recently become a ubiquitous part of college life, work-based learning arrangements are far from new. The apprenticeship, a period dedicated to training and incorporating neophytes into the workforce, has been a part of work life for over three thousand years.<sup>8</sup> The typical internship, shorter and less educationally ambitious than an apprenticeship, takes place in an office, lasts approximately the duration of a school semester, and is part-time (or full-time in the summer). Notably, however, the term “internship” is used to refer to a wide array of experiences and arrangements, in settings ranging from production lines to professional offices. Internships vary significantly in terms of pay, quality of supervision, and assigned tasks.<sup>9</sup> At one extreme, some

internships offer close mentorship, substantive professionally relevant work, and reasonable (to high) pay, while at the other extreme, interns receive no pay and little mentorship, do repetitive work, and experience little professional development.

For some students, such as those in business and STEM, the incorporation of newcomers is often more clearly sequenced and planned, with internships more likely to offer a clear pathway to a career.<sup>10</sup> Further, in sectors such as banking, law, and technology, interns are paid well relative to most US employees. For example, interns on Wall Street can earn over \$16,000 per month and those at tech firms such as LinkedIn, Amazon, and Meta are frequently paid over \$8,000 per month.<sup>11</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, including but not solely in fields such as the arts and humanities, arrangements are much less formalized and less likely to lead directly to a postcollege job. The example of Rita's internship illustrates how aspirants in the cultural industries might do solely mundane tasks with questionable educational or career benefits. In some cases, low pay, long hours, and monotonous tasks mean internships verge on abusive; because the characteristics of an internship vary so widely within and across fields, such conditions are not limited to cultural industries.<sup>12</sup> For example, for three months, an unpaid intern at a Michelin-star restaurant spent almost all his time assembling beetles made of fruit leather, while reportedly being forbidden from laughing.<sup>13</sup> In 2013, a twenty-one-year-old intern collapsed and died one week before finishing his grueling summer internship at Bank of America, which allegedly involved eight sleepless nights during a two-week period.<sup>14</sup> In China, unpaid engineering "interns" at Foxconn factories spend eleven-hour days assembling Apple, Sony, and other consumer electronic products.<sup>15</sup>

The explosive growth of the intern economy is indicative of transformations in higher education and labor markets; while a bachelor's degree was once enough to secure long-term employment, college students of all stripes must now also demonstrate their employability through practical, hands-on experience. Given

the perceived potential of internships to advance the intern's career, many observers praise these placements as valuable opportunities. Lauren Berger, the self-proclaimed "Intern Queen," held fifteen internships within four years and wrote a book celebrating internships as "inarguably, the most valuable experience of today's college student" (2012:5). When *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and American Public Media's *Marketplace* surveyed fifty thousand employers about the role of higher education in career preparation, they reported that when making hiring decisions, employers placed the most emphasis not on factors such as a potential hire's major or GPA, but rather on their experience—most notably, internships.<sup>16</sup>

Until the late 2000s, the internship was overwhelmingly viewed as an unproblematic though rapidly expanding part of the workplace and education system. However, as internships spread to almost every occupation—including unpaid interns tending vegetable gardens, bussing tables at restaurants, and working at doughnut shops—critics emerged.<sup>17</sup> What began as an uncritically celebrated policy (and rhetoric) to facilitate the transition from school to work grew into an unwieldy intern economy. Since the Great Recession started in 2007, the growth of unpaid internships started to outpace paid ones, and employers could more readily replace paid positions with low-paid or unpaid interns.<sup>18</sup> This has prompted growing discontent on the part of frustrated young workers who paradoxically see internships as a barrier, rather than a path, to launching a career.<sup>19</sup> Many commentators have decried internships for exploiting the unpaid labor of overqualified and unprotected young workers often paying tuition to work for free.<sup>20</sup> For example, in his book *The Precariat*, economist Guy Standing (2011:75) portrayed internship programs as a way for employers to obtain "cheap dispensable labor." Shortly before launching her 2016 presidential bid, Hillary Clinton denounced the abuse of unpaid labor by companies, stating, "Businesses have taken advantage of unpaid internships to an extent that it is blocking opportunities for young people to move on into paid employment."<sup>21</sup>

Others have noted explicitly how the intern economy undermines the meritocratic ideals of the education system and US society. In an op-ed, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, referred to “America’s broken internship system” in which opportunity is unequally distributed, concluding, “While many Americans believe fervently and faithfully in expanding opportunity, America’s internship-industrial complex does just the opposite.”<sup>22</sup> Conversely, Harvard University economist Edward Glaeser suggested the government should offer student loans to unpaid interns, even if they already graduated from college, to provide pathways to employment for aspirants of all economic backgrounds.<sup>23</sup> There is therefore extensive discussion, and disagreement, about who can afford to do internships and who benefits from them.

There is empirical evidence that suggests paid and unpaid internships differ in terms of quality and subsequent career outcomes. According to annual student surveys by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, paid interns are considerably more likely to receive a job offer upon graduation than their unpaid counterparts—in 2021, for example, students graduating from a four-year college who held a paid internship received 1.61 job offers on average, compared to 0.94 offers for unpaid interns and 0.77 offers for students with no internship experience.<sup>24</sup> According to my analysis of data from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, a large-scale survey of arts graduates, students who completed a paid internship found jobs rapidly after graduation, but those with unpaid internships had no advantage over students who did not do an internship at all.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the term “intern economy” obscures significant variation between the benefits accrued by paid and unpaid interns.

With the growth of unpaid internships during and after the Great Recession, the contentiousness of the intern economy gave rise to a new phenomenon: several ex-interns have sued their employers for back pay.<sup>26</sup> Companies, educators, and even the courts became increasingly unclear about how to define and justify a legal

unpaid internship. Employers scrambled to catch up with the threat of litigation, with prominent settlement agreements paid by Viacom (\$7.2 million), NBCUniversal (\$6.4 million), Condé Nast (\$5.85 million), and Warner Music Group (\$4.2 million).<sup>27</sup> These legal decisions have tightened the link between higher education and unpaid internships, though colleges and universities have struggled to formalize the intern economy and respond to critics who oppose this form of unpaid labor. Simultaneously, some employers have repackaged their internship programs; a few have eliminated them altogether; and others have started paying stipends.

In this book I examine the internship as a rapidly expanding phenomenon within the context of an especially precarious field—the record industry. In glamorous fields such as music, film, and publishing, there is a consistently large oversupply of motivated people enticed by the symbolic rewards of “cool” jobs, driven by the passionate aim to “do what you love.”<sup>28</sup> The cultural industries such as music, film, television, publishing, and fashion are widely seen as the worst abusers of intern labor, eagerly exploiting students’ efforts and cultural knowledge while offering little training, mentorship, or true career opportunities.<sup>29</sup> Every major record company has been the subject of a lawsuit from former interns demanding back pay.<sup>30</sup> In these workplaces, it is especially likely that an internship neither offers a valuable learning experience nor serves as a stepping stone to a career. While Rita “made it,” many interns never transition to paid work in the cultural industries, even if they intern for years (either at the same firm, or as serial interns potentially securing increasingly prestigious or well-suited internships).<sup>31</sup> The reliance on unpaid or low-paid internships in fields such as arts and culture, politics, and not-for-profit organizations creates a barrier to career entry for individuals from marginalized groups, not least those from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Rita’s triumphant ascent is especially exceptional because first-generation college students are unlikely to intern.<sup>33</sup>

To gather a rich dataset on the intricacies of the intern economy as it plays out within the record industry, I conducted participant observation as an unpaid intern at two music industry firms (which I call “Major Records USA” and “Indie Distribution”) in New York City, and I interviewed more than 120 key informants in and around this social world (record label employees, college personnel, and the interns themselves). Using these data, I show how interns, employees, and educators see themselves and each other, manage daily tasks and tensions, and articulate the internship as a path to employment even though very few succeed. To better understand and address these issues within the intern economy, this book centers on the social process of breaking in.

### Breaking In as a Social Process

Establishing a career may seem like a purely personal endeavor, at least as experienced by the aspiring worker. In this individualist view, someone becomes interested in an occupation, pursues training to develop relevant skills, and, if talented enough, through hard work and dedication, eventually launches a career.<sup>34</sup> However, I refer to “breaking in” as a process to stress its social character. Breaking in is a social process because it involves the interaction of the aspirant with gatekeeping members of an occupation (and/or organization). Beyond accruing the skills needed for the job, a newcomer attempting to join an occupational community must learn and navigate the taken-for-granted norms and values held by its established members. Breaking in is dualistic in nature in that while the aspirant is trying to shift from outsider to insider, the members of the occupational community are “breaking in” the newcomer by encouraging or disciplining them to shed previous behaviors and attitudes that do not align with those of the community.<sup>35</sup>

Classic symbolic interactionist studies of a newcomer’s introduction to an occupation, for example, as a medical student (e.g., Becker et al. 1961) or a police recruit (e.g., Van Maanen 1975), offer

a model for understanding the dynamic, proactive ways newcomers learn to adopt a role (or not) in fits and starts.<sup>36</sup> These foundational studies show that newcomers master a new social world by facing a series of “turning points” and “status passages.”<sup>37</sup> Because roles are often ambiguous and change over time, and therefore must be improvised, there is great variation in the ways individuals embody roles.<sup>38</sup> I illustrate this ambiguity in the case of music industry interns, who can be understood simultaneously as students, workers, and fans. Further, while internships were once predominantly viewed as an educational endeavor, college graduates in creative fields are now more inclined to view them as related to career development.<sup>39</sup>

The ongoing ambiguity entailed by viewing internships variously as training, work, or an activity done out of passion for music limits cooperation between interns, employees, and higher education personnel, making it especially difficult to standardize this form of breaking in and thus compelling all parties to improvise as they go.<sup>40</sup> While the tradition of studying breaking in as a social process provides a fruitful starting point for this book, these classic studies occurred at a time of relative stability for workers, as I discuss in the next section. Such studies generally assumed the host organization sought to transform the newcomer in some way and invested in the process of doing so, but I find a different scenario in the current labor market: due to the multiple possible motivations of interns, and the increasingly precarious standing of the employees overseeing them, employers are often satisfied with surface-level socialization, with the goal of training interns to unobtrusively respect the basic norms and rules of the workplace.

Scholars in this interactionist tradition, and more recent institutional approaches to organizational life, view an organization’s official goals and values with skepticism, arguing that while these matter, they should not be taken at face value.<sup>41</sup> Analyzing the decoupling, or blurry coexistence, of the stated and real (or multiple) goals of organizational policies and practices reveals a variety of official and unofficial aims that contribute to the ambiguity

of breaking in. Employers officially host interns to train, sort, and potentially hire their next generation of workers, but unofficially, and at times more prominently, they work with interns to nurture a constant stream of inexpensive labor. Record company employees do not express excessive inner conflict about whether they should act as “teachers” or “managers”—their default is almost always the latter.

Higher education institutions also exhibit a gap between official and unofficial goals, proclaiming that internships offer rich opportunities for connecting classroom learning to the “real world” and facilitate career development, while largely failing to either allocate sufficient resources, or prioritize rigorous pedagogical engagement, for experiential learning. Professors are often not incentivized, do not have time, or do not see it as their job to invest in experiential learning pedagogy, and internship coordination is relegated to administrative or part-time personnel in an academic department or career services. Anthropologist of education David Moore called this the “paradox of experiential learning,” noting that schools tout experiential learning (such as internships) yet primarily maintain such programs at the margins of their institutions, as if “real” academics want no part in this endeavor.<sup>42</sup> In brief, colleges promote their internship programs as a selling point for potential students while many professors and some administrators only begrudgingly participate in these low-status endeavors.<sup>43</sup>

Looking closely at shared and at times contentious understandings of breaking in makes visible the culture of educational environments, including the “hidden curriculum,” a set of largely unspoken rules and norms that those in power, such as teachers and more privileged students, take for granted as natural.<sup>44</sup> In the classic article “A School Is a Lousy Place to Learn Anything in,” sociologist Howard Becker (1972:96) shed light on the hidden curriculum by comparing trade schools and on-the-job training as differently structured opportunities for learning. Becker noted that in the setting of a workplace, students do not necessarily

receive the same sort of curricular attention they would in a classroom, concluding, “An ideology common among journeymen suggests that if an apprentice is any good, he will make you teach him; if he does not push, he probably does not have what it takes.” Although this ideology is largely unspoken, it leaves learning dependent on the aspirant’s initiative, leading Becker to conclude that a “pushy punk learns more than a quiet young man.”

Rita’s experience is a clear illustration of this dynamic. She eventually came to understand that an intern’s supervisor might not provide extensive training or share insights; supervisors are not necessarily charged with—or concerned with—ensuring interns learn a comprehensive curriculum.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, newcomers must learn how to be a bit of a “pushy punk,” reaching out to employees to solicit their training and build relationships, if they are to have any chance of staying on for multiple semesters and eventually getting hired. Interns must understand that employees treat them less as students and more as trainees working in the proverbial mailroom, that mythical proving ground where the cream allegedly rises to the top.<sup>46</sup> The intern must actively listen and create their own curriculum. By creating this individualized curriculum, interns learn to accept their uncertain, economically precarious work conditions; at the same time, employees judge interns on their creation of a curriculum (or lack thereof).

Based on the analysis of the experiences of interns, as well as employees and higher education personnel, this book contributes to a burgeoning literature on the social process of breaking in that demystifies the “black box” of higher education, extending this research to the workplace. As Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013) argued, although a rich literature uses statistical analyses to assess the returns on college degrees, including differences by type of institution, major, and GPA, these studies miss how the structure of students’ social and academic lives shapes social mobility and reproduces inequalities. Recent studies of labor market entry suggest that college graduates are not all on

equal footing; they are earning the same credential—a bachelor’s degree—but are not all having the same experiences and postcollege outcomes.<sup>47</sup> In particular, the cultural capital, economic resources, and social networks of college students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds result in qualitatively different education experiences and thus subtly reproduce inequalities.<sup>48</sup>

In alignment with these patterns, recent research on parental involvement in college students’ postgraduate job outcomes finds that more affluent parents provide connections and funding to help their children obtain and complete internships whereas students with less affluent parents are more likely to graduate without internship experience.<sup>49</sup> To advance their stated aim of “meritocracy,” schools may implement what I call “internships-for-all policies” intended to help students and address inequities, such as mandating internships to ensure that all graduates gain on-the-job training during their education or offering scholarships to support low-income students completing unpaid internships. However, because these programs often force students to shoulder additional financial obligations, they may be unproductive or even worsen inequality.<sup>50</sup>

By studying interns, employees, and higher education personnel, the three chief players involved in the production of, and navigation through, the ambiguity of internships, I am studying a “breaking-in system”—the ways higher education institutions and industry create and police pathways by which newcomers can potentially enter occupations. The characteristics of these pathways vary greatly by sector, including how closely educational credentials are tied to occupational skills and identities, the norms and values aspirants are expected to assume, and their openness or selectivity. For individuals in relatively “open” fields with an oversupply of applicants and no clear educational shortcut, aspirants break in by doing what I call “provisional labor”—assuming a conditional role for an indefinite period, usually laboring in a precarious position and for low or no pay.

An internship is one type of provisional labor. Alternatively, in educational settings, an aspirant can take on the role of teaching assistant, whereas in social media production, workers (i.e., hopeful influencers) entrepreneurially do unpaid or low-paid labor with the aspirational goal to establish career footholds.<sup>51</sup> Although the role of “the intern” is low in status, it is aspirational and, as with other roles, it can function as a resource a newcomer can use to claim membership within an occupational community and argue for a promotion to a higher position.<sup>52</sup>

Paradoxically, despite the highly uncertain payoffs of unpaid internships and the low status of interns (who are often labeled “just the intern”), there is widespread agreement among cultural workers that aspirants must complete this type of provisional labor to break in. A few years after I met Rita, she pivoted to a new role at a record company. When I ask her if a student could start a career in music without doing an internship, she shakes her head no, exclaiming, “There’s no way.” After thinking for a moment, she adds,

Unless you’re already established in the media industry—if you’re just trying to break in . . . you’re going to have to suck it up and swallow your pride and just work for free. Just for a little while, until you know enough people to not work for free anymore.

While some people I encountered held other roles that served as pathways to breaking in (for example, volunteering at a college radio station, booking shows for bands, or helping local artists), all these paths have one thing in common: aspirants assume the cost of their training as they build their employability.

Importantly, the structure of a breaking-in system is tied to the larger social structure, including the broader employment and education conditions of its historical period. In addition, these systems vary across industries and occupations. In the following sections, I further situate the shifting conditions of career entry for college graduates and contextualize my case study of the music industry.

## Making Yourself Employable in the New Economy

In the mid-twentieth century, the dominant breaking-in system for young adults in the United States consisted of workers being hired into stable bureaucratic organizations that offered training and a career ladder—an opportunity structure—allowing movement from an entry-level job upward. The growth of larger, complex organizations in the early part of the century brought the need for employers to nurture a consistent and well-trained supply of labor.<sup>53</sup> The passage of laws protecting workers, including the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established a minimum wage, and the rise of union membership ushered in institutional protections for workers and helped establish a social contract between industry and labor.<sup>54</sup>

For the three decades following World War II, for the first time in US history, employment was viewed predominantly as a long-term partnership between firms and workers, where loyalty was cultivated and mutually rewarded. Workers received training and opportunities for advancement within the firm, and employers benefited from an increasingly skilled, stable labor force. White-collar workers entered a firm with the expectation of building a lifelong career, incrementally climbing a job ladder.<sup>55</sup> While promotions often proved elusive for blue-collar workers, manufacturing jobs nevertheless offered stability and (by historical standards) good pay for people without a college degree.<sup>56</sup> Because of this new standard employment relationship, as sociologist Everett Hughes (1958:8) noted, “more and more people have assurance, at least on paper, of a smooth and well-marked march by easy stages from the high-school guidance office to a retirement suitable to one’s achievements.” In this period, workers experienced an unusual level of stability and may have thought this was a permanent new normal.<sup>57</sup> However, recent developments have shown that this arrangement was, in fact, a temporary swing of the precarity pendulum.<sup>58</sup>

Since the late twentieth century, shifts in the economic, political, and social landscapes have led to profound transformations of the

employment relationship, prompting a transfer of risk from institutions to individuals.<sup>59</sup> In the 1970s and '80s, global economic integration and competition between companies created noticeable pressure and pathways to outsource work, including to countries with less expensive labor. The decline of unions shifted the relatively equal industry–employee balance of power toward employers. Technological innovations meant firms needed to compete globally but also sped up production and led to faster-changing market trends. Jointly, these developments rendered long-term investments in employees difficult because skills became obsolete rapidly.

At the same time, the United States and much of the Western world saw the rise of knowledge-intensive jobs (for which employers often require postsecondary education) and low-paid service-based jobs, while manufacturing jobs declined precipitously.<sup>60</sup> As a result, firms have become increasingly flexible, and work has become more precarious. “Nonstandard” work arrangements (e.g., part-time, temporary, freelance work) have grown at the expense of the full-time, permanent jobs that were more commonly held by previous generations.<sup>61</sup> Several scholars have argued that the rise of precarious work has led to a more polarized job market in which highly educated workers compete for a shrinking number of well-paying, socially prestigious “good” jobs while fighting to escape the alternatives—often called “bad” jobs because they offer lower pay, even less stability, and few benefits—which have only gotten worse.<sup>62</sup>

These changes in the employment relationship have made careers more chaotic. There is no longer a widespread expectation of long-term affiliation between workers and employers. Today, a career typically involves movement across not only individual employers, but also industries, with US workers holding more than twelve different jobs in their lifetime on average and frequently making dramatic career changes by age forty.<sup>63</sup> The ideal of the tidy, predictable career pathway from graduation to retirement is long gone. Workers must establish and constantly replenish their

skills as they manage their own careers under competitive conditions. In 1993, these developments prompted management scholar Peter Drucker to note, “The stepladder is gone, and there’s not even the implied structure of an industry’s rope ladder. It’s more like vines, and you bring your own machete.”<sup>64</sup> Framed by Drucker as a stark transition from depending on firms to “individual responsibility,” workers are now responsible for planning and managing their own careers.<sup>65</sup>

These shifts have important consequences for breaking in. As employers have come to no longer expect long-term commitments from their employees, they have become less prone, and less incentivized, to invest in job training.<sup>66</sup> Left largely on their own, aspiring workers are responsible for developing skills, becoming socialized to a field’s norms and values, and growing a network of relationships to ensure their career entry and stability. In short, workers must build and sustain their employability.<sup>67</sup>

Against this backdrop, Americans have increasingly turned to higher education to escape bad jobs. As of 2013, more than one-third of young adults aged twenty-five to thirty-two in the United States had a college degree, up from an average of one in four in the same age group in previous decades (24 percent in 1979 and 25 percent in 1995). By 2021, nearly 40 percent of the US population over age twenty-five had a college degree.<sup>68</sup> With a highly credentialed population available, employers have raised their standards for applicants for jobs at all skill levels—even entry-level jobs increasingly require work experience.<sup>69</sup>

Unsurprisingly, young workers who lack college degrees are increasingly considered “at risk” in their school-to-work transition. However, amid these long-term and tumultuous shifts in employment, a growing body of research shows that the career pathways of college graduates are often delayed, erratic, and unequal.<sup>70</sup> While in the aggregate college graduates fare better in the job market than individuals without such a degree, the transition from higher education to employment is neither easy nor automatic. The rise of internships has been fueled by the perceived failings of

higher education to adjust to this new scenario. According to a Pew Research Center survey, most adults in the United States agree that the higher education system suffers from two problems: tuition costs are too high (according to 84 percent of adults), and students are not graduating with the skills they need in the workplace (65 percent).<sup>71</sup> In the context of a hyper-competitive college admissions market, skyrocketing tuition, and the proliferation of school rankings (including those based on degrees' return on investment), internships have emerged as a way for institutions of higher learning to link a degree to work-ready skills. Increasingly, schools must offer students career training and networking opportunities to stay competitive.<sup>72</sup>

While shifts in the labor market and careers have motivated the implementation of college-for-all policies,<sup>73</sup> higher education institutions have more recently embraced internships-for-all policies. As college graduates face greater career uncertainty at labor market entry, higher education institutions are facing significant pressure from students, their families, and policymakers to improve student labor market outcomes and help students with career preparation.<sup>74</sup> As a result of this pressure, postsecondary curricula are shifting to prepare students for the increasingly uncertain labor markets they will soon confront.<sup>75</sup> In recent decades, this shift has included the incorporation of internships to improve job readiness, facilitate the college-to-career transition,<sup>76</sup> and help students overcome the “career progression paradox”—the catch-22 wherein workers need skills to secure a job, but must first have a job to gain those skills.<sup>77</sup> Importantly, however, the rise of internships has occurred without a consensus about what the experience is supposed to achieve, how it should be managed, and who is responsible for managing it. In other words, structural economic shifts have generated both the growth of internships and exacerbated their ambiguity.

Beyond helping students develop skills, internship experience signals a student's competence and commitment. Employers view internship experience as evidence of prior vetting and a relatively

long-standing interest in the field—doing a summer internship rather than holding a more traditional summer job signals “drive.”<sup>78</sup> Some workers, even at the start of their career, carefully craft their résumé by building experience at high-status companies; in the music industry, this might include stints at a major record company, an esteemed indie label, or a music-streaming firm such as Spotify. Internships therefore enable college students to build their “personal brand.” Career counselors, self-help gurus, journalists, and some parents advise students to develop their personal brand, a coherent professional identity that signals their employability in the labor market.<sup>79</sup> Personal branding has emerged as a solution to a market problem.<sup>80</sup> If career trajectories have changed from a steady climb up a ladder at a single employer to a more chaotic trajectory involving several lateral, downward, or upward moves between firms and industries, having a personal brand—ideally described in three or four words that crystalize a potential employee’s “authentic self”—quickly and clearly lends coherence to an applicant’s work history in the eyes of potential employers.<sup>81</sup>

The growth of internships as part of higher education has further incorporated building social capital as part of the college experience. As both conventional wisdom and a vast literature attest, “who you know” is often crucial to breaking in.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, according to some music industry employees, who you know is even more important than what you know, although the two are intertwined. Aspirants use their social capital—the resources embedded in their social networks—to gain informational advantages and influence. Similarly, social capital helps employers decide who they consider worthy of investment.

Social capital helps resolve information problems in the job-search process. In his classic study of job searching, *Getting a Job*, Mark Granovetter found that people with more expansive social networks were more likely to learn about work opportunities than job seekers with fewer “weak ties” (e.g., acquaintances) linking them to other social circles. The advent of LinkedIn and other

online resources means that the problem for current job seekers is often less knowing about a job and more knowing how to make their application stand out.<sup>83</sup> By interning, as well as by joining clubs and groups, students are doing their best to make their application stand out while building a network of people willing to vouch for them. Because the pathways to jobs in some fields appear so unclear, some hopeful interns resemble the job seekers described by Vicki Smith (2001)—potential employees who believed in a “hidden market” for jobs that are gained through networks, some even hoping they could convince an employer to hire them based on a chance interaction.<sup>84</sup>

Social capital also helps resolve information problems in the hiring process. Employers complain that it is difficult to know how people will truly perform as an employee, even after extensive interviewing, because there can be a mismatch between how people act during interviews (to get hired) and how they act as employees.<sup>85</sup> As I describe further, the ability to present oneself competently in job application materials and in an interview does not necessarily overlap with consistently being a competent intern. The rise of online resources, some of them furnished by higher education institutions, enable some students to thrive at obtaining an internship, even if they view the position as no more than a line on their résumé. For example, career counselors sometimes tell students to express a deep passion for the music field and carefully research a company’s artist roster to signal their sincere interest. While employers try to gauge the seriousness of applicants, they have a spotty track record (at best) of weeding out uncommitted interns.

### The Site and the Argument

Part of what I have argued thus far is that large structural shifts have created uncertain and unstable conditions for education and work and, in turn, have given rise to internships as a key way for aspirants to break into a variety of fields. The ambiguity inherent

in the role of intern is present in all fields, though breaking-in systems vary in their level of ambiguity. This ambiguity becomes more visible by studying differently positioned members of a breaking-in system (interns, employees, and higher education personnel).

An ambiguous phenomenon refers to the coexistence of multiple different interpretations, and this can take many forms: polysemy, vagueness, inconsistency, and instability.<sup>86</sup> Internships as a type of provisional labor take all four of these forms: an intern means a “student” and “worker”; interviewees describe internships as ranging from an aspirant doing high-level work with close expert supervision to the equivalent of “bring your child to work day”; the experiences of aspirants vary greatly across and within companies; and shifts in the legal landscape and through intern labor rights activism have brought instability to what is termed an internship.<sup>87</sup> Importantly, ambiguity is not simply a misunderstanding that can be alleviated with more information—the remedy is for social actors to make sense of the world around them.<sup>88</sup> In this book I focus especially on the commercial record industry, which, like many other cultural industries, features a breaking-in system characterized by an especially high level of ambiguity. For the aspirant, breaking in amounts to an ongoing, ambiguous negotiation for belonging.

While there is variation within the cultural industries, the considerable oversupply of potential workers generally exacerbates the usual challenge of finding one’s footing—and, potentially, employment—in the new economy.<sup>89</sup> The allure of cultural industries, in part due to its glamorous performers and bustling events like live performances and parties, helps to explain its considerable excess of aspiring workers. No matter what tasks interns are assigned, occasional but significant brushes with famous people leave them experiencing an odd combination of nearness and remoteness. Interns can feel hope and enthusiasm from their proximity to senior employees and artists, but such contacts are typically occasional and usually do not result in strong ties.<sup>90</sup>

In his work on artistic labor markets, Pierre-Michel Menger (1999) identified two other potential reasons for the oversupply of aspirants and, consequently, the importance of learning by doing. First, a potential worker's suitability for a specific occupation is difficult to discern, both for the worker and for others. Through trial and error, aspirants gain more information about their potential occupation and become better able to gauge whether it matches their abilities and interests. Second, despite the existence of arts- and media-related programs in higher education, many occupations in the field do not require formal training, and therefore education credentials in and of themselves are not sufficient for the selection and screening of talent.<sup>91</sup> Even those creative graduates who receive in-depth training feel like their schooling did not sufficiently prepare them for the professional world.<sup>92</sup> The substantial surplus of aspiring workers prompts some participants to compare attempts to enter the cultural industries to boot camp, rushing a fraternity, or working in the mailroom. While music industry careers are especially chaotic at their onset, they have long been uncertain even as workers gain experience. Standing on uncertain ground, established employees are hardly incentivized to dedicate much time to training aspirants.

Although the record industry has undergone drastic changes since the rise of digital downloads and streaming, the industry has been notoriously unpredictable for decades.<sup>93</sup> In 1959, Goddard Lieberman, the president of Columbia Records, quipped, "This business is like running a gambling house," adding, "You've got to cover yourself in all directions."<sup>94</sup> Lieberman had helped Columbia become the number one company in record album sales at the time by investing in an array of artists and ventures, including the Columbia Record Club. However, his fate illustrates that even giants of the industry can be out of touch. In the mid-1950s, when rock 'n' roll ascended as a cultural form,<sup>95</sup> he believed the genre would be no more than a fad and wanted no part of it—as a result, Columbia rapidly lost ground to their rival RCA, which embraced the trend (notably by purchasing Elvis Presley's contract).

The careers of record company personnel have long been tied to the (unpredictable) success of music recordings. Yet most recordings do not make a profit because, when it comes to cultural products, hits tend to be flukes.<sup>96</sup> Even experts find it difficult to predict which cultural products will be successful, despite strategic and often collaborative efforts to ensure commercial success.<sup>97</sup> This unpredictability is one reason that the careers of cultural workers, including authors, models, songwriters, and visual artists, are especially uncertain.<sup>98</sup>

Careers in the cultural industries are frequently not bound by internal labor markets (i.e., workers rarely build careers through stable long-term employment at the same company). This is most obviously true for individuals doing project-based or freelance work (e.g., songwriters) but also applies to those employed at firms.<sup>99</sup> The commercial record industry is a competitive field organized around a few oligopolistic firms (“major” record companies) and many specialized independent companies (“indies”). The majors tend to frequently reorganize (through mergers or, internally, by combining departments), whereas the indies are inherently small and fragile.<sup>100</sup>

Companies in the cultural industries try to manage risk in part by redistributing it downward, including to artistic and nonartistic laborers in the form of low salaries and temporary work arrangements.<sup>101</sup> To remain attuned to novel trends—for example, to avoid sleeping on the emergence of a new subgenre or being the last company to embrace the next viral TikTok—companies continually welcome an influx of young, culturally savvy newcomers. These new arrivals may make experienced workers feel threatened, and indeed, employees usually do “age out.”<sup>102</sup> It is in this competitive, and at times contentious, environment that aspirants in this book seek to break in.

In the following chapters, I further elucidate the sources of ambiguity in this breaking-in system (chapters 1–2) and how key actors—higher education personnel, employees, and interns—attempt to manage or overcome this ambiguity (chapters 3–5).

Chapter 1 considers how the relationship between higher education institutions and employers exacerbates the ambiguity in this breaking-in system. I show how actors within these fields must negotiate between multiple, often contradictory, goals. In particular, in enacting internships-for-all policies, higher education personnel may well be dedicated to educational aims but must also contend with institutional pressures to maximize internship participation numbers while having limited resources to ensure quality learning experiences. Music industry employers, on the other hand, need an influx of inexpensive workers, but the employees who supervise interns often have little time (and are not necessarily rewarded) for acting as “teachers.”

The repercussions of an unwieldy intern economy become clearer in chapter 2, which shows how internships-for-all policies accommodate (and drive) a wide assortment of intern motivations. I introduce a threefold typology of music industry interns and their motivations: Students, Enthusiasts, and Job Seekers. Due to this variation, music industry employees operate under the assumption that interns are neither committed nor competent. Rather than aim to transform these newcomers into potential employees, employers invest little by settling for surface-level socialization; therefore, employers generally aim to break in interns just enough to make sure they unobtrusively respect workplace norms and rules.

I further consider the perspective of employers in chapter 3, which analyzes how music industry employees manage ambiguity in this breaking-in system. Tasked ostensibly with educating interns, employees justify their relative neglect of interns by adopting what I call the mailroom model of training. Drawing especially on interviews with employees and participant observation data, I find that music industry employees generally embrace the myth of the mailroom to normalize interns’ suffering and position on-the-job learning as the best (or only) way for aspirants to learn. In the process, members of this occupational community legitimate a form of training that puts the burden predominantly or fully on

interns to craft a worthwhile experience, thereby shedding the responsibility for employees to act as “teachers.”

As a result, interns use a variety of individual strategies to make the most of their experience. In chapter 4, I discuss the strategies job-seeking interns use to overcome their ambiguous standing. Broadly, these aspirants seek to signal their commitment and competence and thus enact what I call the ideal intern norm. To go beyond merely being deemed a “good intern,” job-seeking aspirants pursue three key strategies to overcome ambiguities in this breaking-in system: tactful proactiveness, relationship building, and extended investment. However, due to their age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status, some interns are more likely to be evaluated positively as ideal interns and come equipped with dispositions, connections, and financial support that better enable them to break in. Therefore, chapter 4 illuminates how some interns improve their standing, but few can.

In chapter 5, after further unpacking key findings, I conclude the book by considering collective strategies to grapple with ambiguity in breaking-in systems. Notably related to addressing inequities, I ask: Can breaking-in systems change? I outline how intern labor rights activism, lawsuits filed by former interns, and recent policies enacted by higher education institutions and employers offer hope for more equitable, albeit still ambiguous, breaking-in systems.

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