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Unpaid Internships Fall Out of Fashion in Washington

An internship in the White House or on Capitol Hill can be lucrative for a political career, but the pay is only starting to match up

By [Angela Yang](#) [Follow](#)

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Interning for a congressional representative or at the White House is one of the most prestigious entries any college student can put on their résumé. The catch: You often work free.

For decades, many students who interned for government officials in Washington didn't get a paycheck, making the opportunity inaccessible for those who lack financial support. The positions are lucrative steppingstones into politics. House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#), her predecessor, Paul Ryan, and Vice President [Kamala Harris](#) are among dozens of political leaders who started their careers as congressional interns.

Now, intern pay in the nation's capital is changing amid a broader re-examination of private- and public-sector internships. Behind the shift is concern over whether internships too often go to those with wealth or connections, with other qualified candidates missing out, policy makers and pay advocates say.

This fall, the White House will pay its interns for the first time. The \$750 weekly stipend breaks down to roughly \$21.43 an hour for a 35-hour workweek. Congress authorized the money, which will start flowing in September, in the fiscal 2022 budget bill, a White House official said.



During her House internship, Katana Evans lived in the more affordable Lexington, Va., while she attended college.

PHOTO: TERRA FONDRIEST FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Congressional interns stand to get a pay bump from the budget authorization, too, though how much depends on each office. Before 2017, only 10% of interns in Congress got paychecks. Since lawmakers allocated funds in 2018 to pay their interns, nearly all congressional offices have had at least one paid intern, according to an [analysis of payroll data](#) by Pay Our Interns, a nonprofit fighting for [intern pay across industries](#). Congress doesn't officially track how many unpaid interns work in congressional offices, according to the Committee on House Administration.

Katana Evans, 22 years old, worked as a summer press intern in the House of Representatives in 2021. Because of the pandemic, she had the option of moving to Washington or working remotely. She chose to work from her sublet in Lexington, Va.,

where she studied at Washington and Lee University. Her stipend averaged \$7.25 an hour, the federal minimum wage, which she lived on with the help of scholarship funds, she said.

“I would have preferred to move to D.C. and stay there for the summer and be able to network and go to hearings, but because D.C. was so expensive, I couldn’t,” she said. Her commute to the House building would have taken three hours each way.

Ms. Evans aspires to a full-time policy or research role in Washington, but she said most internships or entry-level jobs don’t pay enough to cover the cost of living there. After graduating in May, she moved back home near Little Rock, Ark., and is looking for a remote role that will let her save for an eventual move to Washington.

The average stipend paid per congressional internship, which generally lasted six weeks, was around \$1,600 in the House and \$2,000 in the Senate, according to the Pay Our Interns report, looking at congressional intern pay in 2019. Interns and advocates say that isn’t enough to cover months of rent in Washington plus other expenses. The analysis also found paid congressional interns were disproportionately white and from private universities.

“Money is a huge part of this problem, but money can’t necessarily solve the problem by itself,” said James Jones, a co-author of the report. “The people who are in these roles are not necessarily reflective of our diverse national population.”

Nearly 20% of House members in 2019 were interns or staffers in Congress before holding elected office, according to another Pay Our Interns [analysis](#). Over half of recent congressional staffers surveyed started off as interns—many of them unpaid—according to [a separate report](#) by Washington think tank New America.

Morgan Rako, chief operating officer of College to Congress, a nonprofit that connects college students to congressional internships and funds their stay in Washington, said the well-documented pathway to power proves why it is critical that these internships are accessible to underrepresented members of the U.S. population.

“It’s staff who’s writing the laws that are getting passed and put into place,” Ms. Rako said. “Staff really are the heart of the Hill.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What did you gain from an internship that helped you in your career? Join the conversation below.



Samuel Luna, who interned this summer at the House Committee on Homeland Security, got a full-time job offer as a legislative correspondent for Republican Rep. Mayra Flores of Texas.

PHOTO: SAMUEL LUNA

College to Congress is funded by donations and pays for housing, transportation, meals and a professional wardrobe after helping place students and recent graduates in internships.

Samuel Luna, a recent graduate of University of California, Merced, interned this summer at the House Committee on Homeland Security. Originally, he had planned to join the Air Force after graduation to build up savings for law school before working on the Hill.

But less than three weeks into his internship, he received a full-time offer as a legislative correspondent for Rep. Mayra Flores (R., Texas). With that opportunity, he no longer feels he needs a law degree to launch a government career.

“It completely changed the trajectory of my career,” Mr. Luna, 21, said.



Natalia Gutierrez interned in the House Republican Conference, which led to two full-time job offers on Capitol Hill.

PHOTO: NATALIA GUTIERREZ

For new Senate staffer Natalia Gutierrez, a 24-year-old who recently graduated from Florida Atlantic University, an internship in the House Republican Conference this spring led to two full-time job offers on Capitol Hill.

Ms. Gutierrez said she wouldn't have been able to take the internship, which paid \$1,000 for four months of work, had College to Congress not subsidized her housing and flight to Washington.

"I just knew that I wanted to work in public service," she said. "I never imagined I would step foot in a place like this."

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