

## **Summary Report to WREA Study Participants** **By Dr. Karen Webber, PI and Dr. Amy Stich, co-PI**

During the academic year 2021-2022 and/or 2022-2023, you voluntarily participated in portions of a study funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to examine engineering and computer science students' participation in work-related experiential activities (WREAs) and their perceptions of skills related to career competence that were enhanced during WREA participation. This report provides you with a summary of the findings.

Work-related experiential activities (WREAs) such as internships and co-ops offer the opportunity for students to engage in experiential activities before degree completion, and these experiences provide students with an important way to refine their skills that facilitate career success. Generally, prior research confirms the benefits of work-related experiential activities in students' transition to the workforce, but we sought to further examine the contribution of WREA participation and its benefits in the transition between college and employment. Specifically, this study sought to examine the benefits of WREA participation and the effect of students' geographic location on WREA participation.

We gathered data in spring 2021 and spring 2022 surveys at six universities in Georgia as well as individual Zoom interviews with approximately 75 students and 25 employers and career center directors. We received human subjects approvals from each institution that participated in this study, and we gathered information only from students who were not identified as FERPA-restricted.

Overall, findings showed that approximately 60% of all students we surveyed participated in one or more WREAs. In general, respondents said they perceived value in their

WREA experiences and they helped them become ready to pursue post-baccalaureate employment. The top three items with the highest scores for benefit from their WREA participation were: *interacting with others in a professional setting; establishing relationships with employers; and being guided by a mentor*. Findings from this study also showed that students' geographic location played a significant role in their access to work-related experiences. From survey responses as well as qualitative interviews, we found that students who attended a university in a large metropolitan area participated in more WREAs and reported planning for WREA participation at an earlier time in their baccalaureate studies (some even before their freshman year).

Along with survey data, we gathered individual interview data with students and career center directors as well as focus group data with employers/recruiters working with the institutions in the study. Our in-depth interviews confirmed many of the findings we gathered from the surveys and cemented confirmation that geographic location makes an important difference. Overall, the quantity and quality of WREA opportunities available to students varied by institutional location. For example, students attending institutions in geographically-dense locations with robust employment opportunities had more immediate access to a large number of prestigious WREAs than students attending other institutions in the study. Although students and some career center directors communicated the importance of proximity to Atlanta as an opportunity-rich "industry hub," students attending institutions situated in or near Atlanta experienced immediate access to resources provided by the city's industry-dense core. Geographic privilege enabled students to position themselves in a positive way for the job market. For example, the majority of Georgia Tech interview participants communicated having an early desire for not one, but multiple WREAs. Georgia Tech students also had greater access

to particular “brand name” national and international companies—those that had well-established relationships with the university and participated in Georgia Tech’s Career Fairs.

Disparities in the structure of opportunities for students across institutions were most visible when more elite institutions were compared to less well-resourced institutions across the state. Less well-resourced institutions had fewer Career Center personnel and more localized relationships (which meant that fewer recruiters and fewer recruiters from big-name companies engaged with students). With fewer resources available, caring professional staff worked tirelessly to provide support and opportunities, and students often had to look to themselves and their own networks to find WREAs and prepare for the job market.

We note that our we collected our survey and interview data in 2021 and 2022 during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when employers and university officials were required to impose social distancing but sought to find ways to continue important work-related experiences. This major event may have affected students’ opportunities and our findings.

Again, we thank you for your participation in this study. If you are interested in more detail on any part of our study, you may contact us (email below) or read more detailed reports on the WREA website: <https://ihe.uga.edu/WREA>

Thank you,

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