



# Community and Career Connected Learning: The Impact of High School Internships in Rural Appalachian Ohio

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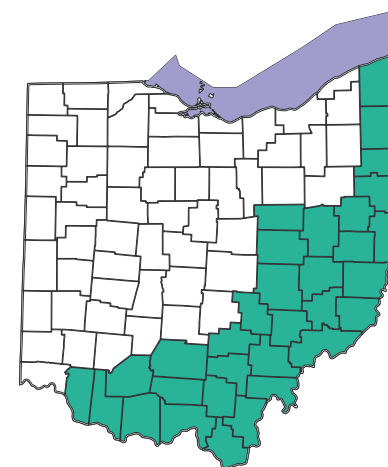
**Rural Action**  
Thriving Communities, Healthy Environments



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## Creating Connections to Revitalize a Region



Rural Southeastern Ohio faces a deep paradox. On the one hand, business is booming. The region has over 1,000 entry-level jobs currently unfilled (JobsOhio, 2021), and 49 businesses expanded in 2020 alone, funneling \$30 million in development capital into the region (Ohio Business, 2021). On the other hand, a recent survey shows Southeastern Ohio high school students exhibit a distinct lack of knowledge about these available jobs; over 12% of graduating seniors surveyed in one county have no plan for work or postsecondary education after high school, and over 23% of graduating seniors do not have a specific career path in mind (BB2C, 2021). In addition, the outmigration of young adults continues to weigh heavily on the region. Due to decades of boom and bust cycles, closing coal mines and steel mills, it's not abnormal to hear from students, families, teachers, and policymakers alike the misplaced belief that Appalachia is a "job desert."

There is a possible solution to this paradox: High School Internships. In interviews with 25 young adults who graduated in 2019 or 2020 and participated in high school internships, every student believed the internship helped them with their career path and goals. In fact, 3 of them chose what college to attend based on their internship experience, 2 entered the workforce directly, and 7 relied on advice from their host site mentor to choose a major, certificate, or schedule classes in college. Eleven said the internship experience gave them a greater understanding of their community and how they could make a difference.

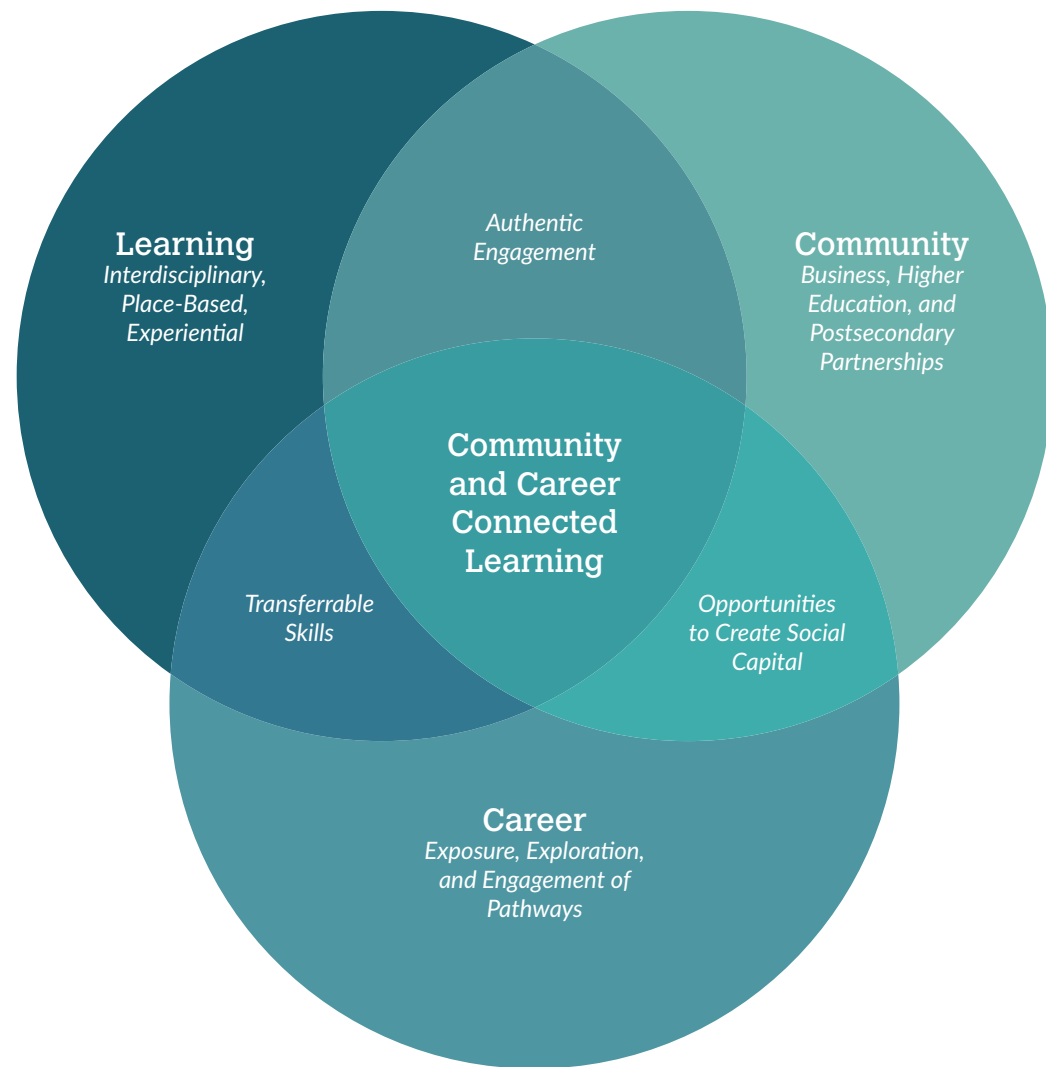
This white paper examines the challenges students in Southeastern Ohio face as they consider a career path, discusses the importance of Community and Career Connected Learning, and examines data indicating the positive impact a high school internship program can have on students.

Southeastern Ohio communities have been reinventing themselves to address inequalities in education and philanthropic support. A partnership between Rural Action and BB2C is a critical piece of this reinvention. We are connecting schools and students to job experiences with host sites in their communities. In many instances, these internships are connected to environmental and economic sustainability and ecotourism, all of which are key components of efforts to revitalize Appalachian Ohio. Students meet and work with community leaders who both inspire them and expand their social capital, creating a support network that is just as much an economic asset as the region's natural beauty and biodiversity.

Although schools for Career Technical Education (CTE), also known as Vocational Schools, and organizations such as Future Farmers of America (FFA) have long incorporated experiential, work-based learning as a core of their programs and certifications, internships are gaining popularity in traditional high school models. This study focuses on high school internships unattached to CTE or associated work-based learning structures.



# Overview of Programs + What is CCCL



Community and Career Connected Learning is a learning system integrating community partnerships and career awareness into experiential, place-based learning.



**BB2C:** Building Bridges to Careers (BB2C) is a non-profit 501(c)(3) built to foster student, business, and civic relationships to inspire career choices through experience, entrepreneurship and education. The idea for BB2C began in 2008 as a small group of community members trying to address the simultaneous problems of outmigration, local workforce needs, and lack of student knowledge about careers in their own community. The first BB2C program focused on job shadowing, a short, 4-hour-long immersive experience where students spend time “shadowing” in a career field to get a sense of daily work and tasks. In 2016, after developing other programs, BB2C created a high school internship program, an experiential learning opportunity pairing a student with a business or community organization for a long, in-depth experience in a career field.

### BB2C's High School Internship Program Structure

- » Average of 18 students annually in Washington County, Ohio
- » Facilitated by ¼ FTE internship coordinator acting as intermediary
- » Students work with businesses 40-160 hours
- » Any student who contacts BB2C can be placed
- » Businesses encouraged to pay students, but not required
- » Students complete a 4-hour job shadow at the host site prior to the internship. This acts as an informal interview process
- » Internship Coordinator makes site visits, regular follow-up calls to both student and business



**Rural Action:** Rural Action, a non-profit 501(c)(3) sustainable development organization working in Appalachian Ohio, believes that for long-term resilience, careers should contribute to environmental and economic sustainability. After observing BB2C's internship program success, Rural Action partnered with the BB2C Network to build its own high school internship program that could reach beyond Washington County. Over the past three years with funding support from multiple regional and local foundations, Rural Action has worked with partner organizations across its 28-county service region to facilitate a paid internship program for high school students.

### Rural Action's High School Internship Structure

- » 2 part-time coordinators work with a network of 8 local coordinators or teacher liaisons to recruit businesses and students in Appalachian Ohio counties
- » The program began with 5 students in 2019 and now serves over 40 students a year in 7 counties in the region
- » Students participate 40-80 hours
- » Rural Action sources grant funding to pay students for their work
  - » Payment averages \$10-\$15 an hour, depending on grant and internship focus
  - » Students also receive start-up funds for transportation and needed work items
- » Application process facilitates selection and matching with businesses
- » Local coordinators follow up with students and businesses to ensure success

# Internship Placements by Career Cluster

Job Categories Where Study Respondents Interned

	Agriculture, Food, Natural Resources, & Conservation	5
	Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics	3
	Architecture & Construction	2
	Health Sciences	2
	Arts, Audio/Video Technology & Communications	2
	Education & Training	2
	Human Services	4
	Law, Public Safety, Corrections & Security	1
	Manufacturing	1
	Marketing, Sales, and Service	3

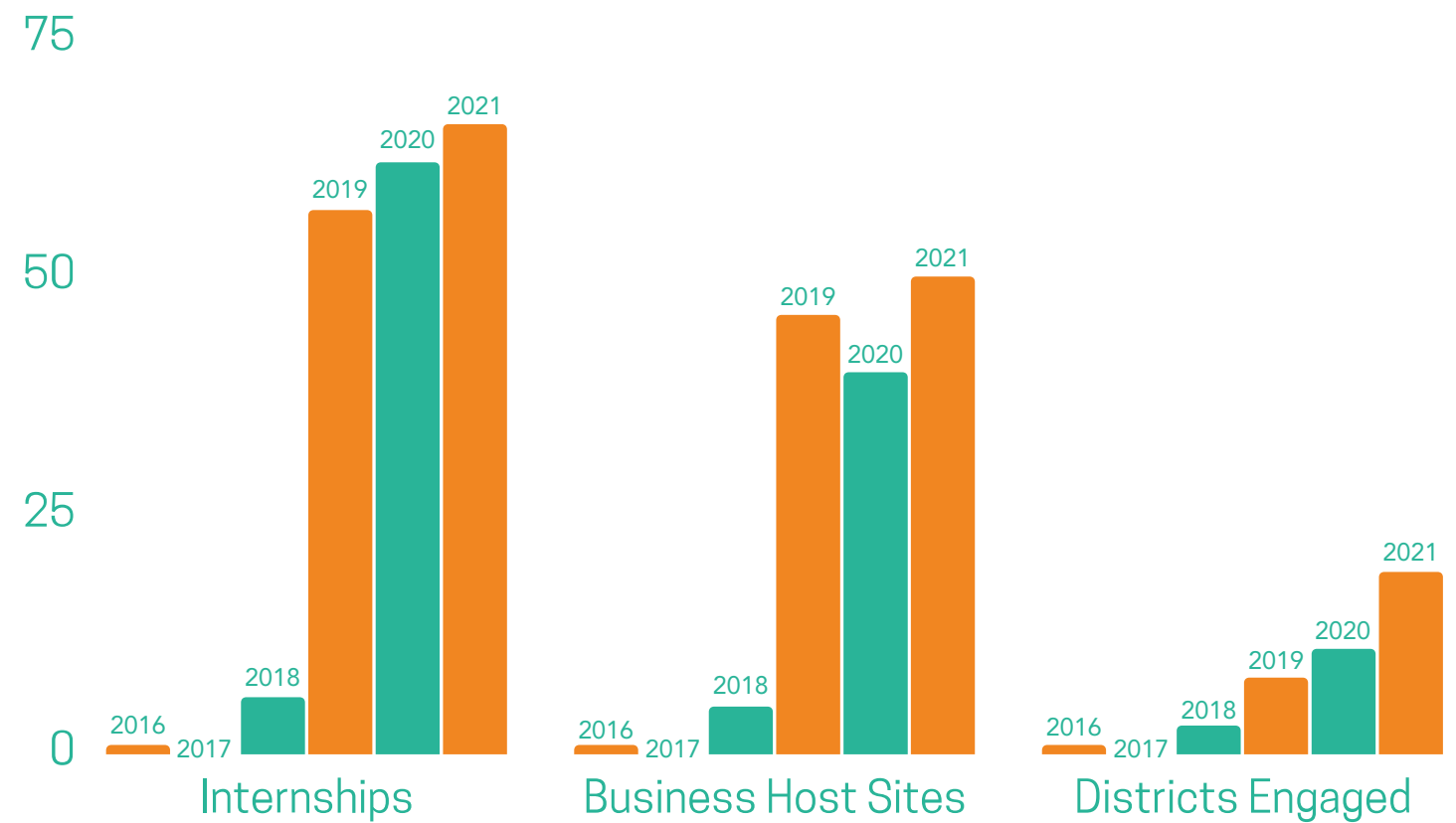


## Demographic Information of Study Participants

Currently living in the region + Employed Full Time	5 students
Currently living in region + College/Technical Training	10 students <small>*one student attends a college out of the region but was attending remotely from home due to COVID... placed in this category because also working in-person in region **5 of these students also are working</small>
Currently living outside region + College/Technical Training	10 students <small>***one student attends a college out of the region but was attending remotely from home due to COVID</small>

# Internship Program Growth

BB2C and Rural Action support internships occurring outside of traditional education. Both organizations collaborate closely with school districts and Educational Service Centers to coordinate internships and source student placements. Community and Career Connected Learning in the boundaries between school and businesses allows the internship experience to be flexible, meeting the needs of the student and the business. Reducing barriers to participation and access for students and businesses is a top priority of both BB2C and Rural Action.





## Big Impacts

18% of students

chose what college to attend based on their internship experience.



8% of students

chose to enter the workforce based on their internship experience.



28% of students

used advice from their host site mentor to choose a major, certificate, or schedule classes in college.



44% of students

said the internship experience gave them a greater understanding of their community and how they could make a difference.

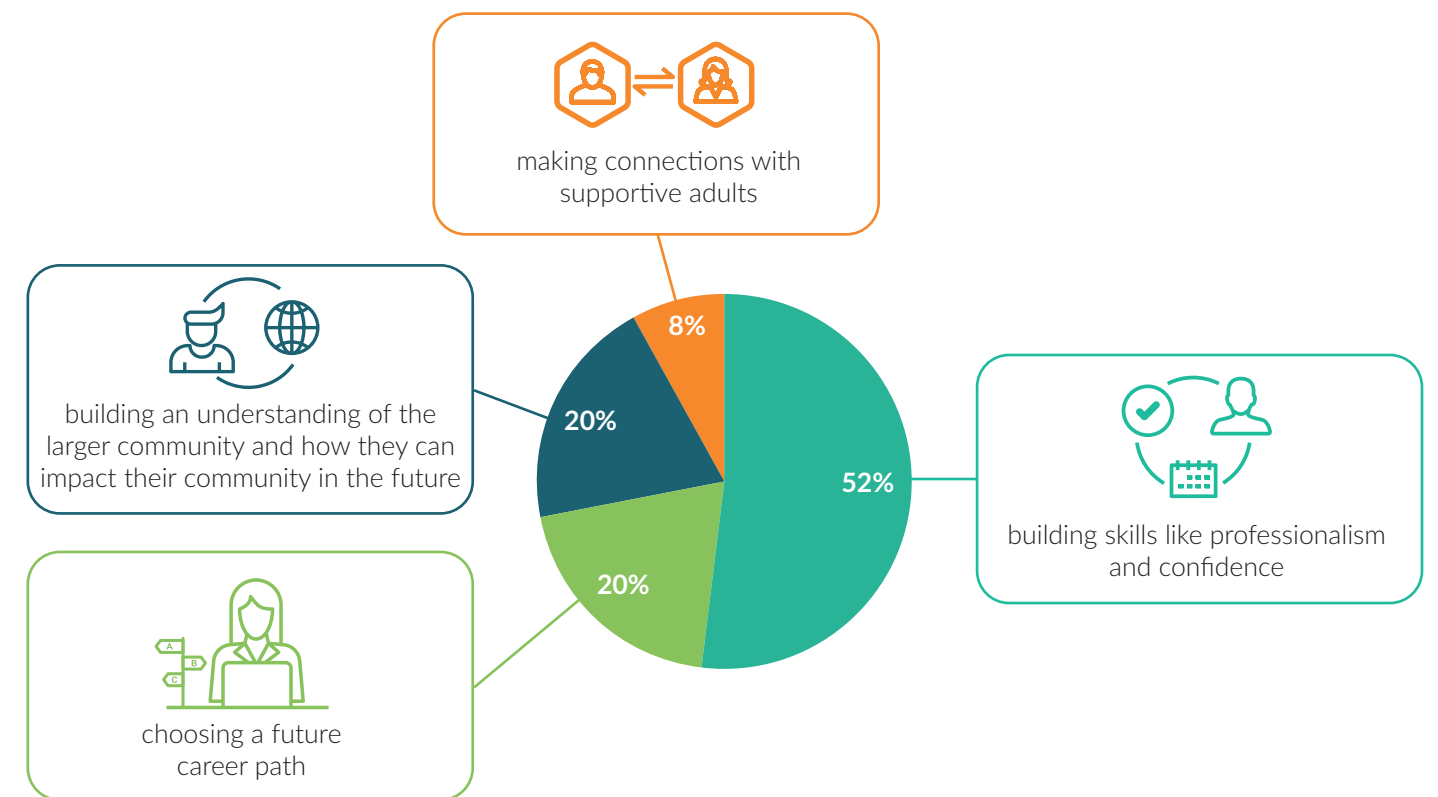


"I think this internship impacted me in a better, positive way. Because over the summer, with the topics that we talked about in my internship in 2020, I was having these conversations in my hometown I've never really had before publicly, when there was a high rise of protests and a lot of conversations across the country happening about race. I think it really made me realize that I want to speak out again, and what I think people should know and be educated about. But I think it really made me more aware and made me realize what I really would like to do in my life and the impact that I can make and would like to continue to make with people."



## The most important change

We asked the young adults to identify the most important change they experienced as a result of participating in the high school internship program.





## Skills Interns Gained

The majority of students cited the skills they acquired as an important impact of the internship, with technical skills, communication skills, and self-confidence leading the way.

28% mentioned increased self-confidence



44% mentioned technical skills



72% mentioned communication skills



### Quotes:

"I think it really taught me to just not be afraid to ask questions. I had never put a grow tube on a tree before or did any invasive species work or anything. And it taught me how to ID plants a little bit, which is huge because I still do that today in all my college biology classes."

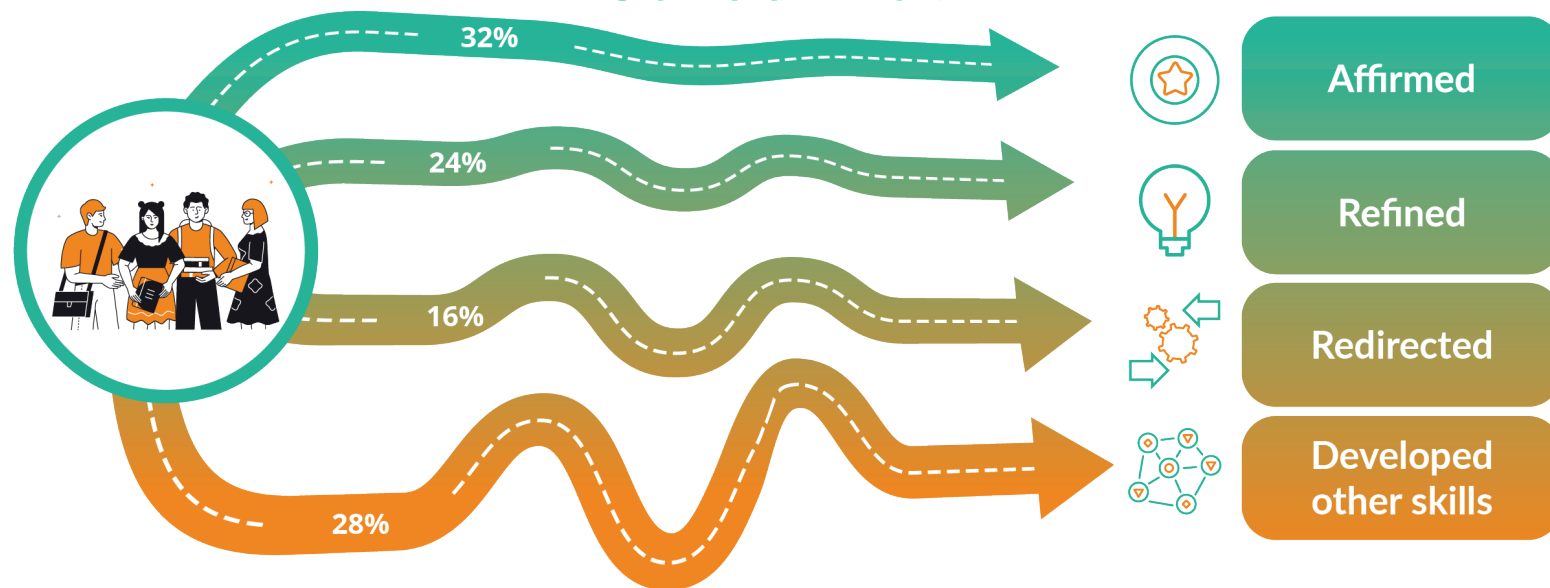
"I'm more outgoing now; I think that's a really good skill to have. I'm kind of a shy person. So now I feel like [the internship] helped because [my host mentor] would just go up to people to talk. She was that type of person. So just being around that, I thought, wow, maybe I should do that."

"I definitely learned time management, like showing up on time. You know, it wasn't a big deal at school, but it felt really important to do it for [the internship]. Also, responsibility. I was making money, and I made sure to fuel my vehicle and do maintenance on it."

"I got a lot of new skills that I wouldn't have had before: being able to conceptualize something creative towards meeting more of a business goal, and I learned a lot about being able to work with a team of different people with different skills. And looking back, if I didn't have that experience, I definitely wouldn't have landed a lot of the opportunities I have now."



## Career Path



We asked if the internship experience helped students with their career paths. Every student believed the internship helped. For some, the internship *affirmed* a desire to pursue a specific career path. The internship for these students solidified a pre-existing interest or helped assuage any worry or fear that they would be able to succeed in a field they wanted to pursue. For other students, the internship *refined* their path. The internship helped them to find a specific place for their skills and interests or gave them the idea to add a certificate, minor, or make another specific choice within a field they already showed interest in. Some students were completely *redirected* as a result of the internship. These students thought they wanted to pursue a certain career, were placed with a host site in that field, and through the daily reality of the career, made the decision to change their career trajectory. Finally, for some students, the internship *developed* other skills that helped them succeed in their immediate career steps.

### Quotes:

"I've always been very, very interested in the sciences, but I never knew how to get started or if it was going to be an option for me specifically. These opportunities really weren't available to me. I'm a first generation college student. My parents didn't go to a four year college, so I really wasn't sure how to reach that barrier between high school to higher-level education, specifically with pre-medicine. It's a scary thing for me to look at, four years pre-medicine and in addition to that, four years medical school, residency, all of that. It was definitely frightening to know that's what I was looking towards, but the internship did expose me to why it would be worth it, and why the path of specifically pre-medicine rather than health administration was the correct one for me."

"The internship helped me know college wasn't for me and that I wanted to get into the workforce. So being able to try that out in high school really helped me to decide that. [My internship] let me know it wasn't a bad thing not to go to college. But I was like, Okay, well, I really, really want to be an engineer. I had participated in the robotics program and did competitions and was taking higher level math classes to prepare myself for the college experience. And then I actually did the program. And it's not that I hated it, but it just wasn't sitting with me. It's not something that I enjoyed. I definitely had a different idea of what I thought it would be like, and then being in that actual environment definitely showed me that, hey, you shouldn't waste six plus years in college because this is definitely not what you want to do. So it saves a lot of time and ultimately, it saves you money."



## One Student's Story

"I really wanted to go to college for media, but I was scared that it would just be a degree that I couldn't do anything with.

I was really scared. I didn't want to take out loans at some point and never even get to do anything with the degree that I got. I was really unsure if I wanted to even go to college. I was all over the place. I was like, maybe I'll be a carpenter, which is really random.

I just was really scared of failing, and if I don't do well, then I'm just paying all this money for nothing. It's like the whole media world just seemed so closed off and unreachable. And the internship helped me realize there's all these other people that did the same thing that I want to do. You know, they're making a living. They're not living on the street. They've had a job for a while!

In my internship I met [my host site mentor] who showed me around, and I met a couple other university students who were doing work studies at the studio. And so I got a lot of insight from them on what college was like, and the different programs and how they felt about going through college because most of them were in either their junior or senior year, so they've been doing it for a minute.

I just remember slowly getting more comfortable with reaching out to people and talking professionally over email, and I definitely think that it built my confidence up a bunch.

[My host site mentor] really helped me realize that there are a multitude of different jobs at different levels in the media world that I could go into after going through college, and it's not unimaginable that I could find a stable job doing something with media. And I think being there, talking to all these different people who were working with them, made me more inclined to want to pursue that path.

I'd also learned a lot of basic stuff about audio recording, audio mixing, different equipment; I got to set up microphones. And so I feel like I did learn a lot about the audio recording world. And I think that really helped to kind of push me to feel comfortable with jumping into college because I was really, really uncertain at the time that I had my internship.

I had no idea about [a specific college] until this opportunity. You know, **I don't know exactly where I'd be. But I don't think I'd be at the college I am now. I think it really was an important experience for me. It changed my whole life path. I don't think I would have ended up where I am without it.**



## Building a Network

The data suggests that internships fill a gap in traditional high school curriculum. For many, the internship provided an introduction into the adult working world, an introduction not provided by family networks or traditional school networks.

100% said high school internships should be offered to all high school students.

53% had little to no networking experience before the internship

"I think it should be definitely offered to people in my high school. ... There's not a whole lot of opportunity for young people to figure out what they want to do with their lives, which is kind of scary. And I think having more guidance and having more opportunities for young people to just get out into the world and meet people that could be their mentors is huge. I think that's kind of lacking in Southern Ohio."

"High school is very structured, very rigid in the rules, right? So with this internship you're given more freedom, and you're really stepping away from that rigid, very structured childhood lifestyle to more adult, free-thinking."

"I think it's good to realize that young people can have a certain amount of autonomy and should have that autonomy because in high school, you have to do X, Y and Z. There's not much wiggle room. But by taking something like this internship, I was able to start building real life skills without having left the bubble yet. These were things they can't teach in the classroom."





## Role of an Intermediary

The responses showed a clear link between students who emerged from the internship with a defined career path for future employment and a responsive, non-familial adult who acted as an intermediary, connecting the student to their (sometimes changing) interests and immersive, real world experiences to explore those interests.

"My internship coordinator is now a really good friend. She's helped me more than anything. She helped me get the experience I wanted in high school. Not only that, but once I finally decided to switch gears, she was there, ready to hit the ground running with resources already in her belt ready to go."

"BB2C as an educational resource was focused on my success. That's what makes that program succeed. It's harder in a school system. It's like, 'What can we do for your class?' But when it came to Building Bridges, it's like, 'What does THIS student need to succeed?' Having that point of view is the total basis of successful students."

"It helped me dig up that passion that I didn't know was hidden. It's almost harder to get my process completed without somebody being a middleman. I think if I hadn't taken that chance and said, 'I think I would like to look into this avenue to see if I like it,' I honestly don't know where I would be today."



## Overall Internship Statistics

192 internship experiences

since 2018



136

were paid internships



6

Community and Career Connected Learning Organizations engaged over

100

participating businesses



20

jobs created or offered to interns at the conclusion of the internship



56%

of businesses said they would hire the intern if they had the resources to create a position

\$722,794

Local Economic Benefit as a direct result of High School Internship Programs



## Impact Study Methods

A research team of five members (two primary investigators and three research assistants) interviewed past participants of the Rural Action and BB2C internship programs. All students in the study participated in the internship program as high school students, were over the age of 18 at the time of the survey and had been out of high school one to three years.

Our aim was to interview a representative sample, focusing on how the participants believed the internships affected their career paths, acquisition of social capital, and perceptions of their community.

### We asked:

1. Did any of the connections you made during your internship give you information that could help you with your career or education goals?
2. Does your current career trajectory relate to your internship experience?
3. How did the internship influence your current career or education path?
4. In what ways did the internship change or impact you?
5. Of all those changes, which is the most important one?

### Breakdown of respondents by graduation year:

2019

7 graduates

2020

18 graduates

### Years of internship participation:

2016

2020

Community and Career Connected Learning seeks to unite students with the natural, social, and economic capital in our region to bridge the opportunity gap. Appalachian Ohio and its mesophytic forests are part of the most biodiverse region of the eastern United States (Braun, 1951; Dyer, 2006). However since the time of European colonization, the landscape has endured centuries of exploitation at the hands of extractive industries such as pre-regulation coal mining and vast clearcutting for iron furnaces. Appalachian Ohio grew up around the boom of coal mining or other resource extraction and suffered socioeconomically when those industries went bust in the latter half of the 20th Century. Miraculously, much of the forest has returned, albeit with permanent scars; our region harbors most of the state's forested land and the biodiversity therein. An important opportunity Community and Career Connected Learning provides is introducing students to new possibilities rooted in place connectedness and more sustainable relationships with the landscape.



American ginseng



Kid swinging on a grapevine

This report highlights the impacts from the students' perspective. Ongoing research conducted by BB2C in collaboration with Ohio University is investigating not only the impact of internships on students but also businesses and the larger community. We hope to better understand the ways local, hands-on learning experiences in the community impacts student and community outcomes.



