

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Upper Division Student Doubts Major Choice After Struggling to Find an Internship

Purpose: This vignette highlights the stress that students may experience if they struggle to secure an internship or other professional preparation opportunities that may help them secure employment.

Student Vignette: Cameron is a 20-year-old, low-income, first-generation college student who is majoring in mechanical engineering. They always dreamed of becoming an engineer based on their participation in an after-school program that was designed to give middle school students hands-on experience in STEM fields. Cameron was drawn to engineering because they loved working with other people to solve problems; they also heard that engineers are paid well, and working as one would allow them to provide a more stable life for themselves and their family. Although Cameron is highly motivated to become an engineer, the path toward this career has not been smooth. As a first-year student, they struggled with some of their math and science pre-requisite courses and needed to retake them. Cameron's faculty members and academic advisors encouraged them to participate in engineering student organizations and undergraduate research opportunities, but they have not had the time to do so since they work 25-30 hours a week off-campus to pay for college. Since Cameron has not participated in engineering activities outside of class, they have been excited about getting an engineering summer internship before their final year of college. However, it is now late into the spring semester, and none of Cameron's internship interviews led to offers. Cameron is getting increasingly anxious given that their professors stress the importance of internships in making people competitive for the job market. After receiving another job rejection email, Cameron walks into your office and says, "I'm not even sure why I'm trying to be an engineer anymore. I can't get an internship, my grades are ok at best, and everyone else has parents or friends who connect them to opportunities. How can I compete with that?"

Guiding Questions:

1. Have you encountered situations like this? If so, briefly reflect on those experiences. How did you support the student? What approaches were beneficial? What approaches were less successful?
2. Describe the challenges that Cameron is navigating. What resources exist on campus that may be helpful for Cameron? What strengths of Cameron's can be leveraged in this situation?
3. Given your role (e.g., academic advisor, program director, faculty, etc.), what might you do to support Cameron? What are some limitations in your current knowledge and skills in meeting Cameron's needs? What resources or opportunities can you connect Cameron with?
4. Reflect on the concept of ecological validation. How could the norms framing student interactions (holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, and developmental) and the work of educators (collaborative and reflective) be leveraged to support Cameron?
5. What policies and practices could be shifted to support students in situations like this? What would need to happen to initiate change? Who would be involved in this process?