For college students in an unsteady economy, gaining experience is often attained through unpaid internships. While many students are eager and willing to take on these positions, several have begun to question the ethics of essentially working without pay.

According to a recent article in the New York Times blog, “a former unpaid intern for the fashion magazine Harper’s Bazaar filed a lawsuit … accusing its parent company, the Hearst Corporation, of violating federal and state wage hour laws by not paying her even though she often worked there full time.”

What this disgruntled intern is speaking out about is something that many college students and recent graduates are facing on the road to employment — working full time for free.

The article continued to explain that nearly hundreds of thousands of young people are participating in these unpaid internships a year, all in the hopes of getting a foot in the door and gaining experience.

While many students choose to take on these roles, “labor advocates assert that many employers are taking advantage of these interns … by using the interns essentially to do the jobs of other workers and not providing a bona fide educational experience.”

According to an article in the Chicago Tribune on the former interns lawsuit, for many industries, such as those in media, communication, writing, and other creative fields, gaining experience is practically essential in order to attain a job, and “the competitive nature of these fields also means that students are often more than willing to work for free in order to get a leg up.”

The New York Times article explained that when it comes to the lawfulness of unpaid internship

positions, “unpaid internships are only lawful in the context of an educational training program, when the interns do not displace regular employees and the employer derives no immediate advantage from the intern’s work.”

While not receiving payment for one’s work is already a burden, an article in USA Today College stressed the fact that many students are not only taking unpaid internships but also paying for the credit hours to take the internship.

“Not only do the students have to pay for the credits, but also they have to pay for transportation to and from the internship, food, etc. Many students’ lifestyles or family lifestyles may not be able to support long periods of work that doesn’t provide income,” the article stated.

While interning without pay is not the most ideal situation, what students gain from unpaid internships is a résumé builder, connections within their industry, professional work experience, credits toward graduation, and sometimes entry-level positions.

While it is uncertain what the face of unpaid internships will become in light of this recent lawsuit, this Editorial Board firmly believes that overall, unpaid internships are unethical if they take the form of entry level work. The fact of the matter is that students are required to pay to work for corporations and, often, as was the case for the intern who is suing, are typically working long hours and giving their time and talents to a business or corporation with little compensation in exchange.

In order for these positions to remain open and available to students willing to work for the chance to get a foot in the door, there must be a sharp division drawn out that defines the difference between an entry-level position and an unpaid internship. Perhaps if more students stand up and request fair wages from their internship, then fair opportunities will arise.