Internships Disrupted Guide

A short guide to online internships for colleges, students, and employers

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE CHATTANOOGA
College of Engineering and Computer Science

utc.edu/CECS

In fields such as teacher education, nursing, social work, and counseling psychology, an in-person practicum or internship is mandatory and required by professional accrediting agencies. In these cases, professional associations or certification boards are currently reviewing how to approach the disruption to many students' field placements.

What should I do about internship courses for fall 2020 and spring 2021?

In contrast to many undergraduate courses, an internship course may be relatively easy to transform to an online modality. In fact, many internship courses are already conducted online and entail periodic Zoom or Skype meetings between advisors and students, a clear plan for preparing end-of-internship reports and reflections, and a system for uploading these documents.

What are online, remote, or "micro" internships?

What is an online internship? Before we answer this question, it is important to consider the definition of an in-person internship. Several definitions exist - from a 1-day fieldtrip to a 6-month on-site experience. In our Center, however, we consider an internship to consist of the following features:

- A position held within an established company or organization while also completing a college degree, certificate, or diploma program
- Engagement in learning experiences that are the equivalent to being in a classroom or other formal academic learning situation
- Working in a position clearly designated as an "internship" by the host organization
- Performing tasks similar in nature and skill-level to tasks done by entry-level employees in the Organization

Furthermore, we consider the following features to be elements of an effective internship:

- Sustained engagement with the physical, socio-cultural and institutional features of an actual workplace
- Participation in authentic tasks considered meaningful to the organization
- Supervision by staff at the internship host organization who are trained in mentorship
- Cultivation of both cultural (i.e., skills, knowledge, professional norms) and social (i.e., professional networks) capital that are valued by a profession and/or discipline

Consequently, our position on online or remote internships is that by definition they cannot provide many of the important features of an in-person work-based learning experience, including the development and appreciation of workplace norms, the performance of certain tasks (e.g., pipetting in a biotechnology company lab, participating in a design review meeting

at an architectural firm), and certain aspects of mentorship and relationship building. As such, we typically view these as a complement to the traditional internship experience that provides additional opportunities for engagement between students and professional organizations, versus a replacement or alternative.

That said, here are some definitions of online, micro- or virtual internships:

Virtual internships are internships that are done online or remotely anytime of the year. This allows you to work on a global scale, but stay local. You are placed with a company and report to a supervisor. You are in regular contact with the supervisor/team via virtual methods such as video call, phone call, email and instant messenger. (https://virtualinternships.com/faqs/)

Micro-Internships are short-term, paid, professional assignments that are similar to those given to new hires or interns. These projects enable college students, graduate students, and recent college graduates to demonstrate skills, explore career paths, and build their networks as they seek the right full-time role. Unlike traditional internships, Micro-Internships can take place year-round, typically range from 5 to 40 hours of work, and projects are due between one week and one month after kickoff.

Micro-Internships are used by companies ranging from those in the Fortune 100 to emerging start-ups, and go across departments including sales, marketing, technology, HR, and finance. (Handshake: https://app.joinhandshake.com/login)

What are the benefits of an online internship given the current situation?

The primary benefit of an online internship at this point in time is that they can provide students with a safe, work-based learning experience that is grounded in an authentic task or project for a firm or organization. Depending on the nature of the project, students can also develop skills – either technical, inter-personal or intra-personal – by successfully completing one or more professional assignments on behalf of a professional organization. Additionally, an online internship can provide students experience with engaging in online project management and communications, which are common modes of project and task-performance in many organizations. Last, an online internship includes no travel or housing costs, and thus may be a solution for those who cannot afford to relocate to expensive cities for extended periods.

Depending on the quality and character of the experience, an online internship may also provide some of the benefits outlined above, including new professional contacts, introduction to professional norms, and so on. But for these benefits to be experienced in an online setting, either third-party organizations, employers, or faculty instructors need to carefully design an experience that is more than a mere short-term project out-sourced to college students.

What are some of the drawbacks of an online internship?

The drawbacks of online internships include the lack of in-person relationship building, immersion in the physical and cultural spaces of a firm or organization, and fewer opportunities to engage in the ad hoc interaction that typically arise during an on-site experience.

In addition, while many companies are using these online internships as pathways to hire prospective full-time employees and students are using them to find the right job, both need to be sensitive to risk of "normalizing" this type of relationship. In particular, the professional development, relationship building, and other benefits of an employee/employer relationship are especially meaningful for early career professionals, so both parties need to be sensitive to viewing these models as a replacement.

How do I set up an online internship for our students?

The process of an online internship varies depending on if you work with an established third-party organization (e.g., Handshake, Virtual Internships) https://app.joinhandshake.com/login or organize one on your own.

What does Handshake do?

Handshake is an app that connects students on college campuses with open positions, mainly internships and entry level jobs. Over 14 million students and young alumni from over 700 universities use Handshake. The app is connected to the school career centers, streamlining the process for employers, counselors, and student candidates.

Users create a profile with their past experiences and information. Once that is done, they can review the job board of companies in the ecosystem. Or, they can wait to get newsletter alerts in their inbox to jobs that fit their interests. Through the app, students can set deadlines for themselves and organize the job openings into collections.

Who is Handshake for?

Given their connections to college career service departments and the fact that their positions are mainly internships and entry level, Handshake is targeted towards college students and recent grads. People who are interested in breaking into a new career path might also benefit from the early career positions on the app.

What does Handshake cost? How much work is involved?

Handshake is free for candidates and employers. Companies can opt to sign up for a premium account. This costs a fee and includes advanced capabilities for enterprise-grade recruiting.

In terms of setup, it is similar to LinkedIn and other job boards. Users set up their profiles with their resume, portfolio, and past experiences. If the candidate was referred to Handshake through their university, they can use a code from career services. This means that some of the information, like GPA, will be pre-populated. Once this is done, they can start applying to jobs that match and following jobs or companies that interest them.

The third-party firms have established processes for matching students to employers, provide operational platforms, and offer other services to support these programs; more information on these procedures are available at their websites (see final page).

For colleges and universities hoping to create their own online internships, there are a wide range of ways to design and implement these programs, and examples of steps are as follows:
- Identify employers (including alumni who may not typically be involved in the on-campus recruiting process) who are willing and able to monitor a student throughout the duration of a project. Also, ensure that employers have projects for students to work on, and budgets to pay students for their work

- Faculty or academic advisors could then match students to these opportunities. This can be done on a one-on-one basis for each student, or by providing students with lists of potential placements. For institutions or programs that do not match students to employers, a list of opportunities can be provided to students
- Some sort of contract or written agreement about the arrangement should also be prepared and signed by all parties. Such an agreement should address issues such as expectations, compensation, nature of supervision, and so on
- Throughout the online internship, a faculty or staff advisor should periodically check-in on the student and assess their progress and the relationship of the experience to the academic program. Such supervision is no small task, and faculty or staff should be compensated for these responsibilities if they are not already part of their job
- At the conclusion of the experience, all parties should evaluate one another and provide feedback on challenges and successes with the online internship. Educators should take this feedback and continually improve program operations

What are some policies and procedures that should be part of an effective online internship?

Ensure viability of intern host organizations: Each college or university should ensure that the organization is an established and legitimate business or organization. This involves documenting that the host has a physical location, a working website, a tax ID number, and contact information that is valid and up-to-date.

Adequate and appropriate compensation: Our position at UTC College of Engineering and Computer Science is that internships should be paid. The reason for this position is threefold: (1) unpaid internships are often only accessible and feasible for privileged and wealthy students, which can reproduce social inequalities since internships are known to have positive impacts on grades and employment prospects, (2) if the work is truly meaningful for the organization then it is likely to be worth compensating the student employee for their work, and (3) exploitation of student interns has been documented around the world, where unpaid students perform important duties for an organization. Paying student interns avoids this problem.

Student learning: College and university personnel need to ensure that the online internship project is beneficial for the student and their professional and academic development. While it is unlikely that an online project would be the equivalent of pouring coffee in an office, educators will need to continually evaluate the academic value of proposed projects.

Legal implications: This depends on the arrangement made with the employer or a third-party organization. In the case of Handshake students participating in a micro- or online internships are not employees or contractors of the host organization, but instead are employees or contractors with Handshake. This arrangement, however, will vary according to the situation. In any event, the legal aspects of an online internship must be carefully considered with the protection, well-being and education of the student the primary concern.

High-quality mentoring: Educators will also need to evaluate the presence and quality of supervision within an online internship. While in some cases little to no supervision may be acceptable to a college or university, ideally the student will have the opportunity to learn from a professional in their field.

What do we do if online internships are unavailable or undesirable for our students?

In some cases an online internship may not be feasible or desirable, even if an internship or other experiential learning opportunity is required for graduation. In these instances, faculty and departments will need to create projects or learning experiences that are similarly robust and authentic. Some ideas for these projects include:

- Problem- or case-based learning projects that require students to conduct background research on a real-world problem, interview experts in the field, and prepare a report or paper that summarizes a solution or approach to the problem
- Service or community engaged learning where students work directly with members of the community to conduct a project focused on meeting authentic real-world needs
- Short reflection papers that require students to reflect on their own progress throughout the experience, including the successful (or not) achievement of their learning goals, issues or challenges faced, and things to work on in the future
- A Zoom or Skype meeting with students to periodically review their progress in the project
- Preparation of career-related materials such as cover letters or resumes
- Projects that focus on important competencies such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving.

These can be embedded in projects mentioned above (e.g., problem-based learning) or can be emphasized in shorter activities such as virtual presentations or creating Excel datasets for an Assignment

Best practices for employers considering delivering of an online (virtual) internship

Virtual internships, when properly delivered can be a rewarding experience for both the student and the employer. For companies and organizations that are considering hosting virtual internships for the summer (and perhaps Fall) of 2020, here are some suggestions;

Allocate enough time before the start of the virtual internship to:
- Select and test and the right software for managing work
- Staff training to use the new software/systems (if students are expected to use new software or information technology, it should be provided free-of-charge)
- Develop a work plan for the intern, training materials, activities and tools that the intern will need to be successful in the role
- Clearly define expectations for both the intern and the supervisor/mentor. These need to be agreed upon before the start of the internship. Goals and expectations should be reinforced on a regular basis
- It is essential that all tasks and projects be carefully prepared and planned in order for the virtual interns to be able to manage the work effectively by themselves. The creation of a written work plan that covers the entirety of the experience is suggested
- Because the intern will not have the opportunity to have the everyday interactions of the workplace, the materials, instructions, and task descriptions need to be well prepared and available online so that they have access to that information when it is needed
- It is suggested that the supervisor engage the rest of his/her team in the delivery of the virtual internship experience. By doing this, the intern will have the opportunity to interact with several individuals throughout the course of the experience. Team members need to be committed and available to engage with virtual interns on a daily basis (and sometimes multiple times a day)

Create and deliver a well-balanced experience for your intern that includes the opportunity for the intern to:
- Learn about your organization
- Focus on professional development
- Engage in meaningful projects and work that will help to develop their overall ability to become a valuable team member in the future

Resources for delivering a virtual internship experience:
- Face to Face Communication – GoToMeeting, Zoom, FaceTime, WebEx, Zoho Meetings, etc.
- Other communication tools – Slack, Email, Instant Messenger, etc.
- Free Project Management Tools – Asana, Open Project, task, Monday, etc.
- Online file sharing – DropBox, Box, GoFile, etc.

Resources for online internships and other forms of experiential learning

There are several third-party companies and organizations that serve as brokers or "middle-men" between postsecondary institutions or students and employers. Here at the UTC College of Engineering and Computer Science we do not endorse any particular organization or service but want to share with the broader community these resources that students, colleges and advisors may not be aware of. In addition, colleges and universities should be aware that with the COVID-19 pandemic, more vendors are appearing to advocate for and support online internships.

Finally, if interacting with any of the resources and organizations below, postsecondary institutions should consider whether there is a cost to the student, to the institution, and/or to the employer. Different vendors have different approaches, and precisely who pays for what and other financial constraints or arrangements should be closely and carefully scrutinized.

Besides offering ideas and opportunities for students, some of these organizations also may provide assistance to postsecondary institutions in migrating traditional internships to online platforms.

Third-party facilitators of online internships between employers and students
Virtual Internships: https://virtualinternships.com/
Handshake: https://app.joinhandshake.com/login
Symba: https://symba.io/

Other resources on internships
Pay our Interns: https://payourinterns.org/
Chegg Internships: https://www.internships.com/
University of Wisconsin System Career Connect: https://www.wisconsin.edu/career-connect/

Organizations that provides faculty with ideas for course-based projects
Riipen: https://riipen.com/
Handshake: https://app.joinhandshake.com/login

Other resources on online internships
Intern Bridge: https://internbridge.com/
InternQube (resource guide for online internships): https://www.internqube.com/articles.html
Essay on micro-internships and the gig economy by Julia Freeland Fisher
https://www.christenseninstitute.org/blog/micro-internships-just-a-gig-or-a-promising-gateway/

Other essays and observations on online internships
https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Micro-Internships-/245470
https://www.forbes.com/sites/jasonwingard/2019/03/06/why-micro-internships-will-be-the-next-bigthing/#3505f0fb700c

Resources for skills-based instruction and faculty professional development
Dr. Hora's 7-week online course on how to integrate "21st century skills" into the college classroom (face to-face or online):
https://continuingstudies.wisc.edu/classes/teach-21st-century-skills-college-courses-certificate/

Resources for on-campus or course-based work-integrated learning
Problem-based learning: https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/resources/teaching-strategies/

Problem-based-learning-(pbl)
Service learning: https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-through-community-engagement/

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Center for Research on College to Workforce Transitions (CCWT)
1025 West Johnson Street, Madison, WI 53706