What is a virtual internship?

Before answering this question, it is important to consider the definition of an in-person internship. The Career Center considers an internship to consist of the following features:

- A position held within an established company or organization while also completing an undergraduate or graduate college degree or diploma program
- Engagement in learning experiences that are an extension of classroom learning or formal academic learning situations
- 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.

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

- Continued engagement with the physical and institutional features of an actual workplace
- Participation in authentic tasks considered meaningful to the organization
- Supervision and mentorship by trained professional staff at the internship organization
- Opportunity to develop skills, knowledge, professional norms, and a professional network that is valued by a profession and/or discipline

With the above mentioned, listed are some definitions of online/virtual or micro-internships:

Virtual internships are internships that are done remotely anytime of the year. This allows students to work on a national or global scale but stay local. Virtual internships are:

- Offered year round
- Can be paid or non-paid
- Can be short-term (1 week) or last up to a full semester, allowing for the opportunity to receive academic credit

Like in-person internships, hosting organizations offering virtual internships provide students with a supervisor to report to, with ongoing communication through virtual methods such as video call (Skype, Zoom), phone call, email or messenger. (https://virtualinternships.com/faqs/)

Micro-internships are short-term, paid, professional assignments that are similar to those given to new hires or interns. The assignments, or projects, enable college students to demonstrate skills, explore career paths, and build their network as they seek the right profession or full-time role. Like virtual internships, micro-internships can take place year-round, however, they typically range from 10 to 72 hours of work, and projects are due by a designated deadline date. 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. (https://www.parkerdewey.com/faq).

What are the benefits of a virtual internship?

The primary benefit of a virtual internship is that they can provide students with a safe, work-based learning experience that provides authentic tasks and projects for an organization. Depending on the nature of the project, students can develop inter-personal, intra-personal, and technical skills. Additional benefits include:

- Engagement in online project management and communications
- Task-performance through project deadlines
- New professional contacts and introduction to professional norms
- No travel or housing costs

For these benefits to be experiences, the hosting employer, organization, or faculty instructors must design an experience that is more than a short-term project.

How do I develop a virtual internship for students?

The process of setting up an online internship is quite similar to creating an in-person internship. There should policies and procedures in place for both the organization and student candidate.

Virtual internships, when properly delivered can be a rewarding experience for both the students and the employer. For companies and organizations that are planning to host a virtual internship, here are some suggestions:

- Allocate enough time to:
    - Select and test the proper software for managing work (online management platforms, communication platforms, etc.)
    - Train staff on the use of the software/systems (if students are expected to use new software/ technology, it should be provided free-of-charge)
    - Clearly define expectations for the both the intern and the supervisor/mentor. Expectations should be agreed upon before the start of the internship. Goals and expectations should be reinforced on a regular basis
- Benchmark peer or industry job descriptions for virtual internships to aid you in the development of your positions
- Develop a work plan or bi-weekly syllabus for the intern to follow. This may include training materials, projects, activities, and tools that the intern will need to be successful in the role. The creation of a written work plan that covers the entirety of the experience is suggested.
- Prepare materials, instructions and task descriptions to be offered online, so they have direct access to the information when needed
- For the supervisor/mentor, it is suggested that you engage the rest of your team in the delivery of your virtual internship experience. In doing so, the intern will be able to interact with several individuals throughout the course of the experience. It is important for team members to be committed and available to engage with virtual interns on a daily basis
- Deliver a well-balanced experience for your intern that includes the opportunity for your intern to:
    - Learn about your organization
    - Focus on professional development
    - Build skills in areas of communication, time management, project management, software skills
    - Engage in meaningful projects that will help them develop their ability to become a valuable team member in the future

Tools for delivering a virtual internship experience:

- Face to Face Communication – Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, GoToMeeting, etc.
- Direct Communication tools – Skype, Email, WhatsApp, Slack, etc.
- Free Project Management Tools – Microsoft Teams, Monday, Asana, etc.
- Online file sharing - Microsoft Teams, Microsoft SharePoint, DropBox, etc.

What if online internships are unavailable or not of interest to students?

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

- Problem- or case-based learning projects requiring students to conduct background research on a real-

world problem, interview professionals and experts in the field, and prepare a report that summarizes a solution or approach to the problem
- Short reflection papers that require students to reflect on their own progress throughout the experience, including the successful achievement of their learning goals, issues or challenges faced, and things to improve in the future
- A periodic Zoom or Skype meeting with students to review their progress in the project
- Projects that focus on important competencies such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving. These can be showcased in projects mentioned above or can be emphasized through virtual presentations or additional assignments

Resources for Virtual Internships

There are a variety of resources available for organizations to aid in their efforts of developing virtual internships. Please refer to the following links.

National Association of Colleges and Employers
- Best Practices for Virtual Internships, https://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/internships/best-practices-for-virtual-internships/
- Hosting Virtual Interns, https://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/internships/hosting-virtual-interns-a-primer-for-the-summer-of-covid-19/
- Keeping Interns Engaged Remotely, https://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/internships/keeping-interns-engaged-remotely/

Intern Bridge: https://internbridge.com/
InternQube (resource guide for online internships): https://www.internqube.com/articles.html

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This document was created to serve as a resource for employers, organizations, and university institutions expressing interest in developing virtual internships. Information provided in this document are sourced from the following organizations.

- National Association of Colleges and Employers, https://www.naceweb.org/
- Virtual Internships, https://www.virtualinternships.com/
- Parker Dewey, https://www.parkerdewey.com/
- Intern Bridge, https://internbridge.com/

For more information or questions on virtual internships, please contact the Internship Coordinator with the Career Center at careercenter@utrgv.edu.