LESSONS LEARNED FROM SUMMER 2020 VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

What makes a virtual internship engaging? How do employers build a summer program that provides connections between intern and employers and among interns, as well as meaningful work experience?

Here are lessons learned from the PIC's 2020 virtual summer internship program.

The Benefits of Virtual Internships

- Students earned paychecks to support themselves and family. They also benefited from being able to earn these paychecks from their home and not commuting to in-person employment and risking exposure to COVID-19 while commuting or working.
- Students developed technology, communication, and critical thinking skills that will help them in remote school this year, in college, and in the changed work environment.
- Virtual internships made it easier for students to learn about different careers within an organization. In most summers, interns work only in one department, with limited opportunities to learn about and interact with employees in many departments across a company or organization. Virtual career panels and discussion groups are easier to organize and require less of a time commitment. Many companies found these easier to offer to interns in virtual formats.

- The virtual environment made collaboration easier between employers. Partners could easily fill schedule blocks with workshops, career panels,

Lunch and Learns, and other activities. Many PIC hospital partners, for example, collaborated to offer weekly professional development workshops for all hospital interns with the help of PIC Career Specialists.

The Challenges of Virtual Internships

- The logistics of switching to virtual internships were among the biggest challenges. Onboarding, payroll, and technology for virtual work and learning offered unique challenges – PIC staff needed to quickly create new systems.
- Being virtual all the time is hard. Students and supervisors/teachers/mentors had a learning curve to understanding and using the technology, and all were exhausted by spending so much time looking at screens.
- In order to do department-level work, students needed access to systems and reports, which was legally and logistically challenging for many employer partners.
- Switching to an all-virtual program both highlighted and heightened the opportunity gap and the digital divide. Some students were extremely tech savvy going into the program and needed little help in learning Zoom and other apps used during the summer. Others learned during the summer and came out of the experience with a lot of new skills. Still others were totally turned off by the idea of virtual internships and didn't participate. Technology hardware was also a challenge: reliable computers, English Language Learners also struggled with remote engagement, which offers fewer informal one on one interactions with supervisors to ask clarifying questions.

Tips for Designing Virtual Internships

Supervision and Mentorship

- Relationships are just as important online as in person – students need to know that someone is holding them accountable, guiding them through the internship experience, and looking out for their interests.
- Internships worked best when supervisors incorporated daily check-ins, including wellness checks, and were responsive to student questions.
- A successful strategy was to create opportunities for mentorship outside of the supervisory role, by engaging other employees across the organization. State Street, for example, recruited mentors from employee affinity groups.

Virtual Work and Virtual Projects

- Students engaged in work important to their employer built the most transferable skills and find their work the most meaningful. Business-related projects included building chatbots for an insurance company, analyzing finance vehicles for a real estate company, processing payments at a bank and designing a marketing plan for an upcoming tech product launch. In the healthcare space, students participated public health research projects that were of interest to students and of benefit to their organizations.
- The best projects asked students to identify a problem, analyze the problem, and come up with solutions. For example, students interning at several of the hospitals got the chance to participate in **Harvard Medical School's MedScience** simulations, where they interviewed "a patient," came up with a diagnosis, and recommended a course of treatment. MLK Scholars interning at **John Hancock** worked in groups to come up with ways for the company to address racial injustice, and how Hancock could focus their efforts to improve or impact these.

- Students were most engaged when they got to choose the topic for their research or the direction of their project. Overwhelmingly, students wanted to work on topics that were relevant to their own lives. When students were allowed to choose their own topics for research or content creation, many chose to work on racial equity and mental health/wellness.
- Students were most engaged when they:
    - Were placed in small breakout rooms and felt more comfortable unmuting themselves to share their thoughts.
    - Had a chance to show off their creative side and express their opinion.

Student Engagement

- The best programs offered variety – interactive content plus career panels plus professional development plus individual AND group work.
- Interactive content is the most engaging – students don't want to just listen to speakers, they want to interact and create. For example, the **Bloomberg Arts Internship** offered writing workshops and **Digital Ready** trained students to use digital design software to create prototypes of practical architectural projects. Avoid programming that involves a lot of online instruction without interactivity.
- The most engaging projects and activities were those that encouraged collaboration among a small group of students. Small group projects and activities fostered a sense of connection and accountability among students that helped overcome the disconnectedness of virtual meetings. Students participating in the **BPS Social Justice Academy** researched the effects of COVID-19 on black and brown communities, while students at **Mass General Hospita**l researched careers within the hospital system.