

# CHAPTER 15

## Virtual Public Affairs Internships

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*The expansion of virtual internships following the spread of COVID-19 is likely to persist. This chapter reviews scholarly work on virtual public affairs internships, situating their recent surge within a longer trajectory. The analysis draws on interviews with faculty, site supervisors, and students to improve our understanding of virtual internships' structural features and their effect on the achievement of learning outcomes. Specifically, we focus on students' ability to build competencies related to career and self-development, communication, and professionalism. The chapter also addresses the implications for inclusion, access, and equity, and closes with concrete recommendations for key stakeholders.*

### INTRODUCTION: TOWARD BEST PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS INTERNSHIPS

**W**orking and learning remotely are not new, but the COVID-19 pandemic initiated an era of remote internships at an unprecedented scale and speed. In early 2020, untold numbers of student interns were hastily shuffled into virtual environments, and other internships were postponed indefinitely or ended without warning. Within a year, many internship providers had largely adapted to virtual spaces through trial and error. Likewise, many college and university faculty worked to adapt their own pedagogical practices to the challenges and possibilities associated with remote internships. The experiences of student interns helped open a window onto the pitfalls and promises of virtual work-to-learn experiences while also providing lessons that can be applied to any internship modality (in-person, virtual, or hybridized).

Prior to 2020, many multi-national business employers had already recognized the possibilities of attracting a more globalized, diverse intern pool through their efforts to branch into remote settings (Jeske and Axtell 2016). Virtual internships had been developed for educators at least a decade before COVID-19 pushed schooling online (Faucette and Nugent 2015). In the public affairs internship context—where student work is primarily associated with public policy, goods, and governance, and having an impact on political communities, broadly defined—the Virtual Student Federal Service was established in 2009 to harness “the expertise and digital excellence of US citizen students” to advance the federal government’s work.<sup>1</sup>

For the relatively few pre-existing virtual internship providers, then, the sudden leap into fully online workspaces required minimal effort. For almost everyone else, the in-person model of undergraduate internships served as a default guide for pivoting to online work, providing a foundation for understanding how to design and deploy experiential learning.<sup>2</sup>

Internships gained greater support on college campuses after they were deemed “high-impact practices” based on their demonstrated contributions to student success and engagement. In particular, they have been shown to have the potential to strengthen intellectual and practical skills through integrative and applied learning (Kuh 2008; 2013). Moreover, as Kuh (2008) and Finley and McNair (2013) have documented, all students have the potential to benefit from experiential learning, but historically underrepresented groups may benefit even more.

Whether remote internships can serve the same educational purposes as in-person ones remains an open question that scholars recently have begun to explore (Adadi 2018; Ruggiero and Boehm 2016). As Pike (2018) points out, “Although online internships are frequently discussed in the popular media, they are still in the exploratory stage in many professional programs throughout the world” (148). Early assessments show that internship outcomes vary with the nature and type of work, specific assignments, institutional organization, and stakeholder goals, among other things. Yet as Hora, Lee, Chen, and Hernandez (2021a) note, this “massive experiment” is largely taking place in the absence of evidence that virtual internships support student success (3).

This study adds to the growing research literature by examining the large-scale natural experiment by which remote experiential learning replaced face-to-face versions. We rely on interviews conducted with faculty, site supervisors, and students, almost all of whom have engaged in both types of internships in the public affairs context, to address three overarching research questions: (1) Conceptually and descriptively, what are the key structural features of online internships? (2) How does the modality of an internship affect student learning or the achievement of learning outcomes? (3) What aspects of online environments impede or facilitate inclusiveness in terms of benefits and access? Finally, to assist those who will supervise and monitor both in-person and virtual internships, which will persist long into the future alongside hybridized versions (Ruggiero & Boehm 2016; Schloetzer 2021), we offer recommendations that move us closer to a set of “best practices” for conducting virtual internships in the public affairs context.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS

Internships in which workplace interaction is mediated through an electronic device (most commonly a computer, phone, or tablet) are variously termed in the literature as *virtual*, *remote*, *online*, *digitally mediated*, *computer-mediated*, and *computer-assisted*. In most cases, students conduct related work in their own physical spaces, which could be a dorm room or local café with a WiFi connection, and they meet with their supervisors, colleagues, or peers only through digital means. The bulk of assignments is conducted independently, either during work hours interns set for themselves or during regular business hours. In hybridized versions, a modest amount of face-to-face interaction with office mates (either offsite or onsite) and in-office work time of varying duration could be included, depending on where the intern is physically located. If we visualize a spectrum of types ranging from strictly online to strictly in-person, internships that mainly take place face-to-face in office settings but involve occasional online meetings generally would not be considered “online” internships per se.<sup>3</sup>

Along with individual faculty, campus career centers have helped facilitate the rapid move to online environments, with demand for their expertise and services spiking as COVID-19 spread in 2020.<sup>4</sup> Virtual internships “arguably became the central modality of work-based learning for students around the world” that year (Hora et al. 2021a, 3; see also Braga 2020; Lumpkin 2020), but public health regulations and widespread economic shut-downs managed to reduce, not eliminate, in-person internships. In their study of mostly STEM majors, Hora et al. (2021a) showed that less than half (45.3%) of all internships in 2020 were conducted online.<sup>5</sup>

Studies about online internships parallel existing research examining work-from-home, telecommuting, and other types of remote employment, which was estimated to be about 15% of the US population prior to COVID-19.<sup>6</sup> Researchers have observed that interns encounter the same practical challenges as employees with respect to technological issues, respecting work-life boundaries, and

communicating with others in an organization—all of which affect either productivity or one’s ability to learn on the job (Hora et al. 2020b). For example, in Sull, Sull and Bersin’s (2020) survey of global human resources managers, keeping remote employees engaged, productive, and connected were frequently mentioned as top concerns; these are the same types of issues that Jeske and Axtell (2017), Hora et al. (2021a), and Criso, Low, and Townsend (2021) have identified in their research on virtual interns. During the COVID-19 pandemic, student interns reported extra stress from the sudden transition to work-from-home arrangements and the tumultuous environment overall, conditions that could influence personal judgments about the overall effectiveness of experiential learning (Bijeu and Peters 2021).

Recent studies of virtual internship experiences have probed the practical issues and challenges that stakeholders such as students, faculty advisors, educational institutions, and internship providers face, and scholars have sought to establish guidelines for success based on comparisons. For example, Bijeu and Peters (2021) studied evaluations of student interns who enrolled in a US university’s for-credit internship program and found that the remote work format required students to become more agile and self-disciplined than might have been the case in an office setting, largely because much of their independent work was not monitored closely or could be done at a time of their own choosing.

Much of what is considered to be best practices for in-person internships appears to be equally important for online internships. Ruggiero and Boehm (2016) emphasize the need for solid preparation that includes meeting with students prior to their beginning an internship in order to articulate learning outcomes together. They also suggest establishing academic standards and professional expectations before the internship begins—which is particularly important for students who have had limited exposure to professional settings. Most critically, Ruggiero and Boehm highlight how “explicit, clear communication between clients, mentors, and interns during the virtual internship” helps interns fulfill their duties and meet expectations (2016, 117). Open and frequent communication among stakeholders can reduce “ambiguity and uncertainty about responsibilities and performance thresholds” (Jeske and Axtell 2017, 153) and ultimately avoids wasted efforts by interns who may not fully understand instructions delivered through an electronic screen (see also Werner and Jeske 2021, and Wunch 1985).

Werner and Jeske (2021) emphasize other practical rules for faculty and supervisors who run internship programs: monitor progress regularly, as well as recognize milestones in interns’ development; make sure that interns are equipped with the proper technological and research tools to perform assigned tasks; connect students to peers and others in the organization routinely, either through collaborative projects or online meet-ups; encourage independent problem-solving and being proactive; and mentor consistently. While these process-oriented considerations are well-established in the literature on face-to-face internships, Werner and Jeske assert that they are of particular importance in virtual contexts.

These structural aspects of remote internships can provide a strong foundation for learning, and research has demonstrated that internships generally are considered a “high-impact practice” (HIP) enabling students to develop knowledge and skills through direct experience (Kuh 2008). Measurable gains from HIPs include higher persistence to graduation rates (Adadi 2018), higher grade point averages, and deeper learning (Finley and McNair 2013). Finley and McNair (2013) found that for underserved students who engage in HIPs,<sup>7</sup> internships lead to higher self-reported deep learning and self-perceived gains, but overall those gains are relatively lower compared to all other forms of HIPs (with the exception of study abroad). To date, almost all studies that have been done on internships as a high-impact practice are based on aggregate data collected about in-person experiences.

Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella (2015) also explored HIPs, finding internships to be a “significant, positive predictor for inclination to inquire and lifelong learning [. . .] and socially responsible leadership” (521). Overall, however, internships had lower levels of impact on a range of outcomes as compared to other HIPs such as service learning or learning communities. Similarly, McClellan, Kopko, and Gruber (2021) observed that regardless of major, students who completed an internship “were more likely to acquire practical competencies, such as crucial interpersonal and career skills” (10), but that internships did not significantly influence other abilities, such as applying and analyzing theories, examining diverse perspectives, or encouraging students to rate their college experience positively (Ibid.). Notably, the authors cautioned that they did not control for the types of internships that were reported in their study or the quality of those internships, remarking that the underperformance of the internship variable “suggests that not all were high-quality learning experiences” (Ibid; see footnote 8, p. 17).

Generally, in high-quality internships, students have the motivation, preparation, tools, space, and external support to attain their goals regardless of format, and they are able to develop transferable skills and qualities that both complement their studies and will enable them to thrive post-graduation.<sup>8</sup> Based on research and in keeping with the overarching objectives of liberal arts education, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) has articulated eight clusters of core career readiness competencies (knowledge, abilities, and skills) that are strongly associated with professional success. These include: career and self-development; communication; critical thinking; equity and inclusion; leadership; professionalism; teamwork; and technology (NACE 2021).<sup>9</sup> When fortified with these abilities, students are broadly prepared for “success in the workplace and lifelong career management” (NACE 2021). These competencies encompass self-learning (Kuh 2008) or developing perceptions of one’s professional preparedness (Bernatson and Marklund 2007), as well as practical learning, whereby college graduates entering a profession such as public service learn the norms and values appropriate to professional conduct in that realm—in other words, they are socialized into a profession (Barnett 2012; Dailey 2016).<sup>10</sup> As Carnevale, Fasules, and Campbell (2020) reiterate, in addition to the job skills and knowledge that are demanded by professional employers today, the cognitive competencies of leadership, teaching and learning, problem-solving, and complex thinking “associated with higher education have grown more important over time” (n.p.), a point that underscores the importance of integrative learning through practical application.

As the COVID-19 pandemic lengthened, researchers began to study the extent to which career readiness competencies were being enabled through remote internships. Bijeau and Peters (2021) found that students reported limitations on their ability to network; meanwhile, their supervisors noted declines over the semester in professionalism/work ethic and leadership, but gains in abilities that interns likely demonstrated through projects such as oral/written communications and critical thinking/problem solving. Students acknowledged restrictions on their professional development (compounded by the pandemic lockdowns), but also greater opportunities for self-reflection, growth, and the need to become more disciplined and autonomous. Students also self-reported significant improvements in their digital technology, career management, and oral/written communications competencies. As Bijeau and Peters surmise, it’s probable that “digital natives” were able to learn and use software effectively, and that their growth in career management was due to periodic, reflective self-assessments that helped them consider their professional development (2021). Criso, Low, and Townsend (2021) reach similar conclusions in their comparative study of in-person versus remote internships, finding that regardless of type, at least half of all interns noted an increase in their (NACE career competency-related) skills, and that the average difference in skills gain that was perceived by students in remote internships was 3.25% less than for in-person ones, a relatively minor difference.

Apart from the issue of whether a well-designed virtual internship can facilitate goal attainment is the question of whether certain student populations can access these opportunities or are better able to thrive in them—in other words, whether the modality fosters inclusiveness and equity. The idea that students can eliminate a commute, work from home, and create their own schedules has led some to conclude that online internships will increase racial and socio-economic diversity in the intern applicant pool (Jeske 2019; Jeske and Axtell 2016; Knight and Taylor 2021). Likewise, Kraft, Jeske, and Bayerlein (2019) and Hora et al. (2021a) recognize that online internships have been largely perceived “as a potential equalizing force in the internship economy,” as low-income and working students, and those students with disabilities or located in rural areas, would theoretically be more able to access virtual opportunities (Hora et al. 2021a, 9). Thus far, studies suggest that rather than easing access, online settings can reinforce existing advantages among those who do not depend on compensation. Hora et al.’s data (2021a) show that online interns predominantly represent upper- and middle-income backgrounds (75.8%) and that there are more unpaid internships in the online format than in-person (42% versus 34.9% unpaid). As internships expand to include previously underserved populations, including racial and ethnic minority and first-generation students, their quality will partly reflect the extent to which they are designed to account for cultural differences and group-specific stressors (Fetter and Thompson 2020; Hora et al. 2021b).

Although research in this area remains under development, it is clear that comparable challenges exist in face-to-face and virtual settings, but the intensity or salience of these challenges may differ depending on context. Jeske and Axtell (2017) report that many of the same aspects of in-person and re-

remote experiences matter, including clarifying goals with interns, communicating, and making them feel valued and rewarded for their efforts. They note that “e-internships provide interns with, not necessarily, any better or worse experience” than they might have experienced in an in-person setting (153–54).

Kuh and Kinzie (2018) also point out that outcomes vary depending on institutional context and the quality of implementation, and a poorly-designed internship—regardless of format—is likely to yield poor outcomes, just as a high-quality internship will do the opposite. This logic also applies to being equity-minded when designing and deploying virtual internships, and more evidence is needed to determine who benefits from online internship placements, who does not, and in what ways. This chapter aims to inform the development of virtual public affairs internships by identifying practices that advance inclusiveness and also equity for student interns.

## OUR RESEARCH METHODS

As noted above, our research seeks to understand how online public affairs internships are structured and conducted, how well they allow students to learn and construct knowledge, and how internship practices impact inclusiveness. Our research also aims to provide guidance to faculty and others who seek to ensure that such internships yield educational benefits. Taking a “360-degree view,” we focus on all major stakeholders rather than one type alone in our study.<sup>11</sup> During spring 2021 we conducted 19 interviews with three types of respondents who had participated in different aspects of virtual internships: faculty and others who mentored students and worked with a remote internship provider; students who completed online internships; and internship site representatives.<sup>12</sup> We were aware that interviewees’ recounting of their experiences could be affected by the condition of living through the COVID-19 public health crisis and kept this in mind as we analyzed the interview material.

Our semi-structured interviews began with a set of designated questions but also responded to the course of each unique interview in order to explore how, from their various vantage points, these stakeholders engaged in and perceived virtual internships (Fujii 2018; Soss 2014). We obtained interviewees through a combination of professional networks and a snowball sampling technique. We continued our recruitment process until we no longer encountered new themes. Interviews were conducted in spring 2021. They lasted approximately 45–60 minutes in length and were conducted virtually via the video-conferencing platforms of Zoom or WebEx and recorded with respondents’ informed consent.

More specifically, we asked interviewees about their experience overall with virtual internships and about their specific role and tasks, their perceptions of the strengths and disadvantages of the virtual format, and where appropriate, asked them to compare their virtual internship experiences to those they had done in-person. As it turned out, most participants had experience in both settings and in many cases, more than one experience within each modality. Such multiplicity, it should be noted, made clear that internships are far from homogeneous; as with in-person experiences, variation among virtual experiences is the rule.<sup>13</sup> We queried interviewees about the projects and tasks they considered to be easiest—and most challenging—to accomplish remotely; how supervisors could ensure that their expectations were reasonable; and about lessons learned—things they felt others would benefit from knowing—with attention paid to what they perceived as the (potentially) unique features of the virtual context. Finally, we directly asked interviewees to describe what they considered to be best practices for either hosting, facilitating, or undertaking internships. As researchers, we recognize that our interviewees speak not only from their designated roles (as student, faculty, or supervisor), but also their unique positionalities, and these are reflected in their responses.

Using detailed transcripts and notes of our interviews, we undertook an iterative and recursive content analysis process with these texts, examining responses for commonalities and general lessons.<sup>14</sup> Our goal was to recognize patterns in the responses, continuing until we were confident that we had exhausted the range of emergent themes. From this, we derived a set of insights into what we consider to be best practices for virtual public affairs internships.

## THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS INTERNSHIP: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### General Features of Virtual Public Affairs Internships

The general description of virtual public affairs internships that emerged from our interviews largely resonates with the growing understanding of remote work, while also illuminating some features that are specific—but perhaps not unique—to the public affairs field. Our respondents participated in a wide range of settings that included government agencies and departments, nonprofits, labor unions, offices of elected officials, think tanks, political campaigns, non-governmental organizations, political organizations, and consulates, among others. Many of these organizations, especially governmental agencies, feature highly structured internal bureaucracies whose work is substantively specialized and complex. Entry points for students are often narrow; at least in our interviewees' experience, successful placements are often obtained through personal or family contacts or are based on campus connections. Their activities often can have high stakes for the communities or constituents they serve, but ironically, their work often remains obscured from public view. Because organizations' budgets are often tight, interns typically receive little to no compensation.

Our interviews with stakeholders who facilitated, supervised, and undertook virtual public affairs internships demonstrated that these internships include some advantages over in-person varieties. For one, distant organizations, government agencies, and foreign countries—which normally involve prohibitive travel or moving expenses and high costs of living—are accessible. Relatedly, more opportunities are available to international students who were restricted from traveling to the US. Hours are flexible for most students, but some (including those who worked for Congressional DC offices) must adjust to working across different time zones, while others appreciate not commuting and creating a smaller carbon footprint. Workflow could also be inconsistent, and depending on the number of interns and regular check-ins, interns themselves could be neglected (“out of sight; out of mind” as one supervisor admitted). For the most part then, virtual public affairs internships contain many of the overarching features of in-person versions, but a few notable differences emerged.

Some of the starker differences between in-person and virtual contexts arose from the work experience itself. All types of interviewees reported that the online modality constrained their work in some way.<sup>15</sup> In particular, tasks that required quick turnarounds, required input from several or many people, or needed sustained, continual attention became far more difficult, if not impossible, to execute. Examples of these include shadowing a supervisor, obtaining quick answers, and addressing last-minute requests. Said one intern, “I think the amount of time that lapses between ‘I’ve got a problem; I’ve got to email them; they’ve got to email me back, then I’ve got to email them back if it even worked’—it just stretched out longer and longer... you need patience. In person I’d be able to get these problems solved a lot quicker.” Even dreaded “busy” or administrative work was a challenge to replicate in virtual form (but this was generally considered a welcome shift): filing, sending mail, photocopying, answering phones, or mundane chores were either eliminated or reduced. Instead, carefully planned tasks, such as research that could be done independently and writing projects such as letters, briefs, reports, and memos, assumed greater importance. On the other hand, without advance strategies or plans, interns could find themselves languishing without much to do or being frustrated that their skills and abilities were not being put to good use.

Some interviewees expressed concerns that the work itself “took up all the space,” meaning there was little room for anything except online meetings and work, as opposed to regular workflows driven by personal interactions that normally occur informally, such as through “water cooler talk” (as several interviewees phrased it). Importantly, opportunities to build relationships with coworkers and peer interns through ordinary interactions mostly were reduced to more formal, online meetings, yet peers often found ways to communicate with each other, such as through texting and social media, online meetups, or remote happy hours (organized by supervisors) for socializing and networking.

In a normal workday, there were fewer regular opportunities to express oneself personally, and respondents could not always perceive the impacts of their work in the organization and beyond. A faculty respondent concluded similarly: “I think [virtual internships] are missing a key component, which is that interaction, that engagement. [. . .] Part of why students do internships is to figure out if

they want to do this as a starting point. You're not going to know that from a virtual internship for the most part." Without the nearly continuous interaction, improvisation, and serendipity associated with face-to-face internships, our respondents reported less than full immersion in the dynamics of a virtual internship site.

Interns' exposure to their organization tended to be fragmented and/or partial, although less so if they interned for a small agency; it was more difficult to form a holistic understanding of an organizational system, including its professional culture, norms, interpersonal relationships, work cycles and rhythms, and interconnections among different organizational parts—knowledge and understanding that enable personal and professional growth and are common features of a meaningful internship work experience. A federal government intern put it this way: "I think I have an 80 percent grasp of what work at the [government agency] looks like, but I wasn't really able to see what my supervisors were doing beyond just what they told me [. . .] I didn't get the full 'how it really works' at the [government agency]. What's the culture like?..." This fractional view can also hinder student interns' ability to apply classroom-learned political science concepts such as power, hierarchy, and agency to their ground-level internship experiences.

Campus administrators and faculty also encounter differences in the virtual context. It takes additional coordination to ensure that internship providers facilitate work and support interns appropriately. Some students may not be interested in virtual internships, and likewise, site partners may not be willing or able to reframe positions accordingly, which can affect course offerings and program goals. New sites may be drawn to the format or recruited to host virtual interns (relying on alumni networks for instance). For some faculty, their experience in terms of overseeing and reviewing student work does not change a great deal. For others, "going virtual" gives them opportunities to craft new placement processes, build virtual meeting spaces, and design check-in methods that are likely to be utilized again, regardless of format type. In some cases, virtual meeting spaces increase the likelihood that organizational elites and public officials are able to make guest appearances for online community events or campus events, such as those that feature final student intern presentations.

In sum, although certain aspects of face-to-face experiences are difficult to transpose to the online context, our interviewees' experiences demonstrate that virtual internships can be intentionally structured to help internship providers attain their goals and students achieve critical learning outcomes, but they cannot duplicate several aspects of the in-person internship. In the analysis of interview material presented below, we focus on career-related competencies in the virtual space, relying on interview material to isolate how these are developed. The consensus among our interviewees was that the same types of skills could be developed in virtual and in-person contexts at least to some degree, but that a few tend to predominate when internships are fully remote, and some remain especially difficult to develop. Being able to identify which skills are likely to be most valued in an online internship helps inform the judgment of whether a student's unique goals are likely to be accomplished in this context.<sup>16</sup> Virtual internships, even when they are well-executed, generally are not regarded as exact replacements for in-person internships, but are valuable learning experiences nonetheless.

### **Impact of the Virtual Modality on Student Learning Outcomes**

Using the NACE Competencies for a Career-Ready Workforce (2021) as a conceptual framework,<sup>17</sup> we examine the conditions for developing the abilities, skills, and knowledge that college students need for future workplace and career success. Recognizing that internships are a key locus of such learning, we concentrate on three of the eight competencies they describe, namely: career and self-development, communication, and professionalism. All of our interviewees repeatedly addressed these three areas directly or indirectly, indicating their salience in the virtual internship context. Our analysis centers student voices, as interns themselves are best positioned to judge some of the impacts of different actors (such as site supervisors) on their learning experiences. Although overlap among categories is inevitable, we fit themes into the most proximate category. Through this approach we contrast in-person and virtual experiences so that faculty can help students identify appropriate placements, anticipate possible challenges, formulate strategies for overcoming them, and articulate realistic learning goals.

## Career and Self-Development

According to NACE (2021), students should continually develop a sense of self and their future career, becoming aware of their strengths and weaknesses and appropriate job opportunities, and networking to build relationships well beyond their campus community.

Isolation from others, as is often the case with remote internships, can reduce a student's potential for professional development. Many virtual interns worked alone, offline, for long stretches—some by design, some not by choice. Online platforms tend to obscure a newcomer's view of how all the parts of an organization and its employees fit together, as well as organizational dynamics and workplace culture and norms. This can make it harder to envision a potential future in that setting. In addition, interns may not be fully immersed in their internship, accessing only parts of the "normal" in-person experience. For instance, one intern said: "At no point for the online DC internship did I interact with constituents. I never once spoke with a constituent." This observation indicates to us that there are some experiences of interest to political scientists that mainly take place "on location." For instance, interns who lack contact with constituents may be less able to solidify their understanding of representation, a concept that is central to the democratic process.

However, some hurdles are surmountable. Many students use internships to lessen the costs of access or to get their "foot in the door," which can be essential for some government or other public affairs sites where internships are a means for identifying talent or expediting more permanent employment. Virtual interns certainly can identify new opportunities and add a line of experience to their résumés.<sup>18</sup> When their work involves independent research and analysis or project-based skills, a supervisor may in fact have a greater ability to assess their potential than if that intern were simply fulfilling more mundane administrative roles. A student interviewee who worked for a Congressional committee was told that if they had been in the office, they primarily would have been "answering phones." Instead, the intern was tasked with researching a concrete policy issue and the data in their report helped inform the committee's budgeting decisions.

Career development also involves networking: "to build relationships within and without one's organization" (NACE 2021), or as one of our student interviewees described it, "figuring out how to do research on people and how to just find points of connection." All interviewees admitted that this aspect of career development was among the most challenging, including one intern who had transitioned from an in-person to a virtual internship during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I think a lot of the big things that people want out of an in-person internship is making those connections with their colleagues, their peers, but also their supervisors and networking and talking to people [. . . during the in-person internship] I was so excited to go [in] every day [. . .] I felt like I was doing something important. I started learning the names of all the people, [. . .] not just [who] I was working with directly, but the doormen and the women at the desk who check you in and the security guards. And all these little interactions that you have with people, I think is what's really valuable about an in-person internship. And that's what makes it fun. And it makes you feel like, yeah, this is like something that I can do as a job. And it gives you all those skills of how to interact with people if you were in a real job setting. So, you are missing out on that [in a virtual space].

Informal daily interactions, previously described as "water cooler" talk but more broadly construed as the small moments of casual conversation, chats during shared meals, and impromptu discussions of matters both work-related and personal that might occur between meetings, represented missed opportunities to establish relationships. One perceptive intern noted that "with virtual there are no off-camera conversations," and another echoed this message: "At least over a video call, it's a lot harder to have a one-on-one conversation with somebody; it's not like you can pull somebody aside and talk to them for a little bit if you're interested in what they do. Instead, you probably send them your email and try to communicate over that, which is a lot more not awkward, and not as natural."

There did seem to be a silver lining to this situation, however. Some respondents felt that having to try harder to make connections beyond their immediate supervisor or team was actually beneficial because it helped them stretch their abilities. Said one student:



I was pretty intentional in both my internships, my in-person and my virtual ones, about trying to reach out to almost everyone in both offices for coffee and to get to know people more than in a one-on-one context. And when people ask me for advice about a virtual internship, that's the biggest advice I give them, because [...] you're in] a virtual environment where people can forget that you're there and ready to help. And when you sit down with them for coffee, especially early on, and tell them about your interests, it kind of reminds [...] them that I'm here to help you with your projects and probably be interested in what you have to work on. And you can kind of see where my skills might lie.

In sum, especially in public affairs careers, relationships are critical for future success and are often cited as a particularly significant dimension of internships that cannot be replicated from the in-person experience. A student who interned for a Washington, DC policy-oriented nonprofit organization made this point well: "A lot of what you want to do in politics is based on personal connections, and it's much easier to get those in person [...] I got to attend events and meet with people and network with coworkers a little bit. Whereas online, that whole network becomes way harder to get, and requires a lot more work."

Our site supervisors and student respondents also noted the need to find ways to create camaraderie among interns themselves—whether through open office drop-in hours, weekly staff meetings, lunchtime gatherings with guest speakers, or happy hours. They used these meetings to talk about next educational or career steps, check in about a given week, or just get to know one another. In one government agency, the interns asked the supervisor to create an online space where they could "hang together" for an hour at a time or have staff members join them for career-related discussions.

Finally, the increased use of videoconferencing appears to have expanded interns' access to busy public officials, enabling interaction or at least exposure that would not have taken place otherwise (a residual effect of social distancing). One supervisor noted their office's tendency to arrange last-minute meetings, and that online interns on standby could quickly hop into a Zoom call and attend important online gatherings that would normally require staff (but not interns) to travel, thus widening their exposure to certain kinds of office work and leaders in their organization.

## Communication

Clearly and effectively communicating in multiple forms is also a key career competency that can be solidified in an internship setting (NACE 2021). Our respondents repeatedly asserted its significance in the virtual context, emphasizing that there was a greater reliance on written communication and less on verbal skills. Many of our respondents reported that their work products were more likely to be formal emails, memos, reports, and other discrete documents that could be edited, rather than delivered via public addresses or even informal conversations. Frequently, interns needed training to produce efficient messages, (in the words of one intern) to "condense intense amounts of information into very digestible, manageable pieces" for memos or briefs, or to craft responses to constituents. Interns were often tasked with research and the drafting of reports that they could do on their own time. Practical outlets and modes for demonstrating knowledge or professionalism, then, were limited.

Online meetings were another important site of communication. Interns occasionally were invited to lead remote meetings, but usually after their supervisors had helped them to prepare well. One supervisor required interns to formulate two questions for every guest who attended their remote lunch hours to facilitate engagement. As described by our interviewees, virtual meetings were not necessarily conducive to developing verbal communication skills: "You get on the meeting, you talk for maybe like one, two minutes, and then [...] everybody does what they need to do so that they can go back to the work that they actually have to do. Whereas like in an office, I feel like I really had to learn how to talk [to others]." The fact that online interaction on campuses and worksites will endure compels students to conquer both writing and speaking in their internships, and to practice different forms of them in class.

Because communication could be delayed and complicated by time zones and technological challenges, students noted that they had to proactively communicate their questions, needs, and progress to be successful. Supervisors echoed that point and expressed concerns that it was often difficult to discern

whether interns understood their instructions; facial expressions were generally hard to read online and they lacked the informal cues of tone or clear body language to convey importance or time-sensitivity, as they could do in person. The impersonal, distanced nature of videoconferencing is reflected in a supervisor's comment that, "Even when I speak [...] they're staring, or silent. [I'm wondering:] [...] am I frozen this whole time?" In other words, perhaps with faculty's guidance, students need to develop the confidence to raise questions and ask for clarification when confused, and supervisors should make directions for complicated jobs explicit and not assume that their instructions are always clearly understood. In any case, virtual contexts do permit the development of "soft skills" such as oral communication (through fewer opportunities) and students in almost every case were required to do substantially more writing.

### **Professionalism**

Understanding and demonstrating effective work habits and acting in the interests of the larger community or workplace define "professionalism," dimensions of which include being prepared, punctual, dependable, dedicated, and consistently meeting or exceeding expectations (NACE 2021)—qualities that help distinguish a person's reputation. Our interviewees repeatedly emphasized that although virtual interns had more limited opportunities to interact with colleagues and gain their trust, building a "professional" reputation continued to be essential; after all, site supervisors can play important roles in recommendations for graduate school, other internships, and employment.

In face-to-face internships, students have ongoing opportunities to display their abilities and ethical sensibilities through a broad range of interactions as well as through their work. In contrast, virtual interns are limited to impressing their supervisors almost exclusively through work habits such as punctuality, taking initiative, professional demeanor and appearance, and their work products (usually writing or online communication). Given the fragmented nature of online interactions, the virtual interns we interviewed also had far fewer chances to learn professional habits from supervisors and staff who would naturally model different facets of professionalism. As a supervisor phrased it: "For in-person interns, they'd hear my conversations, see the meetings, see the type of people we're meeting with, or how I handle those types of interactions, and I think that's something they're missing out on by doing it virtually. They [only] get to see it to some extent."

Internship supervisors appreciated and tended to reward those who took initiative and asked for additional work. One who interned at a national nonprofit was noticed because they efficiently met and sometimes surpassed their daily quota of cataloging news articles; the intern was asked to attend weekly staff meetings, given more responsibilities, and eventually was offered a full-time job. Interns who showed initiative also tend to be those who mastered good time management skills, as virtual interns can be given substantial control over their own schedules. For those who entered the internship with fewer organizational skills, completing tasks on time became more difficult. Said one intern: "I'd put things off until last minute, no one physically watching me at that extra level. [If] someone's here in the office, they need it right now, you can talk to them: [it] helps light the fire under you." Successful interns established systems and structure for themselves in a given week and across the scope of the entire internship period, which could include daily or weekly check-ins with supervisors, regular updates about their projects, and designated time to connect with others in the organization who could provide different perspectives.

Many interviewees noted that it was critical to create literal and figurative boundaries when working remotely. Students who worked from home or a dormitory found it especially helpful to separate themselves from their personal spaces when they could. Strategies included partitioning their work areas with physical barriers, finding workspaces outside their home, dressing professionally when working even when no Zoom calls were scheduled, and blocking out regular hours for work to simulate being in an in-person environment.

All in all, students can cultivate professional habits and their reputations through virtual internships, but others' judgments about them are based on a narrower set of observations. Coworkers and supervisors have fewer chances to set an example, while students have fewer opportunities to observe and absorb the lessons of their professional guides.

## Virtual Internships and Inclusiveness

A general concern associated with face-to-face internships is that many students cannot afford them: lack of reliable transportation, being unable to move due to family obligations, the need for a regular paycheck, or fitting working hours into overcrowded schedules creates equity-based challenges for many types of students, including those who might benefit from them most.<sup>19</sup> The general consensus among our interviewees (across all stakeholder types) was that virtual internships could advance greater inclusiveness and equity if done well—and on a range of different axes. One faculty respondent remarked: “If we as a university have a mission of equitable access and participation, then we have to think about alternative modes because we have students that have different needs and different availability.” How virtual internships could address such needs was repeatedly demonstrated through specific examples that our interviewees supplied.

Among the attributes most closely associated with access to internships was socioeconomic status. Prestigious and well-established public affairs internships are often located in centers of power such as Washington, DC as well as state and international capital cities. Those who attend school in or live adjacent to those areas, and those who have the means to travel and temporarily relocate, are best positioned to seize those opportunities. Conversely, insufficient compensation, loss of income (public internships are “notoriously unpaid,” one student quipped), or the need to extend time to graduation (with accompanying tuition and fees) can render in-person internships prohibitively costly. Virtual internships can eliminate or reduce costs and even provide the flexibility to work for pay simultaneously, as one student explained:

[...] the opportunity cost of not getting a summer job—all of those things are inherently prohibitive to large sections of the population, so in that way, it’s fantastic because you can do it at home, you know, it’s virtual [...] I know people who did two jobs or maybe if they were like a lifeguard where they were just like sitting at a pool and they could get paid while they were still, like, doing their virtual internships [...] It offers students of different socioeconomic statuses access to the same opportunities, which I think is fantastic.

Virtual internships also help address other kinds of geographic considerations. On the plus side, virtual internships could become more demographically representative than their in-person counterparts by drawing in students from all parts of the US and the world. At least one interviewee noted how their educational choices were conditioned by the work-related opportunities available, and perceived fewer restrictions with virtual internships: “For me, I did a grad program in Washington, DC specifically in part so I could do these kinds of internships; I’m interested in federal government work. But I guess [...] another thing that the virtual environment opens up is you can cast your net way, way wider in terms of location, and it just makes access a lot easier.” Not commuting allowed many students to recoup the time and expenses they would have spent on transportation.

Virtual internships also can address some of the issues that derive from identity and positionality. For example, those with certain disabilities or major health concerns can pursue international or distant domestic placements<sup>20</sup>; so can those with home-based caregiving responsibilities, and non-citizens and international students in many cases. Non-traditional age or returning students who have significant family obligations benefit from flexible work hours.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, virtual internships can replicate inequities. Remote interns are no more likely to be paid than in-person interns. Students whose equipment is unreliable or who lack fast internet connections experience more interruptions to their communications and workflow. Students of lower socioeconomic status may also lack the ability to sequester themselves in a quiet location without major distractions. One interviewee expressed the concern that a hierarchy among internships may develop, such that in-person opportunities would be valued over virtual internships. Although internship experiences vary considerably, generally speaking, the issues arising from lack of equity, diversity, or inclusion will continue to exist absent additional supports to address their root causes.

## IMPLICATIONS OF OUR RESEARCH: TOWARD BEST PRACTICES

Our research makes clear that a range of experiences is possible with virtual public affairs internships, and that some features differentiate those experiences from traditional, in-person versions. Students, internship providers, faculty, and educational institutions can realize a wide range of goals through virtual forms of experiential learning.

As our interviewees conveyed, public affairs interns and their mentoring faculty possess skills, knowledge, and insights that can serve them especially well when navigating online internships. For instance, our disciplinary focus on concepts such as power, institutional structure, and agency are likely to help an intern grasp the context in which they are operating. Students with this understanding are better equipped to build connections between classroom and workplace. In sum, we find that with deliberate effort, virtual internships can be designed to facilitate student success and engagement with the discipline.

With this in mind, we offer a set of recommendations for virtual public affairs internships that is rooted in the existing literature, informed by content analysis of interviews, and complemented by our first-hand experience of managing virtual internships.<sup>22</sup>

We hope to advance the discussion of best practices for virtual internships in political science by addressing questions such as: What do we need to think about to produce better outcomes for all internship stakeholders, but especially student participants? What can help mitigate the aspects that can be lacking or are liable to be less developed in this modality? In short: what needs to be in place to promote the goals of departments, programs, and educational institutions, host sites, and arguably most importantly, interns? We offer suggestions for students, supervisors, and faculty (and their institutions) in turn. As the supervisor takes on an outsized role in the virtual context, several of the most consequential recommendations are intended for them.

### Recommendations for Students

As one of our interviewees put it, “I think [virtual internships are] an important experience for a student to have among their portfolio of experiences” in order to test out and prepare themselves for what is likely to be a future in which work contexts may be hybridized or fluid in nature. Ideally, students should be equipped to navigate any modality. One of our student interviewees also suggested that it was important for students to realize that they “can have different objectives for different internships,” whether that is building a reputation in an issue area, sharpening their professional research and writing skills, or otherwise. Students are encouraged to perform a clear-eyed self-assessment of their skills, abilities, goals, and priorities both before and after an internship (see supplemental materials for samples).

Students should pursue a virtual internship if there is a good chance it will provide opportunities to develop and improve their skills, especially those that are transferable to non-virtual settings. Those who aim to improve their ability to work independently or gain professional communication skills can thrive in a virtual internship environment. If networking is the primary goal, then interns should be proactive, doing the additional work needed to establish meaningful connections and relationships. The most often repeated advice to potential interns from those who have done virtual internships was to be very intentional about building a network: meticulously cultivate your relationship with your supervisor to help them to see you as an asset, to advocate for you, and frankly to ensure that they do not forget you are there and making contributions in this low-visibility environment. Past virtual interns encouraged reaching out broadly to coworkers, and doing one’s research to find points of connection that will produce fruitful conversations.

Some additional practical recommendations for virtual interns include: first, setting boundaries between work and other aspects of one’s life through scheduling, professional attire, and physical workspace. We also suggest foregrounding communication via mutually agreed-upon regular check-ins with one’s supervisor, prompt and professional responses to email or phone calls, and reminding the supervisor of one’s individual contributions to the organization, which could be done through regular progress updates. We recommend systematizing networking efforts by setting and achieving goals for outreach to build relationships (such as setting a certain number of virtual coffee dates). Finally, we encourage

students to view and treat their supervisors and faculty as key supporters to their success in this virtual context.

## Recommendations for Supervisors and Sites

Interns' range of experiences from positive to negative made clear that a key factor in the success of a virtual internship is the site supervisor. Supervisors are the key point of contact and are responsible for structuring (or not structuring) a student's experience, and in a virtual internship their role assumes greater significance.

Open and regular communication between interns and supervisors is a crucial ingredient of a successful virtual internship. Not only do we recommend immediately establishing communication methods and preferences (when interns should reach out and what channel is preferred, be it email, text, phone call, or Zoom), but also we recommend erring on the side of *overcommunication* throughout the internship (a term that more than one of our interviewees used). Supervisors should clarify deadlines and detail their expectations whenever possible, especially when projects need to be prioritized or are urgent. Without the frequent points of informal contact that make the intangibles of in-person workplaces known, we encourage making "virtual office" norms explicit by re-writing intern and employee guidebooks or manuals to ensure expectations for professional correspondence, formats for written reports, Zoom etiquette, and so forth, are clear.

Another aspect that is especially important in the virtual format is to ensure that interns understand from the beginning (or even prior to their start) the organization's overall structure, including to whom they directly report, what meetings they may attend, and other guidelines that may be specific to a given workplace. This will help them visualize their role in the larger organization and understand how to play an integral role in it. It may also help to avoid misunderstandings that can become more likely in this context where explanations can be inadequate. One supervisor described some of their essential responsibilities this way:

Setting up expectations beforehand of what are you realistically going to be able to offer to the intern. Setting those goals has really helped in terms of setting objectives, what you want them to get out of the learning experience. Some of it depends on if they are getting academic credit, you need to work with the faculty, or the sponsor—what is it YOU want them to get out of it, and how [the student] wants to utilize their time.

Task development is also an area where we recommend that supervisors engage thoughtfully. Successful interviewees found that a two-track approach was beneficial: by creating both small short-term tasks and larger longer-term tasks or projects, an intern can be more likely to have a consistent workflow. For larger projects, there should still be scaffolding with specific deliverables and deadlines identified and tracked along the way to ensure that an intern is completing the work correctly. Tasks should be meaningful and interns' contributions to the larger team's efforts should be shared whenever possible.

Preparation and advance work help define a successful virtual internship. One student articulated the sentiments of several supervisors when they stated: "Don't build the plane as you're flying it. [. . .] There's so many unexpected [. . .] and logistical things you have to take into consideration in a virtual format." That said, for all stakeholders, flexibility is an inherent part of the virtual internship experience. We encourage supervisors to make contingency plans for the unexpected, to take into consideration the delays that come from mediated communication, and to adjust the work if needed.

Advocating for your interns and helping them network are also ways in which effective supervisors can mitigate some of the constraints of the virtual context. Ideally, supervisors will consider themselves both an advocate and trusted mentor, and in these roles will ask interns about who they might like to meet and facilitate introductions. Good supervisors will be open to having the intern attend extra meetings or create opportunities for learning about the "hidden transcripts" or the underlying context of the workplace, and to help interns recognize where their work fits into the bigger scheme of things. This perception can be especially important in a public affairs internship, as it may affect students' underlying motivation for continuing in the field. More generally, effective supervisors will consider trying to "make space for happenstance" that is all too rare in this context. Being human and creating moments for com-

munity-building between the supervisor (you) and the intern, among interns, and between interns and other members of the organization can go far. These efforts can take the form of a virtual happy hour or guest speaker visits over lunch, or “sign-ups” to meet with an intern. If possible, we also recommend finding ways for the interns to present their work publicly to others in the organization. Take an interest in cultivating their learning—their passive and active learning—by assigning readings or making sure that interns gain technical or other sorts of training. A student interviewee described the approach employed by a seasoned virtual internship supervisor:

He would check in weekly [. . . and] by the end of the week, I had a set expectation that, okay, I’m going to talk to [him]. So I need to know what I’m doing and what I’m going to show him. [In addition . . .] he treated every weekly check-in as kind of like an informal networking situation, too, so sometimes he would bring coworkers [. . .] who I might have mentioned something that I was interested in. And he was like, ‘let me bring them in on the call and you can ask them questions.’ So I thought that was a great way for me to feel like I was part of the team because somebody was always interested in talking to me and [my supervisor] was the one facilitating those conversations.

As this quote demonstrates, site supervisors’ role extends well beyond making sure that a student is doing their work according to the organization’s plan. Finding ways to make the intern part of the team—or at least feel a valued part of the organization—is equally important (Jeske and Axtell 2017; Jeske and Axtell 2018).

## **Recommendations for Faculty and Educational Institutions**

Beyond general training to ensure student success in alternative modes of instruction, we encourage faculty, programs, departments, and institutions to acknowledge that virtual internships often demand the creation of additional scaffolding. For instance, placement procedures, onboarding processes, check-in meetings, quick surveys or “temperature checks” may be needed to ensure that students are flourishing in their internships. In addition, students may need supplemental guidance to navigate these professional contexts, and faculty may discover that they need to provide more detail about protocols, processes, and professional norms. Partnering with campus career staff to conduct workshops or bolstering professional development content in an internship course syllabus may be advisable as well.

Course assignments such as a learning agreement and/or contract will help students to communicate with supervisors about their objectives and gain site support for them (see chapter by Simpson, Braam, and Winston; samples can be found in the Supplemental Internship Resources). Even more beneficial than the learning contract itself may be the communication needed among all parties to complete the document successfully. During the semester there may need to be an in-person drop-in time for questions, and the faculty’s role may feel more like that of a coach, mentor, or advocate to help students navigate the virtual internship successfully. In particular, students may need assistance building confidence and learning to communicate their needs and goals to their supervisors.

Given the amount of oversight that’s needed to operationalize virtual internships successfully, faculty’s elevated role may require additional resources in the way of financial support or administrative personnel. As virtual internships become more common (and as public health guidelines allow), departments, programs, colleges and universities may want to systematize technology “checks” as part of on-boarding procedures and create dedicated facilities for student interns working remotely. For example, some campuses have begun to provide physical spaces for students to conduct virtual internships, which they call a “virtual intern hub [. . . so] they’re able to have a community; they’re able to have a place to focus, and would not necessarily have any technological challenges.”

## CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE OF VIRTUAL INTERNSHIPS AND THE NEED TO MOVE TOWARD BEST PRACTICES

The COVID-19 public health crisis disrupted many aspects of society, not the least of which were higher education and work. Internships reside at the intersection of these institutions. The relatively slow growth trajectory of virtual internships shifted dramatically in 2020 due to the pandemic, and that extraordinary, exogenous shock likely has transformed internships—and the larger work context—for the long term.

The juxtaposition of virtual internships with the traditional in-person type has thrown some of their differences into sharper relief. Our research demonstrates that those involved in virtual public affairs internships believe that they can produce positive outcomes for students, faculty, programs, and internship partners, given the right inputs. Our investigation shows that a significant amount of concentrated effort by everyone involved is required to make it successful, probably more than is required for face-to-face internships. It appears to take more preparation and intentionality, more strategizing and more advance work, and even with those efforts, some aspects of in-person internships are not replicable. Virtual internships can and do facilitate the development of skills and knowledge that contribute to disciplinary learning; at least this was the clear perception among our interviewees. Remote internships can also address some of the inequities that we seek to mitigate in internships more broadly.

With virtual internships likely to continue expanding, additional research and analysis are required to fully contextualize these changes, and to ensure that virtual internships—all internships, for that matter—contribute to student success before and after graduation. Beyond this, virtual internships have the potential to help us clarify our goals for all modes of public affairs internships.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See: Office of eDiplomacy. 2021. "Virtual Student Federal Service." US Department of State, Accessed July 1. <https://www.state.gov/virtual-student-federal-service/>.
2. Almost all extant scholarship on internships can be traced back to graduate positions established in the 1930s and to studies initiated in the 1940s (Hennessy 1970). An offshoot of the apprenticeship model (Benavides, Dicke, and Holt 2013), the traditional internship remains a valued means to apply and test academic knowledge as well as to build skills interactively in a professional setting (National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) 2018). Internships provide training through which students become familiar with workday rhythms, professional norms, and organizational workflows that they may not have encountered in other employment. In the case of public affairs internships, for instance, an intern might address constituent needs as a member of a larger team in a Congressperson or City Councilmember's office, help plan an outreach event for a community-based nonprofit, or assist in implementing an anti-hunger program abroad with a nongovernmental organization.

3. This definition might be compared to one offered by Hora et al. (2021a): “An online internship is an experiential, work-based learning program conducted primarily via digital or online technologies, with important variations within the modality with respect to program format and compliance with experiential learning standards. Despite the important differences inherent in an online internship, the same quality and accessibility standards and considerations should apply to all internships regardless of their modality” (6).
4. As the internet and supporting technology have advanced, remote internships have followed suit. Present in some fields for decades, large technology companies such as Google and AT&T were at the forefront of their development (Hora, Lee, Chen, and Hernandez 2021; Mulki et al. 2009). They made a small footprint on the business internship map and by the 2010s had generated enough opportunities that third-party vendors began to establish full-scale services to match employers with potential interns, an industry that continues to expand today. Higher education’s increased use of online instructional platforms advanced on a parallel track (Allen and Seaman 2014; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017).
5. In addition, 47.6% were face-to-face, and 7.1% were hybrid. The mixed-methods study that Hora and his colleagues performed with the help of an NSF grant (#2032122) included 9,964 survey responses from 10 four-year universities and one two-year college, with an average response rate of 8.53% (a range of 0.4% to 19.73%). The survey was administered between November 2020 and March 2021 with questions concentrating on students’ experiences with internships during the prior 12-month period. Females were also overrepresented (69.3% to 27.9% male and 2.7% non-binary respondents). Most were enrolled full-time (91.1%).
6. Brynjolfsson et al. (2020, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research) report that the results of their representative national survey of the US population (n=25,001) between April and May 2020 revealed 15% of respondents worked from home prior to COVID-19, and that about half of the workforce was working from home during the survey timeframe. They note that their estimates “are broadly consistent with the broader literature, which includes a relatively wide range of estimates” (4).
7. “Underserved” is defined in their study as underrepresented minority, first-generation, transfer, and low-income students.
8. Another approach to evaluating the quality of an internship is explained by Hora et al. (2020a), who develop a scorecard for this purpose: “Our approach differs from NACE (2018) and CAS (2018) because it does not articulate a set of criteria that all internships must meet to be considered ‘legitimate’ or high quality. Instead, we posit that the specific format and activities of an internship may vary, depending on the goals of each student and/or their academic program, and their level of maturity and preparedness” (10). Among these criteria are: the presence of a plan for learning, nature of tasks, mentoring for job performance, active support of student goals, development of specific skills, growth of professional networks, level of student’s satisfaction, the value of the internship for the student’s career and academic goals, and other indicators of equitable access.
9. Alternatively, the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, whose work complements that of the AAC&U’s survey of employers and hiring managers, lists five competencies that are consistently in high demand (and are associated with better earnings and higher work satisfaction)—communication, teamwork, sales and customer service (even for public affairs interns), leadership, and problem-solving and complex thinking—the “competencies students need for workforce success” (Carnavale, Fasules, and Cambell 2020). A fuller list of the competencies that employers want can be found in their report.
10. With respect to socialization and workplace norms, the increased participation of historically underserved students in internships is likely to lead to cultural shifts in workplaces. Higher participation by historically underrepresented groups is one element needed to move “institutions to take greater ownership of sustained efforts to change cultural norms and fundamental practices for the benefit of students of color” (Finley and McNair 2013, 36).
11. The projects were submitted for simultaneous review on both principal investigators’ home campuses and received approval as Project 2021-08 by the University of Redlands Institutional Review Board and as Project 1737971-1 by the California State University Long Beach Institutional Review Board.
12. Of our 19 participants, eight provided the perspective of (former or current) student interns; five were supervisors at sites that hosted student interns; six were positioned as faculty or other sorts of coordinators of student internship opportunities. Our study participants were affiliated with educational institutions both public and private. In terms of gender, women-identified participants outnumbered male participants by a roughly 2:1 ratio.
13. As shown by our interviews, a range of experiences can exist within the category of a virtual internship (and by extension an in-person or hybrid internship). In cases where students had completed two different virtual internships, they would compare those experiences to each other and also to their in-person experiences. Those perspectives allowed us to gain the understanding that just as the reality of in-person public affairs internships

is mixed, so is the reality of virtual public affairs internships. By understanding the “real experience” of these internships we can recognize their peaks and valleys—and make observations about the virtual context’s potential and how to best achieve it in the field of political science.

14. This research is ongoing. Additional research will likely be conducted to assess changes over time and how those changes affect students’ outcomes.
15. Where possible, we tried to discern the impact of COVID-19 that would have interacted with or posed separate constraints on an activity. For example, coordinating in-person events became problematic during the pandemic because of social distancing rules and restrictions on large gatherings, but these events were possible to set up and coordinate remotely, and some did take place through videoconferencing.
16. It also followed that there could be conflicts among various stakeholders with respect to their goals. There seemed to be a sense that an internship site more easily would be able to structure things to best accomplish their goals, but it could be more challenging for an intern, for instance, to attain theirs.
17. The current and previous versions of NACE “career competencies” have also been utilized in other research studies to better understand the impact of internship format, including Morrill Bijeau and Peters (2021) and Criso, Low, and Townsend (2021). While other types of assessments might also be applicable, such as the Association of American College and Universities’ “essential learning outcomes” (Kuh 2008), we feel these categories are best suited to the goals and scope of our study.
18. Students supplied several examples of how they were unsure of how to obtain government jobs unless they were in the system already. Being a virtual intern allowed them to make necessary connections and get ahead in their job searches, especially if they were looking for federal or other government work.
19. Per Kuh (2008), all students benefit from experiential learning and other high-impact practices, but historically underserved populations benefit even more.
20. Health- and disability-related factors a student considers may include access to known medical facilities, providers, or insurance coverage, among other considerations.
21. Aside from the intersections that race and ethnicity may have with some of these aforementioned identities, these axes were not mentioned specifically by our interviewees. That said, there was repeated attention to how some interns are positioned differently in terms of their identity, and so their experiences within the internship itself may differ. Informal engagement or attempts to advocate for themselves were thought to be perceived differently.
22. Cabrera Rasmussen was involved in the planning and teaching of two cohorts of virtual public affairs interns. One was a small cohort of CSULB students who interned with the City of Long Beach to support local census efforts in spring 2020; while these internships started out in-person, the COVID-19 public health crisis pushed these internships into the virtual context, giving her a rare vantage point on the two formats with the same group of students. In addition, she served as part of a larger team on the CSULB campus that crafted and implemented a new program that paired students with local nonprofit organizations: the Long Beach Community Internship Project. The Project’s spring 2021 inaugural cohort interned primarily virtually as state, local, and university public health guidelines required. She also served as the lead instructor on that project and taught the majority of the program’s students in her (also virtual) internship course, and so these experiences necessarily informed her analysis of the data. Van Vechten helped facilitate several virtual affairs internships in 2020.

