

## Tips for Hosting Virtual Museum Internships

*The American Alliance of Museums offers the following information from Adriana Dunn, Curator at the West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center to help fellow professionals develop and maintain a virtual internship program within their own institution. The information shared here is based on the best available information as of publication. Museums are encouraged to seek legal and other expert advice on their specific circumstances, and/or any state or local requirements.*

This tipsheet serves as a guide to museum professionals on creating virtual internship programs. Because of the health risks brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the way in which professionals interact and institutions operate became severely limited. The implementation of virtual collections, curatorial, and education internship programs began as a necessary safety precaution during the pandemic. However, this transition proved to be a long-standing, effective and innovative method for aspiring museum professionals to gain invaluable museum experience. Establishing virtual internships within a museum's program accomplishes the following:

- 1) Provides students with the capability to fulfill degree requirements.
- 2) Solves several market supply challenges, including those posed by COVID-19.
- 3) Extends the museum's ability to reach a new cohort of students living afar.
- 4) Provides an efficient pathway to the successful execution of a museum's mission.

### Virtual Internship Programs: A Break-Down

While virtual learning is not a new concept, it has never been more necessary as a method of educational exchange. The world has entered a period of advanced virtual exchange and digital engagement. The utilization of virtual internships allows a museum to adhere to such changes while making a significant impact within its close and long-distanced community. The following guidelines were developed to meet the requirements for a 3-credit collegiate-level internship executed in a virtual environment.

#### General Requirements

The goals of a virtual internship program are to provide university students with practical/professional museum knowledge and experience and to provide the museum with the successful achievement of a particular objective or product. The following steps offer advice on how to create and organize a virtual internship:

Step 1: The first step in establishing a virtual internship is setting up general requirements that coincide with university standards. According to the Museum Studies Certificate course requirements for a 3-credit hour course from the University of Memphis, internships should run for 150 hours.

Step 2: Before it can begin, each virtual internship is defined and agreed upon by the student and the host museum supervisor and then approved by the university program advisor or professor. The distribution of hours is set between the student and the museum supervisor (e.g., the intern may work 10 hours per week for 15 weeks or 37.5 hours for 4 weeks).

### **Get it in writing**

Contracts help keep the host museum, intern, and university program advisor on the same page. Details in the contract may include what project the intern is working on, how long the internship will last, the hours in which the intern will work, compensation, along with anything that might relate to protecting sensitive object information or copyrights, etc.

At the end of a successful internship (completion of the project and scheduled hours), a letter of completion serves as a great, tangible document that details the intern's role, an overview of the tasks completed during the internship, and an evaluation of the intern's work. This should be submitted to the intern and to the university program advisor or professor (if applicable).

## **Examples of Virtual Internships**

This section offers examples of different types of projects that can be easily converted into virtual internships in the following work areas: collections care, curatorial/exhibitions, education/public programs, and marketing.

### **Collections**

Data entry using the museum's web-based cataloging software. The intern can either be given direct access to the software or can fill in object-related information on an excel spreadsheet that can then be transferred to the software.

Condition reporting an object or small group of objects with the use of a webcam over any video conference call program (i.e. Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime). The intern virtually plays the role of curator or collections registrar as the museum supervisor assists with the holding of the camera around the object during the condition reporting process. This requires the intern to be thoroughly trained through assigned readings and videos, to be given blank condition reports to fill out, and to have the proper condition reporting nomenclature in front of them to work from during the condition reporting process.

### **Curatorial**

Creating virtual exhibitions featured on the museum's website. This includes organizing a series of virtual programs (i.e., virtual events hosted on Facebook Live and/or Zoom) to promote the exhibit and engage the community.

Provide the option of an in-depth virtual conference call to set up an exhibition for virtual curatorial internships. In this scenario, the museum supervisor plays the role of preparator working in the museum and the intern takes on the role of curator directing the set-up of their exhibition.

## **Educational Programming**

Writing a series of lesson plans that reflect the museum's objects and exhibitions for school groups based on the state's education core curriculum standards.

Creating an audio tour of objects featured in the museum's exhibitions. Audio tours provide museum visitors with visual impairments an alternate method of education and engagement with objects in the collections.

## **Marketing**

Creating promotional posts for the museum's website and/or social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) to promote the museum and engage the community. This might include artists' bios, an "Object Spotlight" series featuring photographs and descriptions of objects, or using graphic design software to create a series of promotional images for upcoming events.

Promoting community engagement remotely with interviews, virtual exhibition openings, or lecture series, which can be pre-recorded on a virtual conference call or live on your social media platforms.

## **Preparing the Interns for Their Virtual Internships**

After an introductory meeting, each virtual internship should proceed with assigned readings related to the intern's project focus. Books and scholarly articles serve as educational and experience-based sources that help acclimate the interns to their role.

Another way to prepare interns for their project is by giving them copies of guides, tour-related documentation and access to the museum's collections (either PDF copies of object records or through read-only access to the museum's collection software). This allows them to familiarize themselves with the museum in a remote manner. Lastly, museum supervisors should make themselves available to schedule virtual tours of the museum for each intern in order to provide a full view of the museum's layout, objects on display, and answer any questions the interns might have relating to the museum and their internship.

## **Tackling Applied Learning Components in a Virtual Setting**

The three critical success factors for a seamless transition to virtual internships are strong organization, time commitment, and creativity in the use of technology to replace in-person interaction. The following lists alternative methods for the applied experiential learning components that allow interns to participate 100% virtually during their museum internships:

- Staying connected virtually through conference call platforms
- Staying organized through online task management platforms
- Electronic mechanisms for turning in projects remotely

## **Staying Connected Virtually**

Staying connected virtually requires less time than in-person meetings and allows the supervisor to be more accessible during the internship. If a museum is hosting several virtual internships simultaneously, having the interns participate in a joint virtual orientation is helpful for several reasons:

- It saves the museum supervisor time by coordinating the introductory meetings all at the same time.
- It gives the interns an opportunity to meet each other and learn about the numerous projects going on during their internships. This promotes professional networking with the possibility of collaborating on research if there were any similarities in their internship projects.

### **Staying Organized Virtually**

It is imperative for the host museum supervisor to keep track of the progress made during virtual internships. There are a number of free or low-cost project or task management platforms that supervisors can use to help keep track of intern projects.

These include:

- Basecamp
- Microsoft Teams
- Google Workspace.

No matter which web-based platform you choose, it is crucial that, as the museum supervisor, you settle on the platform that you are most comfortable with, set up each component prior to the start of the virtual internship, and keep in mind the needs of the intern and the internship when making your selection. Once the platform is chosen, the real work between the museum and the intern can begin!

### **Turning in projects**

All written components from virtual internships (e.g. updated museum tour scripts, museum-related lesson plans, writing exhibition labels or didactic panels, etc.) can be facilitated and turned in remotely. Be it via email, Google Docs, Dropbox or by some other means there are numerous ways for interns and supervisors to submit completed written or digital work nowadays.

## **Long-Standing Benefits of Virtual Internships**

Launching a virtual internship program results in both short-term and long-standing benefits.

Integrating virtual internships is the perfect solution to the increasing duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual internship program extends the museum's ability to reach a new cohort of prospective interns who do not have direct physical access to the museum. This provides an efficient pathway to successful execution of the museum's mission to educate and engage its local and long-distanced community.

Lastly, switching to virtual internship programming provides students with great professional experiences by providing them with real-world projects to complete and requires them to maintain

strong time management, organization, and attention to detail to stay on top of the workload. While virtual components of each internship are time consuming for both the museum staff and the interns, it puts the interns completely in charge of their project, just like a professional curator, educational director, or collections registrar. This gives dedicated emerging museum professionals an even stronger museum internship experience.

## **Bibliography:**

Art Museum of the University of Memphis. Brochure. Accessed September 6, 2021.

[https://www.memphis.edu/amum/museumstudies\\_brochure.pdf](https://www.memphis.edu/amum/museumstudies_brochure.pdf).

Simmons, John and Toni M. Kiser. *Museum Registration Methods; Sixth Edition*. Washington, D.C.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020.

## **More resources on virtual and equitable museum internships:**

Virtual Internships Are Here to Stay <https://www.aam-us.org/2021/02/08/virtual-internships-are-here-to-stay-and-thats-a-good-thing/>

The Power of a Paid Internship Creating Pathways to Careers in Museums <https://www.aam-us.org/2019/02/11/the-power-of-a-paid-internship-creating-pathways-to-careers-in-museums/>

Seven Tips for Starting an Equitable and Inclusive Internship Program <https://www.aam-us.org/2018/03/22/seven-tips-for-starting-an-equitable-and-inclusive-internship-program/>

Hosting Remote Internships: Successes, Challenges, and Thoughts for the Future <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/11/27/hosting-remote-internships-successes-challenges-and-thoughts-for-the-future/>

Access and Equity in Museum Internships: A Case Study <https://www.aam-us.org/2016/12/06/access-and-equity-in-museum-internships-a-case-study/>

Talking About Museums and Internships <https://www.aam-us.org/2016/07/14/talking-about-museums-and-internships/>