Virtual Undergraduate Internships: One COVID-19 Side Effect that Academic Libraries Should Keep

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abstract: In spring 2020, the California State University System and its 23 campuses became the first in the United States to commit to a year of remote instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote instruction separated the system's librarians from their users, whose needs were especially great within the system's ethnically, economically, and academically diverse student body. At California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI), public health guidelines and closures prevented many students from fulfilling internship and field experience requirements needed for graduation. CSUCI's John Spoore Broome Library established a work-around by implementing a virtual internship program for one undergraduate that benefited both the student and the library. This paper, coauthored by the intern, documents the virtual internship, describes the model and structure of the experience, and argues that such remote internships are one pandemic side effect that should remain to promote equity in library and information science.

Introduction

Perhaps no population was more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting pivot to virtual environments than students and educators. For the California State University (CSU) System and its diverse population, this meant the transition of 23 campuses and nearly 500,000 students to virtual learning, along with the academic libraries that serve them. The pandemic compounded already existing challenges for CSU students, many of whom come from underrepresented communities. These students faced new social and economic hurdles on top of their typical course loads and graduation requirements. Some met serious barriers to accessing the resources and services that they needed to complete their studies, especially those provided by

campus libraries. CSU libraries quickly implemented solutions to continue serving users from a distance, from virtual instruction sessions to outdoor lockers for contactless equipment pickup. For nearly three semesters of closures, libraries persevered. This perseverance stretched beyond typical library services and extended to other aspects of student success—in this case, virtual internships.

California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) in Camarillo is the youngest CSU campus. It is designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and receives federal funding in support of its Latinx students. In fall 2020, 55 percent of enrolled students came from historically underrepresented groups, and nearly 60 percent were first-generation college students. Most CSUCI students hail from the greater Los Angeles area, and the university offers an important means of upward mobility for families there.[1]

CSUCI's John Spoore Broome Library provides a variety of academic and research services, as well many basic needs, such as Internet access, computers, and space for quiet study; thus, the library plays an important role on campus. During the COVID-19 pandemic closures, Broome's library workers responded quickly to support the increased needs of students on their paths to graduation, many of whom would be the first in their families to walk across the stage at commencement.

A CSUCI education is shaped by the institution's mission pillars, supporting a student-centered education around integrative, multicultural, international, and community-driven learning.[2] Internships and field experiences are often required for students to graduate within their majors. These experiences are easily tied into some fields of study, such as clinical practicums for nursing majors and student-teaching placements for education majors. The path is less clear, however, for many humanities students. Those studying history, for example, have typically served internships in museums and historical societies throughout Ventura County and neighboring Los Angeles County. The COVID-19 pandemic upended the traditional placements for these students. With most museums shuttered and in financial distress due to stay-at-home orders, faculty and students were left scrambling for internship placements to keep students on track for graduation. In desperation, CSUCI faculty reached out to the Broome Library for help in providing virtual opportunities for undergraduates. This paper will describe a case study of a virtual library internship, document the significant and lasting advantages for both the intern and the library, and argue that this modality should persist beyond the pandemic.

Brief Review of the Literature

The benefits of library internships and field experiences are well documented. When executed with thought, commitment, and feedback, they fit the hallmarks of George Kuh's high-impact education practices, those that are especially effective in increasing student retention and student engagement.[3] For graduate-level library and information science (LIS) education, internships are important experiences or even graduation requirements, serving as a bridge between an abstract LIS curriculum and a concrete professional experience.[4] Internships and field experiences provide learners with a chance to "immerse themselves in the daily routines of an information organization where they can experience the professional world, observe a variety of role models, and put theory

and academic rigor into practice."[5] The most common modality for these opportunities, at both the graduate and undergraduate level, is in person.

This paper will describe a virtual internship created because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual internships are not new, however; they have existed quietly within online LIS programs for more than a decade, long before the global crisis forced them into the spotlight. Online LIS programs, such as those at San José State University in San Jose, California, and the University of Washington's iSchool in Seattle, have well-established networks of virtual placements that prepare online students for jobs, just like their in-person counterparts.[6] The numerous, proven advantages of virtual placements include time and geographic flexibility, especially for learners who fall outside the traditional student model.[7] With many documented benefits for graduate-level learners, it is time for virtual internships to trickle down to undergraduates, many of whom are already comfortable within virtual environments and often need schedule flexibility.

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The benefits of internships, both in-person and virtual, are not limited to interns. As Kayo Denda and Jennifer Hunter state, all students possess a "specific knowledge, ranging from expertise, ethnic and national backgrounds, professions and interests, life experiences, and aspirations."[8] Regular, structured interaction with students through internships can provide librarians with a vital window into the student experience, which can be hard to get in the less public-facing areas of the library, such as STEM librarianship and systems administration.[9] Op-portunities for learning and interaction with students are invaluable for academic librarians, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic has separated libraries even farther from their users. Academic libraries and librarians should prize these interactions and networks.

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Beyond a surface-level exchange of work experience and mentoring, internships also create pathways into the field of librarianship for undergraduate students from underrepresented populations. The library profession has lamented for years over the lack of diversity and representation in libraries, and the situation has been slow to change. Despite the creation of many diversity residency programs for new librarians of color, little headway has been made in diversifying the profession.[10] These programs and other hiring-based initiatives assume that candidates from various ethnic and social backgrounds have already found their way to graduate MLIS programs, rather than confronting the issue at the undergraduate level. As documented in a case study from California State University Bakersfield, academic libraries can foster greater diversity

through offering and advertising internships to undergraduate students of color.[11] Recruiting and mentoring undergraduate interns from underrepresented populations is a direct pathway to diversifying the field of librarianship. Virtual internship opportunities extend that pathway to students from an even greater variety of backgrounds.

Case Study Described

As mentioned in the introduction, Broome Library's first virtual internships began out of necessity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students hoping to graduate with history degrees in fall 2020 had planned their academic courses around a culminating, capstone internship, which was required for graduation. These students, along with their instructors, were left between a rock and a hard place after their traditional internship pathways closed due to statewide public health mandates or institutional financial strain. Under these pressures, a history instructor reached out to establish new relationships with the library, beyond the library's typical research instruction.

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For-credit internships were not totally foreign to the library, but they had faded in popularity over the years. Prior in-person, undergraduate internships had consisted of routine labor, such as scanning documents for digitization or running accessibility software. While these activities provided helpful assistance to the library, interns received little mentorship or exposure to the profession beyond their assigned tasks. The library's internship instructor wanted to ensure that student interns would receive useful coaching and introductions to the field; thus, she reached out to recently hired librarians working primarily in digital environments and explained her expectations, requirements, and dilemma. One librarian agreed to design and supervise a completely virtual student internship that would both meet the student's graduation requirements and fit the library's schedule. As a new librarian at CSUCI, she had never led an in-person or a virtual internship; thus, she began with a blank slate.

The virtual internship focused on exploration and learning objectives, rather than labor and deliverables. The supervising librarian thought of it as a course she was teaching and not as a job she was overseeing. The virtual modality was the primary reason for this shift away from a traditional internship model. During the pandemic, the library had few projects available that an undergraduate intern could complete unsupervised and remotely. Rather than creating busywork for the intern, the supervising librarian modeled the internship after traditional

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online courses, with a focus on asynchronous learning. With many librarians working from home, often outside the traditional workday, a primarily asynchronous internship mirrored the experiences of most people working in the field.

It was important to recognize the differences between graduate- and undergraduate-level internships. Through a review of the literature and recalling her own graduate-level internship, the supervising librarian noticed that typical graduate experiences focus on gaining skills that will result in a job placement. In contrast, she wanted to focus her undergraduate internship on fostering an interest in the field of librarianship and exploring the opportunities available. She created a list of tasks that would expose the intern to various aspects of the library and would satisfy the rigorous expectations of an internship. The list of tasks was included in a description that was advertised to students seeking for-credit internships. The ad yielded five applicants, but only one was selected to ensure an adequate level of mentorship.

Preliminary e-mails and an introductory meeting determined that the intern was most interested in humanities librarianship and archives instruction. The supervisor and intern worked together to create a list of semester-long tasks and corresponding learning objectives to expose the intern to several aspects of the field, but with a focus on the intern's unique interests. The tasks and learning objectives are listed in Table 1 (see Table 1).

Although the list of tasks was long, the goal was exposure to librarianship, not completing labor or producing a deliverable. The internship was structured around weekly meetings between the intern and the supervising librarian, which varied from a half hour to a full hour as needed. Each week, the intern discussed what she had accomplished, asked questions, and reflected on her experiences. Periodically, the supervising librarian would provide instruction or readings around library science topics, such as metadata, user experience, and reference strategies.

The Intern's Tasks and Reflections

Early in the semester, the intern began to develop an overarching question that tied together all her tasks—"How do first-year students and incoming transfer students experience the library when they have not yet been to campus due to the pandemic restrictions?" The intern and her senior-level classmates had gained an understanding of the library based on their physical presence on campus and in the building. Through her interaction with younger students in her virtual classes, she recognized that many struggled with resource issues, especially related to their research. She was concerned about how new students with limited access to the library would gain knowledge of the resources available to them. With this question in mind, the intern focused her tasks around exposing new students to library services. Much like a student writing a research paper, she explored this research question for the rest of the semester. This exploration fit seamlessly with the supervising librarian's idea of the internship as a course with learning objectives, rather than labor and deliverables.

The primary way that the intern chose to explore this question was through creating content for a LibGuide hosted on the Springshare platform. Although she could not gain direct access to the library's Springshare interface, she explored the platform over Zoom while creating her content in another document. Each week, the intern and supervising librarian reviewed the content together. The librarian asked questions about the guide's content and encouraged the intern to think through the audience, organization, and

Table 1.
Tasks and learning objectives for a virtual internship in LIS at California State University Channel Islands

Task	Learning objective
Create LibGuide content for archive instruction directed at first-year students.	Gain exposure and familiarity with the Springshare suite of applications and audience-specific content.
Explore the user experience of first-year students with digital archives.	Gain exposure to the field of user experience.
Shadow information literacy instruction, especially within History Department courses that the intern had already taken.	Gain exposure to library instruction.
Shadow archival research consultations.	Gain exposure to archival reference.
Attend a variety of library meetings.	Gain exposure to general library organization and functioning.
Reflect on each of the other tasks.	Dedicate time to thinking and writing about the skills needed to successfully accomplish/ enjoy the tasks.

clarity of the guide. The intern discerned a need for content that defined basic library vocabulary terms she had found confusing during her first years as a student, including *collection*s, *databases*, *primary sources* and *secondary sources*, and *archives*. As the intern explained the meaning of these terms and provided examples, she explored many of the foundational concepts of the field with her specified population—first-year students and incoming transfer students—in mind. She also created content that would last long beyond her tenure as an intern, including visual aids, videos, and tables useful in both the LibGuide and externally.

While the intern explored the topics and developed her LibGuide, she also asked how her chosen population accessed and used the library website and, ultimately, the guide she was creating. In response, the supervising librarian provided instruction and readings about user experience research and design and their importance to libraries. This content sparked the intern's interest and steered her semester's tasks in a new direction. After familiarizing herself with the basic principles of user experience, she reached out to her networks of fellow students for their input, including the campus History Club and the senior history seminar. Her contacts provided the library with informal

but helpful feedback on the structure of the library website, pain points, and areas for improvement. The intern's interests and tasks sparked new conversations about library patrons' user experience that had long been on the back burner but had moved to the front due to the pandemic.

The intern could easily complete her tasks in an online environment, providing both the intern and the supervisor significant flexibility. An additional benefit of the internship's virtual nature was the ease with which she could attend library meetings and perform job shadowing. Without the need to rush from her classes across campus or from home, she could easily attend library meetings, including the monthly library policy committee meeting, unit meetings that related to her interests, and outreach planning sessions. The supervisor invited the intern to attend any meeting that was appropriate by simply forwarding her a Zoom link. This practice also enabled the intern to shadow library information literacy sessions and reference consultations. Many useful experiences came from shadowing courses that the intern had already taken, especially introductory history courses.

Building on the intern's tasks and shadowing, the supervising librarian asked her to reflect on what she learned each week. While she often discovered new tidbits about the field of librarianship, her deepest reflections were skill-based. She recognized the importance of interpersonal and communication skills needed for work in academic libraries. She noted that most of her peers considered librarianship (and her internship) to be an isolated, quiet work experience. Job shadowing during library instruction sessions and research consultations demonstrated how valuable relational skills were in building connections with students, faculty, and researchers. Although the interactions were virtual, the importance of the skills remained clear. The need for strong communication skills was not limited to teaching. The intern also noted the value of written communication skills when creating LibGuide content and conveying information to her chosen audience. She changed her preconceived notions about the field and spread her new perceptions to her peers.

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As noted in the brief literature review, the benefits of the internship were not limited to those experienced by the intern. The supervising librarian, and the library as whole, received substantial advantages from the weekly interactions. Not only was the intern's broad network of classmates beneficial to the user experience study but also her feedback and reflection on her shadowing experience were assets to the supervising librarian's development and assessment. The biggest benefit went to the intern herself, however. Having been exposed to librarians during her study of History and Chicana/o Studies at CSUCI, she already had an interest in becoming a librarian. She developed her own questions and area of investigation, thus driving her discovery of the field and proactively shaping her own learning. The research question-based model that she developed is one that the supervising librarian hopes to use for future interns, both virtual and in-person.

Equity Considerations

For a university like CSUCI and other regional, public institutions that serve diverse populations, equity must always be a priority when providing library services. While the pivot to virtual instruction challenged many students, it also created new opportunities for them to participate in activities they could not have done otherwise. The virtual internship is one such example.

A variety of barriers prevent undergraduate students from participating in traditional, in-person internship experiences that expose them to fields like librarianship. Students who undertake internships need (and deserve) compensation for their time, either through course credit, as in this case study, or monetary payment. Volunteer internships are not feasible for many undergraduates, who would be forced to spend valuable hours on an unpaid activity that would detract time from paid jobs, familial responsibility, and coursework. CSUCI is also a "commuter school" where most students do not live on campus or even nearby. They often travel to their classes from homes or jobsites far away. A lengthy commute is both a time and financial constraint, especially for unpaid labor. A virtual, primarily asynchronous internship offers students the ability to work around their responsibilities and gain meaningful experience on their own schedule. Both geographic and time flexibility open these opportunities to broader populations of students, who might not have considered such an experience within the realm of possibility.

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Apart from social equity, a virtual internship can be more equitable for differently abled students. Virtual projects offer greater accessibility for learners with mobility differences or who rely on technology to complete certain tasks. Additionally, the geographic flexibility of a virtual experience allows students who do not drive to participate in the same opportunities as their peers.

If academic librarians are serious about diversifying the field, they must find ways to reach undergraduate students of color. This means offering chances for students to see themselves in library roles other than that of users. Both in-person and virtual internships can provide these opportunities. Librarians who work in diverse institutions already have a significant pool of excellent prospective colleagues who are on the verge of discovering the field. By providing more diverse undergraduate students with flexible opportunities, librarians can increase the likelihood of these students entering the profession. Hosting virtual internships is one means to that end.

Practical Considerations

This case study will not map to every situation. Not every librarian will have the capacity to host an intern in a meaningful way, nor will every librarian have digital projects

with which an intern can assist. However, hosting a virtual internship is easier than one might think. The research question model presented in this article and designed by the intern herself is one that any library professional can replicate.

Some might argue they lack the time to appropriately mentor an intern and provide a quality internship, but an hour of availability for a Zoom call once a week can produce a successful virtual internship. While planning is necessary to find relevant projects and advertise the position, much of the meeting time can be spent asking questions and reflecting on experiences. This reflection can also be meaningful in the supervisor's career. By changing the learning outcomes from deliverable-oriented projects to exploration-based experiences, supervisors eliminate enforcing deadlines, grading work, or granting extensions. The virtual, self-paced nature of the experience also minimizes the need for the supervisor to monitor the student. Virtual internships are, by and large, easier to administer than their in-person counterparts.

One may employ several strategies to help integrate a virtual intern into the life of the library and ensure that colleagues understand the overall goal of the experience. Supervisors should introduce the intern to the other librarians and staff members and describe the projects that they will work on, perhaps in an all-staff meeting or similar environment. Let others in the library know that the intern will join meetings to listen and learn or might shadow them on the job when possible. Invite colleagues to set up informational interviews with the intern so that the student can learn more about other areas of library work. These simple actions can go a long way toward ensuring that the intern feels integrated into the work culture and helping colleagues make the student feel welcome.

Conclusion

A virtual internship is a more equitable way to expose undergraduates to the LIS field than a traditional internship is. By eliminating the time and geographic barriers of conventional internships, librarians can reach students who may have considered such an experience out of the realm of possibility. The mentorship that a well-administered internship provides is a concrete way that librarians can work to increase diversity in their field. If library professionals can foster positive relationships and experiences with undergraduate students, especially those of color, they can encourage them to enter the field. The intern featured in the case study has entered an LIS graduate program following her graduation and will eventually increase the number of Latinx information professionals. Although this cannot be expected for every intern, if even one additional student can picture themselves in a library career, the effort will have been worth it.

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In addition to the contributions that virtual internships can make toward equity on campus, they can be less challenging to administer than their in-person counterparts. As academic librarians return to their on-campus offices and in-person work, they will almost certainly have new tasks and time constraints. Virtual internships can ease some of that burden while still providing opportunities for students. If librarians can shift the focus away from labor and deliverables and implement a research question model, they may save time, increase their own job satisfaction, and feel a heightened sense of investment in the future of the profession.

This singular case study presents an overwhelmingly positive example of a virtual internship model, but it calls for further study. Questions remain about how this model can be administered at scale and whether similar outcomes occur with interns who have different learning styles and time management skills. Although librarians and educators do not know what campus life will look like after the pandemic, most agree that it will be different. Librarians can lean into that difference and retain COVID-19 side effects like virtual internships that will better support diverse students.

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Notes

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