Virtual Internships, Real-World Learning
School of Library and Information Science
San José State University

Internships are a great way for students to gain relevant real-world experience and build valuable professional connections. Yet many online students find it challenging to locate place-based internships nearby, in settings that interest them and match their career aspirations, and with schedules that fit around their school, work, and family responsibilities.

“Sometimes the best internship opportunity for a student may be across the country, making it nearly impossible for a student to participate in a supervised field learning experience,” said Dr. Patricia Franks, an associate professor at the San José State University School of Library and Information Science (SJSU SLIS), who is hard at work finding ways to solve this problem for students in the School’s Master of Library and Information Science and Master of Archives and Records Administration fully online programs.
Thanks to grant funding from SJSU, Franks is developing and piloting new virtual internship opportunities for students and assessing the framework needed to support student success. “I want all our students to have the opportunity to complete an internship that interests them, regardless of the geographic location of the student or the internship sponsor,” said Franks.

According to Franks, virtual internships also prepare tomorrow’s information professionals for the types of virtual work environments that are becoming more commonplace. “Not only do we expect our interns to produce completed projects for their host institution, but with virtual internships, we expect students to gain an understanding of the virtual workplace and develop skills in self-directed work, time management, and online collaboration with colleagues and clients.”

Laura Warren is one of many students who is already benefiting from the growing number of virtual internships offered at SJSU SLIS. Warren was the first SLIS student to work with Credo Reference’s Libraries Thriving Internship Program, where she collaborated with librarians and other educators to facilitate discussions about new e-resource applications. She moderated online discussion forums, promoted events, and planned online seminars. Warren also helped develop information literacy materials for Credo’s reference resources.

Her internship with Credo Reference led to a part-time job with the company and a chance to co-present at a regional conference with one of her Libraries Thriving colleagues. Her presentation focused on using collaborative online communities as a resource for meeting common library challenges.

During another virtual internship, SLIS student Marina Torres Aiello enhanced the online presence of Yuba Community College in California. She managed the library’s social media services, developed tutorials for students, and updated the library’s website. While the library was housed in the cafeteria during a renovation, Aiello kept students updated about library services via blog posts, tweets and Facebook updates. She also established a Flickr account for the library.

Aiello feels that learning to work virtually was one of the greatest skills she gained during her internship experience. “The virtual setting is really applicable in today’s job environment,” she said. “A lot of jobs require virtual meetings and teamwork with people who are not at your physical location.”

Aiello and her internship supervisor made a presentation about virtual internships at the 2012 California Academic and Research Libraries Conference, where they discussed the advantages and challenges of virtual collaboration.

Several SLIS students completed virtual internships for public libraries in California. Jan Oliver interned at the Marin County Free Library, where she enhanced web resources for the library’s summer reading program and revamped social media tutorials for library staff. Anthony Andora helped the San Mateo Library System enhance its online presence through blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. During a virtual internship with the San Francisco Public Library, Karen Scott conducted research on public library policies regarding digital resources and presented her findings to library employees.

When Franks launched her virtual internship project in Spring 2012, the School offered 30 virtual internship opportunities to its students, yet Franks recognized that the demand for virtual internships far outpaced their availability. During the project’s first few months, Franks and her team contacted nearly 100 employers to find out if they were interested in offering a virtual internship.

In addition, with the help of several SLIS student assistants, Franks has already published an array of useful material regarding virtual internships on the SLIS website (slisweb.sjsu.edu/interns), including tips for students and internship supervisors. Next steps for Franks and her team include promoting new virtual internship opportunities to students, establishing an advisory board of virtual internship supervisors to provide input as SLIS expands its program, and sharing recommendations regarding virtual internship exemplary practices with other educators.

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