



Virtual Internships

Traditional internships are designed to provide an experience for students – sometimes in lieu of actual job experience, the chance for students to see how they might like the work, and the opportunity for students to interface with business leaders who might serve as mentors. But students can face barriers in pursuing traditional internships. Many students already work a full-time job and cannot schedule a traditional internship. Even when the students and employers are willing, the timing might not align or there could be more students than there are internship openings.

The “virtual internship” is designed to be an alternative to the traditional internship. The virtual internship builds real-world experience for the student (and the instructor) and sharpens soft skills in a business environment. And, unlike traditional internships that may not always stress teamwork and interpersonal communications, the virtual internship model strengthens the kinds of soft skills that employers value.

Students are tasked with solving a business problem of sufficient complexity to merit a team-based approach and the involvement of a business mentor. Ideally, the business problem is not clearly defined, thereby helping students understand the value of asking questions. During the semester, the student teams design and build a solution. At the end of the class, the teams prepare a formal report and present it to a panel of business experts and faculty. This presentation period – which can be scheduled in-person or virtually – also features Q&A with the panel about the solution. Just as so often happens in the real world, the student teams must defend their decisions to supervisors.

The faculty member serves as the day-to-day project lead, while the business mentor helps design the business problem and participates regularly via webinar and email during the semester. During these consultations, the mentor discusses the problem and the teams’ progress towards solving the problem.

Requirements:

- A course with a team project in the discipline.
- Faculty member interested in delivering a virtual internship experience.
- Business leader interested in spending a semester (or quarter) serving as a mentor for a team of students to solve a real world problem.
- Access to an online webinar system like WebEx or GoToMeeting.
- Dedication and flexibility from all involved.
- Smaller classes (10-12 students forming 3-4 teams) typically work better.

The Faculty Member must be willing to...

- Be flexible and willing to let a business expert lead the project
- Learn from the business expert
- Set up the webinars, record them, and act as a facilitator during interactions between the student teams and the business expert
- Help identify and establish a relationship with the business expert
- Help identify and arrange for 4-5 additional business experts to attend the final student presentation

The Business Mentor must be willing to...

- Be flexible
- Dedicate time for 4-5 one-hour virtual webinar sessions throughout the semester (or quarter) plus also answer students emails between webinars
- Create and/or vet the team project
- Review and evaluate the final student presentation
- Help locate other business experts to attend the final student presentation

Students must be willing to...

- Take what they have learned to date and work as a team to solve the real-world business problem
- Create a presentation explaining their team's solution
- Build the actual solution (if possible) in a lab environment
- Present the solution as a team to the business expert panel

The Business Expert Panelists need to...

- Understand what courses the student teams have taken so that they have context regarding what the student teams should know
- Actively listen to the team presentations
- Ask probing questions, not trying to stump the students but rather trying to help them
- Review the lab solution if created, asking questions as appropriate
- Fill out the rubric form to evaluate the students
- Appreciate and embrace the value of students solving real-world business problems, working in teams, and interacting virtually

Virtual internship benefits to students

- The job market remains competitive and unpredictable for new graduates.
- On-site, traditional internships are not always a feasible option as community college students often work full time to put themselves through school and provide for their families.
- Virtual internships provide students the opportunity to work directly with a business mentor in a quasi-internship capacity.
- Students can gain a competitive edge adding the virtual internship team project and review experience to their portfolios.
- The virtual internship format offers practice for working virtually with teams, a skill students will likely use once they enter the industry.
- Students earn potential business leader references and valuable job search assistance/support.

Please note also that there is a significant "externship" component to this model as well. Just as the students are learning about real-world business problems, solutions, and workflow, so too is the faculty member. It's a great way to connect business experts (the mentor and the panelists) not just to the students, but also to your faculty member.

Additional documents related to virtual internships can be requested from NationalCTC@collin.edu.