Emergency Management in Academia: Converting Internships into Academic Capstone Courses Mid-Semester and Beyond

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Abstract: The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic created countless challenges in higher education at every level. At the faculty level, one such challenge was how to convert applied internships into online academic capstone courses in the middle of the semester. For programs that require their majors to complete internships as part of a graduation requirement, full-semester conversions were necessary, both for the summer semester and in preparation for the possibility of no internships being offered in the fall. Such actions are in the best interest of all students, many of whom are taking the course during their senior year and run the risk of delaying their graduation absent these accommodations. While on its surface these conversions may seem daunting, both internships and capstone courses share similarities that facilitate the process, including professional development and the integration and application of knowledge students have acquired over their academic careers. This paper aims to serve as a resource for postsecondary educators in the conceptualization and implementation of these conversions. The authors examine several important considerations, including creating new assignments to replace uncompleted internship hours, ensuring that mid-semester adjustments continue to meet course outcomes, communicating with students and internship providers to facilitate a seamless transition, and working with colleagues and university administrators to quickly build and approve a new capstone course for the summer.

Keywords: internship, capstone course, pandemic

Introduction

The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has disrupted higher education at every level. Faculty, staff, administrators, and students have all been adversely impacted by the virus and its effects and were forced to make mid-semester adjustments on the fly. Faculty across the country were tasked with moving their face-to-face classes to an online/remote format, and doing so in real time without any preparation, some with no previous online teaching experience (The impact of coronavirus, n.d.). This was an onerous duty, but university administrators and staff worked together (albeit at different degrees across institutions) to provide faculty with the resources and support they needed to make the transition as seamless as possible under the circumstances.

Internship courses presented additional difficulties. In addition to moving any face-to-face meetings with students online, internship instructors had to convert applied internships into academic courses while still meeting course outcomes and providing students with an enriching experience. Nearly all providers had suspended or terminated their internship programs, leaving students and faculty alike in a state of panic. This panic was particularly palpable amongst seniors expecting to

graduate at the end of the semester. What were internship coordinators to do? Take a deep breath, get creative, and realize they have the knowledge, ability, and discretion to adapt to extenuating circumstances, and that administrators are likely going to be supportive of how they choose to do so in a time of crisis. Although anecdotal, it is our hope that our experiences and the lessons learned from them offer current and future faculty and administrators insight into the considerations involved in converting internship courses into online capstone courses mid-semester, as well as what to do moving forward, particularly for majors that require internships. Below are those experiences and lessons, along with the solutions that worked for us.

Mid-Semester Concerns & Solutions

There had been talk of the possibility of universities moving their courses to online/remote formats prior to mid-March, but when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared a national emergency, that talk quickly sprang into action. Universities across the country immediately began shifting their entire curriculums online. In addition, departments, agencies, nonprofits, and businesses across the country began shutting their doors to non-essential employees, volunteers, and interns. These shutdowns left an immediate and significant void in internship courses across the country. The biggest question internship instructors faced was how to make up for the hours lost from internships cut short by pandemic closures. Related was the need to do so in a way that still aligned with course outcomes. Fortunately, both internships and capstone courses share similarities, including professional development and the integration and application of knowledge students have acquired over their academic careers (Steele, 1993; Durel, 1993; Parilla & Smith-Cunnien, 1997). Rapid adjustments were implemented. In some cases, students' remaining internship hours were replaced with a series of assignments intended to provide them with exposure to critical issues in their fields. In other disciplines, students and their supervisors rushed to complete more on-site internship hours before the campus and many public institutions closed. The students completed more than 90% of the hours they were assigned. They then participated in exit interviews to discuss the work performed. In both cases, students engaged in aspects of self-regulated learning to foster the 'real world' feel of internship experiences.

It was only in rare cases that students could still carry out the responsibilities of an internship that involved an off-campus site placement. For example, one student wished to pursue an arranged internship with a county prosecutor. This placement not only carried with it the experience that would improve their law school application, but the student also believed that the placement would allow them to do important work in family and youth case law. In this rare instance, the faculty supervisor had to engage in several emails and phone calls to address institutional policies on and off campus. The site supervisor detailed the layout of their office and computer, and the student agreed that they would follow campus policies about handwashing and sanitization. The student could be assigned to electronic meetings (where they could participate in depositions), but they also worked in a suitable environment to meet with the supervisor and discuss real cases (both present and past). While such placements are rare, it should be noted that the faculty member and site supervisor had to fulfill several bureaucratic obligations to ensure that a student intern could remain safe while performing important functions.

We take seriously the opportunities internships present to our students, including the potential to engage in applied/experiential learning and the chance to shadow and work with professionals, as such experiences are widely regarded as a vital part of student development in postsecondary education (Kuh, 2008; Stirling et al., 2017). Technology is not an exact substitute for those experiences, but it is a means by which we were able to expose students to some of the fundamentally important skills related to their ultimate career goals. Where it was not possible for students to complete more

hours in on-site internships, online classes were developed in which students learned more about the application of their interests and opinions. Weekly position paper topics were created to immerse students in key issues, debates, and controversies within their major. When possible, topics varied according to a student's individual placement so that the issues covered were relevant to the student's initial site assignment. Weekly papers were required to be a minimum of 600 words (excluding cover and references pages) with a minimum of two academic journal article references per paper. No articles were assigned or recommended for the papers. Rather, students were required to conduct their own research through the university's online journal database to promote self-regulated learning, a capacity both educators and practitioners consider to be crucial in the work force (Boekaerts, 1997; Shine & Heath, 2020). According to Boekarts (1999), self-regulated learning is "a complex interactive process involving not only cognitive self-regulation but also motivational self-regulation" and is a core tool of online education. The number of completed internship hours at the time of the pivot were fairly similar, so the assigned length of the papers was uniform for all students.

For example, Criminal Justice majors typically pursue internships in one of three categories: law enforcement, courts, and probation. Special topics were selected each week relating to important issues for each of the three categories and were assigned based on the student's initial placement. The decision to customize weekly paper topics was done in the interest of the students, both to keep the scope of the papers in line with their initial placement and to expose students to critical issues within their selected internship (and likely preferred career field). While this made for some additional work in terms of preparation and grading, both informal and formal student feedback was positive, with students expressing appreciation for the relevance of the assignments via email, and 100% of the respondents who completed the course evaluation strongly agreed that "course assignments helped in learning the subject matter."

Because they were evaluated using a Pass/Fail grading scheme, students were given a fair amount of latitude on what was deemed satisfactory. However, grading criteria were established for each topic in advance, and if students did not satisfactorily complete the papers, they were required to revise and resubmit them. Students produced papers on a rolling schedule. They wrote about material that was fresh in their minds, and feedback to those assignments was provided within the constraints of the rapidly-moving schedule. It is worth noting that while this approach was ultimately successful, it did require a significant amount of grading on a weekly basis for the remainder of the semester. All other course requirements remained the same, although there was effort involved in transitioning to a fully online format. Exit interviews were carried out online. Consistent with course requirements, students prepared a resume and cover letter using the campus' Career and Accessibility Center to aid in their efforts. Updated versions of each were submitted through the online course management system for final approval. Students submitted their research papers (a more lengthy assignment than the weekly position papers) online through Canvas, as well.

Concerns & Solutions for Summer & Beyond

In addition to the immediate challenges presented by COVID-19 for programs that require their majors to complete internships, more full-semester conversions were necessary for the summer semester. Contingency plans had to be formulated in anticipation of the possibility of no internships being permitted during the fall term, as well. This process involved timely collaboration between faculty and administrators. The new academic capstone course was designed to fulfill the internship requirement temporarily, and with the exception of minor adjustments to account for the slightly shorter length of the summer semester, followed the same format. The biggest difference in preparing the course for the summer and fall semesters was administrative. The fall semester course was submitted and ultimately approved as a new course through administrative processes. However, there

was not enough time to propose a new course through the campus' remonstrance process for the summer semester. Instead, the course was offered as a special topics course for the summer semester using an upper-level course number.

Decisions surrounding the content of the capstone course were also time-sensitive. The syllabus for the course had to be constructed at the peak of the pandemic's disruption (April) in order for the course to be generated in its special topics format by the time the summer semester began in mid-May. The capstone course borrowed from the academic assignments of the internship course, including a career center-approved resume and cover letter and a more lengthy research paper requiring a minimum of 3,000 words and ten academic journal article references (as opposed to a minimum of 1,500 words and five journal article references for the internship course). As was the case with the internship course, students were also required to attend five classes and were assigned a related assignment for each. In addition, students completed weekly position papers and discussion board posts. The five classes mirrored the lessons covered in the internship course, including professionalism, how to construct an effective resume and cover letter, ethics, interviewing techniques, and career opportunities. The differences revolved around the mode of instruction. First, all classes were moved to an online format. In addition, the decision was made to hold classes asynchronously to provide students with additional flexibility, with lessons posted once a week. Assignments relating to each lesson were created to ensure that students were completing the weekly tasks and learning their key points, and the assignments were due five days after each lesson was posted. In these ways, internships still focused upon topics key to completing students' development, and they allowed students a degree of flexibility that eased some of the burdens associated with time management.

Weekly position papers were assigned to examine key topics, debates, and controversies within the course's major. Once again, these papers were required to be a minimum of 600 words with a minimum of two academic journal article references per paper. However, since students were taking the course as a true capstone course, issues from across the discipline were examined, not just issues relating to a given placement/career. Many of the position paper topics created for the mid-semester pivot from internship to online academic capstone course were able to be used for this course, as well. While internships normally provide students with an opportunity to engage in experiential learning and the benefits that accompany it (Kolb, 1984; Beard & Wilson, 2013), the array of topics and the independent research carried out demonstrated that students were able to work within the constraints imposed by the pandemic. Although they could not participate in person at different locations, this new format provided them with a different means to engage in applied learning that pressed them to implement knowledge gained throughout their academic coursework.

Finally, weekly discussion board posts were assigned in the capstone course. Online discussions via Canvas were designed to immerse and engage students in special topics and current events within their major. For example, a few of the topics Criminal Justice majors examined across the summer semester included race, crime, and politics; crime and the media; and juveniles, waivers, and life without parole. Related articles (both academic journals and contemporary news) and supplemental videos were provided, and each student responded to the discussion questions and replied to at least one other student's post per discussion. This allowed students to foster professional communication while deepening their knowledge of critical issues in criminal justice and the research behind them.

Discussion

The adjustments described in this paper as a result of COVID-19 worked well for us. However, in conceptualizing and implementing these adjustments, the pandemic also led to future considerations. For instance, once things return to 'normal,' what is the best mode of course delivery? Should

internship coordinators consider moving all academic-related course content and delivery entirely online? Doing so could minimize future disruptions with the academic components of internship courses should there be additional waves of the current pandemic and/or others in the future. If that is not an option, should internship coordinators consider the HyFlex model and prepare in advance for the possibility of a move back to remote teaching? In addition, should departments consider offering both internship and academic capstone courses to maximize student opportunities? What about the potential for remote/online internship opportunities? While such an idea is likely dependent on the discipline, it may be a viable option. Communication with supervisor(s) and faculty could potentially be done via video conferencing and/or other electronic communication, while interns could potentially complete tasks, projects, and virtual experiences from home and/or campus. Conversely, if students are able to return to traditional internships, faculty members may have to address questions relating to the health and safety of students placed in those activities. Considering the needs of the site placement and existing campus policies in tandem may add additional responsibilities to a challenging role for some faculty members.

The answers to these questions are complex, involve many stakeholders, and will vary both across and within universities. Factors that may influence these decisions include but are not limited to: region of the institution, student majors (both in terms of their requirements and available opportunities), institutional policies, internship providers themselves, and even academic freedom. The key to success is considering the strengths and weaknesses of each approach given the stakeholders (students, internship providers, and the department and institution). Faculty may be the biggest asset as their creativity and flexibility will lead to workable solutions that may serve students during the pandemic and beyond.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused countless complications, both within and outside of academia. One consequential area was internships. The solutions we propose here may offer some ideas to faculty members who need to provide their students with options to engage in applied and experiential learning opportunities. What began as quick fixes for our students resulted in solutions that approximated some key elements of internships: applied learning experiences and encouraging students to think of themselves as budding professionals in their fields of study. Ultimately, we cannot predict when the COVID-19 pandemic will end, nor can we predict when the next pandemic will be. However, emergency management research suggests that two of the primary strategies for dealing with pandemics include preparation and mitigation (Kapucu, Arslan, & Demiroz, 2010; Sauter & Carafano, 2012). Both of these strategies are equally important, and prioritizing the former in advance allows stakeholders more time to focus on the latter in times of crisis.

Epilogue

As we engaged in our pivot to online instruction, involved stakeholders included internship instructors, department heads, the Dean of our school, upper administration (who offered final authority for students to continue internships at the discretion of their providers), internship providers, and our students themselves. We were afforded a great deal of discretion at the school/department level in terms of how to make adjustments to meet the needs of our students. That discretion wasn't something we were entitled to, but the institutional flexibility offered by administrative oversight was something that aided in our success. It should also be noted that the region of the institution can play a role because of virus hot spots (areas in which sudden increases in diagnosis appeared in specific locations, such as prisons or nursing homes). In other words, a campus

decision to indefinitely suspend/terminate internships regardless of the provider's decision may have been much more likely, particularly in a more urban setting, or in communities that established stronger isolation protocols. Student majors can play a role because some majors are better equipped to allow for online/remote opportunities. Criminal justice internships are fairly "hands on," and practitioners don't have time in the middle of a pandemic to restructure internship programs, as systemic resources are limited. Internship providers ultimately have the primary authority as to whether student interns can continue on or if programs will be suspended, and if so, for how long. These decisions varied from provider to provider and were often governed by internal policy. To that extent, frequent communication with internship providers was an important key to satisfying the needs and requirements of both the site supervisor and the institution. Academic freedom played a role as well. Our administration reviewed the adjustments we made to ensure they would still align with course objectives. Nonetheless, the autonomy granted to us facilitated a much quicker, more seamless transition to remote learning than campuses with more administrative oversight. Ultimately it came down to controlling the factors we could control, recognizing and accepting what we could not alter, and working expediently to ensure that we met the needs of our students.

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