

Micro-Internships & Adult Learners: The Surprising Benefits of Remote Work During a Pandemic

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CCE 2021

Introductions

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Engagement

Chicago Semester is an off-campus program that provides students the opportunity to live and work in the city through professional internships and classes. Our students come from over 30 liberal arts colleges from across the Midwest.



What is a micro-internship?

A micro-internship is a flexible, short-term, professional internship. Unlike a traditional semester-long internship, micro-internship projects will usually involve between 5 and 100 hours of work. A micro-internship is a great option for students who wish to gain valuable professional development experience through a short-term commitment.

Our traditional model is a full-time internship at 32-40 hrs/wk. We started our micro-internship model in the spring of 2020.

Due to the pandemic, we pivoted quickly to remote internships for all of our students, including our micro-internship model.

What has been your
biggest challenge with
remote work?

[Poll Everywhere](#)





Through a case study conducted in the fall of 2020, we wanted to know:

How did our students experience the micro-internship? More specifically, how did our adult learners experience the micro-internship? What were their opportunities for growth? What were the challenges?

How Did Micro-Internships Benefit Students?

- Highlights:
- Access - Limited hours gives students access to an internship experience
- Structure - Allows students to balance other commitments (work, family, other classes)
- Time - Amount of hours is not overwhelming, but just enough to feel like they can make a contribution to the site

How Did Micro-Internships Benefit Students?

- Balance - Working remotely meant that issues like work hours, child care, or the commute were not a hindrance
- Transferable skills - Learned a number of transferable skills such as networking, communication, flexibility, time management, being a team player, listening skills, prioritizing work
- Variety - Helps students explore other aspects of their future careers (might be studying education, but got a taste of social work at site)

**Our biggest takeaway:
remote work made
micro-internships more
feasible.**

Emphasized frequently throughout case study

Our Spring 2020 micro-interns' biggest challenge was their schedule. Working a few hours each day, in-person, several days a week, while juggling school, work and/or family life proved quite challenging.

While true for all students, it was even more important for Adult Studies students.

“I liked the fact that it was a micro-internship—it was a really good fit for me. The remote part was beneficial, too.”

Fall 2021 Student, Interview

Allowed students more flexibility in schedule



“I was concerned with [our intern]—he had a varying schedule—and if we had been trying to meet in-person it would have been difficult, but because it was virtual it was almost hard to tell that his schedule even played a role. We didn’t even notice as much.”

Site Supervisor, Interview

For some sites, remote internships worked well, if not better

“These all-virtual internships were an exploration process—something we’ve never done before . . . we weren’t sure how successful they would be, but overall it was successful.

“It made me more comfortable getting to know volunteers and interns on a virtual platform. It was definitely was a huge mind shift for me—before this I questioned the value of it . . . but having supports in place, with regular check-in’s and time to talk, showed me we were really able to build a working relationship and trust their work.”

Site Supervisor

“It was real-world experience without the full 32 hours per week [internship]. As a science major, I don’t have a lot of room in my schedule, so that worked well for me.”

Fall 2021 Student, Interview

For students with limited capacity to intern off campus, the micro-internship gives them an opportunity to put their knowledge into practice



“... getting to know the work Chicago HOPES was doing and getting to know the people was really beneficial. I hope to continue working with [them] moving forward, and I’m really excited about that. So the contacts and relationships I made there are going to be helpful moving forward.”

Fall 2021 Student Interview

Students begin to build their professional networks when they do an internship off-campus



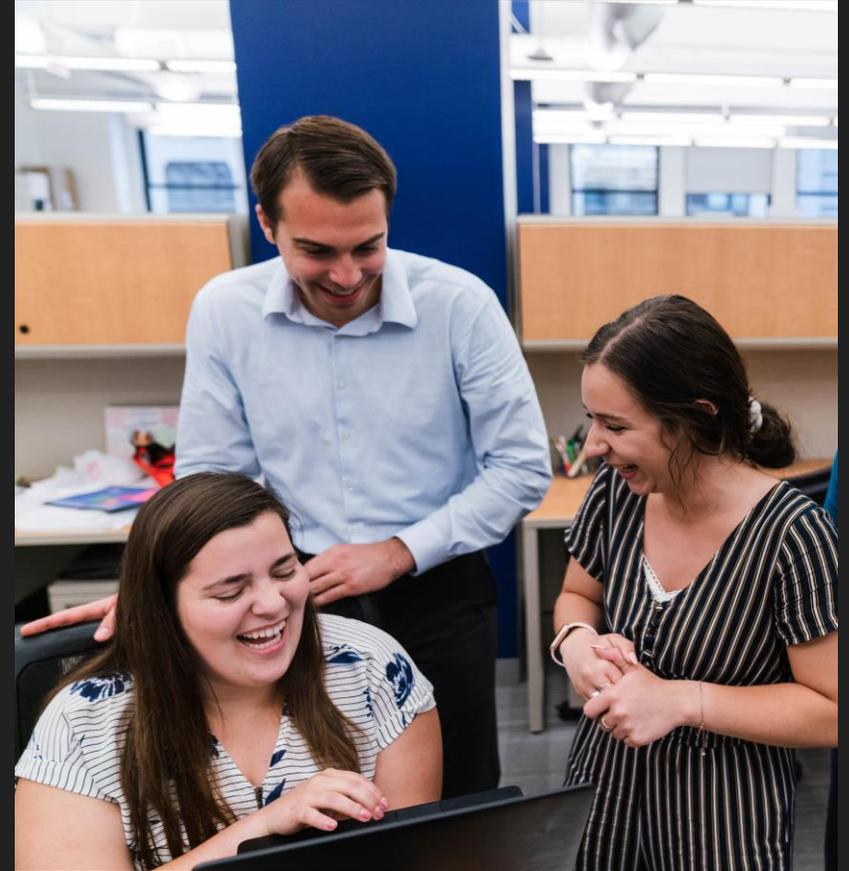
What were the challenges?

- Challenges:
- Fewer hours means limited opportunities to build relationships with supervisor and the site
- Less engagement with the city
- Doing everything remotely meant less time processing with others about the internship and a loss of camaraderie

“Ten hours a week is not much time—it was hard to teach and onboard simultaneously. I tried to give the student things that didn’t have pressing due dates, and the opportunity and time to learn a skill, since workflow was harder. But simultaneous, remote work was a learning curve.”

Site Supervisor, Interview

Limited capacity meant limited growth



Takeaways

- Flexible hours are important
- Projects need to be very specific to give students some structure to their work
- Students liked the idea of a hybrid experience – with some F2F interaction; however, if the work wasn't remote, would students have been able to do F2F internship with their other commitments?



More Takeaways

- Amount of hours/week (10-15) seems to be appropriate for busy Adult Studies students
- Remote internships limit the types of sites we can work with, but might make doing an internship more feasible for adult students
- It's important to emphasize transferable skills (time management, communication, etc.)





Our wonderings:

Pre-pandemic, remote work might not have worked for many of our sites. Going forward, is this the new normal? How do we help students adapt to this? For Q & A please put your questions in the chat feature!