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Flexibility at What Cost?
Stakeholder Perceptions of Remote Work-Related
Experiential Activities

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Background

At the height of the pandemic, many work-related experiential activities (WREAs) were cancelled or were offered online

Trends toward remote learning and remote work do not seem to be waning

Thus, it is increasingly important to better understand the challenges and benefits associated with online WREAs to provide broad access to high-quality, meaningful work-related opportunities.



Focused Literature Review

What We Know About Remote WREAs

- Recent results are mixed
- May provide the same or similar benefits as in-person WREAs (e.g., develop similar skill gains - Jeske & Linehan, 2020)
- Potential to expand access to opportunities for students excluded by in-person barriers (e.g., more affordable, great flexibility)
- Recent research suggests not all online experiences are equal and can create new challenges (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Bell et al., 2021; Hora et al., 2020, 2021)

Focused Literature Review

What We Know About Remote WREAs

- Participants in remote internships are typically from more privileged backgrounds (Hora et al., 2021)
- During the pandemic, students' experiences were less than positive (Hora et al., 2021)
- Research on employers also suggests that they too believe the online environment can make it difficult for some students to acquire or develop particular skills (Morrill Bijeau & Peters, 2021)

Guiding Research Question

How do various stakeholders (i.e., students, employers, and career center administrators) perceive the value of online WREAs?

Theory

This research is informed by Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning:

Learning is a cognitive process that involves engagement with, and adaptation to, the environment. Through interaction in the environment, individuals create knowledge.

Principles of Kolb's ELT have been incorporated into e-learning (e.g., Dunlap et al., 2008; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

When designed with ample support and scaffolded tasks and information, scholars purport that students can perform well in online experiential learning with minimized feelings of isolation, frustration, or low motivation to engage.



Methods

Part of a larger mixed methods study on students' access to work-related experiential opportunities based on their geographic locale

This paper is informed by qualitative data collected at 6 universities across Georgia

- Semi-structured individual interviews with Students (n = 70) and Career Center Administrators (CCAs) (n = 6)
- Focus group interviews with employers/recruiters working with universities (n = 21 across 5 groups)

All interviews were conducted via Zoom during various stages of the pandemic

Analysis

Using MAXQDA software

- Iteratively developed a larger coding scheme for employers, CCAs, and students.
- Researchers began by inductively coding transcripts (by sample) and then refined the code list based on our understanding of what participants thought about online experiences.
- Researchers then met to reconcile any coding discrepancies and reach inter-coder agreement (Miles et al., 2019).



Findings

Similar Across Students, CCAs, and Employers

Shared understanding that online opportunities provide greater flexibility and, for some students, greater access to opportunities at a distance, but that flexibility and access may come at the cost of easy access to guidance and mentorship, social interaction, and learning.

Student Perspectives: A Desire for Flexibility with Structure and Support

For students, the strong desire for the flexibility afforded by remote WREAs was among the most frequently mentioned benefits. However, students also communicated a preference for structure – though many enjoy flexibility, too much flexibility can leave some feeling lost.

Participants not only valued greater choice about when and how to work, but *where*. For students, remote WREAs allowed for increased geographic reach, which translated into greater access to opportunities.

However, students also communicated several challenges with remote experiences, including issues with interpersonal interactions (feeling isolated) and concerns about quality, including a lack of guidance.

CCA Perspectives: A Potential Benefit to Students and Employers

For the CCA participants in this study, the perceived benefits of online WREAs of flexibility, increased geographic reach, and time and space savings led them to believe that online experiences would remain.

For example, Holly stressed: *“So, I think with virtual [online] internships, we’re seeing an increase of recruitment from companies out of state. So, I think students are taking advantage of that differently now.”*

However, CCAs expressed concerns about how intentionally designed the online experiences were.

“So, generally, what our employers have been talking about as a virtual [online] internship is, ‘I hired you, and we were going to be in-person, but now we can’t, so we’re going to switch that to a virtual internship’”—Mark V.

Employers: The Potential for Growth with Notable Challenges

One notable benefit identified by employers echoed that of CCAs: Employers can attract the best talent to their organization regardless of their location. There is potential for growth.

It actually opened it up, we were able to open that pool of untapped [talent] and for the West, in places like Phoenix, in Nevada places like that, as well, in fact, some of those universities that we've never recruited from before. So now we are in the process of trying to come up with a hybrid plan to include maybe 50 of the 200 interns will be remote workers and then everybody else will be on site in one of the locations. (Kendall, Employer)

However, employers noted distinct challenges, including not being able to tell when interns needed help or whether they fully understood concepts or tasks.



Conclusions

Largely supports recent research on remote opportunities, but from multiple stakeholder perspectives

Participants' experience should be understood in the context of Covid-19 emergency adjustments; don't count remote out yet, consider the value of hybrid

If remote is perceived as lower quality, then expanded access to WREAs via remote may maintain inequalities

Effective experiential learning requires intentional design

Conversations should occur between students, employers, and institutional personnel to ensure alignment between student goals and the WREA opportunity

Future research should investigate most beneficial remote structures

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Thank You

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