



RESEARCH ARTICLES

The Current Role of Remote Human Services Internships: A Follow-Up Study

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Health and safety concerns and universal restrictions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic lead to an increase in remote internships in the human services field. This was the first experience for many human services graduate and undergraduate programs with this type of internship placement. An initial study conducted during the summer of 2021 found that participants had mixed feelings about remote internships and were unsure of its role in the future. This study investigates the attitudes of faculty, students, and human services professionals on remote internships and their role in the human services field approximately a year and half after the initial study and three years after lockdown measures were put in place in March 2020. Flexibility and cost-effectiveness continue to be the most frequently noted strengths of remote internships, making the argument as a more equitable option for students, while the biggest challenge remained the lack of in-person interactions both with clients and colleagues. Findings indicate that human services programs are continuing to offer remote internships and most participants believe that they will play a significant role in the future. This study adds to the discussion about the role remote internships will play in a post-pandemic society, a society that is currently experiencing major transitions in the fields of human services and in higher education. As students call for more flexible learning modalities and human services education programs assess remote and hybrid internships models as viable options for their students, there is also a critical need to identify best practices in the implementation and support of these types of learning experiences.

In response to lockdown measures put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many human services education programs worked to develop alternatives to in-person internship requirements (Rogers et al., 2022). Alternative options included class and community-based projects, online trainings and certificates, and case studies. Many programs utilized remote internships and those that did not have them were forced to develop them (Kras & Keenan, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022; Spector & Kras, 2022). Remote, also referred to as virtual, internships are not a novel idea (Maietta & Gardner, 2022). Remote internship offerings have been present in fields such as marketing, information technology, and business for many years, but it was not commonplace in human service and human service-related fields.

The rapid transition to a virtual world during the Pandemic promoted many human services education programs to consider remote internships as a viable option for their students.

In general, remote internships can provide many benefits for students such as: the opportunity to enhance online networking and technological skills, provide opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, and provide flexibility in scheduling and location options (Bowers et al., 2021; Irwin et al., 2022). Remote internships can also provide opportunities for students who may need extra support to strengthen interpersonal skills before direct client contact (Mitchell et al., 2022). Remote offerings increase equity and access for students with physical limitations or family responsibilities by being a more cost-efficient option (Briant & Crowther, 2020; Kras & Keenan, 2022).

Unfortunately, there are also several challenges to offering remote internships including the student's access to technology, the need for improved technological and soft skills (e.g., time management), development of the internships, and extra support needed in completing online tasks (Bowers et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2022). Additionally, concerns about lack of communication as well as managing professional and personal time boundaries have been noted (Bowers et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2022). Even with these noted challenges, there is still strong support for the offering of remote internships across disciplines in higher education (Hruska et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022; Whalley et al., 2021).

Remote Human Services Internships

In the summer of 2021, approximately a year and a half after the world went into lockdown in March 2020, the researchers surveyed (N=41) human services faculty, field coordinators, students, and practitioners about their thoughts and experiences with remote internships (Kras & Keenan, 2022). All participants had experience with remote internships, but 85% of participants had less than three years of experience with this modality. Based on their experiences participants believed that remote internships provided flexibility and skill development, but there was a lack of in-person interactions with clients and staff, a lack of structure, and challenges with technology and privacy when working remotely.

Results of that initial study indicated that a little over a third of participants planned on offering remote internships in the future, but most participants, a little over half, were unsure of the role that remote human services internships would play in the future (Kras & Keenan, 2022). Conflicting thoughts surrounding the accessibility of telehealth services, lack of in-person interactions, and the responsibility of preparing the next generation of human services professionals were shared. Perspectives on remote internships ranged on a broad spectrum from being described as "horrid" and "wretched" to "playing a huge role" in the future of the field of human services (Kras & Keenan, 2022, p. 114). Recommended suggestions

for faculty supporting remote internships included sharing best practices for telecommuting, making sure students have adequate technology, reinforce clear communication plans, and have multiple layers of support in place.

There is currently a lack of research on how remote internships are perceived (Irwin et al., 2022). This is especially true in the field of human services. As society slowly returns to a resemblance of pre-Pandemic times, the purpose of this study was to assess human services faculty, students, and professionals' attitudes about remote internships, as well as the current role of remote internships in the field of human services approximately one and half years after the initial study and three years after lockdown measures went into effect in March 2020.

Method

Research Design

Following the tenets of the previous survey study (Kras & Keenan, 2022), an online qualitative questionnaire was used to gain the diverse perspectives of faculty, students, and human services professionals on the current role of remote internships in the human services field (Jansen, 2010). The research questions that guided this work were: *What are the current attitudes of faculty, students, and human services professionals on remote internships? What is the current role of remote internships in the field of human services?*

Questionnaire

The researcher developed an electronic questionnaire consisting of nine closed and open-ended questions. An online questionnaire was selected as the method of data collection to reach as many potential participants as possible (Braun et al., 2020). Questions were about participants' current involvement with remote human services (questions 1-4) and open-ended questions about their experiences with remote internships (questions 5-9). Questions were replicated from the previous study on remote internships and three questions were added to illicit new information from participants about the status of their experience with remote internships (questions 2, 4, and 9). See [Figure 1.0](#) for a detailed description of the questionnaire.

Figure 1. Remote Human Services Internship Follow-Up Questionnaire

1. What role did/do you have with remote human services internships?
- undergraduate student - graduate student - undergraduate faculty - graduate faculty- fieldwork coordinator - agency supervisor - other (please identify)
2. Are you currently involved with remote internships?
3. How long have you had experience with remote human services internships?
0-2 years 3-5 years, more than 5 years, more than 10 years
4. Did your college or agency offer remote internships as a result of the pandemic? Are they still offering remote internships? Yes or No. Please explain.
5. Based on your experience, what are the strengths of remote human services internships?
6. Based on your experience, what are the challenges of remote human services internships?
7. What role, if any, do you think remote human services internships will play in a post-COVID world?
8. If you are part of a human services education program, do you plan on offering remote internships as an option for students in the future?
9. Do you have any additional thoughts about remote internships that you would like to share?

Procedure

Institutional review board (IRB) approval was obtained, and permission was sought and granted from the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) to share information about the study with its members. Next, NOHS sent an invitation to participate in this study to all its members via email including the link to the online questionnaire. In this voluntary response sampling approach, the requirement for participation was having experience with remote human services internships. The study was left open for three weeks. At the end of three weeks, responses were collected and organized by question and by the participant's role (undergraduate faculty, graduate faculty, field coordinator, undergraduate student, graduate student, human services professional). Responses were kept in a password protected file on the lead researcher's computer.

Analysis

Each of the nine questions on the were individually analyzed. For questions 1-3, results were reported as percentages. The remaining open-ended questions (4-9) were analyzed utilizing thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a viable method to highlight the similarities and differences among open-ended survey responses while following a well-organized framework that focuses on trustworthiness during each phase of analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Rouder et al., 2021). Following Norwell et. al.'s (2017) framework for conducting thematic analysis, during the initial phase responses for each of the qualitative questions were initially reviewed by the researcher, first impressions and notes were recorded and then responses reviewed again.

Table 1. Demographics

Position	<i>n</i> of participants (N=34)	%
Student	13	38
Graduate Faculty	4	12
Undergraduate Faculty	8	25
Field Coordinator	2	5
Dual Role Field Coordinator/Faculty	6	18
Practitioner	1	2

Initial codes emerged and were organized into themes. During the next point in the analysis, the second researcher reviewed responses to the open-ended questions and identified codes, as well as themes. Both researchers then met to discuss their findings and any discrepancies were discussed as part of the peer-debriefing process (Nowell et al., 2017; Patton, 2022). The researchers had previous experience working together to code responses during the first study (Kras & Keenan, 2022). Themes for each question, including the number of participant responses, were shared (Nowell et al., 2017). Exact quotations from participants with varying roles and responsibilities in the human services field were used to support trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Patton, 2022).

Researcher Positionality

It is important to note that both researchers have experience with remote internships. The lead researcher has experience with remote internships both as a faculty member and as a program coordinator at an urban public community college. The second researcher is a Senior Director of Clinical Education Administration at a large urban private university. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, both researchers were put in the position of suddenly developing remote internships. The lead researcher's program still offers the option for remote internships if there is student interest. The second researcher's institution also offers remote internships, depending on the student's program as permitted by the accrediting body for that profession.

Findings

Participants

Participants in this study (N=34) were human services students, human services faculty, fieldwork coordinators, and practitioners who were members of the NOHS (see [Table 1](#)). All participants had some experience with remote internships. Sixty-five percent ($n=22$) said their college or agency offered remote internships because of the pandemic, and 32% ($n=11$) are currently involved with remote internships.

The following section presents the results of questions five through nine which were individually analyzed. The themes that emerged are presented, along with direct quotations from participants.

Strengths

When asked what participants consider to be the strengths of remote human services internships, they described general benefits of being able to work from home such as it being “safe,” “comfortable,” “convenient,” and “less stressful.” Students shared how they are “better able to focus” at home and like how virtual internships provide them the “ability to do it on my own time.” Three main strengths of remote internships emerged including flexibility, cost efficiency, and skill building.

Flexibility

Half of the participants ($n=17$) identified flexibility as a strength of remote internships. This was especially emphasized by the student participants (85% of student responses identified flexibility as a strength). Participants described the importance of being able to have flexible hours, especially when balancing full-time work and family responsibilities. This flexibility also applied to the opportunity to complete fieldwork experiences at locations not bound by geographical locations. Remote internships provide the option for students to “have the opportunity to conduct their internships wherever they are.” A graduate faculty member shared an example of how this remote option was offered to students who wanted to complete an internship in their hometown (not located close to the university). Other students expanded further on this idea:

I was a non-traditional student and have almost 20 years of experience working in human services and work as a supervisor for a local government agency. The option for a remote internship allowed me flexibility to fulfill the requirements of my graduate degree while working full-time.

As a student, I’ve seen there are very few “traditional” student experiences taking place. We all have homes, families, jobs, but we are all working to better ourselves and our communities. Remote internships gave us an opportunity to continue our education without impacting financial stability, or forcing us to choose between family and internship. Remote internships are inexplicably important in modern society. It promotes equality of access and opportunity, and that is what human services is all about.

Cost-Effective

Twenty-four percent of participants ($n=8$) mentioned remote internships were cost-effective in various ways. This included saving money on transportation and gas (also a greener option), childcare, and clothing. Some participants also shared that virtual internships allowed for them to continue to work at their full or part-time job. For example, a fieldwork coordinator writes that remote internships are “usually less financially straining for

students, as they don't have to travel or cut back on work hours to perform the duties of the internship." Student participants echo this sentiment in the responses, "I didn't have to worry about transportation costs and having access to a reliable vehicle" and "It helped me personally because I share transportation with my husband and would not have been able to travel if the internship was in person."

Skill Building

Seventeen percent of participants believed ($n=6$) that virtual internships provided unique opportunities for skill building. Faculty noted these skills included communication skills, telehealth skills, as well as "critical thinking and problem-solving skills to address issues in research or understanding, rather than depending on an in-person mentor to immediately address and solve potential issues." A higher level of engagement with clients and time management skills were also mentioned.

Challenges

While there are many benefits of remote internships, there are also challenges. When asked about the challenges participants faced with remote human services internships, the most notable challenge was the lack of opportunity for in-person interactions. Other less-frequently noted challenges included delayed response time with communication and emails ($n=2$), technological difficulties ($n=3$), finding high quality remote internship opportunities ($n=2$), and time management ($n=2$).

Lack of In-person Interactions

Sixty percent of participants ($n=20$) identified the lack of opportunity for in-person interactions when completing a remote internship was the biggest challenge with remote internships. While a lack of in-person client interactions was most noted, in-person interactions with colleagues and supervisors were also mentioned. Both students and faculty expanded further on these challenges, "independent work with less direct contact and guidance from the field instructor" and "having a responsive site supervisor that helps lead and manage the intern"

Participants felt it was more difficult to build relationships and rapport virtually. Some participants also had specific beliefs around this challenge such as "limited or no personal interaction, getting clients to provide the proper documentation and being able to show them what is required," "poor networking," and "lack of feeling connected." Faculty shared similar concerns, "Limited hands on work and relationship skill development for students who, at this stage in their careers are learning what is expected and traditionally done in person" and "They do not allow for personal interaction, and students did not find them rewarding. Site supervisors were mostly unable to create high quality internships that were remote."

Role of Remote Internships in a Post-COVID World

Currently, 74% ($n=14$) of faculty and fieldwork coordinators (one faculty member is retired and not currently aware of the program's offerings) shared that they plan on continuing to offer remote internships as an option for students in the future. In response to the question, *What role, if any, do you think remote human services internships will play in a post-COVID world?* responses varied, but overall 71% of participants believed that remote internships would play a significant role in a post-COVID world. This seemed to be especially true from the student perspective. Students shared the following:

Giving all students an equal chance to pursue their field education hours. Many students can't take off work, or travel to locations. Many of my classmates couldn't get childcare for their internship hours. Remote experiences level those barriers and give those students equal chance to pursuing this education.

I think it's a part of the new normal, opens up opportunities for people who would not have them without remote work. For example, those like me who don't have reliable transportation. One of the other people I interned with had a disability and didn't drive as well. It will bring people together who otherwise wouldn't cross paths.

Several faculty members also supported why they believe that remote internships will be a significant part of a post-COVID world, "Many agencies have maintained remote work due to cost savings thus will still offer remote opportunities which will allow working students more options fitting their schedules" and "Our new reality is that virtual/remote learning experiences will mirror the job market, so there will always be a need for remote internship sites. That will diminish overtime but remote/virtual will not go away." A practitioner confirmed, "Huge role, as we have gotten use to the convenience of remote working and in bigger cities it is more cost effective for the employer and the employee. Additionally, work life satisfaction is higher."

While most participants believed that remote internships would continue in a post-COVID world, others are not so sure. Twenty-one percent ($n=7$) of participants did not know how or if remote internships will play a role in the field. Undergraduate faculty wrote "I think some will stick with it. We are already seeing that. But I think that mainly, there will be in person experience with many opting to offer remote options" and "My students do not want them, so I don't see them as having a role in my program moving forward."

Additional Participant Insights

Participants had the opportunity to share any additional information about remote internships. Responses expanded on strengths and challenges previously noted providing further insight. One practitioner shared, "Today's

world is full of too many stresses and thus, remote working should continue to grow, as it promotes better life balance, less resources for the employee and employer and curbs environmental pollution.” Echoing the positive aspects of remote internships, one student shared, “We need more of them. We need evening hours, weekend hours, remote hours. We need to re-evaluate what the education experience looks like in a modern post-pandemic society and adapt so that all students can seek and obtain these opportunities.”

Concerns about students building communication skills and “losing the ability to deal with real-life people” were reiterated in several responses. One faculty member stated, “I believe there is an appropriate time and place for remote and virtual work, but best practice standards would best be met through in person contact within the home or community.” Concerns about inequities were shared in the response, “I think if we are going to this, then we need to do a better job to ensure that clientele not only have access to internet and devices to use for remote services, but that there is training by HS agencies so that they know how. In many ways, going remote creates yet another privilege for some and excludes others from services.” Even with a hybrid internship model there are concerns, “They should continue to work; they just need careful management. The other question is in-person internships if the organization is hybrid - that creates the same challenge of connection to others, especially potential mentors and career coaches.”

Discussion

The purpose of this follow-up study was to gain insight into the current thoughts about the role of remote internships in the human services field. When looking at how views towards remote internships change from the former study, perspectives on the role of remote human services internships continue to be mixed (Kras & Keenan, 2022). In the former study a little over a third of participants were planning on offering remote internships in the future and over half were not sure (Kras & Keenan, 2022). A year and a half later in the current study, seventy-four percent of faculty and fieldwork coordinators shared that they planned on continuing to offer remote internships as an option for students in the future, even if on a limited basis. While comparatively there seems to be a wider acceptance or at least offering of remote internships, there were still many concerns. A lack of in-person interactions with both clients and colleagues was the most frequently noted challenge in both studies (Kras & Keenan, 2022). Even with the advancement of telecommunication offerings, some participants did not believe that this is enough, and they are not alone (Kodjebacheva et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2022; Rasnača et al., 2023).

Changes in Perceptions of Work-from-Home

One noted difference in the current study is that overall responses shared participants’ preferences of working from a home environment using adjectives such as “safe,” “comfortable,” “convenient,” and “less stressful.” Participants shared how they were able to focus better at home and were

able to have confidential conversations with clients. Participants shared how they liked not having to worry about the stress of having to be in-person at an agency. These responses differed from the previous study (Kras & Keenan, 2022) where participants had concerns about lack of privacy and interruptions from family and pets, as well as technological issues when completing their internship from home. This shift in experience may be due to an increased adaptation of working from home and family members returning to their in-person obligations, making for a more conducive home working environment.

The most frequently identified strength of remote internships that has remained steady in both studies is the flexibility that virtual internships making it more feasible to balance family and work responsibilities while also providing a more cost effective and equitable option for students (Hruska et al., 2022; Kras & Keenan, 2022). Flexibility is an important factor that people are seeking in both work and educational experiences (Adekoya et al., 2022; Ewing, 2021; Pataki-Bittó & Kapusy, 2021; Whalley et al., 2021). Post-pandemic, people are demonstrating varied work preferences ranging from fully remote to fully in-person, with variations of a hybrid model somewhere in-between (Caligiuri & De Cieri, 2021; Smite et al., 2023).

Call for Change in Higher Education

The call for change in higher education is also being observed (Guppy et al., 2022; Marmolejo & Groccia, 2022). As Ewing (2021) shares, “The pandemic has awakened and enabled opportunities for exploration and change around teaching/learning innovation. But is it enough? Will the sector reinvent itself, or wait for the dust to settle and then revert back to the ways of the past?” (p.50). It is important for human services faculty to consider how higher education, as well the field of human services, have been altered post-pandemic and work to find ways to best prepare future human services professionals.

Human services programs have the responsibility to provide students robust and supportive internship opportunities. As human services education programs assess remote and hybrid internships models as viable options for their students, there is a need to identify best practices in the implementation and support of these learning opportunities. One example is to have students participate in role play exercises that provide them the opportunity to practice virtual client interactions while utilizing their technological training (Kras & Keenan, 2022). While remote internship may have been quickly developed in response to pandemic-related restrictions, it is hoped that programs will be able to re-evaluate the multiple aspects of this type of internship offering. Drawn from the *Online Work-Integrated Learning Placements and Projects Guide*, programs should engage in strategies such as employing good pedagogical practice, guiding students on workplace etiquette, working safely from home, and assisting students in managing information and becoming cyber-security smart (Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2020, p. 2). In addition, establishing clear expectations and communication plans

that are shared with all stakeholders, providing support in addition to the immediate supervisor, creating a daily schedule and structured workflow for students, and providing mentoring opportunities are important considerations for developing remote experiences (Irwin et al., 2022; Maietta & Gardner, 2022). The field of human services education should continue to explore best practices in remote internships to ensure students are receiving the support they need.

The Hybrid Model

While the idea of a hybrid internship model (Hruska et al., 2022; Michel et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022) was previously discussed as a viable model (Kras & Keenan, 2022), there was little mention of it from the current study participants. A hybrid fieldwork model offers human services education programs an additional type of internship opportunity that may address some of the challenges noted of fully remote internships, but that can also offer the benefits discussed. As with any successful internship experience, communication and a strong relationship between human services education programs and partner agencies is essential. Future research should identify best practices in executing both remote and hybrid internship models and assess how well this model supports student and program learning outcomes.

Limitations

A limitation of the current study is that the findings are based on a small, self-selected sample size using self-reported responses. Future studies should seek to recruit a larger sample of participants to provide their perspectives on remote internships. These studies should also include quantitative data comparing the outcomes associated with the different internship modalities and assessment of course and program learning outcomes.

Conclusion

As the field of human services and institutions of higher education continue to navigate a post-pandemic world it is essential to assess and best meet the current needs of all stakeholders involved including clients and students. For some, in-person experiences are the preferred modality, for others a remote environment may work best, and for some a combination of both may be ideal. Findings from the current study provide insight into the importance of flexibility and preference of some to be to work from home in a post-pandemic world. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of access to quality remote internships for students for whom traveling would be a barrier, perhaps expanding upon those who may enter the human services field. Being flexible, while also implementing best practices in the field and classroom is vital. Continued research on how to best support varied modalities of fieldwork experiences in human services is needed.

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