Weeks into higher education’s forced shift into a virtual mode around March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, popular and practitioner media started being flooded with predictions that the situation will permanently alter the learning landscape in colleges toward a more virtual mode. (Kim, 2020; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). While much attention has been given to the shift of formal classes to delivery over Zoom and similar platforms, the field of Adult Education & Human Resource Development (AEHRD) should not ignore the concurrent shift of internships to a virtual mode. Many practitioners in the field work with internships, whether in a university career services role, the talent development team of an employer, or third-party roles such as placement services and reskilling programs.

Virtual internships emerged long before the current pandemic, though the closing of physical worksites created virtual opportunities in organizations where they had never existed before. This is significant because virtual internships can help interns to obtain work experience with employers of their choice despite their location, potential disabilities that may place limits on their mobility and other (family or employment) obligations. This is in line with greater attention paid to nontraditional students returning to education and those individuals who have been disadvantaged in the past due to their individual mobility, financial or family responsibilities (Jeske & Axtell, 2014). This practitioner perspective piece will provide an overview of the current situation as caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Perspectives are provided by research on virtual internships in general as informed by political theories of space and place.

Scholar-Practitioner Perspective

I am currently the Associate Director of the Office of Governmental Relations in Washington, D.C. for Florida International University, the public research university in Miami; I am also a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education program there. In my practitioner role, I manage the university’s Washington, D.C. internship program and have been personally responding to the current pandemic’s effects on our students who were already in Washington interning in the spring semester and those who had planned to come in the sum-
mer and fall. This has included developing policies related to program-related travel to and housing in Washington, identifying organizations who are offering virtual internships, and working with partner organizations to collaboratively develop and fund new virtual internships.

**The Situation on the Ground: Spring & Summer 2020**

By the first week of March 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the United States were clear and a majority of universities and other office environments were transitioning to remote work and learning. Students with Spring internships were either able to work from home, along with the permanent staff, or had their internships abruptly ended (Muller, 2020). It became apparent that summer and fall internships would be affected as well, a grave concern as summer is popularly known as the main semester in which learners seek internships. Nearly a quarter of employers nationally are known to have cancelled their summer internship programs, including major companies such as Yelp, Disney, Geico, American Airlines, and NPR (Moreno, 2020; Lumpkin, 2020; Yaffe-Bellany, 2020).

Several initiatives out of university career services offices, third-party internship providers, software companies, and nonprofits quickly emerged to try to save internships through facilitating virtual experiences. Some universities began to promote “micro-internships,” where interns work on small tasks on their own schedule rather than committing to the schedule, term length, and responsibilities of a traditional internship (Lumpkin, 2020). Internship providers have started to research and adopt of software products, such as Symba, to better manage intern work remotely (Lumpkin, 2020). In the nonprofit realm, the Intern Relief Fund was launched to provide financial support to financially insecure students who had been relying on funds from canceled internships (Save Internships, n.d.). In the DC-specific context, organizations hosting fully-virtual Summer 2020 internship programs include the Charles Koch Institute, the Partnership for Public Service, the Government Accountability Office, and large government contractor Mitre Corporation (personal communications). Yet, with so little time for such a significant transition, and despite the fact that some organizations had successfully launched virtual internship programs in past years, concerns were persistent about the quality of virtual internships and whether interns could possibly engage in sufficient networking and informal learning such as observing office culture and professional norms (McGregor, 2020; Moreno, 2020).

**What is an Internship?**

No one standard definition of an internship is consistently followed by all companies, organizations, and universities. In fact, “the very significance of the word intern lies in its ambiguity,” argues Ross Perlin, who also cites Natalie Lundsteen’s overly general definition of an internship as “any experience of the world of work from which a student can learn about a career.” (Perlin, 2011, p. 23-24). The National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE) is the professional organization for university career services and a policy leader on internships from a legal and pedagogical standpoint. They define an internship as: “a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting” (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2018).

**What is a Virtual Internship?**

Virtual internships can help interns to obtain work experience with employers of their choice despite their location, potential disabilities that may place limits on their mobility and other (e.g., family or employment) obligations. Benefits to employers include accessing such talent from outside of their geographical region and being able to take on more interns than their space would normally permit. The main differences that they find in virtual internships are in the realm of communication, and even here they state that “e-internships have been praised for providing excellent opportunities for practicing and enhancing communication skills” (Jeske & Axtell, 2014, p. 462). This opportunity does emerge from the need to effectively adapt to the challenges of remote communication, such as team members being spread across time zones and needing to take extra measures to ensure team members are emotionally connected and feel supported while communicating solely via computer.

**Decisions Facing Practitioners**

AEHRD practitioners with any involvement with internship programming are currently wrangling with many tough decisions regarding internships for Fall 2020 and beyond. First and foremost, internship administrators
on both the college and employer sides must determine whether internship programs will be postponed or offered fully, and when in-person internships under their auspices will be offered again. These decisions are not always coordinated between employer and universities, due to the variety of configurations that exist for university involvement in internships.

Most commonly, the three modes of university involvement in internships are where the university requires an internship and places the student, where the university requires an internship but the student determines the placement, and where the internship is voluntary and the university plays no role. Variations exist among this spectrum, including when a university does not require an internship but does offer credit for one, or engages in hosting a platform for employers to post internships. Legal precedent indicates that the university’s level of involvement in the placement correlates to their level of responsibility (Edwards et al., 2018). Accordingly, the decisions made by universities may have varying levels of legal implications.

College administrators who want to discourage student participation in in-person internships, even ones that are not controlled in any way by the university, may impose travel restrictions or refuse to offer academic credit. On the inverse, schools who have only offered academic credit or scholarships to students completing in-person internships must decide if they will support virtual internships to the same degree or encourage students to wait until in-person internships are deemed safe. For example, the University of Maryland has updated COVID internship procedures which indicate that virtual internships are eligible for credit, establishing best practices for virtual internships, and clarifying that the university is not a party to any internship for which a student is not receiving credit (University of Maryland, 2020).

Decisions about offering in-person internship programs must be based on a variety of complicated factors, many of which are new to internship program practitioners; these concerns are amplified for those of us managing programs which move interns across the country as opposed to internships occurring in the same geographical region as our main campuses and students. Some considerations include: the current trajectory of COVID-19 cases in the region(s) served by the internship program, and the development of social distancing, sanitation, and isolation procedures for internship sites, classrooms, and housing facilities. An individual practitioner is unlikely to have direct control over all of these factors, as interns are often placed at a variety of employers each of which will have their own COVID-19-related plans. Additionally, concern has been raised about the accuracy of official state statistics on COVID-19 cases, such as in my home state of Florida where critics, including a terminated state employee, has accused officials of undercounting cases, creating uncertainty about these decisions being made on reliable data (Wamsley, 2020).

Depending on the structure of the program, interns may live in various housing providers as well. For both ethical responsibility and legal liability purposes, internship administrators at the college level should remain as informed as possible about the COVID procedures at individual work and housing sites. The complexity of tracking this data and making these decisions is complicated further by the fluidity of the situation. For example, at the onset of the pandemic, one prominent housing provider in the Washington, D.C., which caters exclusively to interns, announced that upon signing a lease, residents must submit a plan for where they would isolate if they contracted COVID-19, as it would not be permitted for residents with the virus to remain in this housing provider’s facilities. This policy was retracted several weeks later, after members of the local higher education community expressed concern about its compliance with local housing and federal health privacy law, though it is indicative of the complicated and rapidly changing set of considerations facing AEHRD practitioners in the internship space.

**Why Support Virtual Internships?**

This article does not purport to provide guidance or a stance on the re-opening of in-person internships. The physicality of internships, especially those with a place-based connection to a city, such as a Congressional internship in Washington, D.C., is a vital component of the overall intern experience and I look forward to the return of in-person internships. Rather, here I argue that virtual internships deserve support both as an alternative to the outright cancellation of programs during the current public health emergency, and that these online internships deserve further study beyond this emergency calculation. On one hand, the permanent continuation of virtual internships could add great value to DC internship programs especially in terms of access and equity. The fact that “available placements in a student’s field of interest or study may not match their own geographical location” is “particularly challenging for students from low social-economic backgrounds, students with care giving responsibilities, disabled students, and online students located in rural and remote loca-
tions” (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018, p. 30), all of which are compounded when an internship is unpaid. Virtual internships may not only provide access to a work experience to students in these situations, they could provide work preparation above and beyond traditional internship for the “likely propensity for computer-mediated graduate work environments,” specifically, “being able to present ideas, concepts, and work products in a computer-mediated environment” (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018, p. 31.).

Space and Place

Teleworking, including virtual internships, take place in cyberspace. It’s worth reviewing some literature on the geographical and political theory of cyberspace to add context to the analysis of this issue. The “geographical self” is “the nature of the human subject who is oriented and situated in place” (Casey, 2001, p. 683). Traditional interns are a sort of geographical selves: humans who are not only learning through an educational work experience, but are doing though from a certain place, which is an “immediate environment of my lived body” (Casey, 2001, p. 683).

Yet, place is distinguished from space or, “the encompassing volumetric void in which things are positioned” (Casey, 2001, p. 683); some advance a postmodern view that place is becoming indistinguishable from space, partly because any “given locale is linked to every other place in global space, pre-eminently by the Internet” (Casey, 2001, p. 684).

Geographers such as Kitchin (1998) have explored the effect of cyberspace on place since the earlier days of the Internet; he presents two contrasting views from that time: that cyberspace is a complete annihilation of place (where a user logs on from does not matter; users are accepted for their thoughts via the written word only), or that place is still largely consequential in cyberspace (access to Internet speeds varies, laws of varying jurisdictions govern what information is allowed to be used and shared). Both viewpoints lend relevance to the concept of virtual internships. The idea that “you are accepted on the basis of your written words, not […] where you live” could be applied to the potential access to internship positions regardless of the location of the applicant (p. 387). Indeed, “the very speed with which we can now cross space (by air, on screen, through cultural flows) would seem to imply that space doesn’t matter any more,” as in cyberspace, those who were far away were now very evidently near” (Massey, 2005, p. 92).

Training for the Future of (Tele)work.

It would be faulty, however, to frame the question simply as whether virtual internships are an acceptable substitute for training students for future jobs that take place within an office, because recent data show that 43 percent of Americans work from home at least occasionally, five percent work completely at home, and 82 percent want to work from home at least occasionally (Hess, 2019). With telework on the rise, virtual internships may provide training for virtual careers that require remote working skills and experiences that place-based internships lack. Taking a more DC-specific look, The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 started the trend of federal agencies implementing telework programs over the past 10 years. Forty two percent of federal employees are eligible for telework, and 22 percent of federal employees participate in telework (51 percent of eligible employees). This does not mean that these employees work from home daily or even on a routine basis; 45 percent of the teleworking federal employees do so on a situational rather than routine basis; 34 percent telework 3 or more days per week, routinely.

Representation in Government and Industry

Speaking to the DC-specific context with which I am most familiar, the impact of access to Washington, D.C. internships during college has a significance beyond simply the educational experience or career future of individual students. Analysis by Burgat & Billing (2019) indicates that alumni specific universities and types of universities (schools located in Washington, D.C. and Ivy League schools) dominate Congressional staffs, and that “many of the schools that make the list of top per capita institutions [for alumni working in Congress] have strong DC-based internship programs, which […] ultimately lower the barrier to entry for becoming Hill staffers” (para. 9). Getting this right is significant not only to the educational experiences of college students seeking internships, but to the representative composition of the governmental and nongovernmental organizations which determine the policies of our democracy. While I have a particular passion for internships that directly tie in with democratic practices, representation in and access to careers in all sectors including business
are important. Similarly, internships and all sectors and in all cities, especially when paid, provide such access, and cancelling them, rather than providing virtual options, is detrimental to such representation and access.

Ultimately, each decision made by employers and universities have a great impact on the opportunities available to college students and may impact their timely graduation and finances. In the bigger picture, the extent to which universities and employers make virtual internships available during and after the pandemic is an issue of access and equity, as interns enter career pipelines without geographic and financial barriers. While practitioners grapple with the complex legal and pedagogical decisions around virtual internships which may seem prohibitive, it is possible to responsibly embrace this format for mutually beneficial outcomes.

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