VSFS

VIRTUAL STUDENT FEDERAL SERVICE

Mentor Handbook

Updated July 2024

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Introduction

Since launching in 2009, the VSFS program has been a powerful recruitment tool for public service and has supported some of the federal government's highest priorities, including workforce modernization and strengthening the American workforce.

Mentors play a critical role in the program's success by guiding interns and implementing well-structured internship plans. VSFS also offers a unique opportunity for mentors to develop their leadership and other professional and interpersonal skills.

This handbook provides detailed information and resources to support you as a mentor. But a few simple practices will ensure a successful experience for you and your intern(s):

Set expectations. Draft and implement a plan for your intern(s) including tasks, deadlines, and work schedules. Meet with your intern(s) to discuss and get their input.

Practice regular and clear communication. Confirm early on how and when you will communicate, including one-on-one check-ins, team meetings, and how to reach you impromptu.

Stay on top of internship logistics and mentor responsibilities. As a mentor, it is your responsibility to ensure that your project stays on track, that you communicate regularly with your intern(s), and that you fulfill all technical requirements on the Open Opportunities platform.

Open emails from program staff. The primary means that program staff have to communicate important program information and deadlines to mentors across the interagency is through email.

Take mentoring seriously. Mentors often play a life-changing role in an intern's professional life. Embrace your role as a mentor and promote your intern's professional development beyond their daily tasks.

Preparing for the Internship

The most important thing you can do before your intern starts is to have a plan.

Create a plan outlining tasks, deadlines, and communication methods. A clearly defined plan sets expectations and ensures accountability. Plans can be simple or complex but experience has proven that they are central to the success of virtual internships, along with regular communication.

Note that a template draft plan is available to VSFS mentors. If DOS, the template is available on the VSFS Project Mentors Teams channel. If another agency, please contact **vsfs@state.gov** and request the draft plan. You should also have a back-up mentor and everyone should have each other's contact information.

Before your virtual intern starts:
- Negotiate and confirm a start date with your intern(s).
- Exchange bios with each other.
- Circulate the intern's bio and/or LinkedIn profile and do the same for the various members of your office.
- Solicit input from the intern(s) for their plan, including:
  - Professional development goals.
  - What they expect to get out of the internship.
  - Availability, especially hours a week, days/times, and school schedule (classes, midterms, finals) for planning purposes.
  - How you will communicate (email, Discord, etc.) for regularly scheduled events like one-on-ones as well as impromptu communication, for example if an intern needs an extension on a task.
- Determine a collaborative space to share documents, such as Google drive, and/or use a task tracking program, like Trello.

Your intern(s) may contact you before their start date for a courtesy call. This is a great opportunity for an informal conversation to get to know each other and get a sense of your intern's goals and expectations for the internship.

Starting the Internship

Start out by scheduling a one-on-one meeting during your intern's first week to review the draft plan. This is a critical step to set clear expectations and learn about your intern's interests and goals so you as a mentor can support them as appropriate. Encourage your intern to provide feedback so the plan is collaborative.

Walk through the plan with your intern(s) and ask questions along the way. Additional topics you may wish to cover in this first conversation include:
- Your office's mission and how it supports the work of your agency.
- Common goals you both share.
- The extent to which you will offer guidance on tasks.
- Intern interests, skills, and expertise that they can offer.
- Your background:
  - Your career path and how long you have been with your office.
  - What you enjoy most about your current position.
  - Why you wanted to become a mentor.
- Any questions or concerns.

Finishing the Internship

Bringing a VSFS internship to a successful conclusion is one of your most important responsibilities as a mentor.

There are three main steps involved:

- Confirm the last day for your intern(s) and schedule an end of the year review. A VSFS evaluation template is available for your use and will be distributed via mentor newsletters towards the end of the program. If DOS, the template is also available on the VSFS Project Mentors Teams channel. Otherwise contact VSFS program staff at **VSFS@state.gov** for the template.
- Close out your project in Open Opportunities. See how-to screenshots below. **You must close out your project in Open Opportunities in order for your intern(s) to receive a certificate of completion.** Once you close out the project, Open Opportunities will generate a certificate which the intern(s) can access through their dashboard.
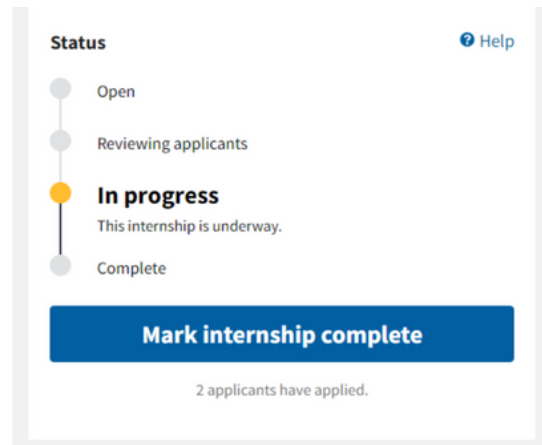
First mark the circle "Mark Tasks Complete" beside your intern's name:
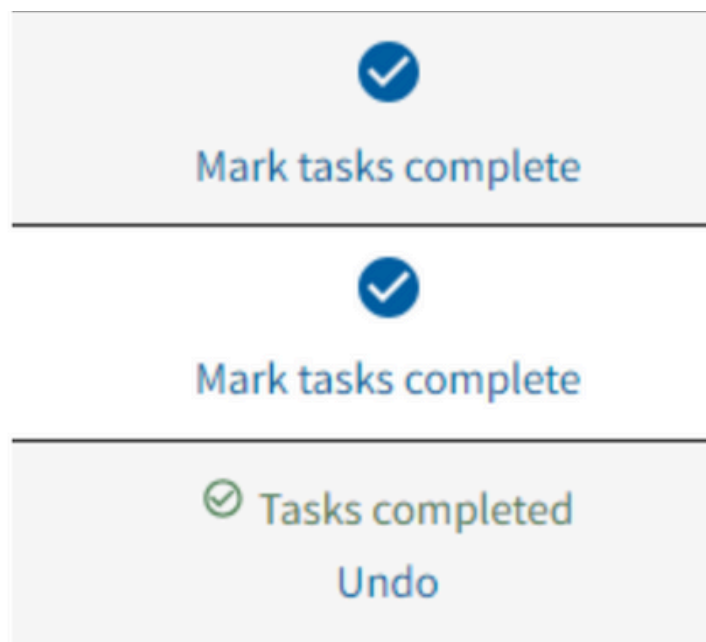
Finishing the Internship - Cont'd

Next, after you mark "Mark Tasks Complete," you must "Mark Internship Complete:"

This button will be grayed out until you "Mark Tasks Complete" for your intern(s).
All interns with an internship marked as complete will receive a certificate. Adjust the intern's status on the Open Opportunities platform if they were unable to complete the internship. If you mark them complete, they will get a certificate.

Additional resources for project close out in Open Opportunities:
- **Step-by-step instructions: How to complete and close out an opportunity or internship**
- **Video: How to complete an internship**

3. Provide a letter of recommendation for your intern(s) if appropriate. A strong reference letter can validate your intern's skills and experience and make them more competitive. Reference letters also can increase confidence and solidify the intern's relationship with you/your office. You may also endorse your intern(s) on LinkedIn or send a letter of appreciation from a senior official.

Virtual Intern Awards

Consider nominating your intern(s) for a Virtual Intern Award (VIA). These annual awards honor the hard work and dedication of program participants. Award categories include Mentor of the Year, Intern Cohort of the Year, and Intern of the Year. A call for nominations will go out towards the end of the program cycle and top selections of awardees are made by an interagency panel. For the 2023-24 program, the **Robertson Foundation for Government** provided cash awards for the Intern of the Year winners. The VIAs are announced at an award ceremony celebrating the completion of the program cycle and commending the work of all participants.
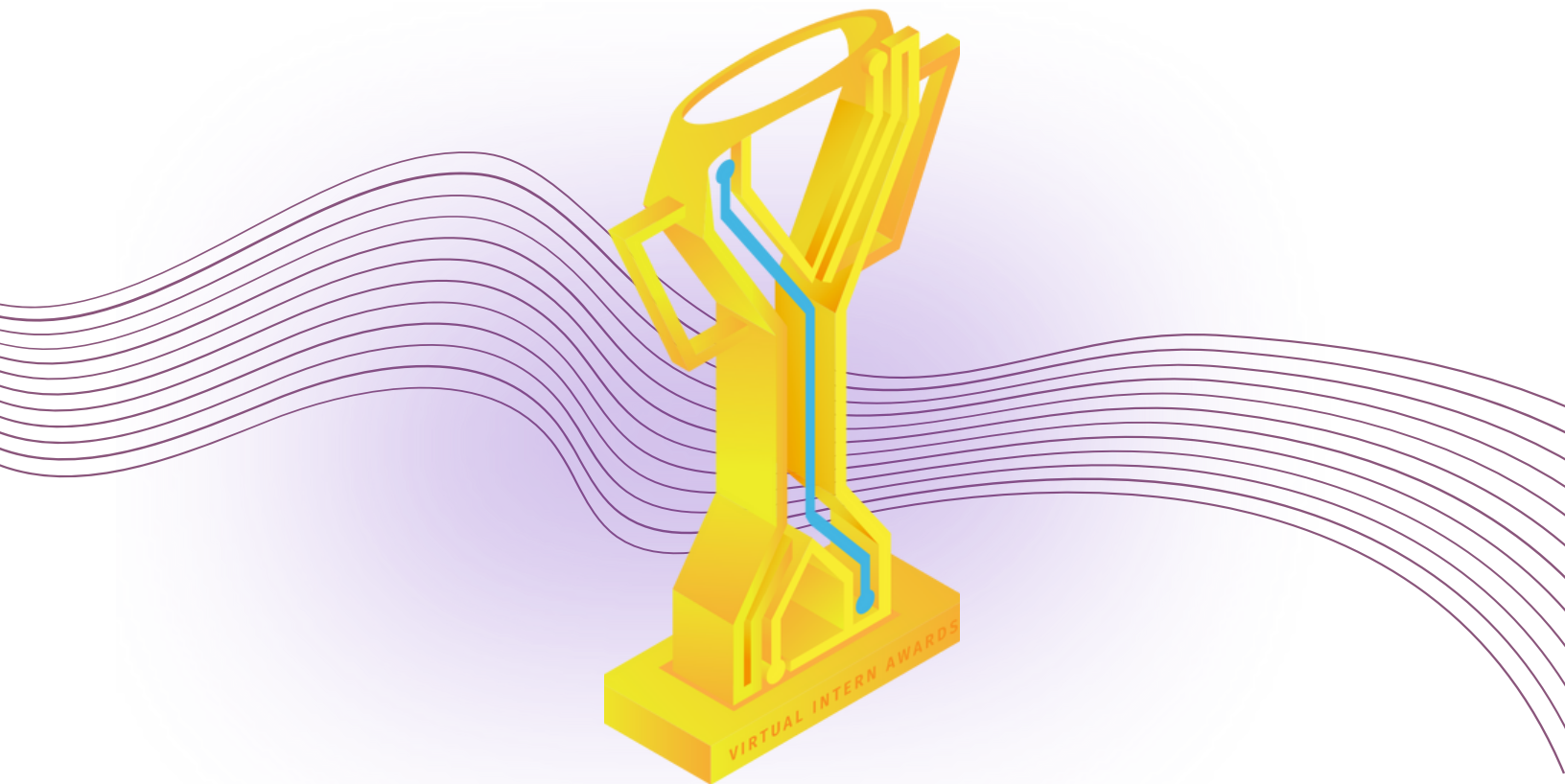
Mentoring Beyond Supervising

Push your own boundaries and expand your professional and leadership skills by stepping up as a mentor.

Mentors can have a life-changing impact on interns' professional goals and trajectory - and vice versa. The best mentor and intern collaborations are where both parties gain new skills and perspectives from the experience.

- **Facilitate networking and mentoring opportunities** within your team and across the interagency for your intern. Focus on connecting your intern(s) with contacts who align with their interests and add value to their intern experience and future career plans.

- **Offer to critique your intern's resume, practice interviewing**, or give feedback on their LinkedIn profile. Encourage your intern(s) to reach out to other agency officials or leadership to learn more about their work while sharpening their interpersonal skills.

- **Integrate virtual interns seamlessly into your team**. Despite years of remote work, it is still common to unintentionally overlook virtual colleagues during meetings. Break this pattern and actively engage VSFS interns in meetings on their valuable contributions.

- **Stay engaged with the VSFS Program Team**. Program staff plan events and host professional development opportunities for VSFS interns throughout the academic year so stay informed and look for invites to share with your interns.

- **Reach out to other student intern programs** and proactively seek ways to support your VSFS intern's interests and goals beyond their project tasks. Flag agency speaker events or activities for your intern and share with the VSFS program team and the VSFS community when possible.

- **Provide resources about federal careers at your agency**. For the State Department, this includes directing interns to contact the **Diplomats in Residence** for their school.

Recognize that mentoring is a tailored experience.
What resonated with one intern might not with another.

VSFS Mentors: Best Practices

Supervising your intern:

- Explain what you are doing, how you are doing it, and why you are doing it. For many interns, this is their first experience with federal service so the additional context about where they fit into things is critical for their understanding and performance.
- Engage interns when formulating tasks and project parameters. Get their ideas.
- Build interns' independence by encouraging trouble-shooting and problem-solving. Do not solve all challenges for the intern; let them take ownership of their work.
- Provide interns with a variety of responsibilities and opportunities to stretch their skills. Review progress on a regular basis.
- Have a plan to transition mentor responsibilities to another mentor if you are leaving the office before the internship is complete; have a backup mentor ready to support when you are out.
- For mentors with large intern cohorts, consider empowering an experienced intern or graduate student to assist with supervision.

Deadlines:

- Specify where there is flexibility and where there is not (for example, a conference).
- Ask your intern(s) to create a shared calendar where deadlines are visible and where you both can view scheduling highlights such as vacations.
- Determine how to prioritize tasks if interns are supporting multiple efforts.
- When leading up to a firm deadline, check-in to make sure interns are on track.

VSFS Mentors: Best Practices - Cont'd

Performance:

- Check in regularly with interns throughout the year; provide consistent feedback and schedule a more formal mid-year check-in.
- Talk to an intern if they are falling behind on their tasks. Sometimes interns encounter unexpected issues, such as an illness or financial hardship. Adjust their workload if possible. If you have tried several times to contact your intern in multiple ways and have not received a response within a reasonable timeframe, let us know at **vsfs@state.gov**. We will work with you and your intern to try and resolve the situation.
- Adjust the intern's status on the Open Opportunities platform if they are unable to complete the internship. Interns sometimes do not complete the program for a wide variety of reasons. It is important that the platform reflects any change in status. If an office needs to discontinue an internship, it is a best practice to document this communication to the intern in an email and CC **vsfs@state.gov** on the email.

VSFS Community:

- Follow VSFS on social media. If appropriate, submit content for an intern highlight or nominate your intern(s) for a Virtual Intern Award at the end of the program. Award categories include Intern of the Year or Intern Cohort of the Year. VSFS program staff will solicit nominations towards the end of the program cycle.
- Attend program information sessions organized by VSFS program staff.
- Connect with other VSFS mentors at your agency. At DOS, engage with the VSFS Project Mentors Teams Channel.

VSFS Mentors: Best Practices - Cont'd

Things to avoid:

- **Not responding to communication in a timely manner.**
  - Interns expect to hear from you on a timely and regular basis.
- **Constantly re-scheduling calls/not communicating regularly with your intern(s).**
  - Show respect for your intern(s). Make time for your intern(s) just as they make time for their internship.
- **Just providing solutions.**
  - View the internship as a growth opportunity for both you and the intern(s). Advise or identify resources to assist the intern to make their own decisions.
- **Offering "personal" counseling or life coaching** that is not related to professional or personal development.

VSFS Internship Life Cycle

VSFS interns commit to work a minimum of 10 hours per week on projects from September to May. A time commitment of more than 10 hours per week must be negotiated and agreed upon, preferably in writing, between the intern and mentor.

January
Mentors submit projects

February
Students apply to projects

March/April
Mentors review applications and conduct interviews

April/May
Offer letters go out

September
Internships begin

December
Mid-year check in

Early April
End of year evaluation

May
Internships conclude

FAQs

Q: I would like to add a colleague to review applicants for my project. How do I do this?

A: If your colleague does NOT already have a VSFS USAJobs Open Opportunities account:

- Please read this **Login.gov FAQ** if you don't already have a USAJOBS account or wish to create a new account for your VSFS internship.
- Don't forget to verify your .gov/.mil email via automated message from Open Opportunities. This step is easy to miss.
- Join the Open Opportunities VSFS Community using your new USAJOBS account.
- A co-mentor can now be added to the project.

Q: Can interns access Sensitive But Unclassified (SBU) information? Do they have access to internal networks? Can they have a .gov/.mil email address?

A: Interns do not have security clearances or background checks unless your agency took this additional step. As a result, they must only work on unclassified projects. Interns are not employees. In general, interns are not given access to internal networks and are not provisioned a .gov/.mil email address unless your agency provides for this.

Q: My intern would like to use the content they created for us as part of their online portfolio. Is that okay?

A: Yes, interns can credit their work as being done as part of the VSFS program for your office and agency.

Q: Is there a student intern handbook similar to this one?

A: Yes, an intern handbook is available and shared with all interns.

Q: What if there is a complaint regarding discrimination or sexual harassment?

A: Discrimination and sexual harassment will not be tolerated. If you have concerns about either, notify your Office for Civil Rights or the equivalent as soon as possible and the VSFS Internship Program Manager, via **vsfs@state.gov**.

FAQs

Q: Can my student continue beyond May or start before August?

A: The VSFS Program has always been a 9-month program and the system we use to track participant data does not support interns working with mentors outside of the nine month September-May timeframe. This is important because the VSFS Program Team cannot manage internships or confirm participation outside of the standard nine month period.

However, we are aware that mentors, in collaboration with their leadership, have informally worked with interns over the summer. For example, an intern who completed one cycle and will be rejoining the same office for the next cycle. If you choose to start working with your VSFS intern over the summer, consider a supplemental agreement during this time that includes:

- Confirmation that the independent volunteer internship is unpaid and not part of the VSFS program
- Start and completion dates
- Number of hours per week
- List of tasks

Offices that wish to work with an independent volunteer intern should follow their own approval and implementation protocols; VSFS program staff do not engage with approvals or other processes for interns outside the VSFS program.

The VSFS agreement that mentors and interns have signed for the 2024-25 academic year takes effect in September 2024. VSFS internship start dates are flexible and may depend on mentor or intern schedules. Projects should start no later than the Monday after Labor Day unless other arrangements have been made. Orientation can begin in August.

FAQs

Q. If my intern is in town, is it ok for me to meet with them?

A. Yes, it is fine to meet with interns in-person when there is an opportunity to do so.

Q. Can students receive academic credits for participating in a VSFS internship? What do I do if my intern asks me for academic credit?

A. Yes, interns are able to receive academic credit for serving as a VSFS intern. To pursue this option, the intern needs to work with their academic institution and manage the process. Your only role as a mentor is to confirm the intern's participation in the VSFS program and complete any necessary paperwork that the intern should provide from the academic institution. Some institutions also may require an evaluation.

Do not sign a Memorandum of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding or any binding contract with the school. Schools should accept a less formal affirmation of the intern's successful selection as a VSFS intern, such as a letter on letterhead, and a description of the intern's VSFS project. The intern should be responsible for making all arrangements and relaying any information from the school advisor to you.

Q. Can I write a letter of recommendation for my intern?

A. Interns may ask for a recommendation. As with any internship, this is up to you. If your intern was an outstanding performer, you may also consider endorsing them on LinkedIn or sending a letter from a senior official.

Q. Will my intern receive a certificate of completion for the internship? How do they get this?

A. The Open Opportunities platform creates a completion certificate for interns, accessible via their dashboard. To make it available, mentors must mark all tasks as complete in Open Opportunities.

Connect with Us

The VSFS team at the State Department **(VSFS@state.gov)** is here to ensure that everything runs smoothly. We want to hear from you and we are here to help you succeed!

https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/usdos-vsfs/

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