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VIRTUAL STUDENT FEDERAL SERVICE

Intern Handbook

Updated July 2024

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Introduction

Congratulations and welcome to the Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) program! As a VSFS intern, you are joining a dynamic community of mentors and interns dedicated to innovation and public service. Your work will support some of the U.S. government's highest priorities and will help solve some of our world's greatest challenges. Above all, your work as a virtual intern represents a powerful idea - the idea that people plus technology can transform lives.

We commend your interest in public service and are confident you will gain professional skills as well as insights into the work of the federal government from your VSFS experience. Being proactive with your mentor and taking ownership of your internship will be key to your success.

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

- **Develop an internship plan with your mentor.** If your mentor does not provide you with a written plan, ask for one. Plans can be simple or complex but serve a critical function in ensuring accountability from both mentor and intern for internship tasks and outcomes.
- **Set expectations about communication and meetings.** From day one, confirm with your mentor how you will communicate (for example, via Discord, email, etc.) and how often (for example, once a week one-on-one check-ins), how you will manage tasks (for example, using Trello), and if you will be expected to attend team meetings.
- **Participate in the VSFS community.** Attend VSFS professional development sessions. Follow VSFS social media and offer a highlight. Staying engaged with the community is a networking opportunity and will broaden your VSFS experience.
- **Stay on top of internship logistics.** Keep your internship on track. Request a [mid-year check-in](#). Make sure your mentor closes out your project in Open Opportunities at the end of the program so you can receive a completion certificate.



Preparing for Your Internship

Studies on leadership consistently find that a strong relationship is the foundation of any successful collaboration. Before you start your VSFS internship, ask your mentor for a preliminary meeting to get to know each other. This conversation is an opportunity for you to convey to your mentor your interests as well as your goals and expectations for the internship. It is also an opportunity for an open conversation about your mentor's goals for you.

When you ask for the meeting, be clear with your mentor that you would like to discuss your interests and goals for the internship. This will prompt them to ask questions about you. To start the conversation, you could ask your mentor:

- **What inspired you to pursue a career in federal service?**
- **What educational and professional experiences prepared you for your current role?**
- **Did you always know you wanted to work in government, or did you consider other career paths?**
- **Could you describe a typical day in your current role?**
- **What are the most challenging aspects of your job, and how do you overcome them?**
- **What surprised you the most about working in federal service?**



Starting Your Internship

Set up a Planning Meeting:

During the initial weeks of your internship, schedule a planning meeting with your mentor to outline the specifics of your internship.

Clear communication and setting expectations are critical to a successful internship.

Topics to cover should include:

Your availability. Let your mentor know what dates/times work best for your schedule and when you will be unavailable. Your mentor should have your class schedule, midterms, and finals dates, as well as when you will be on breaks so that they can plan around these times.

How and when you will communicate for regularly scheduled check-ins. Options include Discord, Google Meet/Chat, Teams, etc. You should also confirm with your mentor how best to reach them apart from the check-ins, for example when you just have a quick question or update.

Your available resources. For planning purposes, your mentor needs to know what you are working with in terms of personal laptop, computer programs/software, camera, library, tools, and anything else you might need.



Starting Your Internship - Cont'd

Confirm your weekly schedule:

Discuss with your mentor(s) that you are volunteering ten hours per week on your internship, so they can plan your work and schedule accordingly. If you find that you can handle additional work and would like to work more hours, let them know. Conversely, if you find that you don't have enough time to complete your assigned tasks, talk with your mentor. Clear and open communication is key.

If you have not heard from your mentor by a week before your scheduled start date, contact the VSFS team at VSFS@state.gov.

Manage your schedule:

A virtual internship gives you a lot of flexibility in setting your own schedule, but that means that it can be easy to get distracted from completing things on time. To ensure that the team is making the most of your experience and your time, consider these tips:

1. Stay Organized. Because you are working virtually, it is especially important for you to complete tasks and projects on time. Keeping to a schedule will help you stay organized and keep you on track. Dedicate time each week when you can focus on your VSFS work.

2. Have a Consistent Workspace. Just as with your academic work, your professional work environment is key to your success as an intern. A consistent workspace that aligns with your preferences - whether at home or in a café - will help you focus.

3. Regular Communication. Regular communication is particularly important for remote work. Maintain regular and open communication with your mentor. Provide updates about your progress. Stay connected with other initiatives and events taking place with your team. When you are not able to meet for a scheduled meeting with your mentor, let them know and reschedule.



VSFS Interns - Best Practices

Working Remotely:

Communication is key. When VSFS first launched in 2009, remote work was relatively new and the program offered a lot of lessons learned for other virtual internships and workplaces in general.

Today, virtual work is common but one thing has not changed: communication is essential to the success of working remotely. Because remote teams do not have regular in-person contact, it is critical that you develop and implement a communication plan with your mentors.

Communication best practices include:

- Set up a weekly check-in meeting with your mentor and confirm what other weekly team meetings you should be attending.
- Confirm communication platform and frequency.
- Respond to or acknowledge any communication within 24 hours.
- Consider time differences. To avoid any confusion when scheduling calls, use a time zone converter such as <http://timeanddate.com/worldclock> and be sure to indicate the time zone associated with the scheduled communication.

NOTE: If at any point in your internship you are unable to reach your mentor, please email the [VSFS team](#) so they can resolve the issue.



VSFS Interns - Best Practices Cont'd

Taking Ownership of Your Internship:

Be proactive in reaching out for feedback from your mentor. Guiding your professional development is one of your mentor's most important responsibilities and supports their professional development as well so don't hesitate to initiate this conversation.

After you submit a project or complete a task, ask your mentor questions such as:

- **Was that what you were looking for? What will this be used for and does my contribution support the broader purpose of the project?**
- **Is the format, language, or analysis correct?**
- **How can this be improved?**

If there are revisions, offer to make them yourself or, if your mentor makes them, ask to see what was changed to give you an opportunity to learn and develop a better sense of what to do moving forward.

Remember, sometimes government and academic terms and lingo can mean something different to each group. Always double check with your mentor if you have any questions about an acronym or term.

VSFS program staff are also here to support you in your professional development. Take advantage of the numerous professional development sessions that the VSFS program will offer throughout the year. Past topics have included interviewing, public speaking, and resume writing.

Lastly, the VSFS team encourages mentors to schedule a mid-year check in with interns as well as an end-of-year evaluation. If your mentor does not offer a check-in or evaluation, take the initiative and ask for one. Mentors are aware of these internship components and should be open to your request.



VSFS Interns - Best Practices Summary

- **Take ownership of your internship.** Ask for a plan. Practice regular and open communication. Request an end-of-year evaluation or letter of recommendation.
- **Document your tasks and accomplishments.** This will be useful if your mentor asks for your input for an end-of-year evaluation or letter of recommendation as well as for when you apply for jobs in the future. It is too easy to forget specifics of what you did.
- **Attend VSFS professional development sessions.** Set a goal to build target skills during your time here and use these sessions to network with other interns and mentors.
- **Engage with the VSFS community.** Connect with other mentors and interns and learn more about what they do and their career paths. Follow VSFS social media and offer a highlight.





Finishing Your Internship

As your internship wraps up, start working closely with your mentor to bring the internship to a successful conclusion.

There are three main steps involved:

First: Confirm the last day of your internship and if your mentor has not yet suggested it, request an end-of-year review and evaluation. A VSFS evaluation template is available for your mentor's use and will be distributed to all mentors in an end-of-program newsletter. If DOS, the template is available on the VSFS Project Mentors Teams channel. Other agencies can contact the [VSFS team](#) for the template at any time.

Second: Make sure that your mentor has closed out your project in the Open Opportunities platform. Mentors must close out projects in Open Opportunities in order for interns to receive a certificate of completion. Instructions on how to close out projects in Open Opportunities are repeatedly sent to mentors at the end of the program year. Instructions and instructional videos are also available on the [Open Opportunities Help Center](#).

Once your mentor has closed out your project, Open Opportunities will generate a certificate which you can access through your dashboard. You will receive an email notification that your project has been completed at which point you can retrieve the certificate from your dashboard. Note that Open Opportunities does not store documents on the platform so you should download and save the file for your records.

Third: If your mentor has not already suggested it, and if appropriate, request a letter of recommendation. Reference letters can validate your skills and experience and make you more competitive as an applicant for future academic or professional opportunities. Requesting a letter at the end of your internship ensures that your accomplishments are still fresh and your mentor can provide details for greater impact. You may also request that your mentor endorse you on LinkedIn.



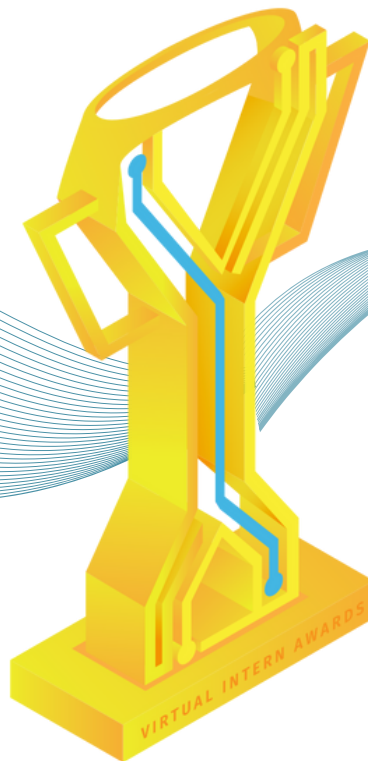
Finishing Your Internship - Cont'd

Virtual Intern Awards (VIAs):

The annual Virtual Intern Awards (VIAs) ceremony celebrates the program year and commends all interns, mentors, award nominees, and winners on their accomplishments. Award categories include Mentor of the Year, Intern Cohort of the Year, and Intern of the Year. For the 2023-24 program, the [Robertson Foundation for Government](#) awarded cash prizes to the nine Intern of the Year winners. Interns nominate mentors for awards and mentors nominate interns; top winners are determined by an interagency panel.

Academic Credit:

Your college or university may allow you to earn academic credit for participation in VSFS. To find out more about this process and what requirements may be needed, speak with your academic advisor and/or your school's career center.





Post-Internship

Participant Verification:

In the future, if you are undergoing a background check for future employment or other participation verification, please list your experience as “Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS)” with VSFS@state.gov as the email address and the agency where you interned as the official agency.

For reference letters or other forms of recommendation, ask your mentor.

Program staff can verify program participation but cannot supply references or confirm the number of hours that you worked.

Other Opportunities:

You may be eligible for federal internships and job opportunities through the Pathways and other student programs.

For more information about federal jobs for students:

<https://help.usajobs.gov/working-in-government/unique-hiring-paths/students>

For more information about student internship opportunities at the Department of State:

[Internships/Fellowships - Careers \(state.gov\)](https://internships/fellowships-careers.state.gov)

[Additional Internships and Fellowships - Careers \(state.gov\)](https://additional-internships-and-fellowships-careers.state.gov)

For more information for students with disabilities who are interested in federal service:

<https://www.wrp.gov/wrp>

For information about study abroad opportunities at the Department of State:

<https://exchanges.state.gov/us/find-programs>

<https://studyabroad.state.gov/value-study-abroad/why-study-abroad>



VSFS Internship Lifecycle

VSFS interns commit to work a minimum of 10 hours per week 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.



Connect with Us

Contact the VSFS team at vsfs@state.gov and follow us on social media:



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



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