VIRTUAL STUDENT FEDERAL SERVICE

V S F S

Mentor Handbook

"I've learned about working independently and utilizing social media." - Alison, eIntern with U.S. Consulate Guadalajara

Welcome!

The Virtual Student Federal Service (VSFS) is the largest virtual internship program in the U.S. government, with over 50 participating federal, state, and local entities. Since 2009, thousands of eInterns (American college students working remotely) have expanded the reach of U.S. government efforts and made a real difference in the work in all of our work around the world.

Once you have reviewed applicants, interviewed, and offered positions, you are ready to begin work right after Labor Day!

Getting Started Checklist

eInterns volunteer about 10 hours a week to further the work of our government. They want to feel engaged and know they are contributing. Remind them of that and let your projects take their own shape! Remember: VSFS is agile. VSFS is flexible. VSFS is collaborative.

- ❏ Once your student has accepted your offer, email them to:
    - ❏ Set up a time to connect and get to know each other, share expectations, familiarize students with your agency, learn more about your eIntern(s), and (begin to) plan out your year together
    - ❏ Share your (and anyone on your team's) contact information and business hours/days
    - ❏ Suggest websites and reading materials and other info about your office, post, etc.
    - ❏ Schedule a call/Skype/Google Hangout/DVC to "meet" your eInterns (video chats are nice to help put a face to a name)
- ❏ Once you've met virtually (or in person, if your eIntern happens to live in the same city):
    - ❏ Set up a weekly or bi-weekly check-in call/Skype/Hangout/DVC day & time
    - ❏ Chat about your career and ask about your student's interests, studies, what they hope to get out of this amazing experience, etc.

❏ Pick a collaborative space to share documents, such as Slack or Google, and/or use a task tracking program, like Trello or Asana – check with your eIntern to see what they may prefer or use (make them part of the process)!
❏ Work with your eIntern to find the best way to introduce him or herself to your team. (Think: Google Hangout, video, newsletter article, printed off picture of eIntern in the kitchen...be bold, be brave, find a fun and new way)

Timeline

All eInterns are committed to putting in *up to* 10 hours per week on projects from September-May
- **Late August/early September**: connect with your eIntern
- **Weekly/bi-weekly:** Set up regular check-in calls for the year
- **November / Decembe**r: Mid-year check-in
- **April / May**: End of year check-in

Welcome and Orientation

Don't take too long to get started. The best eInternships and the best results come from close collaboration. Make sure the eIntern has a backup mentor and contact information. **If you are unsure of how to proceed, ask your intern for ideas!**

Ways to "welcome" your eIntern(s):
- If there is a team working with the student, circulate the student's resume and photo, or a LinkedIn profile.
- Use Twitter or Facebook or other social media platforms to inform others that your eInterns are starting. Use #eIntern or #eInternship or @vsfsAtState.
- "Invite" the student to a staff meeting to get to know your team and issues

Project Descriptions and Requirements

Students want to contribute. The happiest eInterns are those who are busy and who feel part of a team. Share your project description and final, expected outcome or end product with them. Solicit their opinions and suggestions. You may be surprised!

Managing Teams

If you are working with more than one student on a project, encourage them to collaborate separately. Don't forget that each student is hoping for a meaningful experience and mentorship. If you need help, call us.

Project Deadlines
- Set deadlines together - make them early and be upfront with what is expected.
- Be firm on dates but responsive to inquiries.
- Identify which dates are set in stone (i.e. a conference or summit) and where there may be some flexibility (around winter break or finals).
- Ask your eIntern to create a shared calendar where deadlines are visible and where you both can identify vacations and other commitments
- If there are multiple specialized projects the eIntern will complete, decide how these will be prioritized and accomplished
- When leading up to a firm deadline, check-in to make sure your eIntern is on track.

Communication

Communication is vital to every relationship and you need to be creative if all your communication is digital. Ask your eInterns for suggestions! There are many platforms available for communicating:

- Slack, FreeConferenceCall.com, Skype, CO.NX, wetoku, Google Hangout or chat, and Facebook video or mail, Yammer, etc.

Online calendars, such as Google Calendar, Keep and Share, or Podio, can also help keep things organized.

Course/internship credit

Some students may ask their school for course credit for their VSFS eInternship. You can confirm participation, but **DO NOT sign a Memorandum of Agreement** or **Memorandum of Understanding** or **Contract with the school** -- **or any other binding agreements.** When in doubt, check with VSFS or your agency's legal office regarding any concerns.

If your eIntern is not meeting your expectations, let us know IMMEDIATELY! If you are unable to supervise, don't forget to appoint a backup (let us know)!

MANAGING YOUR eINTERN(S)

Supervising your eIntern

Remember, eInterns do not have security clearances and all of their work must be unclassified. eInterns are committed to working with you from September through May for the VSFS project year, for up to ten hours per week.

As a mentor, it is your responsibility to ensure that your project stays on track and to communicate regularly with your student. Here's a good Fast Company article that mentions VSFS and some virtual internship tips and pitfalls to avoid.

If you find that your student is falling behind on their assignments, talk to them about it. There may be unexpected situations, such as illness or change in financial situation, that come up. You may be able to adjust the work load for your student.

If you have tried several times to contact your student by phone and email and have no response within a reasonable timeframe, please let us know at vsfs@state.gov. We can follow up with you and your eintern to try and resolve the situation.

If all of these efforts fail, you may let the student go, explaining why the project and eIntern's performance is not working out. Please cc vsfs@state.gov on the email so we can accurately update our database to reflect the date and reason.

In addition, we can help you identify another candidate, who may be better suited for your project. We want to help make your experience with VSFS a successful one!

The VSFS team will be reaching out to students and mentors a couple of times during the year to check-in.

Mentorship and Career Guidance

In addition to making a contribution, eInterns are motivated by the opportunity to learn more about government careers. This is your chance – go ahead and give advice! Find a colleague or two who can also share their story. The more you put in, the more you get out. For State Department, you can also direct them to contact the [Diplomat in Residence](#) for their school.

Here are a few ways you can help your eIntern:
- Offer to take a look at a resume and make helpful suggestions for improvement
- Do a mock job interview
- Help your student create or update a LinkedIn profile
- Suggest some organizations or affinity groups to join
- Offer to write a letter of recommendation

Meeting in-person

If your eIntern asks to meet up and you can do so, go ahead! We've met up with many an eIntern when they've come to DC for a visit or other reasons.

Wrapping up

In addition to the evaluation template which we will send you, students may ask for a recommendation. As with any internship, this is up to you. If your student was a star, you might want to endorse them on LinkedIn or send a letter from a senior official.

We will send each student who successfully completed their eInternship a certificate signed by Secretary of State. If you are from another agency and would like an email template to customize, please let us know.

Worst Practices (and other things to avoid)
- Not responding to emails quickly. If you have too much email, switch to Slack or another chat program to cut down on email! Students need to hear from you on a timely and regular basis.
- Constantly re-scheduling calls/not communicating regularly with your eIntern. Make a plan and stick to it! Sure, things come up, but you need to make time for your students just as they make time for their eInternship.

WHO WE ARE

The VSFS team at the State Department (Bridget Roddy and Nora Dempsey at 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!

All eInterns will receive a student guide and will be invited to join a closed Facebook group to connect with each other. We also encourage you to recognize your eIntern's accomplishments in your own way!

Find us at:

[VSFS@state.gov](#)   [@VSFSatState](#)   [Facebook](#)   [LinkedIn](#)   [VSFS_US](#)

Call us at: 202-286-6501, 202-634-3605, or 202-634-3622

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

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 have a VSFS account:
1.   Ask your colleague to register for an account using his/her work email address as Username: http://vsfs.state.gov/login
2.   Colleague activates account by clicking on link in automated email (note: check spam or junk folder) which should arrive within 5 minutes.
3.   Once account is activated, you or your colleague emails vsfs@state.gov asking for an additional mentor/supervisor position.
4.   We add the new mentor.

If your colleague is already registered, email vsfs@state.gov asking for an additional mentor position. Please mention that the user already has an account.

Q: Can eInterns access Sensitive But Unclassified (SBU) information? Do they have access to internal networks? Can they have a .gov email address?
A: While we normally like to say "yes" whenever possible, the answer to these questions is "no." eInterns do *not* have security clearances or background checks. They must only work on unclassified projects. eInterns are not employees.

Q: Do I have to pick the number of eInterns I initially requested?
A: You can always pick more – you just need to let us know (vsfs@state.gov) so that we can enable that functionality for you. Just remember, students deserve a good mentoring experience. There is no need to pick fewer; if your applicant pool doesn't meet your expectations, we know there are students on the list who want to work with you. Let us know you're still looking, and soon after the matching period ends on August 31, we will give you access to a searchable list of students still available.

Q: I need to create another project and find a new intern for it. How can I do that?
A: Easy-peasy! Fill out a "VSFS Project Proposal Submission AFTER DEADLINE" form and email it to VSFS@state.gov, noting "NEW PROJECT SUBMISSION" in your subject line. We'll enter it into the project system and then you can log in to search for candidates.

Q: I would like to bring our current intern on board as an eIntern. What steps do I need to take?
A: Please fill out a "VSFS Project Proposal Submission AFTER DEADLINE" form, noting your intern's name and contact info in the document (see "Name of requested intern (if transferring to VSFS program)" question). Then email the document to VSFS@state.gov and let us know that the intern is converting to eintern status.

Q: My eIntern would like to use the content she created for us as part of her online portfolio. Is that okay?
A: Sure! She can credit her work as being done as part of the VSFS program for your office and agency.

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

A: Yes, and here it is!

Q: Can my student continue beyond May?

A: Yes, of course! Just let us know :)

And, because cute animals let everyone smile: