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AGENCIES REIMAGINE SUMMER INTERNSHIPS DUE TO COVID-19

Many opportunities for students to kick-start their careers have been canceled, but some have been transformed



By [Lindsay Rittenhouse](#). Published on May 26, 2020.





Agencies transform their summer internships to go virtual during the pandemic Credit: Illustration by Tam Nguyen/Ad Age

Come Memorial Day, eager college students and recent graduates in advertising typically flock to agencies in major cities for internship opportunities that could, in best-case scenarios, lead to entry-level jobs.

This summer though, most offices along Madison Avenue will likely remain dark.

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It's becoming increasingly likely that agencies in major U.S. cities such as New York and Chicago will not open again until September, October or later, as WPP CEO Mark Read recently warned in a memo to staff. As the effects of the pandemic continue to ravage the industry—with many agencies having to cut a host of expenses, reduce salaries and even furlough and lay off staff—opportunities for aspiring creatives to get their foot in the door are dwindling.

Still, organizations like the 4A's and agencies including VMLY&R, FCB, Pereira O'Dell, Eleven, Swift,

Instrument, Havas Group and Madwell are trying to either continue their internship programs virtually or provide other resources for entrants in the industry as they try to kick-start their careers in the midst of a global pandemic.

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A bleak future

The COVID-19 crisis has undeniably taken its toll on the economy, leading to sweeping job losses.

McKinsey estimated in an April report that in the initial shutdown phase of the pandemic, 53 million U.S. jobs were left vulnerable—a term the firm uses to reference layoffs, furloughs and reductions in hours and pay. McKinsey found that the majority of Americans laid off were part-time workers, minorities, women and young people.

According to the report, young workers are 35 percent more likely to hold vulnerable jobs. McKinsey says workers under the age of 35 make up 36 percent of the U.S. labor force, but 49 percent of the newly unemployed. As [Ad Age previously reported](#), advertising, public relations and related services lost 36,400 jobs in April alone.

Those figures paint a bleak picture for college students and recent grads just entering the workforce and in search of a job or paid internship.

“Most of the students who had for-credit national agency internships in New York, San Francisco and Chicago—most of those were canceled,” says Dan Windels, a professor of advertising and supervising instructor of internships at the University of Florida.

Windels says students who have secured internships have done so at local, smaller companies in Florida. Still, he says typically about 50 students at the University of Florida seek for-credit internships during any given semester but, this summer, the college has received “less than half of that.”

“Students were certainly very disappointed at first, but they’re trying to make the best out of a bad situation,” Windels says, noting how seniors “were counting on internships” to ignite their careers and were “scrambling” after many agencies canceled those summer opportunities.

He says students’ biggest concern is, not surprisingly, when agencies are going to start hiring again. Since Windels obviously has no insight into that, he says he’s been advising his students to reach out and network with industry folk.

“I’ve just been telling them to build as many contacts as they can,” Windels says. “Have career discussions. Find someone who is a media strategist. Have a conversation through Zoom.”

A simple conversation may not seem like much to a student who was looking forward to walking the halls of a big-time agency and getting real-world experience, but it is something. Agency executives tend to be receptive to requests to lend career advice.

Here to help

“Talk to as many people as you know. Network,” says Michele Sileo, managing director of San Francisco agency Eleven, echoing Windels’ advice. “Don’t be afraid to ask adults you admire or who you’ve admired from a distance. Everybody in our industry, I believe, has a heart and would be willing to have a

conversation or two.”

Each summer, Sileo says Eleven typically hires 10 to 12 interns, which amounts to 10 percent of the agency’s workforce, which she believes is “a fairly robust program given our size.” She says Eleven also has a relationship with the Miami Ad School to onboard creative interns on a regular basis. But the pandemic has thrown a monkey wrench into those programs.

“It’s a tough one,” Sileo says. “We’re doing all we can to keep our business in the black. We feel fortunate [we’ve been able to]. Hiring people that need extra support and hand-holding is not exactly something we are raising our hand for at the moment.”

Fortunately, Sileo says Eleven was able to bring on four summer interns from Claremont McKenna College (CMC) in California after an anonymous donor agreed to fund internships for students at the school. The interns started at Eleven last week.

“We’re thrilled,” Sileo says. “We’ve had great success with students from CMC in the past. We could not be more grateful to this anonymous donor.”

Sileo says one intern will work in Eleven’s experience design division, one will be in a client group and two will likely be in business development. She says they will initially work from home, but all expressed their willingness to go into the office should Eleven be able to open its San Francisco digs later in the summer. Sileo says there will be “a lot of video conferencing,” and interns will be encouraged to tune into staff meetings held via web conferencing.

“The biggest piece missing in this is not being able to experience a culture,” Sileo says. “So that will be a bummer. On the flip side, these kids are entering a job market in the worst of times. In many ways, they are thrilled to have something to do, put on their résumés and gain some skills and experience regardless of what it is.”

Evolving the summer internship

Since most agencies will continue working remotely through the summer, those that do continue internships, like Eleven, will have to do so virtually.

The 4A’s is transforming its Multicultural Advertising Intern Program (MAIP) this summer to adapt to the current environment. Typically, the 4A’s accepts a certain amount of diverse college juniors and seniors and recent grads into MAIP. Finalists are then selected and receive offers for 12-week paid

internships from 4A's partner agencies.

This year, the 4A's says it had 386 interns that were unable to be placed due to the pandemic, which is why the organization will be running the program virtually. The 12-week program will lean on agency partners to host training sessions and networking opportunities. There will be weekly events including a MAIP party, cooking classes, meditation and yoga. The annual Diversity Career Fair will be held virtually and the 4A's will also host a virtual MAIP Greenhouse and Virtual Development Summit.

Simon Fenwick, the 4A's executive VP of talent engagement and inclusion, says 92 agencies will be participating in the virtual MAIP, and each 2020 fellow will receive a coach who can "give them career advice and guidance to understand the industry a little bit better."

Fenwick says these participants won't be paid, and the 4A's is "not a proponent of unpaid internships." Students therefore won't be working on actual projects for agencies this year but instead be provided with training and educational exercises.

Pereira O'Dell, for its part, worked with The City University of New York on an initiative called "Save the Internships." The project is a call to action to "challenge agencies to keep their promise to diverse and inclusive talent." The initiative urges agencies to keep their summer internships, but conduct them virtually and shorten them from three months to four or eight weeks.

Mona Munayyer Gonzalez, managing director of Pereira O'Dell New York, says the independent agency will be providing an "accelerated" six-week internship program this year.

"Interns [will] participate in 101 advertising 'crash courses' and virtual conversations with senior leadership, in addition to having a chance to contribute to the agency's open briefs," she says. "In some cases, it's a part-time position to complement these students' existing part-time jobs and family responsibilities. In all cases, the positions are paid so that these talented students are compensated appropriately for their skills and time."

FCB Chicago and FCB Health are both continuing their internship programs virtually. The FCB Chicago Internship Program, which the Interpublic Group of Cos. agency says "has been a cornerstone of advertising education" in the Windy City, will be a mixture of virtual agency classes, departmental workshops, case assignments and live feedback. It will admit 50 students into the six-week, unpaid program beginning in mid-July. FCB Chicago says 70 percent of its 2020 summer intern class are minorities and 60 percent are from out of state.

FCB Health is providing a similar virtual summer program for 55 interns.

Madwell will be offering a virtual open-source course led by the agency's strategy department this summer. The program was developed by Madwell Strategist Mary Ergul and Kristina Husted, a group strategy director who also teaches at the University of Boulder, Colorado. The two put together an eight-week syllabus that explores entry-level strategy in modern advertising that any student can download and complete.

"This program is not something to be precious about," Ergul says. "The more people involved, the better the advertising community will be."

In lieu of a summer internship this year, Instrument, a digital product and brand experience agency, will be providing digital portfolio reviews to 150 emerging designers through an "Office Hours" initiative. Instrument opened the initiative to recent college graduates through a lottery—winners will receive private, 30-minute sessions with Instrument employees.

Havas Group is offering "The Havas Outernship" this summer, a five-week program that will provide college students with virtual employee-led learnings, mock projects and shadow sessions. Students will also receive one-on-one career coaching with Havas employees.

VMLY&R is launching a virtual masterclass, called Nexus, in June as it will not be able to carry out its usual summer internship program. Nexus is a 10-week remote learning series focused on areas such as brand marketing, strategic planning, customer experience and social media.

A group of creatives at Swift, a social creative agency in Portland, Oregon, reimaged its internship program, Flight School. The usual summer internship program was canceled; instead, Swift has invited six students to take part in a one-month program rebranded as "Flight School Night School," that will offer weekly meetings on topics like "How to design a deck" or "Make an idea a statement." The program is led by Nakita Simpson, a junior art director at Swift and former intern at Wieden+Kennedy.

Simpson says the unpaid program will be focused on educational opportunities. She says being an intern at Wieden+Kennedy before she joined Swift was a transformative experience that shaped her desire to be in the industry.

Simpson drives the point home that agencies do want to help usher in the next generation in advertising, and says the team at Swift was "crushed" when they couldn't bring on the usual class of summer interns

this year.

“There’s a nice sense of empathy happening right now,” Simpson says. “Reach out. You can email or message anybody on LinkedIn. Hop on a 30-minute call. People want to help.”

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