Chapter 5

Career–Ready Through Remote and Hybrid Fellowships:
Experiential Learning in Graduate Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the experience of students in a graduate program with an intensive, field-based fellowship component. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these students have participated in their fellowship experiences through online and hybrid formats. The chapter discusses the challenges and opportunities of graduate level professional development experiences in remote and hybrid contexts. It provides guidance and recommendations for consideration in the development of remote and hybrid field experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education provides opportunities for the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge and skills which can be applied to civic engagement and professional life. In contemporary society, access to higher education in the United States is expanding, with increases in first generation and traditionally underrepresented student groups (RTI International, 2019). According to RTI International, over half of undergraduate students are first generation students and, of those, nearly sixty percent are the first child in their family to attend college. Since the 2000s, there have been gains in postbaccalaureate enrollment across most racial and ethnic groups (Okahana & Zhou, 2018), with Black and Hispanic student enrollment doubling during this time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Although higher education is critical to social mobility for most Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the rising cost of higher education causes many to question the value and worth of

a higher education degree (Honu, 2019). Colleges and universities are experiencing challenges with retention of students both in person and online and tuition-dependent institutions have experienced loss of revenue (Seery et al., 2021). With government funding for higher education waning, tuition increases have been used to substitute for lost government revenue (Brint & Clotfelter, 2016). Higher education institutions, particularly smaller, liberal arts institutions, have become vulnerables to closures and mergers (Seltzer, 2017).

Higher education institutions can provide concrete evidence of their value for students and society through workforce development and career preparation programs. Opportunities for students to explore career pathways through curriculum and professional experiences can bolster students' career success (Steele et al., 2020). Along these lines, Saunders and Zuzel (2010) note an increased emphasis on building professional skills into the higher education curriculum. When students gain the knowledge and skills that they need to transition effectively and seamlessly into meaningful employment, this serves as an affirmation of the value of a college education.

Employability is of key importance to both college students and higher education institutions (Finley, 2021). Interest and student investment in higher education is often tied to the increased development of necessary skills and likelihood for sustainable employment. Finley (2021) notes that employers value both higher education and applied and active learning experiences, ranking the following as the highest liberal arts education outcomes: ability to work in teams, critical thinking, ability to analyze and interpret data, application of knowledge in real-world settings, and digital literacy.

Career-ready education is especially important in graduate education, as students pursue graduate degrees with the specific intents of propelling their careers forward or retooling for career changes. Graduate education is critical to innovation and to the economy yet graduate students lack adequate information about career opportunities and pathways (Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service, 2012).

These challenges and movements in higher education, including the rising cost of higher education and societal challenges to the value of higher education, were present pre-pandemic (Kromydas, 2017). The emergence of the Coronavirus in 2019 and its evolution in 2020 and 2021 has exacerbated these issues while also highlighting many other critical issues pertinent to higher education, access, equity, and social change. Lederer et al. (2021) discuss the challenges that college students face in the context of COVID-19 such as mental health issues, financial concerns, housing insecurity, and family caregiving responsibilities. They note the added challenges faced by students of color, including xenophobia and racism, violence and hatred directed toward Asians, Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders, and the disproportional impacts of the Coronavirus in communities of color.

In this context, a traditionally on-ground graduate fellowship program successfully transitioned to remote and hybrid modalities. This chapter shares that experience, focusing on the fellowship model of a graduate program in Community Engagement at Merrimack College, a private, Augustinian liberal arts college situated in North Andover, Massachusetts. The chapter explains how the program pivoted to a remote and hybrid academic and fellowship model during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this transition has spurred consideration of the opportunity to offer fellowships in remote locations over the long term.

The chapter seeks to explore best practices in providing career-ready education for Master's level students. This chapter may be of interest to those providing professional education for graduate students with a focus on experiential education, including remote and hybrid experiential learning. More broadly, the chapter will be of interest to administrators, faculty, staff, and students in higher education, includ-

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