

Taking Internships Online

Insights from MDRC's 2020 Gueron Scholars Program

Erick Alonzo

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The COVID-19 crisis has upended students' lives and their career plans, including their ability to line up college internships. As millions of people across the country continue to work or attend school from home, many companies and organizations have had to cancel their internship programs, which are an important part of recruitment and diversity hiring initiatives.

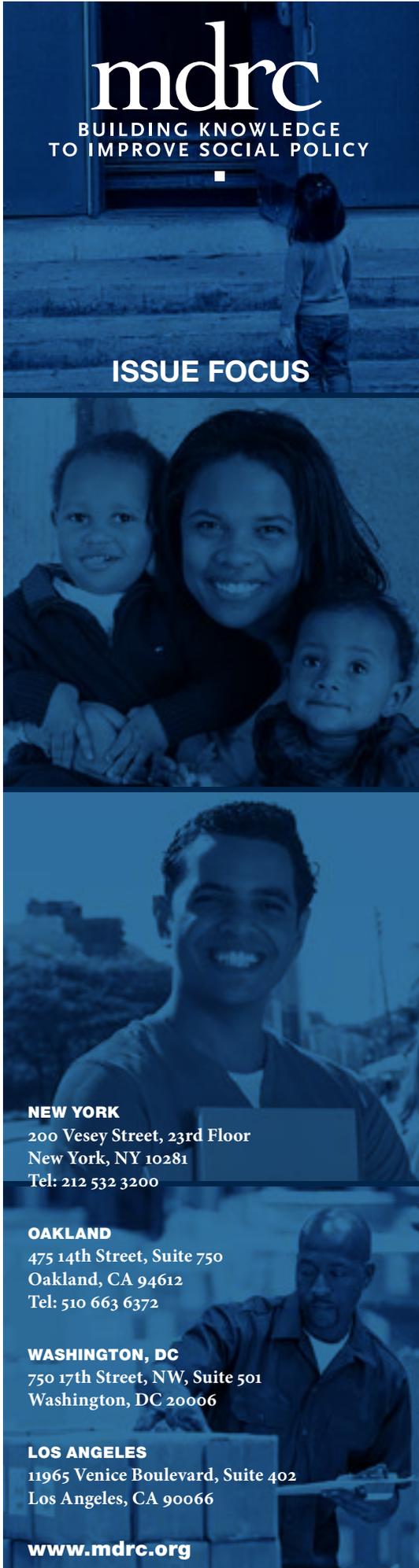
MDRC's [Gueron Scholars Program](#) (GSP) has continued to operate, despite the disruption caused by the global pandemic. Established in 2004 and named for former MDRC president Judith Gueron, the program introduces MDRC's work to students from groups that are traditionally underrepresented in the fields of education and social policy research. The program typically offers paid undergraduate- and master's-level internships at the organization's New York City office, during which students work hands-on with project teams for eight weeks on a range of organizational and analytical tasks. The GSP's doctoral fellowship allows Ph.D. candidates engaged in independent dissertation research to continue their work while learning about MDRC. At the end of each eight-week program, the Gueron Scholars deliver presentations about their summer experience.

This year the pandemic caused some of MDRC's research to be put on pause which led to unanticipated budget constraints. As a result, MDRC made the difficult decision to suspend its master's internships and doctoral fellowships for 2020 and focused instead on the undergraduate component of the program. The internship was redesigned to take place virtually for local college students — in part, because so many organizations and businesses in New York City had cancelled their summer employment opportunities.

This issue focus shares lessons from MDRC's experience planning and implementing a virtual learning program and offers some things for other organizations to consider if they are thinking about offering virtual programming in the future.

PLANNING

The GSP planning team's priority was to create a meaningful experience for interns — even if we could not interact with them in person. The team first considered logistical questions: How long should the program be? Since we would continue to pay the interns for their time, how many students could we host? Should the program be part time or full time? More importantly, we considered how we would keep the interns engaged in a virtual setting. Should we provide a "light-touch" experience through seminars alone, or should we take a more robust approach that included actual work on MDRC research projects?



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NEW YORK
200 Vesey Street, 23rd Floor
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750 17th Street, NW, Suite 501
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www.mdrc.org

Eventually, we decided on the model shown in the table below. One of the most important changes from MDRC’s usual in-person model, which provides hands-on engagement in one or more MDRC projects, was the shift to a virtual learning program that included seminars, shadowing a team member on a project, networking with MDRC staff members, and professional development.

Table 1. GSP’s Paid Virtual Undergraduate Program

Seminars

- **Introduced MDRC and policy research:** A series of virtual seminars introduced the interns to MDRC and the field of education and social policy research. The team sequenced the presentations so that each seminar built on the previous one. The series started with an overview of MDRC and the field of education and social policy research and concluded with a presentation on entry-level positions at MDRC. All seminars were interactive and were adapted from existing presentations delivered in other forums, saving on staffing costs.

Project Shadowing

- **Assigned interns to one of two MDRC projects,** based on their interests. Interns were invited to project meetings to learn about the day-to-day aspects of each program and its research and policy contexts.
 - **SUCCESS:** Scaling Up College Completion Efforts for Student Success is aimed at improving the graduation rates of traditionally underserved students at community colleges.
 - **P-TECH:** The NYC P-TECH Grades 9-14 high school model is a contemporary approach to career and technical education that involves postsecondary and employer partners.
- A project team member debriefed the interns to explain what was covered in meetings and the implications for the work.

Networking and Professional Development

- **Networking at MDRC:** GSP interns had the chance to network with MDRC staff whose academic backgrounds, areas of study, and career trajectories matched their own interests and goals.
- **Data programming:** Interns developed their coding skills by taking introductory classes in R programming, led by MDRC’s Women of Color in Tech Affinity Group.
- **All-staff presentation:** The interns honed their public-speaking skills by delivering a presentation on their summer experience at an MDRC lunch forum.
- **Resume and LinkedIn Builder with HR:** Each intern received one-to-one resume coaching by a member of the MDRC human resources department and attended a LinkedIn Builder session called “Rock+Your+Profile.”

Supervision and Program Structure

- **Intern supervision:** Each intern was formally supervised by a near-peer staff member and also assigned a buddy, who provided additional support. Weekly and mid-program check-ins provided opportunities for interns to reflect on their specific goals and helped MDRC staff members continue to tailor the virtual experience to the interns’ interests and goals.
 - **Program structure:** Interns had fixed schedules for most of the summer program, devoting about 18 hours per week for four weeks. They were also provided with laptops and virtual collaboration tools so that they could access documents of the projects they were shadowing.
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LESSONS LEARNED AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

MDRC's primary takeaway was this: Virtual learning experiences that offer students exposure to an organization's work *are* doable. Our interns were fully engaged with the program. They attended all of the virtual seminars, networked with MDRC staff, and gave presentations on what they learned. They were also able to articulate how the program influenced their post-graduation plans. Similar virtual programs can provide undergraduates with meaningful professional development and organizational experience even if interns do not receive all of the benefits of an in-person program. Below are some actionable lessons for organizations that might be considering virtual internships or learning experiences:

- **Students appreciate and benefit from access to knowledge-building activities such as seminars and project shadowing, which can be successfully delivered in a virtual format.** One key consideration is balance: Do you want your program to offer *more* interns a light-touch opportunity or *fewer* interns a more robust opportunity? It is possible to expand programming, increase networking opportunities, and reduce costs by sharing programming with other organizations. This could take the form of one organization's interns participating in online seminars or career or graduate school fairs offered by another organization or institution. This type of partnership not only grants interns access to new content in a given field but extends their professional networks.
- **When possible, provide hands-on project work, which will deepen the program experience.** As mentioned above, the pandemic affected how MDRC staff were deployed and created unexpected funding constraints, which had the effect of limiting the number of project-related opportunities available to interns. Our summer interns said that while they found the virtual experience to be meaningful, they wished they could have had more hands-on work, instead of simply shadowing a staff member. If MDRC decides to host a virtual program in the future, we hope to once again assign interns to projects where they can either lead or work directly with MDRC staff on specific tasks.
- **To maximize interns' engagement and connection to staff — and to combat the isolation that can result when working virtually — organizations should tailor activities to the interns' interests and include them in community events.** Consider how to adapt in-person program activities for an online format. This can be done by continuing to host welcome lunches paid for by the organization (MDRC sent gift cards to the interns to pay for their lunch), sending all-staff emails introducing the interns to the organization, matching interns to projects based on their interests, setting aside time to respond to any questions they may have, and inviting them to company-wide seminars and social events. It is also useful to invite interns to deliver an all-staff presentation. These activities are especially important in a virtual setting to increase interns' sense of belonging in the company. Giving interns the opportunity to present on their work and reflect on their experience in the organization can further promote engagement and also allows them to hone their presentation skills using digital tools.

To learn more about the virtual program experience from the interns' perspectives, read [Francis Estrada's](#) and [Ismerlyn Gonzalez's](#) reflections on their summer at MDRC. Also, here are two other valuable resources for creating virtual internships: Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions' [short guide to online internships](#) for colleges, students, and employers; and Achieving the Dream's guide to [moving to virtual internships](#).

Erick Alonzo, a research assistant in MDRC's Postsecondary Education policy area, led the development and implementation of MDRC's 2020 summer Gueron Scholars Program.