

Virtual Field Experiences in Business & Management

On Thursday, April 30, 2020, 40 members of the UMN teaching community convened to discuss strategies for conducting virtual field experiences in business and management. Ideas and effective practices generated during that discussion are documented here. Contact cei@umn.edu to suggest an addition to this resource.

Facilitators and panelists:

- [David Langley](#), Center for Educational Innovation, UM System
- [Siddharth Chandramouli](#), Carlson School of Management, UMTC
- [Ellen Trader](#), Carlson School of Management, UMTC

Recording and slides

- [Session recording](#)
- [Slides](#)

General Resources for Field Experiences

- Example of a [powerful field based experience at the Carlson School](#) for Sara Moret, 2016 MBA. Sara initially served as a client for students completing projects through the [Carlson Consulting Enterprise](#) and later expanded her education through the same program.
- An [Experiential Learning Project Client Handbook](#) from the Carlson Analytics Lab detailing the project timeline, grading, team composition, and many other elements of a first rate program on field experiences
- [Guide to online internships](#) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, with numerous recommendations and practices for students in any discipline
- Description of the [internship program](#) at the Labovitz School of Business and Economics at UMD, where students integrate in-class theory with real world applications

Introduction: The Carlson Field Experience 2020

- **The nature of the experience:** 70% of the projects typically focus on strategic work (e.g., locating new markets, trying to launch a new project where one identifies competitors, examine supply chains, etc); 30% of the field experiences are usually aligned with helping an organization be more agile or uncover best practice.
- **Access to external clients:** since COVID-19 occurred in March, all clients have maintained their connection to Carlson students

- **Upcoming summer 2020:** It will be more difficult to find projects for the summer - external clients don't have the bandwidth to think about this right now. In addition, it is going to take more time to get the projects lined up than normal.

I. Preparing for the Virtual Experience

What should students achieve in any field experience? How do those goals change for a virtual field experience?

- **The greatest value** for a field experience is for students to see how different elements of what is learned in the class fit together in a real world setting. Normal class assignments are clear and well-structured, but the real world is messy. This messiness is valuable to help students recognize the complexity of problems and their solutions. Being uncomfortable and learning to work through ambiguity is a key part of student learning in business and management.
- **For Carlson students**, goals have not shifted from the first 8 weeks of the face-to-face course and the current virtual field experience. Students still need to be able to translate their technical work into the language of business. This can be more difficult without f2f interaction. During the virtual field experience, students are asked to spend more time with clients so that they can solidify the communication and understanding of key management concepts.
- **In any field experience**, there can be leadership and power issues. Students may not feel comfortable asserting themselves - they need to learn to do this. Knowledge is power - students need to become confident in what they know and be able to express that knowledge clearly.

What are the top anticipated challenges when transforming face-to-face to a virtual environment?

- **One key challenge** is working on projects that require access to confidential data
 - At Carlson, faculty have negotiated with clients on how students can gain access to the client's data. Non-disclosure agreements are important and the data may need to be de-identified. NDA's are typically signed by CSoM and go through the Office of General Counsel;

II. Sustaining the Virtual Experience

How can faculty monitor the field experience?

- **A weekly deliverable** is a key way to measure student success and can be an important way to monitor the field experience.
- **Regular touchpoints/milestones** in a project are a good way to monitor experience
- Student teams set up **weekly 2 hour meetings** on each project with faculty. In addition, students also use this time to dig deeper into the project, which makes these become “problem solving” meetings.
- **Students can do weekly status updates** with their clients. Faculty can also attend some of these meetings since they are virtual.
- **360-degree feedback** with all parties can be done and is part of the student’s final grade

How can faculty adapt an experience that is not going well?

- **At UMD, consistent communication** and follow through with all parties helps to troubleshoot and problem solve. The situation needs to be addressed as soon as possible.
- A **culture of feedback** can be created that identifies these issues early on. It also needs to be shared with students and fully understood by them.

III. Assurance of Learning

What methods--formal and informal--should be used to ensure that student learning outcomes have been achieved?

- **At Crookston**, a survey instrument is used to assess student learning and whether they valued the experience. There are questions about what the faculty member could have done better and what did she do that was helpful. In addition, multiple touch points are regularly used to ensure students are on track.
- **As described earlier, milestones/ deliverables should be weekly.** Faculty need to assess along the way on what is being produced. In another vein, students can be asked to articulate the value that they contributed to the client - the before and after.
- **Peer feedback** and self-reflection can also be included in the student’s grade.

IV. Satisfaction with the Experience

What have the students, faculty members, and external clients said about the field experience?

- At Carlson, things have been working well in the last half of the Spring 2020 semester. There have been more meetings than in the past, however.
- A key concern involves this fall - having to do the current scenario for another semester will bring on much stress.
- Outside of the business/management world: Many health care institutions have cancelled internships for summer; working on alternatives - e.g., case studies with students.