



V S F S

VIRTUAL STUDENT FEDERAL SERVICE

MENTOR HANDBOOK

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Dear Mentor,

Thank you for being part of the **Virtual Student Federal Service** (VSFS) family! Innovative mentors like you make VSFS a success.

As we enter the second decade of the VSFS, more remote interns are becoming federal employees and government contractors. Nearly 50 State Department Foreign Service Officers are VSFS alumni, and a third of these officers come from underrepresented groups. **If your agency is hiring VSFS alumni, please email the good news to VSFS@state.gov.**

VSFS equalizes the playing field for students who want to contribute to their country. It is a powerful tool for diversity and inclusivity, connecting more than 50 agencies with the cutting-edge tech excellence of a new generation.

All the best,

Team VSFS

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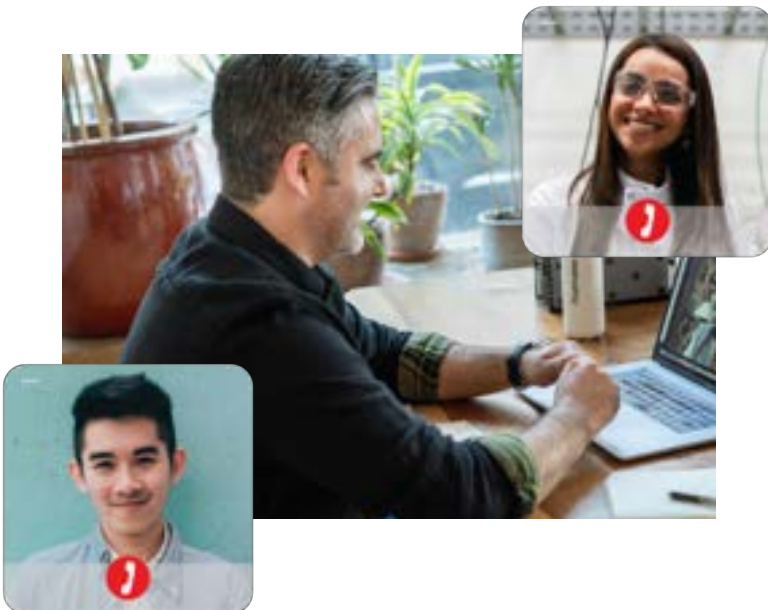
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VSFS Mentoring Basics



Program Overview



Getting Started

Set and Manage Expectations

Setting and managing expectations from day one is key. This is true with in-person internships, but you must be even more intentional with virtual interns. The VSFS team has found that when we spend more time with our virtual interns upfront for onboarding, they were better able to work independently on tasks as the weeks progressed.



Determine Availability and Communication

Include a discussion about availability and communication methods. For example, we text with our virtual students, which is something we might not do with an in-person intern.

With the majority of your communication potentially occurring via email, discuss email etiquette/professional norms of email early.

Incorporate Network and Mentoring Sessions

Be intentional about setting up networking and mentoring sessions. A lot of this happens organically in the office.

► Schedule meetings to review résumés. Invite a student to a mock interview.

► Setup virtual coffees for them with your leadership because they will not be able to run into those people in the break room and integrate them with your in person interns if possible since so many events are hybrid since COVID-19.

It is easy to forget to invite virtual interns to meetings because other members of your team will not be in the habit of including them, and you will not be able to see them sitting at a desk like you would for an in-person internship.

There is no singular “right” mentoring formula. Every student is different. Aim to get to know one another and communicate expectations and preferences. Together you will figure out what works best for both of you.

If you have been a mentor before, the way you communicated last time may not work this time. Many factors influence communication in a mentoring relationship including interpersonal chemistry, cultural background and personality, etc.

Welcome & Orientation

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

Ways to “Welcome” Your Intern(s)

- ▶ Share bios both ways. Circulate the student’s resume, photo, and/or LinkedIn profile and do the same for the various members of your office.
- ▶ Invite the student to a staff meeting to introduce them to the rest of the team.



The First Conversation

The first conversation with your intern can set the tone for the rest of your relationship. What should you talk about during your first meeting? Here are suggestions:

- ▶ Clarify expectations about the extent to which you will offer guidance concerning personal as well as professional issues as you work together to define learning objectives.
- ▶ Discuss and define common goals and focus.
- ▶ Discuss what you can offer: information, skills, experience.
- ▶ Decide how you will interact in the future.
- ▶ Discuss any questions or concerns.
- ▶ Discuss communication preferences, availability, and deadlines. How should the student communicate if they need an extension or will be on leave, etc.?

Becoming Acquainted

Help the Student Understand your Background:

- ▶ How long have you been with your agency?
- ▶ What is your agency’s history? Your office’s mission?
- ▶ What do you enjoy most about your current position?
- ▶ How long have you worked in this industry?
- ▶ Where did you go to school?
- ▶ Where did you grow up?
- ▶ Where do you currently live?
- ▶ How do you spend your time away from work?
- ▶ What are your interests and hobbies?

Review Goals

- ▶ Please tell me about your goals for participating in this program. Why do you want a mentor?
- ▶ May I tell you about my personal and professional development goals? Discuss your interest in being a mentor.

Checklist

Virtual interns 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, flexible and 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 intern(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, agency, etc.
 - Schedule an introductory call/video chat to meet
 - Set up a weekly or bi-weekly check-in
 - 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 Drive, and/or use a task tracking program, like Trello or Asana—check with your intern to see what they may prefer or use (make them part of the process)!
- Work with your intern to find the best way to introduce him or herself to your team.



Timeline

All interns are committed to putting in an average of 10 hours per week on projects from September-May.



Late August/Early September

Connect with your intern



Weekly/Bi-Weekly

Set up regular check-in calls for the year



November/December

Mid-year check-in



April/May

End of year check-in

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 flexibility (around winter break or finals).
- ▶ Ask your intern 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 intern will complete, decide how these will be prioritized and accomplished
- ▶ When leading up to a firm deadline, check-in to make sure your intern is on track.

Communicating with Your Interns



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

► Online calendars, such as [Google Calendar](#), [Keep and Share](#), [Podio](#), and [Doodle](#) can also help keep things organized.

► Software building tool [Github](#)

► [TimeandDate.com](#) is a handy time zone converter when working with interns across the country and across the globe.

► Appointment scheduling tool [Picktime](#) is great for planning applicant interviews.

► [Trello](#) is an easy to use visual collaborative project management tool that allows you to track the status of intern tasks. The free version is sufficient for most. Chances are your students have already used this tool for school. Watch a “getting started” video [here](#).



Managing Your Interns



Supervising Your Intern

Remember, most interns do not have a security clearances and all of their work must be unclassified if this is the case. Interns 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 is a great [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 workload 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 intern to try and resolve the situation.

If all of these efforts fail, you may let the student go, explaining why the project and intern'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.



Tips on being a Great Mentor


There is no specific “correct” way to be a great mentor. Every mentoring relationship is different, and the goals and expectations will vary depending on the individuals. Here are tips to help guide you:

- ▶ **Beyourself.**
- ▶ **Listen** to your intern and then share your knowledge that relates to their needs.
- ▶ **Learn** what is important to your intern by asking questions.
- ▶ **Understand** their expectations.
- ▶ **If** your intern needs help with self-confidence, then that could be an area that you assist in developing.




Mentor Best Practices



- ▶ Lead by example at all times.
 - ▶ Explain what you are doing, how you are doing it, and why you are doing it.
 - ▶ Repetition and routine are helpful for an intern's growth, but do not be afraid to ask the intern to stretch their skills and/or provide the intern with a variety of responsibilities.
 - ▶ Set goals in small attainable steps to support success. Engage the intern in the process and review progress on a regular basis.
 - ▶ Build the intern's independence by providing them with trouble-shooting tips and talking the intern through problem-solving steps. Rather than solving all challenges for the intern, let the intern learn how to solve them.
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Mentor 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 intern. 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 internship.
 - ▶ Do not simply provide solutions, but instead advise or identify resources to assist the student to make their own decisions.
 - ▶ Do not offer "personal" counseling or life coaching that is not related to professional or personal development.
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Mentorship & Career Guidance

In addition to making a contribution, interns 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 the State Department, you can also direct them to contact the [Diplomat in Residence](#) for their school.

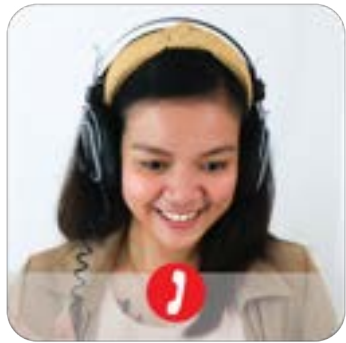
Here are a few ways you can help your intern:

- ▶ 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



Meeting in-person

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



Course/ Internship Credit

Some students may ask their school for course credit for their VSFS internship. We think that is great, and we hope you agree. You can confirm participation and fill out paperwork the school provides, and agree to evaluations as necessary. Do not, however, sign a Memorandum of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding or any binding contract with the school. In our experience, Universities will accept a less formal affirmation of the student's successful selection as a VSFS intern, such as a letter on letterhead, and a print-out of the VSFS project description. The intern should be responsible for making all arrangements and relaying any information from the university advisor to you. In most cases, the paperwork is minimal and is not time-consuming.

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 generate a certificate for all the interns that complete the program at the end of the year.

Who We Are

The VSFS team at the State Department (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 interns 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 intern's accomplishments in your own way!

 [@VSFSatState](https://twitter.com/VSFState)  [@vsfs_us](https://www.instagram.com/vsfs_us)  [@VSFSatState](https://www.facebook.com/VSFState)  [VSFS](https://www.linkedin.com/company/vsfs)

vsfs.state.gov

vsfs@state.gov

Q&A

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** already have a VSFS account:

1. Ask your colleague to [register](#) for a new account using his/her work email address as the username.
2. Colleague activates the account by clicking on the link in the automated email (note: check spam or junk folder), which should arrive within 5 minutes.
3. Once your 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 interns 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.” Interns do **not** have security clearances or background checks for the most part unless your agency took this additional step. As a result, they must only work on unclassified projects. Interns are not employees.

Q I would like to bring our current intern on board as an intern. What steps do I need to take?

A: Great idea! That’s how the Virtual Student Federal Service program got started. Contact the VSFS team at vsfs@state.gov to find the best way forward.

Q My intern 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 intern handbook similar to this one?

A: Yes, we will email the student handbook to all interns.

Q Can my student continue beyond May?

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

Q What if there is a complaint regarding discrimination or sexual harassment?

A: Discrimination and sexual harassment will not be tolerated. If you have concerns of either, please make sure you notify your Office for Civil Rights as soon as possible or the equivalent and/or the VSFS Internship Program Manager, via VSFS@state.gov.

Q



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