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## Transforming Criminal Justice Internships into Capstone Courses: A Response to the Challenges of the COVID-19 Crisis

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***Transforming Criminal Justice Internships into Capstone Courses:  
A Response to the Challenges of the COVID-19 Crisis\****

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**ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the declaration of a national emergency that closed universities across the nation in March 2020. With no warning, faculty were required to change classes from face-to-face to completely online instruction. This situation posed many difficulties, particularly for faculty who were teaching and supervising students completing internships. Interns were removed from their internships abruptly as agencies and departments moved to essential personnel only. Faculty scrambled to create online learning experiences that met academic learning outcomes and the goals of criminal justice students enrolled in these courses. This paper details our experiences with these challenges, particularly as we revised criminal justice internship courses and developed capstone courses to replace face-to-face internship experiences. Although the challenges we faced involved criminal justice internships, they were not unique to the major, and the approaches taken and lessons learned are likely applicable to a host of disciplines.

**KEY WORDS** Internship; Capstone Course; COVID-19

Internships are a valuable part of the undergraduate criminal justice curriculum. Whether completed as requirements for the degree or as electives, internships provide students with personal, professional, and practical benefits (Kuh 2008; Lei and Yin 2019). Internships, one example of a high-impact practice (HIP) in institutions of higher education, lead to deep learning, enhanced student engagement in their learning, persistence in college, and increased graduation rates (Kuh 2008, 2013; O'Donnell 2013). Additionally, for many students, internships are the first practical exposure to a potential

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career in criminal justice. Students who have never experienced firsthand the work of the criminal justice system such as policing, courts, corrections, and other related work are able to utilize internships as a mechanism to evaluate their career interests and to determine whether the career is a good fit for them. Students who complete internships are presented with the opportunity to connect with and build relationships and networks with criminal justice practitioners. Further, students completing internships are able to develop soft skills that come with working in a professional environment (e.g., time management, professional etiquette, enhanced communication; Lei and Yin 2019); thus, internships provide hands-on integrative and collaborative learning, build connections to the community, build professional relationships and experience, bridge the gap between theory and practice, increase student learning of academic subject matter, allow students to explore career options, and potentially lead to job offers upon graduation (Callanan and Benzing 2004; Crain 2016; Finley and McNair 2013; Knouse, Tanner, and Harris 1999; Kuh, O'Donnell, and Schneider 2017; Murphy and Gibbons 2017; O'Neill 2010; Schneider 2015; Taylor 1988).

The COVID-19 crisis created havoc for postsecondary institutions worldwide. Virtually overnight, faculty had to transform face-to-face classes into online courses. This created numerous challenges, particularly for faculty supervising internships. Many students were informed that they would not be able to continue working as interns for the agencies, departments, and courts at which they had been placed. This change was due in part to agencies being restricted to essential employees only and in part to the concerns that universities had about allowing internships to continue, even when agencies approved the internships' continuation, because of the increased risk to the students' health and well-being. Faculty had to rush to find online alternatives to these valuable applied-learning experiences, and administrators and faculty had to navigate the murky bureaucratic policies and procedures of academia in a relatively short time to implement the necessary changes.

This paper is based on one case study, our experience at one Midwestern university, and discusses the practical and academic concerns of moving students from internships to alternative methods of instruction while still achieving an HIP that allowed students to achieve the course learning objectives. Although ours is one story of many across the nation, we believe that sharing our experience and insight from the COVID-19 crisis may help others learn from how we managed the crisis and the challenge it presented, and that we can begin a conversation to learn together how to respond should another pandemic or other disaster require similar conversions in the future.

## **THE CHALLENGE**

The COVID-19 pandemic created numerous concerns for academia at every level. One such concern was the effect of the closure of university campuses and the requirement that students and faculty learn and work remotely (Times Higher Education N.d.). Faculty, many with no prior online teaching experience, were instructed to convert their on-campus classes to a remote/online format in the middle of the semester. This was an enormous challenge for all instructors and courses across campus, particularly given the

urgency of the situation; however, internships presented special challenges. Most students completing internships during the spring semester of 2020 were told they would not be able to complete their internships on-site; thus, faculty and administrators were required, with little notice, to determine how to revise field-placement internships into online learning experiences that met student learning goals, fulfilled the requirements of HIPs, and kept students engaged.

Fortunately, much like criminal justice practitioners, educators are afforded a certain degree of freedom in our work. In mid-March of 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, faculty were able to work creatively with colleagues to identify revisions to the courses that addressed academic concerns about maintaining achievement of course learning objectives as well as students' (particularly graduating seniors') natural concern and trepidation over losing valuable experience that enhanced their understanding of the field and provided many practical benefits toward achieving their career goals. Most students were particularly understanding, given the gravity of the situation and that events unfolding were not due to the choices of the instructors, university administrators, or internship-site practitioners. Students were able to see that the COVID-19 crisis had abruptly and severely interrupted our academic and personal lives in ways that were largely unforeseeable in the time preceding the crisis, and they were willing to work with faculty to achieve their academic goals in ways different from those originally planned. In short, students were largely cooperative and understanding rather than resentful and critical of the changes that instructors had to make to classes.

## **THE SETTING**

Our campus is a regional campus of a Big Ten university. Approximately 3200 students were enrolled in classes during the 2019–2020 academic year. The student-to-faculty ratio is 16:1. The campus offers more than 60 degrees, including undergraduate and graduate degrees. With approximately 140 majors, criminal justice is one of the largest on campus. Students enrolled in criminal justice are required to complete a capstone experience as part of the Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice degree requirements. They may choose from either an internship (the most common choice) or a research practicum, depending on their career goals and interests. Thirteen students were enrolled in the internship course during spring semester 2020. Six of these had completed all their required internship hours prior to the COVID crisis and the subsequent cancellation of internships or were able to continue with their placements after the campus was closed. Thus, seven students had to abruptly end their field placements and complete the course online.

## **THE SOLUTION**

The most pressing issue that the pandemic presented to the faculty supervising internships during the 2020 spring semester was how to replace students' lost internship hours. The most logical response was to convert internships into online capstone courses, as both are HIPs (Kuh 2008, 2013; Kuh et al. 2017; O'Donnell 2013). They are

also similar in other regards (Durel 1993; National Leadership Council 2007). For example, both internships and capstone courses build on students' entire college careers, culminating in experiences that allow students to apply knowledge in the discipline and to personally reflect on ways to creatively solve real-world problems.

Applied internships and academic capstone courses foster similar skills, including synthesizing the knowledge gained over collegiate careers and bridging the gap between theory and practice (Parilla and Smith-Cunniën 1997; Steele 1993). A critical distinction between the two, however, is the practical work experience that students gain through internships when they are placed with an agency, department, or court in the criminal justice field and are required to complete meaningful work that contributes to the overarching mission or goals of the agency. Students gain experience in professional settings and learn practical and professional skills. Students in capstone courses, in contrast, must generally produce a product (e.g., report, project, paper, portfolio) that synthesizes, integrates, and applies the knowledge they have acquired over the course of their academic careers. Criminal justice capstone courses allow students to use the totality of the knowledge they have gained in criminal justice courses to critically evaluate and creatively engineer solutions to real criminal justice problems (Kuh 2008; Schneider 2015). The challenge, then, for criminal justice faculty and administrators during the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020 was to revise internships in which students could not continue to work for agencies and to provide students with similar experiences in an online capstone course. The most logical solution was to create alternative assignments within the capstone course that adhered to the stated course objectives.

After consulting with stakeholders at the department and school levels, faculty decided to replace students' outstanding internship hours with weekly position papers. Topics were selected to expose students to critical issues and current events in criminal justice. When possible, topics varied according to students' internship assignments, so the content covered pertained to a student's initial placement. In general, students intern in one of the three components of the system: policing, courts, or corrections. Weekly topics were chosen based on critical issues within each of these components and were assigned to students based on their original placements. For example, one week's topics included "Broken Windows Policing & Its Effectiveness" for policing interns, "The Impact of Race on Sentencing Outcomes in the U.S." for students interning with courts, and "Risk & Needs Assessment—What, Why, and How" for corrections-related internships.

Position papers were required to be data-driven, to reference a minimum of two scholarly articles, and to be at least 600 words in length (excluding cover page and references). The papers required students to synthesize empirical literature on the topics and to integrate and apply what they learned to real-world issues. This problem-centered inquiry is at the heart of preparing students to enter a complex and uncertain world and aligns well with the requirements of HIPs (Schneider 2015). Instead of being assigned readings, students researched their assigned topics independently via the university's journal subscription database to facilitate self-regulated learning, a skill that both academics and practitioners regard as vital in the workforce (Boekaerts 1997;

Shine and Heath 2020). It is worth noting that the number of completed internship hours at the time of the conversion for all students enrolled in the course were fairly similar, so the requirements for the papers were the same for all students.

Given the pass/fail grading scheme of the course, position papers were graded liberally. A grade of C– or better demonstrated competency in and/or understanding of course material. In addition to competent writing, minimum expectations regarding achievement of learning outcomes on the assignments included demonstration of basic understanding of the assigned topics and relevant scholarly research. If students failed to meet the minimum expectations, they received feedback on errors and omissions and on where improvements could be made. Students were required to resubmit their papers based on the feedback. Weekly papers were assigned on Monday morning and were due by 5:00 p.m. the following Friday. The papers were graded, and students were provided with extensive feedback by Tuesday of the following week. In this way, students could access the feedback while the topic was still fresh in their minds and make revisions as needed. The course met once a week for the first five weeks of the semester, covering professionalism, how to write a resume and cover letter, ethics in criminal justice, interviewing skills, and careers in the private sector. Because the five meetings concluded before the pandemic was declared, there was no need to meet as a class once courses were moved online.

To successfully complete an internship, each student was required to submit a resume and cover letter to the career center on campus and to meet with a career center counselor to review these documents. Students who had not completed this requirement before the campus was closed because of COVID-19 were still required to submit their materials online for review, make any revisions suggested by the reviewer, and resubmit the updated versions for final approval. Once a career center staff member replied with final approval, the student forwarded that email to the instructor and submitted the final version of the resume and cover letter via Canvas (our university's learning management system). Students submitted their research papers (a separate and lengthier assignment than the weekly papers) online as well. Each student participated in an exit interview at the end of the course. These interviews are standard for the internship course and are intended to give students the opportunity to share and reflect on their internship experiences and to provide valuable insight and perspective to internship coordinators. As part of the transition to online, the exit interviews were conducted virtually.

## **EFFECTIVENESS OF COURSE TRANSFORMATION FOR SPRING 2020**

Our main concern in converting the internship course to an online capstone course mid-semester was to ensure that students successfully learned the course objectives despite the dramatic format change. Although limited, the data that we have demonstrates that students successfully met the course objectives in spring 2020. These data, based on the case study model, include student course evaluations, assessments of student learning, and exit interviews with students.

A mean of eight students completes the internship each semester (fall and spring). Each student completing the internship course is given the opportunity to provide a

course evaluation. Unfortunately, the percentage of students completing the course evaluation is small. Despite the low response rates, the course evaluations for the internship course from spring 2019 to spring 2021 are very positive. Table 1 shows the mean scores of the course evaluation questions most relevant to student learning for spring 2019 to spring 2021.

**Table 1. Select Student Course Evaluation Results**

	Spring 2019	Summer 2019	Fall 2019	Spring 2020	Summer 2020	Fall 2020	Spring 2021	Spring 2021
	<i>J380</i>	<i>J380</i>	<i>J380</i>	<i>J380</i>	<i>J370</i>	<i>J380</i>	<i>J380</i>	<i>J490</i>
	<i>N = 4</i>	<i>N = 1</i>	<i>N = 3</i>	<i>N = 4</i>	<i>N = 5</i>	<i>N = 1</i>	<i>N = 2</i>	<i>N = 4</i>
<b>Statements</b>	(36.36%)	(16.67%)	(50.00%)	(30.77%)	(62.50%)	(25.00%)	(40.00%)	(40.00%)
Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as outstanding.	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.80	4.00	4.00	3.50
Announced course objectives agree with what is taught.	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.80	4.00	4.00	4.00
The course improved my understanding of concepts in this field.	4.00	4.00	3.67	4.00	3.60	4.00	4.00	4.00
This course increased my interest in the subject matter.	4.00	4.00	3.67	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.50
Course assignments helped in learning the subject matter.	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.80	4.00	4.00	3.75
My instructor uses teaching methods well suited to the course.	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.80	4.00	4.00	3.00

The course evaluations for the internship course are provided for the three semesters leading up to the “COVID semester” (spring 2020), when we converted the

internship into an online capstone course halfway through the semester, as are the mean course evaluation scores for both the internship and online capstone courses for the three semesters following the COVID semester. As can be seen in the table, there are no significant differences in mean scores across the seven semesters.

Students were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), their level of agreement with the statements. High scores indicate positive course evaluations, with scores above 3.0 indicating agreement with the statements and demonstrating positive student evaluations of the course. Students in the internship courses before spring 2020, in the internship course during spring 2020, and in both the internship and capstone courses during spring 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021 agreed or strongly agreed that (1) the announced course objectives aligned with what was taught in the course, (2) the course improved their understanding of concepts in the field, (3) the course increased their interest in the subject matter, and (4) the teaching methods used by the instructor were well suited to the course.

Very few responses were received to the qualitative questions (*Which aspects of the class were most valuable? Which aspects of the class were least valuable? What could the instructor do to improve the course or his/her teaching effectiveness?*) on the student course evaluation. Furthermore, limitations to the responses were present. For example, it was not possible to determine if the students who responded to the open-ended questions at the end of the spring 2020 semester were students who had completed their internship hours or those who had completed the course as a capstone course. Thus, the responses from one student who wanted more meeting dates throughout the semester and from another who thought “the class was well taught” are not helpful in determining the effectiveness of the transition to online learning. Despite these limitations, it is important to note that no students mentioned the transformation of the course from field placements to online instruction as positive or negative; they did not mention the change at all in the course evaluations.

Assessment of student learning is another measure of a successful transition from internship placements to the online capstone experience. Of the course learning objectives, the objective “apply concepts learned in the criminal justice program at IUK to the work environment” best measures the effectiveness of our strategy for transforming the course into an online capstone experience.<sup>1</sup> Assessments of student learning through the position papers and the final research paper demonstrates that students were able to successfully meet the internship course goal even though they completed the class as a capstone. For example, seven students completed the position papers that were required as part of the capstone. As part of the paper requirements, students were required to apply theoretical concepts and empirical evidence to a contemporary problem in the criminal justice system. All seven students successfully demonstrated achievement of these learning goals in each of the four position papers. The students also completed a final research paper whether they had completed the internship hours or the capstone. All thirteen of the students completing the paper met or exceeded expectations on the assessment by demonstrating knowledge of criminal justice concepts and their relevance to the field. These assessments show that students achieved course goals despite the move from field placements to a capstone experience.

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A final measure of the success of the transformation from internship to capstone experience comprises student responses and comments during the exit interview for the course. Each student completing the course was required to meet with the instructor for an exit interview. The purpose of the exit interviews is to gain a better understanding of students' activities and experiences with their internship providers. For students who didn't get the opportunity to complete their internships traditionally, questions about the pivot to a capstone model were also asked, and although there was naturally a bit of disappointment about not getting to complete their internships as planned, students voiced support for the conversion, as well as appreciation for weekly paper topics related to what they had been doing in their individual internships.

Although limited direct data exist to help us assess the effectiveness of our approach in transitioning from in-person internships to an online equivalent experience, the available evidence indicates that the revision of the course was successful. Assessments of student learning, course evaluations, and informal exit interviews with students all indicate that students successfully met the learning objectives of the course. The evidence that our approach was successful encouraged us to continue with the online capstone course for the summer and the following academic year as some students were still unable to complete internships through spring 2021 because of COVID restrictions.

**PREPARING FOR SUMMER AND BEYOND**

In addition to making mid-semester changes to the internship course, criminal justice faculty needed to determine how to manage summer internships. Students (including those who were graduating in the summer) had already been enrolled in the full-semester summer internship course when the national emergency was declared in the United States. The university made the decision to continue with online rather than face-to-face courses in the summer to comply with state mandates and to ensure the safety and well-being of faculty, staff, and students. The criminal justice faculty decided that any changes to the summer internship course should be easily and readily applicable to the following academic year in case internships were not available to students because of continued COVID-19-related restrictions. In fact, the capstone was not needed for fall semester, as the only four students who needed to complete the capstone experience requirement for the degree enrolled in the internship course rather than the capstone course. These students were able to be placed in an agency to complete the internship. In spring 2021, two students were able to find internship placements and four students enrolled in the online capstone course.

Through collaboration between the instructor, the department head, and the dean of the school, it was decided that the summer internship course should be replaced with a capstone course. Several possible ways to offer this alternative experience to students were considered. One possibility was to keep the internship course on the schedule, allow students to register for the internship course, and then teach it as an online capstone. This option was similar to what occurred in the spring but would apply to the full semester rather than to only the last half of the semester. Another alternative was to offer a capstone course, distinct from the internship course, and temporarily allow it to be

substituted for the internship degree requirement.<sup>2</sup> The former option was problematic because the capstone course is not an actual internship. The department and school administrators determined that it was not appropriate to have an internship listed on an academic transcript when, in fact, the experience was not an internship. The latter option was problematic because it required the full design (albeit built upon the work done in the spring) of a course in less than two months. Ultimately, it was decided that the second option, although clearly challenging, was the best option for the students, the program, the university, and potential future employers; thus, the instructor of the internship course designed a capstone course to be offered in the summer, and potentially in the fall, to temporarily replace the internship requirement.

Once the summer capstone course was designed, only minor adjustments were needed to account for the two-week difference in length between the summer and regular academic semesters. The second iteration of the capstone course was developed and eventually approved as a new course (J490) through remonstrance. There was not enough time to gain approval for a new course through remonstrance in time for the summer semester, however. As such, the summer capstone course was listed as a special topics course for the summer semester using the upper-level special topics course number (J370). Two criminal justice students were approved for in-agency internships in the summer; thus, the instructor taught both the capstone course (as a topics course) and the traditional internship course (J380) in the summer.

Decisions regarding the curriculum of the capstone course were also pressing. For the course to be offered in the summer, the syllabus needed to be submitted for review in April. Similar to the internship course, the capstone course required students to complete resumes and cover letters reviewed by the career center. In addition, a 3000-word research paper was assigned (a longer version of the 1500-word research paper required for the internship course). Also consistent with the internship course, students were required to attend five virtual classes. In addition to attending the required classes, students completed an assignment related to the topics covered during each class. Finally, students were assigned weekly position papers and were required to participate in weekly online discussions.

The topics covered during the classes mirrored those covered in the internship course classes, including how to dress and behave in the workplace, how to write a resume and cover letter, ethics in criminal justice, the interview process and interviewing tips, and careers in the private sector. To assist students with the unique and individual time constraints posed by COVID-19, classes were held asynchronously, with lessons posted on Monday mornings. Assignments associated with each topic were created to ensure that students were completing and understanding the virtual lessons. The assignments were due by 5:00 p.m. Friday of the week that each related lesson was posted.

Weekly position papers were assigned to examine critical issues in criminal justice. The requirements and grading scheme for the position papers were identical to those listed for the spring semester conversion. Because the course was a traditional criminal justice capstone course, however, topics covering every stage of the criminal justice system were assigned, not just those associated with a student's preferred career.

That said, many of the paper topics used in the spring semester conversion were utilized for the capstone course as well.

Lastly, students were required to participate in weekly online discussions covering key issues and current events in criminal justice. Examples of these issues include Miranda rights and warnings, America's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and crime and the media. Students were provided links to supplemental readings and videos and were instructed to answer the discussion questions and to reply to at least one other student's post per discussion. This gave students the opportunity to learn with and from their peers while facilitating interpersonal communication and engagement.

### **EFFECTIVENESS OF SUMMER AND FALL TRANSITION TO CAPSTONE COURSES**

As discussed earlier, the results from Table 1 demonstrate that, based on student course evaluations, the transition from internship courses to capstone courses was effective for the summer, fall, and spring semesters. Students in both the capstone and internship courses agreed or strongly agreed that the course improved their understanding of concepts in the field and increased their interest in the subject matter, and that the instructor asked questions that challenged them to think and used teaching methods well suited to the class. Although the mean response scores to the questions in the capstone course were slightly lower than those in the internship (e.g., 3.75 and 4.0), the difference is marginal. The responses were *agree* and *strongly agree*, and it is not possible to determine how much more agreement *strongly agree* has than does *agree* or to determine how students interpreted the distinction between the two. Agreement and strong agreement are both indicators of a positive course experience; thus, the course evaluations demonstrate similar student perceptions of both the internships and the online capstone courses. Further, assessments of student learning in summer, fall, and spring revealed that students effectively learned the stated course objectives in both the internship and capstone courses.

### **CONCLUSION**

The COVID-19 crisis created several challenges within academia as faculty were required to abruptly move from face-to-face to online learning. Within this context, internships presented even greater challenges as faculty struggled to provide students removed from internships with online learning experiences that matched internships in learning objectives and HIPs. The strategies we used to transform internships into online capstone courses were successful. We hope that the presentation of our experience in developing and revising curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic and of the strategies and lessons we've learned through this experience will enable others who are grappling with the same issues to use our experiences to think through and develop improved learning experiences for their criminal justice students. Further, we expect this case study to engender discussion and encourage others to share their experiences to increase the

discipline's overall understanding of effective teaching practices and to improve teaching practices if future crises were to occur.

## ENDNOTES

1. There were other course objectives; however, the other objectives were assessed prior to the transition to online or as part of assignments that did not change (e.g., the research paper) during the transformation of the mode of instruction. As such, the learning objective noted above is the best assessment of student learning through the transition to online.
2. The research practicum course was not offered during the summer for reasons unrelated to COVID-19, and faculty and administrators agreed that criminal justice students who wished to pursue careers, rather than graduate studies, upon graduation should not be required to take a research practicum course that did not align with their academic or career goals.

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