Arcadia Unified’s Digital Communications Internship Program

Research/Planning:

My initial research and need for the internship program stemmed from the fact that I could only attend and cover a limited number of events throughout our district. While I worked as many nights, weekends, and hours as I possibly could, there were still a lot of great events and publicity opportunities within our district that were not receiving any coverage. I researched what other school districts were doing to get additional help and stories covered for their districts. I discovered some districts had hired Public Relations firms, had paid internship programs, or some relied on PTA parents for photography projects. My biggest obstacle for many of these options was not having the budget to pay anyone. In order to create an internship program of my own, I knew I needed to provide some sort of value to the students. I have done this by making the internship exclusive and highly valuable in the skills and knowledge they learn through my teaching, critiques, workshops, guest speakers, and lectures.

Target Audience:

The target audience is students at the high school. Their work is targeted at the community, and nationally. I also have plans to eventually expand the program to the middle schools. I want to have middle school students be journalists for their schools, and my high school interns will each be assigned a middle school student to mentor and work with. They will take on my role as a mentor and review their work. This will give another great leadership opportunity to my interns, while also growing the program to the middle school level, increase news coverage, and ensure the AUSD DCI program has interns who are ready to hit the ground running when they get to high school.

Measurable Goals:

The program started with one student intern five years ago, and due to its popularity, has expanded to between 30 to 40 students some semesters. Though it’s an unpaid internship, I always receive more applications than I can accept. I have spoken about the AUSD DCI program at several conferences throughout California, including CSBA. Many other districts throughout the state and country have adopted our model and have been inspired to create their own internship programs after learning about AUSD DCI.

Since this internship’s inception and in non-pandemic times, my interns produce, on average, between 10 and 20 additional stories and videos a month. For example, in one school year alone, our interns covered 207 events throughout our district and community. That’s an astonishing number considering there are only 183 school days in the calendar year. In that same year, our interns took approximately 10,350 pictures, which were published on our social media accounts, websites, and have been archived for future use. The drastic amount of
positive stories from DCI has been a tremendous help and has allowed me to amplify our messaging and branding to our community. The work done by my interns was a significant factor in helping our district pass an 18-year parcel tax that will generate $77 million.

We have formed partnerships with the Arcadia Weekly and Aradia Patch, two community newspapers, in which our interns’ stories are published professionally. This gives DCI’ers a great platform upon which to build their resumes/portfolios, while also expanding the reach of our district’s stories. We also established a partnership with the University of Southern California (USC), and each semester, 10-12 of our interns attend a full day of workshops, lectures, and get hands-on experience in USC Annenberg’s media center. Several of our interns have also been accepted to USC’s prestigious 4-week summer journalism camp. Currently, we have DCI alumni attending Yale, USC, Northeastern, NYU, UCLA, and UC Berkeley. Many of our alumni interns are studying journalism or communications in college.

The pandemic did not halt our program’s operation. With an increased need to tell our stories and boost student and staff morale, we had 12 interns working closely with us to help generate positive and supportive content delivered through a mixture of news articles, podcast episodes, infographics, and videos. As an example, our interns created, led and managed a middle school writing competition. The writing prompt asked middle school students to write a news piece on something positive happening in their classrooms or community during the pandemic. Not only did it help bolster positive articles about our school district, but now those students know about our internships and will hopefully apply for our program when they reach high school.

https://www.ausd.net/apps/pages/AUSDMiddleSchoolWritingCompetitionWinners2020

The purpose of the Arcadia Unified Digital Communications Internship (AUSD DCI) program is to significantly enhance our district’s ability to generate additional positive stories, while providing our students the opportunity to gain real-world, professional, on-the-job experience. We have a group of more than 20 student-interns who contribute to the efforts of our district’s Public Information Office by serving as “reporters” for our district. Another significant purpose of the internship program is to provide an equitable voice to our student population.

My initial research and need for the internship program stemmed from the fact that I could only attend and cover a limited number of events throughout our district. While I worked as many nights, weekends, and hours as I possibly could, there were still a lot of great events and publicity opportunities within our district that were not receiving any coverage. I researched what other school districts were doing to get additional help and stories covered for their districts. I discovered some districts had hired Public Relations firms, had paid internship programs, or some relied on PTA parents for photography projects. My biggest obstacle for many of these options was not having the budget to pay anyone. In order to create an internship program of my own, I knew I needed to provide some sort of value to the students. I have done this by making the internship exclusive and highly valuable in the skills and knowledge they learn through my teaching, critiques, workshops, guest speakers, and lectures. When explaining what DCI is to prospective interns, I advise that this program could be likened to an Advanced
Placement (AP) style course. The specialties covered in the program consist of the following: journalism (including broadcast, print, and digital), communications, video production, marketing, public relations, media relations, crisis communications, event planning, social media, and business and real-world skills, such as interview techniques, ethics, and professionalism.

The program started with one student intern five years ago, and due to its popularity has expanded to between 30 to 40 students some semesters. Though it's an unpaid internship, I always receive more applications than I can accept. I have spoken about the AUSD DCI program at several conferences throughout California, including at the last in-person CSBA that was held in San Francisco. Many other districts throughout the state and country have adopted our model and have been inspired to create their own internship programs as a result of learning about AUSD DCI.

The pandemic did not halt our program's operation. With an increased need to tell our stories and boost student and staff morale, we had 12 interns working closely with us to assist with generating positive, helpful, and supportive content delivered through a mixture of news articles, podcast episodes, infographics, videos, and more. In addition to helping create our #schoolsclosedheartopen video showcasing the really inspiring work our teachers, staff, students, and parents have done to stay positive and connected through the pandemic, one really wonderful idea that was generated by, planned and managed by our interns was a middle school writing competition. The writing prompt asked middle school students to write a news piece on something positive happening in their classrooms or community during the pandemic. Not only did it help bolster positive articles about our school district, but now those students know what AUSD DCI is and will hopefully begin further honing their skills and apply for our program when they reach middle school.

https://www.ausd.net/apps/pages/AUSDMiddleSchoolWritingCompetitionWinners2020

Since this internship’s inception and in non-pandemic times, my interns produce, on average, between 10 and 20 additional stories and videos a month. For example, in one school year alone, our interns covered 207 events throughout our district and community. That's an astonishing number considering there are only 183 school days in the calendar year. Within that year, our interns took approximately 10,350 pictures, which were all published on our social media accounts and websites and are now in our archives for later use. The drastic amount of positive stories from our interns has been a tremendous help to my job, as it has allowed me to amplify our messaging and branding to our community. Accordingly, this internship was a significant factor in helping our district pass an 18-year parcel tax that will generate $77 million.

We have formed partnerships with the Arcadia Weekly and Aradia Patch, two community newspapers, in which our interns’ stories are published professionally. This gives the interns a great platform upon which to build their resumes/portfolios, while also allowing our district’s stories to reach an even larger audience through these local publications. We have also formed
a partnership with the University of Southern California (USC), and each semester, 10-12 of our interns attend a full day of workshops, lectures, and get hands-on experience in USC Annenberg’s media center. Several of our interns have also been accepted to USC’s 4-week summer journalism camp, which has honed their skills even further. Currently, we have past interns attending Yale, USC, Northeastern, NYU, UCLA, and UC Berkeley. Many of our alumni interns are studying journalism or communications in college.

AUSD DCI is an integral part of the Communications and Public Information Office. The program is equivalent to an Advanced Placement (AP) course, which prepares students with college and career-ready skills. There is an in-depth application and panel interview process that prospective students must successfully go through in order to be accepted. Upon initial acceptance, interns go through a probationary period to allow for accurate work assessments. The application, interview, and probation period are also teaching moments to help enhance their real-world business skills. I review with our students proper application and interview techniques after they go through this somewhat intimidating process for the first time. Then, for new students, they sit on the interview panel and learn how to ask questions and critique possible candidates. I teach the students various important interview techniques, such as how to organize their strengths in an interview, proper handshake and eye contact, how to sell their qualifications and to always ask questions at the end of an interview. Besides journalism and communications, I teach them a lot about professionalism. Weekly meetings are comprised of lectures, workshops, discussions, guest speakers, and planning.

The specialties covered in the program consist of the following: journalism (including broadcast, print, and digital), communications, video production, marketing, public relations, media relations, crisis communications, event planning, social media, and business and real-world skills, such as interview techniques, ethics, and professionalism.

Article about the program

Webpage about program
http://ausddci.blogspot.com/

My initial research and need for the internship program stemmed from the fact that I could only attend and cover a limited number of events throughout our district. While I worked as many nights, weekends, and hours as I possibly could, there were still a lot of great events and publicity opportunities within our district that were not receiving any coverage. I researched what other school districts were doing to get additional help and stories covered for their districts. I discovered some districts had hired Public Relations firms, had paid internship programs, or some relied on PTA parents for photography projects. My biggest obstacle for many of these options was not having the budget to pay anyone. In order to create an internship program of my own, I knew I needed to provide some sort of value to the students. I have done this by
making the internship exclusive and highly valuable in the skills and knowledge they learn through my teaching, critiques, workshops, guest speakers, and lectures.

All my interns must apply and interview, and not everyone is accepted. I also spend a lot of time teaching and doing workshops in our meetings. It's equal to a college hybrid course. We meet once a week but also have group discussions and assignments that are done online. I am helping to improve their skills at every step, not just having them do work. I review all their work, mostly in a class setting, so everyone can see the suggestions. I have held workshops on social media, professionalism, video, writing, and more. Video production, graphic design, and public relations are also heavy concentration topics. So, I provide a lot of value by teaching them the skills that they are not getting in other classes. My background as a television news reporter and now a communications professional has really helped me work with them and hone their digital communications skills. In addition to my teachings, we have had guests speakers who were alumni and current television reporters, a book publisher, copy editor, and freelance writer for national publications. I also had a videographer from NBC Network News conduct a video lesson on framing, lighting, and interview techniques.

The target audience is students at the high school. Their work is targeted for the community. I also have plans to eventually expand the program to the middle schools. I want to have middle school students be journalists for their schools, and my high school interns will each be assigned a middle school student to mentor and work with. They will take on my role as a mentor and review their work. This will give another great leadership opportunity to my interns, while also growing the program to the middle school level, increase news coverage, and ensure the AUSD DCI program has interns who are ready to hit the ground running when they get to high school.

The measurable goals were set in the way of increased news stories and overall reach. Every year the program has existed, we have dramatically increased our digital content and digital footprint in the media. For example, during the 2017-2018 school year, our interns covered 207 events throughout our district and community. That’s an astonishing number considering there are only 183 school days in the calendar year. In that year alone, our interns took approximately 10,350 pictures which were all published on our social media accounts, websites, and that are now in our archives for later use. The drastic amount of positive stories from our interns has been a tremendous help to my job and helping to communicate our message and brand to our community. It was also a significant factor in helping our district pass an 18-year parcel tax that will generate $77 million.

We have been able to track and increase our followers. This was to help the goal of increasing communications with our Asian demographic which is very important for our district. We have also seen a great increase in the news articles and videos that we are producing. My goal initially was to get a slight increase, but we have probably increased our story output anywhere from 50-70 percent since expanding the program. We also set goals to increase our social media following, and the interns helped create and execute a social media campaign that did
exactly that. Our Facebook page now has more than 6,700 followers. Our Instagram page has more than 4,500 followers and was recognized by BuzzFeed as one of the top 10 Educational Instagram accounts in the world, and our Twitter account has more than 3,400 followers. Our Youtube page now has 302 videos with 932 subscribers and over 500,000 video views. The content from the interns on these sites and their outreach efforts have increased the followers and reach on these platforms by approximately 55% since the internship started.

The program has been extremely rewarding thus far. I've also spoken with several of the interns' parents who are thrilled with the program and their child's involvement and work. Their gratitude feels great and is very humbling. All of the interns' stories are either publicized on our social media accounts, online, or in the local paper with their byline. The board of education members, superintendent, and countless other staff are also very pleased and appreciative of the program and what we have accomplished, and more importantly what we are providing as an opportunity and learning experience for our students. We have accomplished many goals so far and have many more to go.

A few projects we have completed: A comprehensive video about our performing arts program at our high school; started and hosted a district-wide Staff Appreciation Night at our high school, created a Chromebook Care and Safety video to ensure our 10,000 Chromebooks are taken care of and repair costs decrease, which earned an Award of Excellence from CalSPRA; promotion of school events, plays, sports, and clubs through photos and videos; coverage of our annual education foundation fundraiser; we also took a field trip to cover the Rose Parade alongside international media members; attend a school board meeting each semester; created a marketing campaign with our local Robeks franchise; and several other projects and public relations campaigns.

As I was quoted in a local news story about the program, I want to make this the best high school internship program in the country. I have a passion for teaching, and I absolutely love working with these dedicated students who have a passion for learning. I didn't expect the internship program to take off as it has or the work it would take, but it's been an amazing learning experience for me as well, and it's honestly one of the proudest accomplishments of my professional career. I hope to continue to inspire other districts to create their own programs which will help more communities advocate for public education and its many benefits for our youth.