

Inclusive Mindset: Remote Professional Summer Experience

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Keywords: inclusive and equitable pedagogy

In response to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new pilot program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, College of Architecture was established in partnership with local design professionals by identifying opportunities to engage a diverse student population inclusively. Due to the reduction in internships, the pilot program provided an equitable educational experience to all students regardless of academic level, academic performance, previous work experience, financial ability, or geographic location while allowing them to maintain their academic paths to graduation. The partnership provided students a three-week remote professional summer experience through a series of three one-credit sessions, including eleven sub-themes.

The pilot program was established for two student groups. The first is upper-level students who are required to obtain internship experience before graduation but could not get these internships due to COVID-19. Another target group was students early in their educational careers who were interested in getting a firsthand look into practice by engaging with a multi-disciplinary professional design office.

The course structure employs inclusive strategies for students at various academic levels and physical locations to participate in the class and with professionals remotely. Because of this the developmental team believes the course experienced rapid interest and enrollment within a brief timeframe, suggesting strong student interest in having access to and engagement with professionals they previously lacked. This emerging professional participation model for accessible learning in diverse student groups cultivated inclusive excellence, providing impactful learning experiences about design practice with professional design communities to student populations who would otherwise have limited engagement opportunities and access to these communities.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln strives to cultivate an inclusive mindset of excellence¹ through inclusion and equity strategies to prepare students to become future leaders in

design practice. The idea of inclusive excellence is essential to the university's mission as a flagship institution because of its geographic isolation and low level of student diversity. The university's Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Inclusion initiated a 'Path Towards Inclusive Excellence' and requested all colleges to prepare diversity and inclusion plans to strengthen their impact. The University's initiative builds upon the Association of American Colleges & Universities' 'Making Excellence Inclusive' and their notion of 'Equity-Mindedness.'² "The term 'Equity-Mindedness' refers to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes."³ The University and College of Architecture are committed to taking personal and institutional responsibility for student success by assessing design education practices. In the College of Architecture, the notion of inclusion was strengthened to broaden its intellectual, social, cultural, and geographical reach.

In contrast, the notion of equity was supported to provide opportunities for historically underrepresented populations. Underrepresented populations in the College of Architecture include those grouped by race, ethnicity, and geographic isolation. To support the College's visions for inclusion and equity, and in response to the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new pilot program was established by two program directors in partnership with local design professionals by identifying opportunities to engage a diverse student population inclusively.

PILOT PROGRAM TO PROFESSION DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, offices around the country were unable to uphold summer internships for Architecture and Interior Design students. In late spring 2020 during the pandemic's initial months, the college was approached by Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture, a professional office located in Omaha, Nebraska with strong ties to the College. They wanted to offer a service by providing students with a remote internship experience. The office has a long history of educational outreach in the state, making them an ideal partner for the college, with the remote internship experience building upon their strengths for "putting people

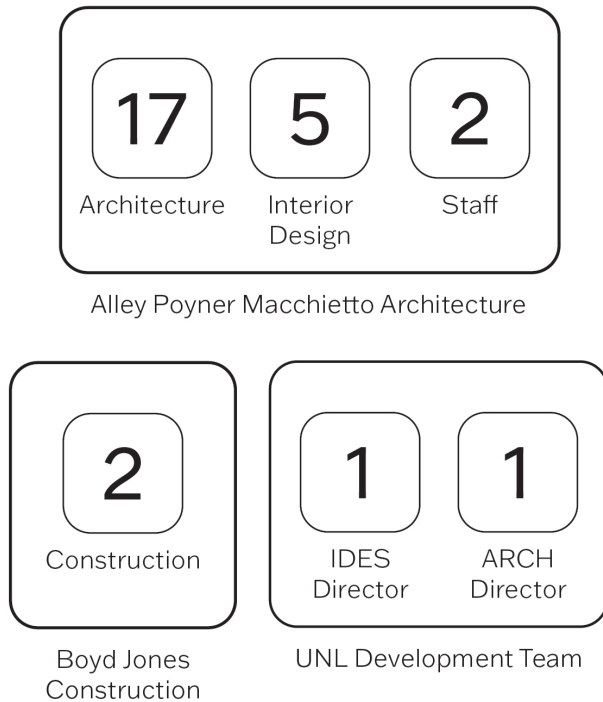


Figure 1. Professional and academic participation in mini-sessions.

first, advancing design, and building communities.”⁴ Erin Trofholz, Partner from Alley Poyner Macchietto Architecture, states, “When we were not able to have our traditional internship program due to COVID, we saw an opportunity to create a broader internship experience virtually. Multiple architects, designers, and construction administrators from our firm were able to engage with a wider, more diverse group of students (see Figure 1). In addition, this virtual program gave our team the opportunity to not only teach but also adapt to the virtual world with the students.” Working together, the development team including two program directors and three professionals sought to provide an inclusive and equitable educational experience to all students regardless of academic level, academic performance, previous work experience, financial ability, or geographic location while allowing them to maintain their academic paths to graduation. The program was initially driven by the need to provide professional practice experience for students who were required to earn professional internship credits for graduation to stay on their four-year academic plans. However, as the program was developed the core developmental team quickly realized its potential to provide greater exposure and engagement with design practice to more students earlier in their design educations with significantly fewer obstacles (e.g., geographic, financial, etc.).

This experiment was an ambitious task that provided students with valuable experience and access to professional practice topics that will help them gain an understanding of their future employment potential. To this end the development

team partnered with local professionals to provide students a three-week remote professional summer experience through a series of three one-credit sessions that included eleven modules. The summer pilot program also fills a gap in the college’s framework for internship experience by enabling students to gain low-risk introductions to professional insight.

The Architecture (ARCH) and Interior Design (IDes) programs each have existing courses that provide credit for internship experiences. Both programs require students to negotiate employment independently facilitated by an annual college-wide career fair, but the ARCH course is optional for graduate students. The IDes course is required, with most students completing the course in the summer before their fourth year. In previous years, when the responsibility of connecting with leading firms across the country fell on individual students advocating for themselves—or in some cases depending on individual faculty connections—the path to diverse work experiences was limited and more challenging to navigate. As a result, many qualified students were often intimidated to pursue internship opportunities outside of their immediate comfort zone. These students will often pursue safe and familiar local options that are limited by their background, exposure, and awareness to the range of potential experiences—choices that further result from their lack of confidence or encouragement to take the risk of interviewing with firms that are not as immediately accessible. These students can be overwhelmed about where to apply, elect to not even attempt internships at firms that map to their desired professional goals, or become discouraged after not receiving a positive response on their first attempt. As a result, these students settle for less impactful experiences to meet the required curriculum need (e.g., retail-based jobs selling architectural products).

The current internship courses are structured as a curricular need, with success being measured by the graduate job placement rate. Undergraduate Interior Design and graduate Architecture graduation job placement rates are 96% and one of the highest at the university. By adding the online pilot program with its accessible, inclusive, and affordable one-credit modules, the development team is holistically approaching a new professional development framework. With this new framework the development team can begin to measure the impact on student diversity, as well as student access to professional firms. To achieve this, the development team sought to provide a scaffolded internship experience with low professional office risk and high return for participating students. As a result, the course experienced rapid interest and enrollment within a brief timeframe, suggesting strong student interest in engagement with professionals they previously lacked.

The development team believes the pilot program has potential to positively impact inclusion and equity in professional engagement of students by identifying new pathways to facilitate internship experiences. Students in a typical internship

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1ST - 5 WEEK SESSION

MODULE A (1 CREDIT)
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Firm Life
Learn about how we work; from our culture to our process and everything in between.

Firm Structure
Take a virtual tour of APMA's offices and learn about how we define organizational structure in a creative culture.

Project Life Cycle
From inception to ribbon cutting, see how projects get off the ground and off the books.

Community + Client Relationship
We work hard to nurture relationships. Learn valuable communication skills that impact project success.

MODULE B (1 CREDIT)
JUNE 15 - JUNE 22 | MWF 10-11:30AM

Design + Construction Considerations
Learn the keys to preparation, flexibility and creative problem solving on-site and in the studio.

Mentoring and Team-Based Practice
The best projects are the result of collaboration and welcoming different perspectives.

Software, Tools, and Technology
See the various ways we use technology to get the best results for and from our clients.

Design Workflow and Review
Hear from the experts about how to keep an eye on quality while keeping a project on schedule and on budget.

Design and Construction Collaboration
Learn about how our construction partners and administrators help us realize design intent.

2ND - 5 WEEK SESSION

MODULE C (1 CREDIT)
JULY 13 - JULY 22 | MWF 10-11:30AM

Design Opportunities
From re-imagining historic buildings, to new construction that inspires; learn about the various opportunities for great design.

Pre-Design
Learn the ins and outs of early planning and studies that have big impact on overall design direction.

Historic Preservation and Adaptive Reuse
See how our dedicated team of historic architecture specialists restore and rethink even the most neglected spaces.

Second Nature Sustainability
Go beyond the green-washing and learn about sustainable design practices that make the greatest impact.

Beyond the Building
Environmental graphics, furniture, fixtures and equipment can make or break a space. Learn more from our award winning interior design team.

Figure 2. Pilot Program promotional flyer, including main modules and sub-themes.

experience are often relegated to working on repetitive tasks across multiple projects, isolated to working on a single project team for an extended period, or pigeonholed into non-repeatable tasks. While the typical internship model takes advantage of the student's strengths and abilities honed in academic design studios, it can be confusing for students experiencing and contributing to professional practice for the first time, and as a result, students often have difficulty understanding the larger picture of a professional office. The development team understood this and used best practices from pedagogical approaches as well as professional practice to develop a broader introduction to an office experience. This resulted in co-developing three main modules: "Firm Life," "Design and Construction Considerations," and "Design Opportunities." Each module included three to four sub-themes, including "Firm Structure," "Mentoring and Team-Based Practice," and "Beyond the Building" (see Figure 2). When students gain exposure to a professional office's broader view, they are more likely to understand their role and responsibility within it.

Additionally, the development team believes access to this online internship program earlier in students' academic plans (during the second year) provides a broader knowledge

regarding professional practice that will help them to more strategically seek traditional summer-long internships that align with their interests. In addition, the insight and engagement with topics and design professionals gained in mini-courses will not only help students understand their role within practice but will: (1) increase their confidence and level of comfort so they can more meaningfully engage with the professional design community, and (2) inform them about the professional frameworks they will be operating within as interns or entry-level professionals.

INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES

Since the profession is often labeled as a "prestigious" or "tight-knit" culture, there exists a greater need to bridge the gap for interested students, especially those from underrepresented communities. With this in mind, the pilot program course structure employs inclusive and equitable strategies for students at various academic levels and physical locations to remotely participate in the class and with professionals. The University and College see inclusion as the "active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social,

cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect—in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions.”⁵ To that end, the development team achieved inclusivity in four ways: First, intellectual inclusion was achieved by appropriately scaffolding knowledge with slow, deliberate, and meaningful introductions to professional practice. For one hundred percent (9 out of 9 survey respondents) of these students the internship was their first experience inside an architectural office (aside from the occasional office tour); this prior lack of exposure is one issue that the program can remedy by providing students with introductory-level exposure and dialogue with practicing designers and professional offices. Over time, and with the use of longitudinal data, the development team plans to assess how the program impacts the quantity and diversity of the professional internships pursued.

Second, social inclusion was achieved by providing students from different educational groups with opportunities to enroll in the pilot program. The development team actively sought to include diverse educational groups ranging from sophomores admitted into a professional program to graduate students, allowing students the opportunity to participate and enroll. Third, because there exists a tradition within the practice of students being awarded internships based on their portfolios or GPA, the need to change these norms has led to greater cultural inclusion by removing traditional metrics to gaining employment (e.g., portfolio and GPA). The removal of these barriers allows a wider range of students to gain introductory internship experience and is an important step to opening new paths to professional exposure, which more typically occurs near the end of a student’s academic years. For example, one high-performing undergraduate senior within the department had never worked in an office; while there could be a variety of reasons for this (e.g., summer conflicts or lack of personal interviewing skills), the student enrolled in the summer program with the goal of gaining the confidence and exposure to secure a professional job. On the other hand, one perceived disadvantage of earlier exposure to professional practice is that a student might realize the professional practice of their studied discipline is not what they had hoped it to be and become discouraged or change majors. This might be a disadvantage for the program itself, but it will ultimately prove to be a long-term advantage for these students.

Finally, geographic inclusion was achieved through remote/distance learning that allowed students to participate regardless of where they were from while allowing them to social distance. Many design students return home each summer to communities within the state that do not have professional design offices (thus reducing their ability to network effectively), and the program provided a broader range of students with greater access to design professionals and design culture. For about forty percent (4 of 9 survey respondents) of the

enrolled students participated in the course from outside of the university town of Lincoln, Nebraska, with at least one student taking the course out of state. The design professionals participating in the pilot program are in Omaha, one hour outside of Lincoln. This geographic diversity in both the student and firm participants speaks to the program’s ability to provide equitable opportunities regardless of location.

The development team support the university’s mission and see equitability as “the creation of opportunities for historically underrepresented populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that are capable of closing the achievement gaps in student success and completion.”⁶ An equitable education is achieved by providing all students with equal opportunities to gain professional skills that may previously have been off-limits because they could not secure an internship. The core development team sought to close these achievement gaps by scaffolding incremental steps so students could better prepare themselves for professional practice and obtain future internship positions. Equity in architecture starts with expanding reach and exposure to underrepresented populations while helping those populations toward jobs and—in many cases—hours towards architectural licensure. When students are introduced to different professional practices (e.g., those that differ in size or geographic location) that address diverse societal needs, these students are more likely to identify with a particular type of office where they can better adjust and ultimately have a more significant impact. The expanded list of offices will broaden students’ exposure to diverse professional models and help them gain access to firms that may have previously been beyond their reach, with the program itself forming an initial, though critical, step the college is taking in their inclusion and equity mission.

MINI-SESSIONS (AUDIENCES)

The development team established the pilot program for two student groups: upper-level students (including graduate students and undergraduates) and students early in their educational careers (including second-year undergraduates and graduate students just beginning their programs) who were unable to obtain an internship due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 3). The summer pilot program option provided these students with relevant exposure to a design office and allowed them to gain credit and maintain their paths to graduation. Additionally, over the summer months the team identified recent high-school graduates as a third student group to include in the following year’s program.

Upper-level students (4 of 17) engaging in the pilot program reported a range of beneficial reflections, with one upper-level undergraduate Interior Design student stating, “I gained a lot of information that I will bring with me the rest of my education and career.”⁷ This reinforces the pilot program’s impact and the importance of expanding it to include more students while

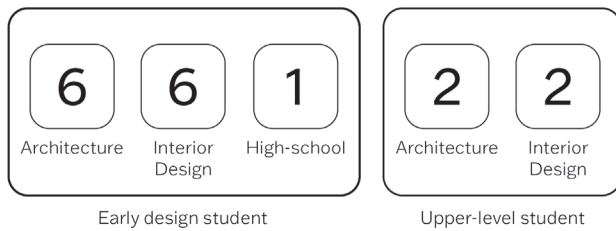


Figure 3. Summer 2020 student cohort.

suggesting the meaningful way in which academic study can influence professional practice. To understand the influence of meaningful academic study more closely, further investigation is needed to identify specific areas from the program that impacted both the remainder of students' academic careers and their future practice. Similarly, one upper-level undergraduate Architecture student reflected that "it was very beneficial to be exposed to the daily work of architects and being able to look at different firms to see how they operate." In response to this feedback, next summer the pilot program will increase the number of participating offices and expand its range of practices from across the country, furthering students' ability to gain experience with different firms. Because the majority of students at the university come from geographically isolated areas, their desire to obtain a wider range of opportunities is often limited due to low confidence or a lack of prior exposure. The program's goal of exposing undergraduate and graduate students to a diversity of offices around the country is especially relevant in its ability to increase both students' sense of confidence and their awareness of different professional paths outside of their preconceived notions.

Another target group was students (both undergraduate and graduate) early in their design education interested in getting a firsthand look into practice by engaging with a multidisciplinary professional design office. This group was well represented, and consisted of seventy-six percent (13 of 17) of enrolled students. Within this group, one hundred percent (9 of 9 survey respondents) had no internship experience whatsoever. These numbers speak to students' early interest in knowing about and engaging with design practice and professionals. The pilot program provides them with the desired exposure to their fields of interest while demystifying professional practice and giving them the confidence they need to apply for future internships. One three-year M.Arch student reflected on their experience in the first year of the program by stating, "I was unable to land an internship this past summer and still wanted to gain useful knowledge that I could apply in the future. I thought that taking these sessions would allow me to gain that knowledge and learn about potentially working at a firm."⁸ The same student discussed their positive observations of "firm setup, project lifespan in an office, and [the] range of projects one office might address." The pilot program introduced this student to aspects of professional offices that often go unexplained to interns because they become so

ingrained in the daily lives of professionals who then forget to explain them to students. This exposure to often-overlooked aspects of professional practice reinforces the program's ability to grant students a more well-rounded understanding of office culture and operations, thus better positioning them to obtain jobs in a design office.

Overall there existed a general sense that students "feel more comfortable going into the design field"⁹ after taking the course. One third-year undergraduate architecture student who had never worked in a design office reflected that, "I would recommend these sessions for anyone in any design discipline because they allowed me insight into the types of careers I am looking for after graduation. I think having a firm teach students in these mini-courses is very beneficial to the student and also the firm. It teaches students more about day-to-day life in the field, prepares them for an internship, and teaches them new skills relating to programs and the design process."¹⁰

In addition to the original two university student groups for which the pilot program was intended, one recent high-school graduate also participated in the program. The student was interested in majoring in a design-related field at the university and worked at a design office over the summer to gain mentoring and shadowing experience, where they were able to receive college credit before officially starting the undergraduate program. By expanding the pilot program beyond university students to include those who had not yet started an undergraduate program, the pilot program team was able to more inclusively provide all students with engaging experiences. In future years the development team intends to more prominently promote the program to recent high-school graduates to achieve more holistic inclusion.

CONCLUSION

With the initial goal of providing a remote internship experience, the development team modeled and deployed a pilot program to rectify students' immediate needs. The development team quickly realized the opportunity to cultivate an inclusive mindset of excellence, and throughout the summer the team identified ways to strengthen the program. The development team identified several aspirational goals to extend greater reach to geographically isolated communities, including broadening exposure by diversifying the types of practice and disciplines covered, expanding the mini-session topic, and inclusively increasing participation from high-school students. This emerging model of professional involvement for accessible learning for diverse student groups cultivates inclusive excellence, providing an impactful learning experience focused on balancing both academic and professional communities and underserved student populations.

ENDNOTES

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8. Student Reflection #8, Microsoft survey, August 2020.
9. Student Reflection #10, Microsoft survey, August 2020.
10. Student Reflection #6, Microsoft survey, August 2020.