

**Final Internship Paper
CYSE 368 Fall 2025
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11/23/2025**

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Introduction

For my internship, I chose to work for the Alliance for Civic Engagement (ACE). My reasoning for this choice was not a deep one, or really an option at the time I got the offer. It was primarily a situation where I did not receive any other offers, and this was the one that came back to me in time for me to secure an internship and take this course. However, it by no means takes away the prestige and incredible opportunities that ACE gave me. They offered astonishing guidance in my writing, networking, and professional development to provide me with more confidence in my next steps after graduation.

The first learning outcome that I hoped to achieve in my internship with ACE was to create a baseline network of individuals to be able to connect with after the experience concluded. Before the start of the internship, my LinkedIn was very bare and almost non-existent, which I knew needed to change if I wanted to make myself marketable to employers. I also struggled with networking with other people in the field due to having a job while on campus that took me away from a lot of events. In my first two years of college, I also made the mistake of thinking that the opportunities would be handed out, so I did not correctly take the steps to network early on. All of these factors contributed to my need to understand and create a network while I was in an organization with plenty of chances to do so.

A second learning outcome that I hoped to achieve was to improve my writing and speech skills in a professional setting. Before ACE, my writing and speech skills began to deteriorate because I became online for school and had little reason to go out of my way to communicate with people in the Cybersecurity field. I noticed that my work began to decline dramatically as it came to writing for classes, since I started to have less writing frequency in my courses. The introduction of Artificial Intelligence also became a crutch as I began to stop brainstorming and would just ask it for topics to write about instead. I became very comfortable with not trying as much and just getting by with each passing writing assignment.

The final learning outcome that I hoped to achieve was to gain a better understanding of what I wanted to do in the Cybersecurity field. Cybersecurity is an enormous field with several opportunities, ranging from being more Computer Science on one side and then Information Technology on the other, which makes it a very specialized field. Throughout my entire college journey, I wrestled with what I wanted to do in the field because I would always lose interest so fast when I would take a class that I thought housed my interests. I became doubtful that Cybersecurity was what I truly wanted to do. However, with the opportunity ACE presented me with, I hoped to finally find my spark in Cybersecurity.

Business Overview and Internship Start

When I first started the internship, I was very nervous and not sure how I would be able to fit in. This was primarily because the other interns were extremely qualified and attended some of the country's best schools, which led me to compare myself a bit. However, I quickly began to understand the assignments, and the other interns were all very grounded, making them nice to work with. ACE themselves were very professional, and I could immediately tell that all the leaders love their job and take pride in their impact on the nation. I almost instantly became determined and proud to work with them due to the excitement they would project for their mission.

The initial orientation went in a meet-and-greet style over Zoom, where we were all broken into breakout rooms with individuals who had similar interests. This gave us a chance to get acquainted and to get a chance to share some common goals. Later, we had training sessions that involved proper and improper AI use, as well as going over ACE's way of publishing briefs. It was vastly different from my own typical research paper, as they would use hyperlinking in their publications, compared to the usual citation formatting of academic research papers. They also went over topics we could research and gave us resources to find and narrow down our thoughts to create concise briefs.

The Alliance for Civic Engagement is a non-profit organization that focuses on bringing non-partisan and unbiased policy briefs to the world to inform them on events that could shape the future. They are based in Massachusetts, but offer their unpaid positions remotely to students across the country. Their target audience tends to be more young adult-focused, as they create content that is easy to understand and fast to read to account for the attention span of younger adults. However, they recently updated their website to make it more appealing and accessible to people worldwide. Their mission is realized through their consistent commitment to create and promote a world of truly reliable and impartial content.

Management Environment

The management structure at ACE was straightforward to understand and less complicated than that of many other organizations or businesses. At the head of the organization, Ellen Rizika resides as the Executive Director. Underneath her is the Director of Policy Research, Ella Dennis, and she manages all policy briefings that are published to the ACE website. After her, my direct supervisor would be Olivia Scott, and she was tasked with managing the technology policy team, which I was a part of. Together, they made up the leadership for my team and helped facilitate the incredible internship experience I had.

Supervision within the internship was very professional and support-focused throughout, due to it being a virtual medium in which we communicated. We were consistently invited to ask any questions and to reach out with any interest that we may want to share with management to create stronger connections with one another. They also provided constant updates on the status of the organization and offered great feedback for our publications. The supervision for ACE felt mostly hands-off, which felt comforting to have trust from them upfront. ACE also had very constructive ways of addressing concerns that they may have had for an individual to check up and offer assistance if necessary.

This management environment was extremely effective in giving me the chance and feeling that I could provide my best work for their company. Management was reliable whenever I had a concern, and they communicated very well with everyone when events or deadlines would change. Personally, I had an experience where I needed an extended deadline, and they were very friendly and understanding of me. I even received feedback almost immediately once submitted, which solidified my trust and confidence that they love what they do. This, in turn, made me care even more about their mission, which was reflected in my work going forward.

Work Duties/Assignments

My primary work assignments during the internship with ACE were to prepare unbiased, non-partisan technology policy briefs. The topics I chose for the first two briefs dealt with privacy and technology usage among younger individuals in America. We were also tasked with completing a joint brief, which included six others and me. Within this brief, we chose to highlight the “Pros and Cons of the Policies addressing the Homework Gap and the Digital Divide.” Each brief required extensive source gathering, outlining, drafting, and editing before it could be officially published on ACE’s website.

Other assignments for the internship included attending team meetings, attending company-wide events, and assisting the editing team in editing papers if time allowed. The team meetings were primarily to align us all for our joint brief that was due at the end of the program. Company-wide events were able to give us all a chance to better acquaint ourselves with one another, as well as build a network of individuals to know in the professional world. Then, editing papers to aid the editing team’s huge process was sometimes an option to throttle the production of publications for the platform. Each of these assignments was a great change of pace from the usual writing and brainstorming of the typical work responsibilities.

My assigned duties were extremely important to ACE since their entire platform is practically based on student-written policy briefs on timeless topics around the world. My policy briefs help add to their vast catalog of technological policy briefs that is still growing today. The time I spent editing and giving feedback helped hasten their editing operations to put out more publications at a time. Then my attendance at the events helped better their image, as well as expose me to new opportunities. Whilst they, of course, have several other publishers and editors, my work would still matter not only for the company but also for my entire technology policy team.

Cybersecurity Skills Application

One technical skill that I learned during the internship that came up a lot was regulatory compliance. Due to the internship, diving deep into domestic policy, I found myself doing extensive research into why and how certain technological policies came to be. I would also often be tasked with finding the arguments for and against the policies, which would give me a much deeper insight into how policy shapes all the technology we currently use and the society we live in. I investigated NIST frameworks, privacy policies, and AI regulations for my briefings, which I had not previously known as well. Regulatory compliance was much deeper than I originally thought, and ACE helped me discover a new career option with this experience.

A soft skill that I had before the internship that was necessary for my success in the role was my ability to think critically. This skill was extremely important as I had to create meaningful work without the typical biases present in publications about domestic policy. It was particularly challenging because of the sheer amount of sources that have bias actively in them, which limited what I could and could not use. Often, I would have to combine the paraphrasing of multiple sources to create a strong point for my briefs. However, I believe that this difficult experience truly helped me grow as a professional and a writer.

The internship experience helped me understand the difficulty often faced by start-up businesses trying to break into the technology industry. This is because there is an immense financial burden imposed initially, since there are so many rules and regulations that must be followed in order to remain in business. However, this is also understandable because there must be to ensure that these businesses hold themselves accountable for their mishaps. Therefore, I think Cybersecurity holds a huge amount of potential for world growth in the next century in its hands. Primarily because the world is gravitating more and more to technological advancements, and Cybersecurity is what keeps it all under control.

Connection to ODU Curriculum

When considering if the ODU curriculum prepared me for the internship experience, I would have to say that it did not. This is primarily because I do not think that the seemingly infinite paths of Cybersecurity are properly identified by advisors to help direct students into the field. There are also very few internships available in the Cybersecurity job market, which makes it increasingly difficult to find meaningful work that aligns with the university's broad approach to the degree. This created much more difficulty for instructors since there was no true way to understand what may or may not have been taught before, and made me struggle to understand more often than not. I believe that there should be a push to make a clearer approach to the degree, focusing on what needs to be done in the curriculum to better aid students' journey into the profession.

As it relates to ODU and their curriculum, the only skills that came up were from my freshman year and the broad overview of the NIST framework that I was taught in that class. Most of my other knowledge, like writing, critical thinking, and time management skills, came from high school and work experience I previously had. This is partially due to my not living on campus during the internship and having to manage all of my responsibilities with the internship virtually rather than in person. The other part is that I did not really have much professional assistance from any professors in my time at ODU, as most would just assign homework and leave it at that. The most impactful part of ODU for my degree, which is not curriculum-related, would be the facilities and resources they provided to their Cybersecurity students.

The amount of compliance data that the internship required me to go through really helped me revisit and relearn that part of the ODU curriculum. In my previous studies, there were always broad overviews given for domestic policy; however, my internship gave me a much better chance to fully grasp the concepts. Policies like the Federal Information Security Modernization Act (FISMA) and the California Age-Appropriate Design Code Act (CAADCA) were both modern-day policies that I had no clue about beforehand. I also got a better look at the processes necessary to implement these policies, which is very important for regulatory compliance for any big business. It also helped me gain a bit of interest in compliance specialist roles for my future career as well.

During my time with ACE, a concept that stood out to me would have to be their way of writing and producing content for their platform. The first aspect that stood out visually was their use of hyperlinks in their briefs, and not typical sourcing like regular research papers. Another would be their way of presenting arguments without conveying any sense of bias, even if you feel a certain way about a topic. Lastly, their approach to annotated bibliographies is much different as they require almost a braindump of sorts of sources and annotations with a minimum of 23 sources. It completely changed my perspective on writing and was surely a beneficial bump in my expertise.

Learning Outcomes

For the first objective that I set out to complete at the beginning of the internship, I believe that I completed this very quickly within the internship cycle. Multiple events allowed me to network with both fellow interns as well as industry professionals. I was able to exchange LinkedIn information and gather advice on how to gain more professional experience before I graduate this December. It also inspired me to update my LinkedIn profile and resume to better market myself to potential employers. This goal was a bit difficult due to the struggles I faced with being an online student, as well as existing commitments; however, ACE gave me a great chance to make up for lost time.

My second objective was met and exceeded with the internship experience that I was able to have with ACE. As described previously, other interns and I were tasked with completing multiple policy briefs that required planning, drafting, and editing by multiple individuals. This allowed for several eyes to see what I was producing, and it gave me the chance to have critiques on my research and writing skills that I did not get previously. When it came to speech, I was able to do much better with inserting myself into conversations to convey interest and professionalism. This was especially the case when industry professionals were invited to speak at networking events that were held.

The final objective was to use the internship to find my place in the enormous Cybersecurity field. However, I do not feel like I have truly found that place as of now. While I am very intrigued and interested in the regulatory compliance side of the major, I do not feel like it is what I would like to do long-term in my life. I learned that the internship experience was not going to be what helped me find my spark in this field of study I chose. But I also took it as a chance to explore further post-graduation to continue to expand my knowledge, and because the industry is so broad, I am sure that I will find my footing soon.

Motivating Aspects

The first motivating aspect of interning with ACE would have to be the chance to have a platform to share your voice with the world. Being a publisher so early in my life creates a very unique start to my career, since I will already have a professional news outlet showcasing my work. It was also nice to feel like my concerns with technological policy were heard and even shared with the world, so other people could weigh in on their opinions as well. I also have a reputation that is associated with the company, giving me a great chance to be associated with their work as they continue to create incredible briefs. The opportunity to publish for them was very incredible for my future, and I am happy to have had the chance to put my work out there through another medium other than my LinkedIn or personal website.

Another motivating factor would have to be the pursuit of not letting my team or the company down due to a poor work ethic. Our team-based brief was one of the hardest group work assignments that I may have ever had in my entire life. It was not only due to the nature of the assignment, but also because we all come from different backgrounds and writing styles, which impacted the cohesion of our final product. There were plenty of times when I felt like I was not going to be able to pull through, but I knew I could not disappoint my team. This kept me going constantly, as I did not want to leave my portion of the work undone or unsatisfactory.

A final motivation for the internship would be the chance to try something new, to hopefully find something that piqued my interest in the field. This internship was an opportunity for me out of hundreds that I applied for, which I hoped for to learn what I would want to do as a career. I enjoyed the challenge that it presented since it was different from the previous coursework I completed, and it had a different style of writing that I was not used to. However, I was particularly intrigued by how unique the internship was compared to the typical desk internships that most college students end up in. I got a chance to see the field in an unlikely way, which created a new career avenue for my future.

Discouraging Aspects

The first discouraging aspect would have to be the lack of pay in the technology policy intern role. This is primarily because it does not allow for the opportunity to provide a source of consistent income while in school, and it would still require you to have a job to make money in the meantime. I believe that if there had been some sort of compensation, it could have led to a much more focused approach from me and my fellow interns, and it would have given a stronger reason to return. It also discouraged me because I could not invest the time that I would have wanted at times due to my preexisting commitments to my occupation. While pay certainly does not have to be a reason for everything, in this case, it could go a long way in the long term for ACE.

A second discouraging factor would have to be the lack of in-person communication during the internship. Whilst it is nice not to have travel obligations, it sometimes feels very sad to only be able to communicate with everyone through virtual meetings and chats. This is especially true for the networking events that they would host, since there would not be a true way of conveying your emotions or interests fully through a small camera as you could face-to-face conversation. Being remote is also sometimes not convenient due to the lack of structure it can create if self-discipline is lacking. Therefore, I do believe that if there could ever be funding to implement events in person, it could go a long way in fostering great connections between interns.

One other discouraging part of the internship would have to deal with the lack of opportunities to move forward within the organization. Once I was halfway through the program, I was only able to continue with the position that I had at the time. While I certainly enjoyed and appreciated the company for the chance to join the organization, I could not possibly accept the same unpaid internship position. It was a huge bummer to decline because I enjoyed the management and their passion for the job so much, but I had to make the best decision for my future. I am truly hoping that one day they can add more roles for alumni to return to higher positions in the future.

Challenging Aspects

My first challenge during the internship was certainly the ability to manage my time effectively between work, school, and the internship needs. For my entire college journey, I have been working; however, I severely underestimated the obstacles that adding an internship would cause. There were numerous all-nighters that I had to pull to complete work for both school and the internship, which led me into my shift for work the next day. This challenge broke me mentally and physically numerous times to the point where I could not function due to the stress of everything happening in my life. However, I stood up to the challenge and had to learn how to create better time management habits for myself that have certainly changed my life forever.

The next challenging aspect would be the ability to create meaningful work that I would want to read if I were ACE's audience. With the unbiased and non-partisan values that ACE holds, it can be very difficult to create briefs that stand out to viewers. This challenge created a very unique predicament for me because most of the time in school, you are taught to always pick a side in an argument. Therefore, it took a while for me to rewire my brain and fix it to the new style of writing ACE introduced me to. However, when I did it gave me insight into a whole new perspective that I am happy to have handy for future papers.

One last challenging factor would be the burnout that I often experienced during my internship. As mentioned before, I already had a great deal of existing commitments before accepting the internship. However, I never really took the chance to make a sustainable plan for my life once the internship was accepted. I found myself struggling to have time to go to the gym, hang out with friends, or even play video games, which was so easy for me before. It became a lot for me to have to grasp, and due to the lack of relaxation, I quickly burned out. Through this, I learned that you must treat yourself from time to time to stay rewarded but also to stay sane.

Future Intern Recommendations

ACE is a place full of diversity and unique thinking that I have not previously encountered in my life. Even with going to a huge school like ODU, ACE had a global reach that allowed me to connect with people from all over the world. I say this because it led me to compare myself and all the achievements I had to those amazing individuals I interned with, which made me ridicule and devalue my own work. It got so bad that I thought I would never be able to produce work to the degree they could and that I would just bring the quality down for everyone. However, that was not the case, and for any future interns, it will not be either. If you were chosen by ACE, then you belong, and there is something that you offer that can help them grow.

My next piece of advice is that future interns should take the steps necessary to manage their lives correctly while partaking in any internship. It was extremely hard to keep control of life because I did not have any concrete plans or a sleep schedule to ensure that I could get all my work done in a timely and high-quality fashion. This created several instances where I would have to redo and rethink work because I would start and later have no clue what I was wanting to do. It also made me stress so much, as I felt that I was not keeping up, and I was getting lost in all the chaos. Having structure will be a key part in succeeding in any internship, and it will improve all of your work.

A final piece of advice is to go through the experience with an open mind and be open to criticism. ACE is a writing-intensive internship, and it is almost guaranteed that the editors will have some sort of opinions or edits for your work that will change your process completely. However, this is normal, and we are human, so mistakes are bound to be made on either end, regardless of expertise. The key here is to speak up if you do believe there is a mistake, but also to be quiet and listen to the other side as well. Remaining humble is a key skill in the professional workplace anywhere, but in ACE, it could really help improve your briefs.

Preparations that future interns should take before doing an internship with ACE are definitely updating themselves with current events in the technological world, as well as gathering previously written samples to present to the team in their interview. Keeping up with current events can give you a much easier time when having to pick your brief topics, and also gives you something that you are passionate about to write. Having previous writings to present at the interview is important because it allows them to have a synopsis of your writing style upfront. This could go a long way in helping you get hired and build a reputation early with your team lead. Lastly, I would say to find joy in the time you have with the team, as time flies in the internship, and it does not last forever.

Conclusion

One of the takeaways from the internship experience I would like to highlight is the ability to manage so many moving parts of my life at once. During this internship, I had a full-time job, school work, fitness commitments, and vacations. It was a lot more than I thought when all of it came together, and I overestimated what I could handle. The internship with ACE showed me that it was all possible, and that I would have to learn how to prioritize if I was going to be successful in all of these endeavors. I completely changed my life as a result, and I am happy to say that in the end, I made it through.

One other takeaway is that the professional world is vastly different from the workforce in terms of management and care. Quickly, while being a part of ACE, I was able to see the amount of passion that the management held for their work. It inspired me to do the same and made me not want to disappoint in the slightest with my work. They would edit papers on the day of delivery, respond to emails within a couple of hours, and even take calls on weekends without notice. Their commitment to their career was admirable, and it was so amazing to be involved with such a great group of leaders.

The internship experience with ACE will certainly help my writing ability for the rest of my college journey as it begins to come to a close. It also helped me regain lost creativity and thought processes that had previously been limited due to my losing myself in my studies. My confidence levels have also improved as I feel better about speaking out and being able to insert myself into conversations with higher-level individuals. ACE would also be a great recommendation to use in the rest of my journey to help other college students who are struggling to find an internship like I was. I feel that if I had longer in college, then I would also find myself pursuing more classes in the field of law to improve my knowledge further on regulatory compliance.

ACE has given me another hope for the Cybersecurity field and the chances of me being able to find a meaningful career. It also taught me valuable lessons in time and stress management that will certainly be of help in all aspects of my future. I look forward to using the tools that they have provided to be more successful in team-based settings, as well as at the briefing stages present in the field. I am also excited to use the connections given by ACE to be a springboard for future opportunities as my LinkedIn and resume continue to grow. This internship was by no means easy, and I am very thankful for the opportunity and experience it provided me for my professional growth.