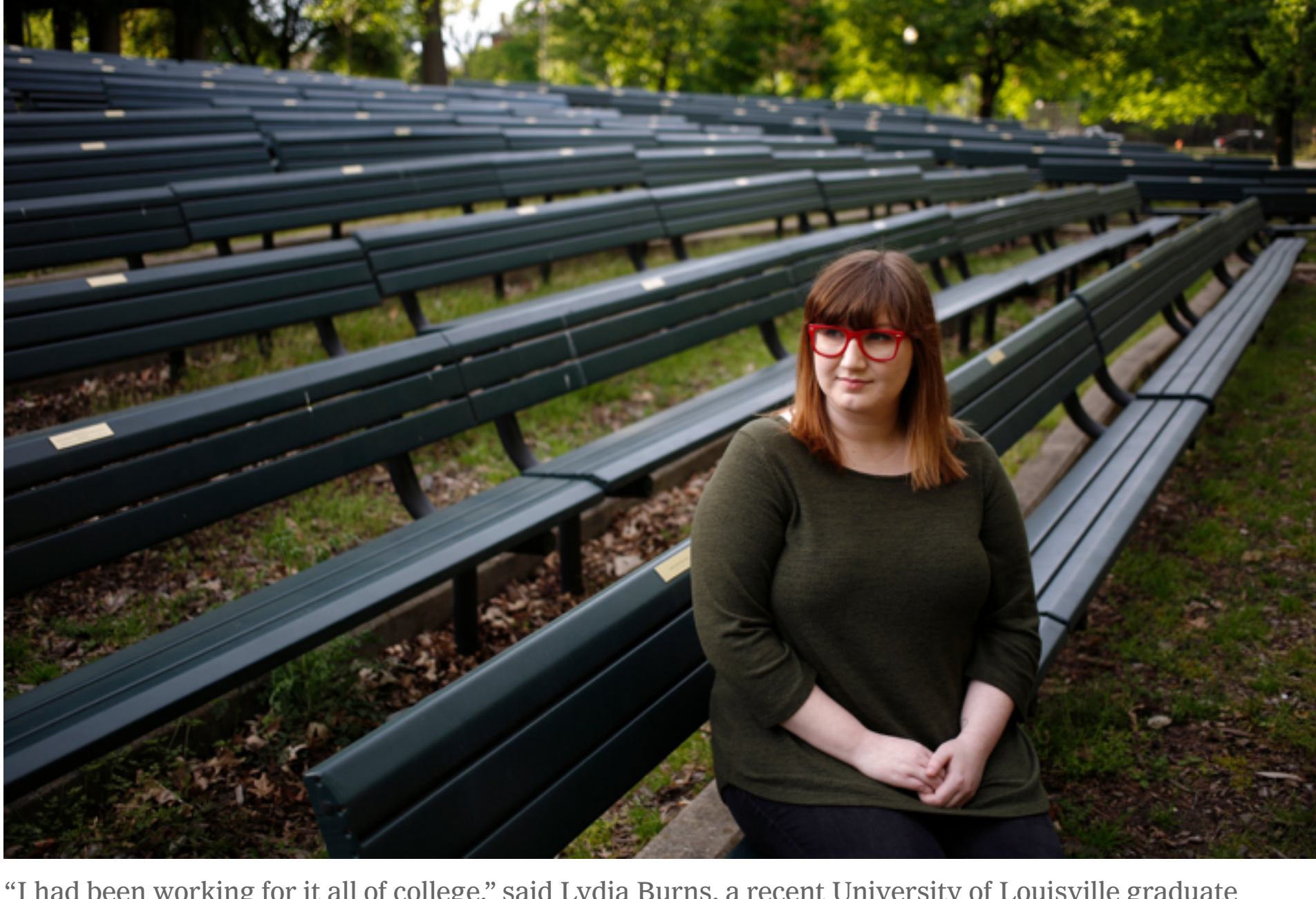


Another Casualty of the Coronavirus: Summer Internships

Like so much else, summer internships have been upended by the pandemic, with hundreds of companies canceling their programs and rescinding offers.



"I had been working for it all of college," said Lydia Burns, a recent University of Louisville graduate whose internship was called off. "Now I don't know what I'm going to do." Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

By David Yaffe-Bellany

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When she found out in mid-March that she had landed an internship with an education nonprofit in Washington, Lydia Burns, a senior at the University of Louisville, called her mother to celebrate. The whole world was falling apart, but here, finally, was good news.

"Mom, guess what?" she said. "Things are amazing!"

The euphoria lasted all of a week. As she worked on a paper the next Tuesday, Ms. Burns got an email from the nonprofit: The internship was canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic. She burst into tears.

"I feel like I had such a strong plan," she said. "I knew what I was going to do — I had been working for it all of college. Now I don't know what I'm going to do."

For millions of college students, internships can be a steppingstone to full-time work, a vital source of income and even a graduation requirement.

But like so much else, summer internships have been upended by the pandemic, with a wide range of major companies, including tech firms like Yelp and entertainment behemoths like the Walt Disney Company, canceling programs and rescinding offers.

Students who had locked down internships as early as September are now jobless. Others who had hoped to experience an office setting for the first time are instead looking for work at fast-food restaurants. Many low-income undergraduates, already saddled with student loans, are concerned that a jobless summer could put them at a disadvantage in future application cycles, making it harder to find full-time work after graduation.

Some companies are continuing to pay interns to work from home, sending corporate laptops in the mail and holding get-to-know-you sessions over Zoom. But students fear that remote internships will not afford the networking opportunities that can make spending a summer in an office so valuable, especially for interns who have few professional contacts.

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"You pick up a lot of subtle clues about how to behave in that profession, how to communicate like an engineer, how to work in teams like a nurse," said Matthew Hora, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin who has studied internships. "Students are going to be missing that."

Cassandra Dopp, a junior at the University of South Carolina, felt the effects of the pandemic earlier than most American college students: She was studying abroad in Rome when the coronavirus swept Italy.

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Ms. Dopp, a business major, returned home in March and was set to work for Geico this summer in Fredericksburg, Va. But as she sat in her childhood bedroom last month, Ms. Dopp got a call from a human-relations official at the company, who informed her the internship was canceled.

Many of her friends had already gotten similar calls. But Ms. Dopp has always prided herself on keeping organized and planning for the future. Now, she has no idea how she'll stay occupied after final exams, let alone what she'll do in July or August.

"I'd never put myself in this position to not have a plan for my summer and my future," she said. "It was a big letdown. It's disappointing."

In a statement, Geico said its summer program rotates interns through multiple departments to expose them to different facets of the company. "Unfortunately," the company said, "this experience was not possible in our current remote working environment."

Many of the cancellations stem from those kinds of logistical challenges, or from cost-cutting at companies that are reeling from the economic damage of the pandemic. In other cases, students were hired to work at sports venues and political conventions, or help organize events that have been canceled.

Keri Johnson, a journalism student at Ohio University, landed what she described as a "dream" internship writing marketing material for the Nelsonville Music Festival in Ohio. Then the festival was canceled, along with many other cultural events, [like South by Southwest](#).

Ms. Johnson has to intern for at least 200 hours to earn her journalism degree in the fall. With the festival canceled, she's concerned she will have to push back her graduation, making it harder to find a job and putting financial strain on her family.

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"Summer is the time I get to work as much as possible because I'm not in class," Ms. Johnson said. "It's kind of scary thinking about the fact that I won't be able to work in the summer as much as I normally would."

The cancellations have cut across virtually all industries, from media to technology to finance. But predictably, the industries that have suffered the most during the pandemic — travel, retailing, hospitality — have had especially large numbers of cancellations.

Connor Machon, a sophomore at the University of Texas at Austin, accepted an internship at American Airlines in late September, turning down several other offers. He got his first inkling that the program might be in jeopardy when a friend who was set to work at Southwest Airlines had an offer rescinded in March.

A few days later, he learned that his internship was also being cut. Over the next weeks, Mr. Machon kept busy applying for dozens of other positions and sending more than 100 networking emails. Ultimately, he secured an internship at a start-up in Austin, earning \$15 an hour.

"At this point, I was really open to anything, as long as I was being paid," he said.

Not all internships are canceled. A number of banks and technology firms have simply shortened their programs by a few weeks. Media organizations like The New York Times and [The Wall Street Journal](#) gave some summer interns the option of deferring until the fall or next year.

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Offering perhaps the sweetest arrangement is the New York law firm [Cahill Gordon & Reindel](#), which announced in April that the incoming summer associates would not have to work but would still be paid and still receive full-time offers after their graduation in 2021.

Other companies have moved their internships entirely online. In early April, a recruiter at eBay, Cindy Loggins, presented a series of options to top executives, like shortening the program or holding it remotely.

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Given all the uncertainty, a total cancellation was also a serious possibility. "You'd be silly not to consider that as an option," Ms. Loggins said.

In the end, the company moved the internship online. But a remote program presents certain logistical difficulties, like combating "screen fatigue" and devising work schedules for interns who live in different time zones.

To address any problems, Ms. Loggins said, her team plans to conduct weekly check-ins with each of the interns, rather than the midpoint and end-of-program meetings eBay has held in the past. But some rites of passage will be impossible to replace.

"Perhaps I'm getting up to go somewhere and the intern says: 'Hey, where are you going? Can we grab lunch?'" Ms. Loggins said. "That's what we're going to miss in this summer."

Many students will also miss the chance to spend a couple of months in the real world, away from the cloistered environment of a college campus.

Irene Vázquez, a junior at Yale, is interning for a small publisher based in New York. Months ago, Ms. Vázquez had envisioned the summer as a test to "see if the whole East Coast tiny apartment thing was going to be viable down the road." Instead, she's going to spend the summer working remotely from her childhood home in Texas.

"I could be much worse off," she said. "But it's certainly not the experience I had planned."

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