In just over a year from now, San Diego State University hopes that three of every four students will have gotten an off-campus paid internship.

The university’s Division of Student Affairs and Campus Diversity launched the bold initiative last fall, with the goal of at least 75 percent of undergraduates participating by the start of the 2024-25 academic year.

It’s a tall task, but the folks at SDSU Career Services are spearheading the campuswide effort while also reshaping what “career services” looks like following the COVID-19 pandemic.

“My team definitely has their work cut out for them,” said Danny Newell, who was hired in September as executive director of Career Services.

Paid internships provide students with real-world experience, a leg up in the job market and, in some cases, a pathway to a career — all the while getting compensated for their work.

“We don’t want students just to come to SDSU, and we don’t want them just to graduate,” said J. Luke Wood, vice president for Student Affairs and Campus Diversity. “We want them to be able to go into careers that create a better life for themselves and for their families, and paid internships are a pathway to make sure we’re doing it.”

“We don’t want our students just to have jobs, we want them to have careers,” Wood added, “careers where they can see advancement and growth, and eventually are able to come back and participate in graduate programs here at SDSU to further their career mobility.”

Internships, highlighted in the university’s strategic plan, are considered one of several “high-impact” practices that studies have shown to foster higher levels of academic achievement and retention and prepare students for a global workforce.

Brandon Washiashi, a fourth-year international business major with a minor in finance, interned last summer and fall with Carlsbad-based Meketa Investment Group, which specializes in institutional investing.

Washiashi, who found the opportunity through a virtual Career Fair hosted by SDSU Career Services, said that the experience was an invaluable learning experience.

“The opportunity allowed me to learn more about an industry I knew nothing about — but was interested in. I saw how the company was run and learned practical knowledge relevant to the industry.” — Brandon Washiashi

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“I would recommend getting a paid internship for anyone, as you get to learn about an industry through hands-on experience,” Washiashi said. “It can connect...
you with the right people and set you up for success beyond college, and it can also allow you to discover if it's what you expected.”

Aina Narvasa, a second-year civil/environmental engineering master’s student, was able to parlay her graduate research assistant work into a summer internship with the NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland.

“My internship at NASA was an exciting and fruitful experience,” Narvasa said. “Every day I learned new wisdom and perspective from scientists at the frontlines of advancing space technologies. During my time at the agency, I saw firsthand what it is like to work as an engineer/scientist, where problems were norms and second nature for them to solve.”

Narvasa said every student should seek out internship opportunities.

“I believe it will open their perspective of their fields outside the classroom and textbooks, where it will expose them to the reality of what their field entails,” Narvasa said. “Most importantly, it will give them the confidence in seeing themselves beyond the label of just students but as real scientists, engineers, educators, etc.”

In order to produce more experiences like Washiashi’s and Narvasa’s, Newell said there are two things that SDSU needs: more internships and to better connect students to the opportunities.

“We have a lot of internships, but many are out of state. We need to make sure we have an adequate supply to meet our students’ needs, and that comes with industry relations,” said Newell, whose expertise is in industry relations and helping employers create job and internship opportunities.

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“The second part is, how do we get students to bite?” Newell said.

Newell said Career Services will do this using several strategies. First, it will expand the number of in-person and virtual connection events with employers.

Second, Career Services will pilot a program to bring industry consultants onto the Career Services team to host sessions with students on topics ranging from interview to resume preparation. “This will help engage students with actual industry recruiters and, quite possibly, they could leave the sessions with a job offer from someone actually in the industry,” Newell said.

The pilot began in the spring with the plan to expand during the summer. Additionally, Career Services will create a pair of newsletters this semester, one for students and one for employers.

These initiatives are in addition to the suite of resources that the department currently offers:

- Career fairs
- Workshops and webinars
- Career assessments and major assessments
- Employment preparation sessions on topics such as how to nail a job interview and salary negotiations
- Job search programs, such as Handshake, Parker Dewey for internships and Going Global for international students
- Diversity, equity and inclusion resources for LGBTQIA+ students, students of color, veterans and students with varied abilities
- Special programs such as the hugely successful Aztec Mentor Program that pairs Aztec alumni with current students for mentorship and, in some cases, leads to future employment; and Workability IV, which provides career services for students and alumni with varied abilities

This summer Career Services plans to finish the update to its strategic plan, which will guide how the

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