

Establishing an Effective Internship Program

Internship programs are mutually beneficial to an organization and a student. The needs of an organization are met through the valuable assistance of the student intern, and the intern gets the opportunity to gain real-life work experience that will enhance their resume and help them find a job or begin a career.

The following tips can help you successfully develop and implement an internship program in your workplace.

An internship program should meet the following criteria:

- **The internship must offer relevant experience in the student's chosen field.** An internship should prepare students for a position in a particular field. Students may perform some routine or clerical duties, but their responsibilities must be largely career-related. For example, if an accounting office has a position that involves nothing more than answering the phone, making copies, filing and running errands, it does not qualify as an internship. But if students are also provided projects that involve accounting, reconciling, financial reporting or processing-related paperwork, then it becomes a learning experience related to their field, and would qualify as an internship.
- **There are clear beginning and end dates,** usually one semester with the option of continuing for additional semesters. Allow students to work a significant amount of time (10-20 hours/ week), but with consideration for the student's class schedule.
- **There should be a clear Internship Position Description** structured in ways that simulate an actual job which includes a substantial level of responsibility with duties, requirements and benefits clearly stated and agreed upon.
- **Someone must act as a mentor to the student.** In other words, students are not just "handed a list of things to do". Students must interact on a regular basis with someone who has experience in their intended field. This interaction should include instruction, guidance, and advice. In addition, if the student receives academic credit, some academic departments may have specific learning objectives or other criteria that must be met.
- **Interns should be encouraged** to initiate projects, ask questions, absorb information, and provide feedback as part of their learning experience. (Even if "regular" employees are not encouraged to do this in your organization.)
- **The organization should have a clear written agreement** with the intern about expectations, responsibilities, evaluation, resources, learning goals, supervision, and work schedule. A copy should be provided to the intern.

Unpaid Internships and the law:

Whenever possible, it is always best to pay an intern - minimum wage is all that is required by law. Paying an intern shows an investment in their learning and recognizes the contribution they will make to the organization. Also, most college students cannot afford to spend 10-20 hours per week in an unpaid position. You will increase your internship candidate pool if you provide some compensation for their time.

If your organization is not able to find the money in your budget to pay the intern, then you must follow the **Fair Labor Standards Act** which states the criteria that must be met by an employer if the intern is to be unpaid:

- 1.** The work performed directly relates to a major studied by the student.
- 2.** The work experience benefits the student. For example, the intern picks up benefits such as college credits, valuable experience, or additions to the student's portfolio.
- 3.** The intern does not displace regular employees nor does the intern job description match that of paid employees.
- 4.** The employer gains no "immediate advantage" from the student's work. The courts consider billing clients for work performed by an intern an advantage. The intern's work must primarily be an educational experience.
- 5.** The employer holds out no promise of future employment.
- 6.** The intern understands that he or she is not entitled to wages for the time spent in the internship or in training.

Requiring credit is not mandated by law as necessary in unpaid employment situations – the valuable experience a student gains in an internship meets criterion #2. Also, **students may have to pay the university** for the internship credit if it exceeds their course load limit or if they are not taking additional classes in the summer. **Therefore, if you are not creating a paid internship, it is best to let the student decide whether or not to earn credit.**

The following checklist can be helpful to organizations interested in establishing a successful internship program:

_____ **Conduct an Internal Audit** – talk to your staff members and get “buy-in” from anyone who will be working with the intern. Decide the answers to the following questions:

- Can you provide meaningful work assignments?
- Are you prepared and able to invest time in interns?
- Is a staff person willing and available to supervise the interns?
- Can you provide financial support to the interns in the form of wages, stipends, or travel and parking reimbursements? (If not, you must clearly state this in your position description.)
- Do you have adequate office space and equipment for interns? (computer, telephone, desk)

_____ **Select the Intern Supervisor**

- Is this person committed to and capable of developing student interns?
- Will this person have adequate time to mentor and supervise?

_____ **Develop a position description**

- Provide an accurate overview of the position responsibilities, work assignments, and time frame
- Clearly outline expected outcomes

_____ **Review Applications/Resumes and Interview Prospective Interns**

- Do not automatically accept candidates without interviews
- Interview and select interns, notify all candidates of the outcome and provide constructive feedback for those interns you did not select.

_____ **Orient and Supervise the Interns**

- Share the organization's mission statement and goals with interns. Provide them with a tour of the facilities and information on policies and procedures, formal and informal. Introduce interns to all staff with whom they will be working.
- Arrange for training, as necessary, with computer programs, telephone systems, copy and facsimile machines or other equipment the interns will be using.
- Provide interns with information regarding appropriate work attire and behavior.
- Offer directions on the specifics of work assignments.
- Include the interns in staff meetings when appropriate. Assist interns in arranging informational interviews with colleagues in other departments or offices.
- Meet with interns on a regular basis to answer questions and to provide feedback.

_____ **Seek and Provide Feedback**

- Ask the supervisor to write recommendations for the interns if appropriate.
- Take interns to lunch on their last day. Discuss their experience with your organization.
- Assess your internship program. Make adjustments as necessary.

_____ **Evaluate Intern's performance for academic credit (if applicable)**

- Complete any official documents that require your input and/or signature for the student to obtain credit.