

**Center for Career Development  
and Community-Based Learning**



# How to Develop a Successful Internship



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So you are thinking about having an intern? Where do you start?  
*Right here.*

## What Is An Internship?

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An internship is any carefully monitored work or service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what she or he is learning throughout the experience. Characteristics include:

- Duration of anywhere from a month to two years, but a typical experience usually lasts from three to six months (a semesters length).
- Generally a one time experience.
- May be part-time or full-time.
- May be paid or non-paid.
- Internships may be part of an educational program and carefully monitored and evaluated for academic credit, or internships can be part of a learning plan that someone develops individually.
- An important element that distinguishes an internship from a short term job or volunteer work is that an intentional "learning agenda" is structured into the experience.
- Learning activities common to most internships include learning objectives, observation, reflection, evaluation and assessment.
- An effort is made to establish a reasonable balance between the intern's learning goals and the specific work an organization needs done.
- Internships promote academic, career and/or personal development.

### How Do Internships Benefit Employers?

- Year round source of highly motivated pre-professionals
- Students bring new perspectives to old problems
- Visibility of your organization is increased on campus
- Quality candidates for temporary or seasonal positions and projects
- Freedom for professional staff to pursue more creative projects
- Flexible, cost-effective work force not requiring a long-term employer commitment
- Proven, cost-effective way to recruit and evaluate potential employees
- Your image in the community is enhanced as you contribute your expertise to the educational enterprise

*Interns can add a lot of value to your business, but not without proper planning. A poorly designed experience can lead to more work for you and a frustrating experience for all. Use the guidelines and suggestions included in this guide as you begin exploring if an internship is right for your company.*

Make sure the internship you design meets the Department of Labor's Internship requirements:

### DEFINITION OF "INTERNSHIP" AND CONSISTENT CRITERIA

Because the parties involved in the internship process—students, colleges and universities, and employers—have differing objectives, it is important to have a definition of "internship" upon which all parties can agree. Currently, the term "internship" is used to describe various experiences. Moreover, there are no guidelines by which employers, educators, and students can consistently define "internships."

To establish uniformity in the use and application of the term "internship," NACE recommends the following definition:

*An internship is a form of experiential learning that integrates knowledge and theory learned in the classroom with practical application and skills development in a professional setting. Internships give students the opportunity to gain valuable applied experience and make connections in professional fields they are considering for career paths; and give employers the opportunity to guide and evaluate talent.*

To effectively implement this definition, it is necessary to develop criteria that college career centers and employer recruiters can use to identify workplace experiences that can legitimately be identified as “internships.” The discussion of these criteria is framed by several conditions. These conditions are the legal definitions set by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA); the widely varying guidelines set by individual educational institutions and academic departments within institutions; employer perspectives on and objectives for internships; and the unique experiential learning objectives of students.

Students pursue internships because they want to gain professional experience that links their academic coursework to the disciplines they want to pursue for their careers. To gain this experience, students want to engage in projects and tasks that contribute to the professional work of the organization. This means that the employer *does* benefit from the work of the intern while, at the same time, it provides a meaningful experience that allows for the application of academic knowledge.

To advance this assessment, the ethics must be considered. *At the foundation of such an assessment is the tenet that the internship is a legitimate learning experience benefitting the student and not simply an operational work experience that just happens to be conducted by a student.* The core question then is whether or not work performed by an intern will primarily benefit the employer in a way that does not also advance the education of the student.

In January 2018, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) issued a statement essentially replacing the six-part test it had initially issued in 2010 with its new “primary beneficiary” test to determine if an individual can be classified as an unpaid intern.

The primary beneficiary test does not include a rigid set of requirements; instead, it is a non-exhaustive list of factors to determine who is the primary beneficiary of the internship. These factors include:

- the extent to which the intern and the employer clearly understand that there is no expectation of compensation;
- the extent to which the internship provides training that would be similar to that which would be given in an educational environment, including the clinical and other hands-on training provided by an educational institution;
- the extent to which the internship is tied to the intern's formal education program by integrated coursework or the receipt of academic credit;
- the extent to which the internship accommodates the intern's academic commitments by corresponding to the academic calendar;
- the extent to which the internship's duration is limited to the period in which the internship provides the intern with beneficial learning;
- the extent to which the intern's work complements, rather than displaces, the work of paid employees while providing significant educational benefits to the intern; and
- the extent to which the intern and the employer understand that the internship is conducted without entitlement to a paid job at the conclusion of the internship.

Excerpt taken from:

<https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/advocacy/position-statements/position-statement-us-internships/>

# Getting Started

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## **Identify your goals:**

Are you hoping to build a pipeline to your workforce? Are you interested in mentoring the next generation of professionals in your industry? Knowing what you want your company and your intern(s) to get out of the experience will help you identify where to start and how to get to your end goal.

## **Identify your needs and resources:**

*What skills does this person need?*

Identify what skills and qualifications someone taking on your internship must possess and what skills you think they will gain while interning with you. An intern job description is highly recommended in order to ensure that both you and potential intern are on the same page. Internships are learning experiences; so, make sure that expectations of work performance are at a level that aligns with the level of an applicant who has minimal experience in the field. Focus on a student's willingness to learn, their long-term career goal and how various tasks or opportunities may expose or align with the student

*What level of education is needed for your internship?*

This can be a tricky question for some. Our societal norms say you should desire a candidate that is working towards a bachelors degree; but, you should consider the most essential skills related to the tasks you are seeking the intern to complete. 2-year degree (Associates) seeking students come from all walks of life. Inver Hills is proud to have a diversity of students who range from completing their associate degree before they complete their high school diploma to students who are returning for a career change and already hold a 4-year (bachelors) degree in another field-

It is important to separate out required skills from preferred skills. In general, potential candidates tend to rule themselves out before applying; therefore, it is important to list the minimum requirements first. Also, try to list general statements that can be applied to a broad range of applicants instead of being very specific. For example, stating that you want a "full-time enrolled college student" versus "a student seeking a bachelor's degree" will open the applicant pool to any degree-seeking college students.

*What will the intern do?*

An intern will not know what to do unless you tell them! Before on-boarding an intern explore what tasks you would like them to do. Should their internship be project based where they focus on one project their entire placement? Or maybe their internship will be task based where they do a variety of projects throughout their term.

Ask yourself, "What will be the most beneficial to your company and manageable for supervising?" An intern is looking for meaningful work and assigning them work that really matters to you will help keep them engaged and invested in their tasks.

*Can we pay the intern?*

Inver Hills has conducted research among their students and alumni to understand their reasons behind not accepting an internship. The number one reason students chose not to participate in an internship was lack of money associated with the internship. Students are faced with many financial constraints and to accept an unpaid internship with no guarantee of a job offer at the end can be prohibitive. This can be even more challenging for students who may be paying for child care or their tuition out of pocket.

If there are funds for paying the intern, you are encouraged to do so. You will have more applications for your opening. If you cannot pay, please make sure you review the [Department of Labor's Fact Sheet on Unpaid Internships](#).

Non-profits: Here is a [resource](#) for you about unpaid internships.

#### *Who will mentor the student?*

Mentorship is an essential part of an internship experience. A mentor should be assigned separately from a supervisor to the intern(s) and provide work direction if possible. Some internship sites have a supervisor for the intern to provide work instruction and supervision AND a mentor who is more available and able to answer day to day type of questions for the intern. Consider which of your employees has the desire and ability to support the student's academic growth.

Ideally, an intern's mentor will be able to formally meet with them at least once a week to check in on projects and needs of the intern. It is best when this meeting can be reoccurring and scheduled out in advance.

If it is difficult to find a mentor for the intern, make a request to your colleagues or leaders to host the intern(s) for a few hours or a day at some point in their internship experience. This type of arrangement is called "job shadowing" and can be highly effective if there is advance notification.

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## **Developing a Position Description**

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A position description informs the student what to expect in your internship and allows them to make a decision on if they qualify and want to apply for the position. Before you begin writing an internship position description, it is essential that you identify what you would like the intern to do. Successful internships tend to have one main project that the intern will be focused on and then have access to several supplemental activities.

An effective position description will include the following bits of information:

- 1) Your location
- 2) A brief description of your company
- 3) Explain anticipated duties and responsibilities of the intern
- 4) List requirements and qualifications you hope the intern will possess

*Consider your language around what level of student you are seeking. Please review the "Getting Started" section to view recommendations to what should be specified.*

Detail the anticipated benefits of the internship (i.e. compensation, development opportunities, etc.)

*Clearly display whether the internship is paid or unpaid. If possible, add the wage and any other benefits that you plan to offer with the internship opportunity in the job description. This will reduce the level of confusion during the selection process. Everyone will be on the same page with what is being offered with the internship opportunity.*

- 5) Provide anticipated schedule for the intern and duration of the internship
- 6) Instruct how to apply for the position

## Promoting the Internship Opportunity:

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Now that you have figured out what you want your intern to do, we need to recruit and find an intern. Inver Hills is part of a consortium called Career Hub (powered by College Central Network). This Consortium allows you to share your opportunity with 14 two-year schools in the Minnesota State system.

You can create an account at [www.collegecentral.com/msch](http://www.collegecentral.com/msch). Anticipate that your account will be approved in 24 hours and then you will receive a confirmation email that will allow you to return to the site and post your position.

You are encouraged to share you posting in all of the other ways you normally recruit for professional openings. Use your website, LinkedIn, anything else.

The Center for Career Development and Community-Based Learning will post internship opportunities that hold the following:

- Internship consists of structured learning experiences with outlined responsibilities, regular supervision and evaluation process. Outlined responsibilities should relate directly to the students major or career interests.
- Paid internships must adhere to the guidelines for Posting Positions listed [here](#).
- Credit bearing internships are coordinated through the appropriate academic program faculty.
- Unpaid internships with for profit companies must adhere to the U.S. Department of Labor guidelines at <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf> and/or National Council of Nonprofits guidance at <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/interns-employee-or-volunteer> .

We are happy to share your posting on our job board on campus, on our [Facebook page](#), and with faculty in the appropriate program area.

Beyond these suggestions, we encourage you to make personalized outreach within your own network. Do you know of a faculty who teaches in an area where you think you might find your next intern? Can your industry's professional association provide some advertising assistance in their network? If you have an alumni of our college, have them contact their network! That personalized touch makes a difference.

# Designing a Selection Process

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When thinking about how to select an intern for your organization, it is important to clearly articulate your expectations during the selection process. In general, there are four main phases to the selection process, which are:

1. Building an Application and Review Process
2. Pre-selection
3. Interviewing
4. Verification

## **Building an Application and Review Process:**

An application should be treated as a tool to be used to get to know a potential candidate. It is important to create questions that align with your expectations of the internship opportunity. The questions should also align with any evaluation measures that are put into place for the review process. A reviewer should have some clear direction in how to evaluate the candidate based on the questions in the application.

***Be aware of equal employment opportunity laws and how they apply throughout the selection process.*** For example, it is illegal to ask on an application about citizenship status. If possible, you can consult with an HR representative or lawyer to reframe the question, but it is highly recommended to seek their expertise about the application in its entirety and the review process prior to going live.

When working with an internship application, you should ensure that it is not a barrier to applying. Think about the questions that are being asked and whether it is something that is important to know right at that moment. For example, if you are requiring an applicant to write a long essay on why they would be a fit to the internship opportunity; it could potentially increase applicant drop off rates. Instead, ask specific questions that are in a short-answer format that provides insight for the reviewer to develop a holistic view to why a candidate would be a good fit.

Reviewers should be directed in how they should evaluate potential candidates. A document outlining how to evaluate a candidate should be created and required for all reviewers to use it. Also, a space should be created to connect about unconscious bias in the review process and what ways reviewers can mitigate them. Each reviewer brings a lens that need to be recognized and it is important to acknowledge it to maintain objectivity in the review process. What you don't want is a reviewer to screen-out a candidate because their personal lens about skills and character clouds their judgment of the candidate.

## **Pre-Selection:**

Narrowing down an applicant pool can be difficult. When you are thinking about who to bring in for interviews, think about what intrigued you about each candidate and what more that you would like to know during the interview. A discussion among the reviewers about top candidates should happen if possible.

Be aware that a candidate applying for an internship may not have all the skills and characteristics that you desire; however, their eagerness to learn, overall awareness about themselves, and how they could contribute to the experience should be considered. These characteristics can usually be identified based on how the student answered the questions in their application.

## **Interviewing:**

When preparing for the interview, it is imperative to find engaging interviewers and ask the right questions. There should always be at least two interviewers per interview session. Exceeding more than two interviewers per interview

session for an internship may become overwhelming for the student. Remember that this may be the first time that a student is interviewing in a formal setting.

If you are wanting the student to meet more than two colleagues during the interview session, offer a tour of the office and give them the opportunity to visit each colleague who may be a contact for their internship opportunity. The other option is to break up the interview session by splitting the interview questions between interviewers. While switching interviewers, this may be a great opportunity to provide a small break for the student before the next session.

The interview questions and interview session should stay consistent between all potential candidates interviewed. Also, make sure that appearance is not the focal point of the interview. There may be some students who interview and don't have the traditional western business casual or business formal style of clothing. This should not be a key factor in your decision for an internship opportunity. The interview process as a whole should be more of a learning experience for the student; therefore, putting aside judgement and listening to understand should be key. If possible, providing constructive feedback to selected candidates may be an option to offer once they begin their internship.

**Verification:**

The verification should be conducted after you have selected a desired candidate(s). The offer can be contingent on the background check; however, internally, you need to come together with HR representatives or a lawyer to decide what would happen if there are any convictions or major infractions that show up in the student's history. There may be a way to allow the student an opportunity to work for your organization instead of automatically disqualifying the student based on their history. People can change and it is important to recognize that, but also maintaining a level of safety for current employees.

Finding good references can be cumbersome for the most experienced professionals. Unless the student is going to be working on sensitive information, be open to who they write down as a reference. For an internship opportunity, a personal reference shouldn't harm the student's chances of being considered. Also, two references should be enough to get a good idea of who they are and whether their interview presentations aligns with what others are saying about them.

Once these phases are complete, you should have a qualified student to fill your internship opportunity.

## Prior to Internship Start

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Before your intern begins, there are 2 important documents the college would like you to make sure you complete. These documents may look different for every course or school you partner with, but they should all have similarities.

### *Site Agreement*

A site agreement is essentially an informal contract between you and the student committing to the internship. Often times it is a space where you can share contact information and an organized tool for you to discuss schedules, communication expectations, attendance and more. Typically, instructors ask that this be completed prior to the start of an internship placement.

This can be created through the form of an offer letter. Be aware of wage theft laws in your city. Recently, Minneapolis passed a Wage Theft Prevention city ordinance that requires employers to provide a new hire notice that specifies certain information required for an employee prior to the start of their employment. [\[Source\]](#)

### *Learning Goals*

A learning goal is a goal for the student that they hope to complete in their internship. Usually these are broken down into 3 distinct categories: Academic, professional and personal. Students are encouraged to identify these goals and then bring them to their supervisor in their first 2 weeks of internship for review and collaboration. Interns don't know what they don't know about their internship placement, so we know that the supervisors input is valuable. This conversation and help the supervisor understand what the student wants to get out of their experience and help them shape those experiences. This learning goal document should be reviewed at check in's and at a mid-term evaluation period.

Learning goals are encouraged to follow the SMART goal process development model.



Ask students:

Learning Objective: What do I plan to learn or be able to do academically?

Learning Strategies: What are the steps I will take to accomplish the objective

Learning Outcomes/Evidence: How will I show I learned or did what I said I would do?

Completion date: When will I be able to show evidence?

# Hosting your Intern: Now What?

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## ORIENTING AND TRAINING INTERNS

If you have a human resources representative, make sure that you connect with them beforehand to understand what paperwork will be required for the student to document work authorization and set up payroll. For some, the required paperwork like a Form I-9, Form W-4, or other onboarding documents may be difficult for the intern(s) to complete; therefore, allow some time and the ability to ask questions on their first day.

Orient your intern to their new workplace. This might take the form of a conventional orientation program or merely a walk around the office, depending on the size of your company. Give interns an overview of your organization; some companies give talks or hand out information about the company's history, vision and services. Explain who does what, and what the intern's duties will be. Introduce them to co-workers and point out the kitchen and bathroom

Give your intern the resources they need to do the job. That may sound obvious, but you'd be surprised at how many companies stick their interns out in the hallway or transfer them from desk to desk. Give the intern a desk, point out the supply room, and introduce the tech support people. If you have more than one intern, try to have them sit near or next to each other. This will allow for the intern to also build connections with their peers.

Many students are unfamiliar with the activities, environment and objectives of business and industry. Even though your interns may have worked part-time to support their education, these experiences may not have exposed them to organizational politics, the need for confidentiality, the importance of teamwork, or the profit-making orientation of business. It is this orientation and training dimension of the internship experience that emphasizes the partnership role of the sponsoring organization.

The sooner your student interns understand what your organization does and how it operates, the sooner they can assume assigned responsibilities and become productive. You can help this process by providing the following kinds of information about your site:

### **Personnel Structure**

- + company organization
- + special industry jargon
- + specific work standards and procedures
- + reporting relationships
- + access to the supervisor (days, times, and duration)
- + tasks that can be completed without supervisory approval
- + work processing requests and timeliness
- + mail and telephone systems
- + approved form(s) for correspondence
- + safety regulations
- + procedure for signing off completed work
- + periodic forms or reports to be completed
- + security and confidentiality issues, if relevant
- + acceptable dress and appearance
- + maintaining the premises and work station
- + productive interactions with others at the work site
- + personnel who can answer different kinds of questions
- + how the organization wants the intern to deal with clients, customers, and vendors

*You can communicate this information in several ways:*

- + take your interns on a tour of the facilities and introduce them to the other employees
- + give your interns company materials to read such as newsletters, annual reports, an organization chart, or memos from the CEO
- + encourage your interns to spend break and lunchtimes in places where employees gather
- + schedule regular one-on-one meetings with them
- + give the interns opportunities to observe (or participate in) professional meetings
- + allow the interns to interview company personnel
- + encourage the interns to walk around and observe others at work

The success of an internship depends on the partnership between representatives of the organization, the college, and the student. These three parties need to agree on the conditions of the internship, the responsibilities of each party, and the reporting requirements. The site supervisor is the critical link. You guide your interns by providing direction and feedback. If a problem occurs, you counsel the students and contact the faculty supervisor, when necessary.

### **KEY POINTS**

- Develop a thorough orientation and training plan to be implemented when the interns begin work, so they will learn quickly and become productive members of your team.
- Invest supervisory time to establish an important bond with interns and set a crucial tone for the internship experience.

### **Time Sheets**

Interns are likely to be expected to track their internship hours to verify for their faculty how many hours they have completed. In most cases, these time cards will need to be signed by an employee of the business that can verify that indeed, the student was there when they said they would be there. This form may look different depending on each discipline. But expect this to require a signature every week or every other week.

### **Evaluations**

An important part of an internship experience is having the opportunity to reflect on your progress and skill development. One of the ways this can be done is through mid-term and final evaluations. In most disciplines, these forms are provided to the student to give to the employer/internship site for completion. In the event that is not the case with your student, you are encouraged to tailor an evaluation form to mirror the developmental stages of an intern. If you need assistance with that, just ask the Center. We have several templates that may fit your needs.

### **Creating an Inclusive workplace**

Ensuring that an intern has an outlet in your organization to candidly reflect on their experience and be their authentic selves is important. There are many ways to create an inclusive space at your organization. The first step is to take the time to learn about the intern and what can be the most effective way for them to thrive in your environment. Be aware of how you are listening to your intern, assigning tasks, directing them to specific opportunities, providing constructive feedback, and building the workplace for them from a lens that acknowledges the fact that privilege and bias exist. Talk to your intern versus talking down to your intern.

Speak to your intern in a way that honors their strengths and unique knowledge that they bring to your organization. Something as simple as acknowledging the intern's ideas and having a discussion around it to see if it is feasible can create a feeling of inclusivity. Seek professional and personal development opportunities that will expand your awareness about your own positions and actions and how they impact Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in your organization.

## Off-boarding Your Intern

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At the end of your intern's experience, it is the hope that you are sad to see them go and you question how you ever got work done without them on your team! Your intern is likely questioning their next steps and feeling a sense of loss for their internship experience. Help facilitate closure with the intern and do something to acknowledge the end of the experience.

You do not need to throw a big party or offer up gifts to the intern. Something simple like a card or everyone intentionally gathering in the lunch room to share a meal can be a special experience. Also, consider if you would be willing to be a reference for your intern and tell them.

Don't forget to have them share the word about their internship and ask them to help recruit your next intern!

## Virtual Internships

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Are you considering a Virtual Internship? There are a few things extra you may want to consider.

Start by checking out these top [7 reasons to consider hosting a virtual internship](#). Everything discussed in this guide regarding internships applies to virtual internships too. You still need to find a way to on-board and connect with the intern, but there are some additional factors:

### **Technology**

With an in person internship, interns are usually provided with space and tools to do their work. Consider if you have the means and tools to provide these same resources to the intern if they are expected to work from home. Some students may not have a computer at home or specific software your company uses. Don't forget about internet and phone access.

Some companies mail their intern this type of equipment other companies explain what an intern would need to be successful in their internship as part of their position description. You will need to evaluate what is best and most secure for your place of business.

Telework may be a new experience for your intern. You are encouraged to set clear expectations with your interns on what your expectations are for work place etiquette on camera. Have a discussion with your intern to learn if children are in the home, if they have a quiet and neutral space for virtual meetings, learn about their environment before making inflexible rules. Remember to keep in mind not all students have the same experiences and may need some flexibility to be successful in your setting.

### **Telework Agreements**

Students who complete an internship for credit are usually asked to complete a learning agreement provided by the school. This is an agreement between the student/school and the supervisor. This document usually outlines expectations on communication, hours, etc. In the instance of a virtual internship, your company may want to consider a telework agreement.

A telework agreement may include more specific information related to your expectations regarding how the intern will use their time at home working for you. This telework agreement may include information/expectations on how private or industry related information is used or downloaded on a student's personal computer, if the company is not providing them with a computer.

