**Building Meaningful, Sustainable, Reciprocal Internships**

Internships pose a host of challenges and opportunities for students, colleges and social impact organizations. This case study aims to highlight and analyze some of the most salient points, from both student and employer perspectives, that arose during the Posner Center for International Development’s Educational Workshop, May 18th-19th, 2014.

**INTRODUCTION**

The significant amount of time, energy, and human and financial resources that social impact organizations must devote to training, managing, replacing and retraining interns once interns graduate or move on to other organizations often cause internships to be as much of a burden as a boon. This is especially true for interns coming from colleges on a quarter system (e.g., the University of Denver) rather than a semester system due to the short amount of time students have to complete their internships before the end of each term. This situation can be problematic for organizations with tight budgets and limited human capacity. At the same time, professional interns can play a vital role in organizational programming, administration, research, fundraising, and social media, among others, especially for small and growing organizations.

**WHAT MAKES AN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM WORTH THE TIME, ENERGY and EXPENSE?[[1]](#footnote-1)**

According to Forbes,[[2]](#footnote-2) some key benefits of an internship program include:

* Positive energy: because internships are often time limited, most interns waste no time in making a good impression! They are relying on a good reference, and many understand that an internship can lead to an amazing job. As a result, they will bring their A-game everyday!
* Offloading: while there should be a balance between routine tasks and more meaningful work, interns can help take some of the mundane tasks off your plate.
* “#Madskills”: according to Forbes, “Interns represent a highly targeted market and understand how to best reach it.” Allow your interns to use their social media savvy to boost your social media presence and brand visibility.

**SOME INTERNSHIP STATISTICS**

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers:

* Nearly 97% of employers plan to hire interns in 2014.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* In 2011, U.S. companies saved an estimated $2 billion by not paying interns minimum wage.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* In 2012, Independent Sector announced that the estimated average value of an unskilled volunteer hour in the U.S. was $22.14.[[5]](#footnote-5)
* 63% of the graduating class of 2012 completed at least one internship during college and 28% completed two or more internships.[[6]](#footnote-6)
* 66% of all internships in 2012 were unpaid and 72% of student interns said compensation was the least important consideration when deciding on an internship opportunity.[[7]](#footnote-7)
* 39% of small companies (under 100 employees) made full-time job offers to interns in 2012.[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Despite the high demand for interns and internships, only 47% of organizations reported having a structured internship program in 2012.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**CASE STUDY**

This case study follows an academic roundtable held on May 18-19th, 2014 at the Posner Center for International Development, where staff, interns and other stakeholders from various nonprofits and social enterprises presented their ideas on how to build meaningful, sustainable and reciprocal internship programs. They brainstormed ways of addressing the underlying causes of unsuccessful internships from both employer and intern perspectives. After the presentations, participants split into four groups to discuss, organize and diagram ways to initiate, implement and maintain successful internships (see the diagrams below).

**Group One / Scenario One: “A Win-Win Proposition”**

1. Starts with PCID Values

**“A Win-Win Proposition”**

6. Best Practices

3. Give lots of supervised responsibility

2. Procedural Approaches

5. Add value to organizations

4. Mentorship

1. Internships adhere to Posner Center for International Development (PCID) values.
2. E.g., an online system that places internationally-based interns with organizations and institutions in other countries, as appropriate.
3. Employer treats intern like a paid employee, develops work plan and builds trust.
4. Employer develops mentorship guidelines and gets to know intern on a personal basis (beers, e.g.) 🡪 Path to (deliberated) self-growth.
5. Long-term internships with high level of professionalism.
6. Coordination: a ‘hub’ or internship coordinator following procedures, matching interns with appropriate internships, setting standards, and evaluating performance of both employer and intern to drive mutual understanding, increase transparency and reduce inefficiencies.

**Group Two / Scenario Two: “Posner Center Liaison / Internship Team”**

5. Intern Management

**“Posner Center Staff / Internship Team”**

(1)

Develop online internship application system

(2)

1. Identify tenant needs / desired skills
2. Design internship descriptions
3. Design internship program guidelines
4. Develop policies, processes, procedures
5. Draft MOUs for staff, tenants & interns
6. Develop intern accountability rubrics

**Ongoing input and feedback from tenants**

(4)

Vet resumes, interview and evaluate candidates, and make recommendations to tenant organizations based on the skills and needs they previously identified.

(3)

Recruit Students from Denver-area academic institutions via various networks

(5) INTERN MGMT

* Weekly reports
* Briefing/debriefing
* Time accountability
* Results

**Group Three / Scenario Three: “PCID Integrated Interns”**

* Grad Schools
* State
* INGOs
* Curtis Park Community
* Colleges
* Refugee Communities
* Industry
* Faith-Based Organizations
* K-12 Teachers
* Zoomer Boomers
* Discuss Strategies Collectively
* $$$

$$$

REPORT

INTERN MENTOR & MANAGER TYPES

* Engagement
* Duties
* Teaching strategies

$$$

REPORT

PCID STRATEGIC PLAN

* Mission
* Vision
* Board
* Advisory Council

GLOBAL POSSIBILITIES

* CGI
* YALI
* RRC
* GMDP

**Group Four / Scenario Four: “Value and Interns”**

**“Craigslist” for Interns**

**Posner Intern Team:**

Templates for intern

* Screening
* Training
* Management

**Value Creation Driver!**

Allow value creation to drive intern hiring approach & behavior

Clear Goals:

2-way Agreement

What value is intern bringing?

MOUs with Universities to fill hopper with clear needs and wants.

Addressing management constraints individual tenants face.

Have Public Profile as well so future interns can learn about previous experience

**Posner Tenants**

What tenants need:

* Skillset
* Funding
* Arrangement type
* Profiles viewable by other parties
* Lower Transaction Costs to the Intern Process

HOW?

Reach out to other orgs, groups, pools of talent.

**ANALYSIS & FINDINGS** - Upon analysis of each team’s diagram, our findings are as follows:

Unsuccessful Internships are often the result of:

1. Unstructured, ad hoc internship programs that do not capitalize on intern capabilities.
2. Lack of conduits between organizations and colleges to facilitate intern selection.
3. Lack of intern training, professional experience and/or supervision by superiors.
4. Interns’ skills, backgrounds and knowledge incommensurate with the position.
5. Length of internships too short to get a ‘return on investment’.
6. Intern turnover a financial and administrative burden for organizations.
7. Interns underutilized or given menial tasks when capable of more responsibility.
8. Utilizing undergraduate, rather than (presumably) more professional post-grad, interns.

Successful Internships are often the result of:

1. A predesigned, highly structured, well-managed, focused, long-term and formal program.
2. Intern orientation (including contract, employee manual, confidentiality and liability waivers and briefing on organizational mission, vision, policies, processes, culture and values).
3. Inclusion of intern as part of team: introductions, icebreakers, meetings and collaboration – interns that are treated as employees more likely to step up than those treated as interns.
4. SMART goal-setting (specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, time-bound), weekly reports, objective evaluation of performance and a means for interns to voice questions, concerns, problems, suggestions and so forth.
5. Formalized schedule that doesn’t interfere with interns’ academic responsibilities.
6. Intern management: ongoing trainings, professional development and debriefing.
7. Internship program implementation plan including job description templates, prospecting and recruitment, continuous feedback, a well-defined exit strategy, internship program data collection and intern evaluations and reference letters that document skills that interns gain as well as their accomplishments during the internship.

**SWOT ANALYSIS OF INTERNS & INTERNSHIP PROGRAMS**

**STRENGTHS**

**WEAKNESSES**

* Lack of funding (all stakeholders).
* Poorly structured and managed.
* Lack of intern accountability.
* Inappropriate skillsets.
* Brevity of academic terms.
* Organizations overextended & unable to take on new interns or provide sufficient supervision, goals, feedback, and evaluation.
* Interns’ variable schedules may complicate time commitment.
* Online application platform that organizations, colleges & students access: internship opportunities, vetting, recruitment & selection.
* Partnerships with area colleges and systematic intern placement.
* Strong interns 🡪 employees.
* Fund, partnership, professional & organizational development.
* Improved social marketing and use of new technologies.
* Interns add value to organization
* Cost less than full-time employee.
* Do both easy & challenging tasks.
* Interns bring enthusiasm, fresh ideas and work ethic – “A-Game”.
* Provide university resources not otherwise available to NGOs.
* Bring networks of professionals & experts not otherwise available.
* Post-grad interns more expertise.
* Inappropriate intern placement.
* No MOUs b/t NGOs & colleges.
* Undeveloped recruitment system.
* Intern turnover a big expense for organizations (time, energy, $$$).
* Expense for colleges and interns.
* Lack of intern supervision, goals.
* Lack of feedback and evaluation.
* Lack of means for intern to voice questions, concerns, suggestions.

**THREATS**

**OPPORTUNITIES**

1. Julia Alvarez provided the statistics in this section and the next. Thanks, Julia! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Forbes 1](http://www.forbes.com/sites/kateharrison/2012/07/11/why-interns-are-your-new-best-friends/) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE)](http://www.naceweb.org/internships/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [CBS News](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/employers-11-favorite-recruiting-strategies-for-hiring-new-college-grads/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Independent Sector](http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time#sthash.dbk8xxD4.dpbs) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Forbes 2](http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2012/12/06/internships-may-be-the-easiest-way-to-a-job-in-2013/) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)