

Volunteer Internships Benefit Local Governments and Students

by Robin Popik

Internships have been around for more than a decade, and numerous local governments have toyed with the idea of offering them but not as part of the community's volunteer program. Could it be that some volunteer managers just aren't sure how to sell the idea to local leaders, or maybe staff just aren't buying the concept?

Here are some tips to help you get an internship program started, along with some reasoning to help get your local officials on board with the idea.

WHO IS THE INTERN?

The typical college student who scurries to find an internship opportunity has initiative, goals, and high expectations for the future. This student not only wants to build a résumé but also wants to see if college goals are a good match for them. The student sees an internship as a stepping-stone to bringing a career to life. That enthusiasm has a tendency to be contagious for those who work with the student.

Interns can be paid or nonpaid; and the individual could be working on a bachelor's degree or a master's degree, or could already be finished with these degrees. The basic premise of an internship is to take the organization or field of work out for a test drive. Depending on the level of the intern, the organization can also test drive the person for compatibility as a future employee.

HOW DO YOU SELL THE IDEA?

Government organizations that need temporary staff for special projects are a great place to use internships. Challenge the intern to bring out the value of the project. Don't shortchange the intern or your organization by providing only menial tasks to supplement the secretarial pool; if you do, you'll both be disappointed.

Interns want to learn and apply program theory and management to work flow. In local government, internships directly related to the student's area of study can be in numerous departments, including building inspections, environmental services, park planning, engineering, local government manager's office, and fire.

Practicum and cooperative education provide workplace settings in which students gain practical experience in a particular discipline, enhance skills, and integrate such knowledge as libraries, finance, or police.

Internships offer the opportunity of better-trained employees while developing new talent in an employer's organization. Not only does an intern bring enthusiasm to the workplace, the person also brings up-to-date theories and business practices that relate to a specific field. Not to mention that internships are just point blank great recruitment and retention tools for any organization.

If the best public relations tool is an employee, then the second best is an intern. That individual is a great resource to educate the community about what happens within the local government organization.

Local governments can champion this concept by using interns to teach about the governmental process and politics in a way most textbooks miss. The partnership between the educational institution and a government organization can also foster other community or training opportunities.

As the workforce continues to age, governments like all other organizations are looking for educated indi-

viduals to fill needed positions. These internships bring to the forefront students who may otherwise not have come via the local government service route. Where better to teach students how their government runs or introduce them to politics?

Local governments have diversity in departments, from police to park planning and libraries to environmental services, where students can use their talents and explore a career in this public sector.

HOW DO YOU START AN INTERNSHIP PROGRAM?

Start with what you know by reviewing your organization's existing job descriptions to determine the ones applicable to college interns. Next, talk to departments in the organization

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and collect their ideas for projects that an intern can do.

Write a job description for the internship and advertise it on your organization's Web site, on www.volunteermatch.com, or through an area volunteer center or local college. It's best to start with just one or two places. Another place to list your internships is on co-op and service learning Web sites.

You can also opt to post a generic job description that reads something like this: "College interns can volunteer throughout the year using their skills while they learn more about leadership. Our office would be happy to work with your college to find places for

students in different departments. For more information, contact xyz."

Plano, Texas, advertises for college interns throughout the year and matches them as they contact the city. In the past year, interns were used in building inspections, engineering, park planning, environmental services, police, health department, Plano's television network, and parks and recreation. It's a surprise to see the projects that departments can organize once the staff knows a student is available and interested in their area.

Requests will usually be sent by e-mail. When students approach your program, review their interests to see if their skills and academic major fit one of your departments. You can request more information before actually meeting with a student and can suggest the individual visit your organization's Web site to find the department that best complements the student's field of study.

This past summer, Plano had 12 interns. Three interns worked for the police department, where they use interns all year long. The job descriptions were ready, and assignments were easy to make. The libraries are always willing to accept a student in a library science field of study, which they did this past summer.

In June, the health department made a special request for a student with a science or biology major to assist with a special research project. The other students were matched up by reviewing the answers to questions that were sent by e-mail, through a phone conversation with the volunteer manager and volunteer supervisor, and with an outline of requirements from their schools.

At first you might decide to stay with safe choices, such as office assistant, database development, Web site design, data entry and scanning, research projects, newsletter writing, or environmental specialists, but actually the possibilities are endless.

The length of the internship depends on the school and the number

of credits the student requires. Service-learning requirements can start with as few as 15 hours, while credit internships can extend as long as 360 hours. This information should be discussed up front with the student and the department director, so they both know what's expected and can plan ahead.

The school or student should share the course description, course focus, and course competencies with the volunteer supervisor. Here's an example:

Course description. Career-related activities encountered in the student's area of specialization offered through an individualized agreement among the college, employer, and student. Under the supervision of the college and the employer, the student com-

bines classroom learning with work experience.

Course focus. Work experience should:

- A. Add a unique dimension to classroom instruction through on-the-job experience and training.
- B. Test career aptitude and interest against practical job requirements before graduation.
- C. Develop self-confidence, maturity, professional skills, and an understanding of human relations.
- D. Help gain a professional contacts that may be used as a reference for after-graduation employment.

Course competencies.

- A. Improve interpersonal skills in class and on the job.
- B. Work as a team member to accomplish the employer's goals.

C. Meet with members of your work group to identify problems that need to be addressed.

The final grade will be determined by criteria established by the student's college. However, here is an example of possible criteria:

Course work percentage.

Contact information:	5%
Daily log:	10%
Supervisor evaluation:	15%
Book review:	30%
Quizzes:	15%
Discussions:	25%
Total percentage:	100%

The volunteer manager completes the course agreement form, establishes learning objectives with the student and the instructor or coordinator, evaluates the learning objectives to decide whether they were completed in a satisfactory manner, and completes an evaluation form.

The student is under the direct or close supervision of a qualified college faculty member who will provide the local government with the necessary paperwork. Steps to supervise an intern are similar to supervising an employee or volunteer: orientation, training, guidance, and review of the student's activities.

The additional supervision might include sending e-mails to the college faculty to understand what is expected of the student and completing mid-session and end-of-session evaluations.

College academics are just one part of preparing for a future career. New graduates' résumés need to offer something extra to prospective employers, and that's where an internship is helpful. An internship also helps students gain hands-on experience and shows employers they have taken extra steps to learn more about their career choices.

Best of all, internships introduce supervisors to their next generation of employees. **PM**

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I think that the LGMF program is one of the best things that ICMA has ever done. Given the quality of the Fellows that the process presents and the value that they have added, I intend to participate in this program over and over again. —*Jim Ley, County Manager, Sarasota County, Florida*

**Contact ICMA at 202/962-3560 or lgmfprogram@icma.org
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