Creating Internship and Cooperative Education Student Programs:

A Guide for Economic Development Organizations

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Creating Internship and Cooperative Education Student Programs: A Guide for Economic Development Organizations was the result of ideas gathered from the IEDC Higher Education Advisory Committee. With this Internship Guide, Gary Skoog and the other members of the Higher Education Advisory Committee hope that it will help economic development organizations (EDOs) better utilize interns and introduce new talent to the economic development profession.

About the International Economic Development Council

The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) is the premier membership organization dedicated to helping economic development professionals create high-quality jobs, develop vibrant communities, and improve the quality of life in their regions. Serving more than 4,600 members, IEDC represents the largest network of economic development professionals in the world. IEDC provides a diverse range of services, including conferences, certification, professional development, publications, research, advisory services, and legislative tracking.

About the Higher Education Advisory Committee

The IEDC Higher Education Advisory Committee develops and implements strategies to foster broader engagement between economic developers and the higher education sector, including universities, community colleges, and technical colleges. This Committee encourages building the capacity of economic developers and higher education to work collaboratively to grow jobs, investment, and talent in a knowledge-based economy.

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# Table of Contents

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4
- Making the Intern Connection ...................................................................................... 5
- Describing the Intern’s Job .......................................................................................... 7
- Higher-Education Sources for Interns .......................................................................... 8
- Searching for an Intern .................................................................................................. 8
- The Intern Interview Process ...................................................................................... 9
- Orientation .................................................................................................................... 10
- Work Period ................................................................................................................ 12
- Intern Evaluation .......................................................................................................... 13
- Intern Paycheck: A Portfolio ....................................................................................... 13
- IEDC Intern Packet Summary .................................................................................... 14
Introduction

This intern/co-op packet is meant to assist economic development professionals in their quest to hire an intern or cooperative education student (co-op). Those of you who have previous experience with intern/co-ops may want to select the appropriate section of the packet to serve your needs. Those with little or no experience will benefit from reviewing the entire packet before formally beginning the intern recruitment, interview, and hiring process.

It may be helpful for those not familiar with internships/co-ops to define them. According to Wikipedia:

An intern is one who works in a temporary position with an emphasis on on-the-job training rather than merely employment, making it similar to an apprenticeship. Interns are usually college or university students, but they can also be high school students or postgraduate adults seeking skills for a new career. Student internships provide opportunities for students to gain experience in their field, determine if they have an interest in a particular career, create a network of contacts, or gain school credit. Internships provide employers with cheap or free labor for (typically) low-level tasks, and also offer the prospect of skilled workers who may return to the company after completing their education and require little or no training.

An internship may be paid, unpaid, or partially paid (in the form of a stipend). Paid internships are most common in the medical, architecture science, engineering, law, business (especially accounting and finance), technology, and advertising fields. Internships in non-profit organizations such as charities and think tanks are often unpaid volunteer positions. Internships may be part-time or full-time. Typically, they are part time during the university year and full-time in the summer, lasting 6-12 weeks, but can be shorter or longer. The act of “job shadowing” may also constitute interning.

Internship positions are available from businesses, government departments, non-profit groups, and other organizations. Due to strict labor laws, European internships are mostly unpaid, although they are still popular among non-Europeans who seek international and foreign language experience for their resumes.

Cooperative education is a structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience. A cooperative education experience, commonly known as a “co-op,” provides academic credit for a structured job experience. Cooperative education is taking on new importance in helping young people make the school-to-work transition through service learning and experiential learning initiatives.
Making the Intern Connection

Two schools of thought prevail on ways to manage the intern/co-op (from here on called intern) recruitment process. The first, probably the most popular, is to identify a project for a student, such as researching a topic, business retention/business recruitment or social marketing of a concept, or product. Then a job description is developed and sent to local colleges and universities, and applicants are interviewed.

The second school of thought favors the posting of a very general job description that allows the assignment to be flexible. After responses are received, interviews take place and the economic developer attempts to identify the applicants’ skill sets. When an intern is hired, a project is developed to mirror that person’s interests and skills.

Neither approach is necessarily better than the other, but you must decide which method will work best in your situation.

It should be noted that other organized national experiential learning programs may be open to collaboration with your organization. One is Learn and Serve America (A Program of the Corporation for National and Community Service). This service/learning program engages students in the educational process using classroom knowledge to solve real-life problems. Further information is available at www.learnandserve.gov.

This intern guide will focus more on partnering with local institutions of higher learning.

Internship Benefits

It has been said that the workplace and the academy are two different worlds. The workplace is allegedly more practical, while the academy is more conceptual and theoretical. An internship is a wonderful bridge between these two entities for both sides. It allows the student to try out theories learned in the classroom, while the employer gets exposure to tried-and-true theory and to new concepts from academic research. The learning experience occurs on both sides, and this is the beauty of experiential education. Typically, both the student and the employer benefit.

Student and Employer Goals

It is advisable for both the employer and the student to pause to look at the big picture before making a mutual commitment. Both need to decide what they want out of the internship experience and set some basic goals, whether the internship is only for two weeks or covers a semester or longer.
Sample employer questions to ask within the company:

- What needs to be accomplished in the department and how will an intern assist in this task?
- Are there long-term employment opportunities for the intern, assuming s/he has the skill sets needed?
- Who will be the primary supervisor for the intern, and are the two a good fit?
- What tasks does the company need assistance with, immediately and in the long term?

Sample questions prospective interns should ask themselves:

- Is this the type of work experience that I really want? If so, is it to explore this type of industry or to gain building blocks for my career path?
- Is the internship job description compatible with my skill sets and career goals?
- Am I interested in pursuing a long-term employment relationship with this company, and if so, how can I impress them so that I might get an offer for full-time employment? Who do I need to impress?
- How important to me is pay versus obtaining valuable work experience that will strengthen my resume?

What Makes a Good Mentor?

Although there may be exceptions, the intern’s supervisor will likely also be his or her mentor in the workplace. As workplaces vary, so too do personalities. However, good internship mentors have some common characteristics.

A good mentor:

- Is an experienced employee who can speak generally about the work world and specifically about the company’s culture and policies.
- Is knowledgeable about the internship program’s demands and expectations.
- Is committed to devoting the preparation time needed to develop the intern’s workflow, projects, and proper exposure to the career field.
- Possesses a natural desire to help others, especially young workers, in the economic development field.
- Has solid communication skills and makes people feel comfortable.
- Is willing to give the time to make sure the intern learns and has a good work experience.
- Provides appropriate projects to ensure a useful and invigorating work experience.
- Is organized with intern tasks and serves as a good example in the workplace.

This leads to the next internship planning component - the intern’s job description.
Describing the Intern’s Job

As an economic development administrator, your organization may have a policy on internship positions. For example, you may offer only non-paid internships, for graduate-level students only, and only during the summer. Your particular requirements and needs will influence the intern position, type of projects and job description.

You may want to begin by establishing some basic goals and objectives for an intern position, and then outline a few major projects, some minor ones, and some typical daily functions.

In these ways an intern’s job description will be similar in many ways to your other organizational job descriptions, breaking tasks and assignments into percentage of time spent on each component. The components might be as follows:

**Intern Description**

[Name of company or organization]

*Title:* Marketing Intern

*Reports to:* Director of Economic Development [or your title]

*Location:* [Town and address]

*Job Purpose:* Direct marketing and promotion of organizational special events and trade shows. Adherence to comprehensive marketing plan.

*Key Responsibilities and Duties:*

- Update industry database
- Develop and update materials for display at trade shows
- Call on specific companies to gather business retention information
- Create PowerPoint for a CD to give to companies
- [Hours of work]
- [More?]

*Pay:*

[Payment amount, specifying by the hour, week, month, or total stipend; non-paid or travel stipend only.] (Communicate your situation.)
Higher-Education Sources for Interns

You will probably go online and search for the Career Service or Career Management office of your local community college, college, or university. However, if your internship is paid, offered in the summer and at a fairly high level (e.g., for a Master’s degree holder), consider a national search.

With search engines such as Google, Bing, Yahoo, or others, you can enter a target college or university name plus “career services” or “internship” or “co-op,” which should connect you with the school’s online information on internships and the procedure you need to follow to post an opening. Your goal here is to get as much information as possible about what employers need to do to list an internship. Even if you get only a phone number and/or email, you are ready to proceed.

Searching for an Intern

If you choose a local college or university, you may already know an administrator or faculty member. If so, begin there by asking for a referral to someone in the right office. If not, you might contact a department’s faculty chair. Most colleges do not offer a major in economic development as such. Depending on your project, you might contact the Business, Economics, Urban Planning, Geography/GIS, Information Systems, or Liberal Arts departments to get started.

One advantage to this approach (especially if yours is a paid internship) is that the professor may be able to hand-pick a candidate for you after you have described the project, as s/he will know students who might be interested, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

If you visit university internship web pages, you will see that career services offices usually encourage students to research prospective companies to learn about the company’s history, goals, culture, product or service, and finances. Be sure that your intern position availability notice directs anyone interested to a website or other source to learn more about your organization.

Once you reach an appropriate contact or web page, you will be able to list your intern opportunity in the right place, online or with hard copy for handouts, or a bulletin board. Be sure to indicate a time frame for your search and a deadline for responses to the listing.
The Intern Interview Process

If you are an economic development professional, there is a 99% probability that you went through at least one interview and perhaps more to get hired in your present position. The individual or search committee hiring you was trying to match your skills and personality with the demands of the position, and the same is true in the internship interviewing process.

Review the objectives of the intern position, as well as the intern description you created earlier. Consider some questions, both open-ended and specific, that will probe the candidate’s skill level relative to the demands of the position or project and reveal aspects of his or her personality at the same time.

Some typical questions might be:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you pick your major?
- What are your computer skills?
- Tell me about your previous work experience.
- Tell me how your skills relate to the skill needs listed in the notice.
- Why do you want this internship?
- Why should we hire you?

Other pre-hiring evaluations to consider:

- Most organizations have computer and software tests for administrative assistant jobs. Do you want to evaluate candidates using these tests or some of them?
- How important are the intern’s writing skills? Do you want to evaluate them?
- If the project includes considerable spreadsheet work, do you want to give the candidate a minor task to complete, such as building a spreadsheet in Excel or some other software in GIS, graphic arts, word processing, or database management?
Orientation

You’ve hired an intern! Now the goal should be an orientation process that will make your intern feel comfortable, be a part of your team, and have a solid understanding of what you expect in terms of projects and responsibilities. The following orientation structure comes from the Career Services office at the University of Memphis, TN.

First, 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.

**Prepare for the intern’s arrival:**

- Set up an organized work area for the intern.
- Set up voicemail, computer, phone, email, Internet access, and/or other resources necessary for the intern to accomplish the tasks in the position description.
- Outline work expectations for the duration of the internship.
- Prepare forms to be signed, including a confidentiality agreement if necessary.
- Plan a tour of the facilities and introductions to other employees.
- Give your intern company materials to read, such as newsletters, annual reports, an organization chart, or memos from the CEO.

**Explain the mission of the organization:**

- How did the organization start? Why?
- What is unique about your product or service?
- Who benefits from your product or service?
- What are the organization’s current objectives?
- How may the intern contribute to those objectives?

**Explain the organization’s structure:**

- Who reports to whom?
- Who, specifically, is the intern’s supervisor?
- What is the intern’s department responsible for?
- How are decisions made?
- Which personnel can answer different kinds of questions?
Outline organizational rules, policies, decorum, and expectations:

- Is there special industry jargon?
- What are the specific work standards and procedures?
- What access to the supervisor (days, times, and duration) does the intern have?
- How should the intern process incoming requests?
- How do the mail and telephone systems work?
- What are the approved forms of correspondence?
- By what safety regulations must the intern abide?
- Is there a procedure for signing off on completed work?
- What periodic forms or reports need to be completed?
- What local, state, and/or federal guidelines or laws apply to the intern’s work?
- Are there security or confidentiality issues the intern should be aware of?
- What is acceptable dress and appearance?
- How should the intern maintain the premises and the work area?

Define the intern’s responsibilities:

- What is the intern’s role?
- What projects will be assigned to him or her?
- What resources are available to the intern?
- What training is necessary?
- How does the organization want the intern to deal with clients and vendors?
- What tasks can be completed without supervisory approval?
- Do other employees understand the intern’s role?

Monitor the intern’s adjustment and understanding of what is expected:

- Make yourself visibly available to the intern.
- Assign someone who can periodically “check in” with the intern.
- Provide feedback and constructive criticism.
- Encourage the intern to ask questions.
Work Period

In some respects, developing the intern’s job description or work plan may be the most important component of a successful internship experience for your office. You will want to provide the intern with a good work experience. For the intern, it is better to have no work experience at all than to have a bad internship.

Steps to a quality work plan:

1. Think in terms of a simple but effective goal for the internship. What do you want to accomplish with this position? For example “To gather information to establish an effective company retention program.” Under that goal you might list specific tasks or objectives, including projects to achieve the larger goal, such as the following:
   a. Develop a database of local companies that includes company information like phone, address, contact, email, and sales volume.
   b. Create a survey to gather information on the company’s financial health or on local, state, and national issues (positive and negative).
   c. Disseminate the survey and make follow-up calls to encourage company completion.
   d. Compile response data into a spreadsheet or database for analysis and future actions.
   e. Contact companies to set up “industry cluster meetings” to share results and determine company willingness to schedule innovation programs.

2. Make sure you assign experienced personnel aside from yourself to direct and assist the intern. Do you have upper management on board?
3. Develop projects and break them down into functional areas to determine with whom the intern will be working. Identify the daily routine tasks to be performed. Avoid “grunt work” as the daily routine, although most internships have some small degree of these tasks.
4. Determine the intern’s budget, especially if he/she will be doing some traveling as part of the experience (gas, vehicle, travel expenses, etc.).
5. Appreciate the ways that cycles of activity vary between the private business sector and academic life, and plan accordingly.
6. Consider a time and assignment flow chart to space projects and time on a continuum.
7. Assign an evaluator or point person to whom the intern will report. Select evaluation criteria on the front end to be fair to the intern and the process.
Intern Evaluation

It is advisable to share evaluation tools and criteria with the intern prior to the work experience.

There are numerous evaluation tools. It is recommended that the economic development professional maintain an evaluation form or method that reflects what is used in the workplace. One goal of the internship is to provide the student a work experience in a work environment that is not possible in an academic classroom. It will be beneficial for the student to see the contrast between a workplace evaluation and an academic evaluation based on tests, papers, and final exams.

Evaluations can be from numerous perspectives. It is advisable for you or the direct supervisor to employ two different evaluations, one that assesses the student’s performance in the workplace and the other in which the student evaluates his/her own work experience and your organization as an employer.

The first is expected and probably mandatory for the student to receive academic credit. The second will give you valuable feedback on how to improve work experiences for future interns. Examples of each can be found through an internet search engine, or you can use your organization’s evaluation tool to provide a non academic evaluation experience.

Intern Payback: A Portfolio

An intern portfolio of documents associated with the experience can serve numerous purposes. First, it can be one component of a student’s report to his or her college’s academic department, providing a window for the university into the participating organization and its workplace.

Secondly, and possibly most importantly, the portfolio can be a bridge to an intern’s postgraduate employment. A good academic record is important, but past work experience relevant to a job in a chosen field can be equally valuable. For instance, if a graduate is applying for a job in accounting, a portfolio demonstrating past work experience in accounts payable, accounts receivable, and tax accounting would be sure to impress a prospective employer. A marketing major applying for a job carrying a portfolio of past promotional campaigns, market research, direct mail experience, sales letters, and writing samples from an actual workplace would have a distinct advantage over another applicant without an internship. The student with the intern portfolio might even have a hiring advantage over another intern without one.
Discussing the concept of a portfolio early in the intern work experience would send a message that you value the intern’s future and prospects for success. It will prompt the intern to get a notebook and begin saving brochures, letters, project elements, and so on that communicate the internship’s work experience. Of course, one important portfolio component will be a recommendation letter from the direct supervisor and other appropriate company employees.

**Typical items to include in a portfolio:**

- An introductory essay that describes intern functions in the company.
- A brochure or booklet describing the company and the department where the intern worked, if possible.
- Examples of tangible work output, such as reports or research findings.
- Agendas from meetings to show subjects the internship involved.
- Proposals the intern worked on.
- Photos, as appropriate.
- Email correspondence.
- Newsletters about company affairs, especially if the intern is mentioned.
- The supervisor’s evaluation (if it is favorable).
- Notes conveying thanks for the intern’s contribution.

**NOTE:** Some documents and emails may be confidential. Be sure you review the contents of the intern’s portfolio before the relationship terminates.

**IEDC Intern Packet Summary**

As the old adage says, “You get out what you put in.” Like most projects, spending the necessary preparation time on researching colleges or universities as intern sources, developing a careful description of intern duties, proper promotional work to attract candidates, thoughtful interviewing techniques, and a well-organized intern orientation will pay great dividends. The outcome should be beneficial to both the intern and to your economic development organization.