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Introduction

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) have a mutual interest in ensuring that high-quality internships are available for MPA students.

In the early 1990s, ICMA's Advisory Board on Graduate Education, with input from representatives of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) Urban Management Education Committee, initialized a set of guidelines to be used by program directors and faculty to encourage local governments to establish internships. Since those guidelines were created, MPA internship programs have increased nationwide, which suggests that an update of the guidelines is appropriate.

Internships benefit both students and communities, and they are the best way to promote an interest in local government management for qualified graduate and undergraduate students. While content, duration, and other factors may vary, successful internship programs exist in all types of local governments—large and small, urban and rural. To be successful, internships should not only benefit the student but also serve as a good investment of time and resources for the sponsoring jurisdiction, which should stand to gain from the knowledge and skills of graduate students. Internships also help ensure that professional local government management practices are passed on to future city and county leaders.

The ICMA Internship Guidelines are intended to help local government managers and MPA programs work together to develop meaningful internship opportunities that benefit both the student and the local government.

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The Purpose of Internships

Effective internship programs provide an excellent opportunity to make use of very talented people and assess them as possible full-time employees. These programs also provide an opportunity for managers to demonstrate to interns the potential of a career in local government administration.

The Internship Education

An internship that integrates the student as an operating member of a management staff is a critical component of the local government management education of graduate MPA students. One benefit of such a program is that it provides students with a realistic exposure to an organizational/bureaucratic environment. This experience should enhance the student's awareness of the organization—its internal dynamics and values as well as its employees' attitudes toward both their clientele and their administrative/political superiors. The internship should help students understand their obligations as professionals and as public servants. It may be one of the few opportunities that students have to test the knowledge and skills they developed in their academic coursework.

A second benefit of internship programs, particularly those of a year or more in duration, is the opportunity it gives the organization to take advantage of the knowledge and emerging skills of the students. Graduate interns represent an intellectual resource for the local government as it addresses the needs of the community.

In a very real sense, interns—whether they are part-time, temporary, or full-time—are employees of the host organization and should be treated as such. Their position should be integrated into the organizational structure as any other position would be, and their assignments and responsibilities should reflect the needs and priorities of the local government. When the intern is treated like an employee, both the student and the organization gain the most from the work assignment.

Although the intern should handle real work assignments, all supervisory personnel—both professional and academic—should remember that the major reason for the internship is to provide the intern with an educational experience. Both the faculty internship coordinator and the local government internship supervisor must function as educators in their dealings with the intern. In particular, supervisors should assume responsibility for mentoring the intern—that is, showing how to apply theoretical knowledge from the classroom to real-world situations; demonstrating how knowledge affects problem solving; and providing guidance in interpersonal interactions, communications, and task achievement.

Key Principles

The following is adapted from a description of the city of Phoenix's Management Internship Program. This postdegree program has been in existence for more than fifty years. The principles

and perspectives expressed here are applicable to virtually any internship program; thus, they can serve as the basis for judging the quality of an internship program.

Practical Experience: Interns serve in an entry-level professional capacity and are responsible for completing a mix of key projects and assignments related to major issues facing the city. Interns observe and participate in the decision- and policy-making processes, learn the fundamentals of the budget cycle, and recommend changes to existing policies and procedures after engaging in thorough research analysis. Interns benefit from the same performance evaluation system as permanent employees and receive constructive feedback on their work.

Mentoring Process: Informal mentoring takes place during and beyond the intern program year with the budget and research director, city manager, and other management and supervisory staff. Interns are encouraged to arrange informational sessions with department staff and other city officials to obtain first-hand knowledge of specific operations.

Networking Opportunities: Interns are to be fully integrated into the network of local government professionals through participation in various professional association activities. These activities occur on a local and regional basis and provide interns with extensive exposure to a variety of key issues affecting other jurisdictions.

Exposure to Council-Manager Form of Government: Interns are afforded the opportunity to obtain a working knowledge of how policies are developed and implemented within the council-manager form of government. Theories pertaining to the policy/administration dichotomy are further expanded as interns realize that developing and administering effective policies requires a coordinated effort between elected officials and management staff.

Successful implementation of an internship depends on standards, expectations, and structured communication. The government entity, the academic representative, and the intern must collectively and periodically evaluate the intern's response to the program to provide ongoing guidance and support outstanding achievement while helping the intern to develop the strong sense of ethics he or she will need as a professional.

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The Basics of Internships

Whether a local government can offer an internship will depend upon a local government's available resources. A prospective host agency should consider the following issues when making this decision:

- Ability to compensate an intern
- Types of suitable projects
- Proximity to student populations
- Access to available transportation
- Availability of office space
- Undergraduate level or graduate level.

If the decision is made to proceed, it is important to ensure that the internship is carefully integrated into the student's overall academic program. This requires attention to the basic issues of duration, timing, preparation, and placement.

Duration and Timing

One difficulty in establishing internships is coordinating them with the academic calendars of the institutions from which interns will be drawn. Schools usually have a great deal of flexibility in allowing students to continue in internships before and after the official start or end of a term, but student interest and availability are often tied to the school terms. Thus, internship sponsors should be aware of the starting and ending dates of the school terms and, to the extent possible, synchronize the period of the internship with the school calendar.

Most internships that occur as part of a student's course of study are part-time (typically twenty hours per week). They may last from three months (a summer internship) to the nine months of the academic year or even for a full year. While many internship programs are available only in the summer, a long-term experience—preferably at least six months full-time or one year part-time—is better. Shorter programs provide too little time for the student to adequately grasp the organizational and political cultures of the host local government and may not give the student a sufficient range of experience observing and participating in diverse activities.

MPA programs are now using a variation on longer part-time internships to establish a formal link between the MPA program and a local government. In this structure, students are hired as interns and work part-time for the local government, but they are placed on graduate research assistantship contracts and are treated like research assistants, gaining tuition reimbursement and other academic benefits as a full-time student. Under such an arrangement, the intern is available approximately twenty hours a week during the two semesters of an academic year. Often such an arrangement can last for the two years of a typical MPA program.

For its part, an academic institution that offers an internship program should be aware of the local government's board meeting nights and try to avoid scheduling evening classes on those nights. This will enable the intern to experience working with elected officials.

Preparation

A locality that seeks to establish a useful internship program should prepare by taking the following steps:

- Create effective outreach materials and advertising strategies.
- Identify the types of internship available (generalist or specific focus).
- Arrange to conduct the internship as a summer school course to maintain communication links between the school, internship site, and the intern.
- Consider summer placement to an area that could benefit from having interns even if it is not close to the school, almost like an MPA intern summer "Peace Corps."
- Develop mutual selection criteria as part of the intern application process
- Ensure that strong program supervision and evaluation mechanisms are in place.

Intern Placement

One of the most important components of internships is the nature of the assignment given to the student. The primary responsibility for evaluating the adequacy of an intern's placement should rest with the academic coordinator, working in conjunction with the local government administrator.

The intern placement process should take into account any experience or skill sets that the candidate may possess that might make him or her particularly well suited to a specific internship post. The process should mimic a job application process and include an interview with the local administrator and the intern supervisor (if different from the administrator). Both the student and the local government should have the right to refuse a placement.

When a student is placed, there should be a formal understanding among the local government, the academic coordinator, and the student of the obligations and responsibilities of all parties. Evaluation and oversight responsibilities of the academic unit and the local government agency should be described with a periodic feedback mechanism for the intern. While not necessary, we recommend that a brief, formal "agreement" or job description be developed as a guide for all parties.

Placement should ensure that management interns are

- Exposed to a broad range of management problems
- Given diverse work assignments
- Expected to perform daily management tasks
- Required to conduct long-term research and report preparation
- Required to interact with other professionals inside and outside the local government
- Required to interact with constituents
- Exposed to elected and appointed officials
- Exposed to boards, commissions, and various groups associated with policy advisement/development

- Provided opportunities for interaction in professional association activities.

Intern assignments should also allow for the use of various communication skills, including written memos and reports as well as oral presentations to groups of various sizes and compositions.

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Choosing the Type of Internship

Internships can be full-time or part-time, undergraduate or graduate. Whatever option is chosen can be a positive experience as long as the goals and projects meet the needs and expectations of both the government and the student.

Part-time/Undergraduate

An undergraduate internship in local government works best for filling a certain need in a department or for completing a particular project. The position should allow for flexibility, enabling the student to maintain an ongoing relationship with his or her school.

Undergraduates usually can obtain degree credit for their job-related work, so they are less dependent on outside income. Various alternatives to paying interns are discussed in the undergraduate section. While undergraduates usually bring a less-developed skill set with them, students with specific educational preparation can be targeted to work on projects that use their experience and knowledge.

Office space enhances productivity and demonstrates that the intern is part of the staff. If space is limited, however, an undergraduate or part-time intern might be appropriate since he or she will need whatever space is available for only brief periods of time, and other interns or employees can then use the space when the intern is not present.

Graduate Level

Often referred to as “management internships,” positions established for graduate students usually run for the duration of their MPA coursework. Graduate interns typically work approximately twenty hours per week in their internship positions.

Graduate students bring a more mature and focused skill set to the internship. Thus, employing a graduate student requires more preparation time than employing a part-time undergraduate intern. For example, a graduate intern will need office space. This should be taken into consideration before the intern arrives.

Interns who are hired as part of a graduate MPA program are best served by rotating through a variety of departments and job assignments, working on substantial projects, experiencing the realities of local government management, and interacting with elected and appointed officials. These rotations, which should be of two to four months’ duration, should include the local government manager’s office, the finance/budget department, and two or three operating departments. The rotations can be chosen based on project proposals submitted by each department or agency. Project proposals should include

1. What the intern can learn from a rotation in the department
2. Who will serve as the intern’s immediate supervisor (preferably a department head)
3. What specific projects and work assignments the intern will perform
4. How long the rotation will last

Commented [jc1]: Why? Degree credit doesn't buy them food and lodging. Don't they still need outside income? Or is the idea that since they're undergraduates, they're not yet out on their own and thus are supposedly less in need of outside income?

Commented [jc2]: Where is that? This appears to be the only “undergraduate” section.

5. What enhanced experiences and activities will be provided for the intern
6. Any additional information on the department's ability to provide a meaningful experience and on what the intern's assistance will mean to the department.

Finally, graduate interns expect compensation. Similarly, many MPA programs require that their students be compensated, even though the students are required to participate in the internship. Compensation can range from a nonpaid internship to entry-level pay with or without benefits.

Commented [jc3]: This needs to be explained. What would a nonpaid internship be compensation for?

Summer Graduate

A program with summer graduate students is recommended as a way to save money, complete short-term projects, work with student schedules, and accommodate students from schools that require a summer internship. It is recommended that the format of a graduate student internship include resume-building tasks, open access to upper-level management, and frontline experience.

Other Internship Considerations

The local government hosting an intern should consider this an opportunity to accomplish a task that no one on staff has time to research and/or complete. The employer should make sure that the project has clear criteria and expectations outlined before the intern begins. Because the intern may be getting course credit for this work, the intern, the school adviser, and the employer might want to enter into a "learning contract." Such a contract can include the following measures to ensure a quality experience:

- Specific start and end dates
- Designated supervisor for the intern and project
- Course credit hours to be earned
- Description of duties
- Hours to be worked
- Measures for evaluation.

The employer should develop a work project before the intern is selected. Every effort should be made to ensure that the following guidelines are met for the intern's project or position:

- The supervisor can provide guidance and mentoring, learning opportunities, and access to upper-level management.
- The project should be achievable within the time frame.
- Time should be allowed for the intern to participate in other government functions.
- If the position entails working on many small tasks, those tasks should provide tangible learning experiences and, when possible, result in a concrete product.

Allowing an intern to participate in other aspects of local government management will enhance the intern's experience, and the value of this experience can be used to attract interns to unpaid positions. An employer should consider allowing the intern to

- Sit in on upper-level management meetings
- Shadow the local government manager for a day
- Take part in front line service delivery
- Attend council and neighborhood meetings
- Experience collective bargaining activities.

4 Attracting the Best Talent

There are interested and qualified students out there, and it is in the local government's best interests to attract and hire the best talent available.

Recruitment

Local government managers have a number of options for publicizing internship openings and attracting excellent talent. Possible marketing techniques include

- Posting on the community website
- Advertising in the community newsletter
- Using social media (blog, e-newsletter, etc.)
- Posting on association websites, such as ICMA (jobs.icma.org) and NASPAA (www.naspaa.org)
- Contacting state associations
- Consulting with academic coordinators at educational institutions and with professors and program directors in the field of public administration
- Participating in university job fairs and leveraging ICMA's brand. (To arrange participation at a job fair under the ICMA umbrella, contact careers@icma.org or visit icma.org/careerfairs for more information.)

Local government managers should use several of these marketing techniques to find the method that produces the best results. They should also be sure to find out how applicants heard about the particular opportunity being offered.

It is important to sell the employing local government to prospective interns. The job description should be easily accessible online and upon request. Photos and an outline of past projects will help to tell the story of what the internship experience is like in your community.

To attract the best candidates, local governments should offer potential interns

- The opportunity to participate in leadership meetings or council meetings
- Meaningful project work
- A flexible schedule
- Compensation
- Course credit
- Mentoring and assistance with job placement.

The Application Process

Since staff time is often limited, a straightforward and efficient process can be used to determine which applicants will provide the best fit for an organization.

The following are items frequently requested from applicants:

- Cover letter
- Résumé
- References
- Employment application (if applicable)
- Writing sample

The Interview Process

After reviewing the materials submitted, a host agency should be able to reduce the number of applicants before interviewing. While it can conduct the initial interview by telephone, it should conduct an in-person interview prior to the final selection to ensure that the candidate meets its criteria for professionalism. Even though interns are part-time employees, a local government should not cut corners during the selection process.

Qualities to look for during the interview process include

- Strong communication skills
- Applicable experience
- Applicable coursework
- Interpersonal skills
- Interest in local government
- Self-motivation.

The interview process also provides an opportunity for prospective candidates to interview the community during their visit. The applicant should be provided with an opportunity to attend a brief tour of a public facility and/or to meet members of the management team.

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Compensation and Financial Considerations

Internships are, in many cases, one of the methods that students use to finance their education. While it is not always feasible, every effort should be made to create funded internships. The old adage “you get what you pay for” is true for many internships.

Compensation

Local governments that contribute financially to the support of the internship are more likely to make meaningful use of the intern, to provide the intern with good supervision, and to demand more from the intern in terms of professional productivity. The more the intern is treated like an employee, the more valuable the internship will be to both the student and the local government. Providing financial support to the internship is also likely to increase the pool of potential interns from which the local government can choose.

Municipalities who opt for the nonpaid intern should, at a minimum, pay the expenses for the intern to attend related regional and national conferences as well as to take advantage of local opportunities typically offered through local ICMA or Council of Government organizations. In the event of an unpaid internship, some universities may waive the internship credit required for graduation so that the student is not paying tuition money to work for free. A local government should be sure to discuss compensation options with area universities before publicizing a job announcement.

Financial Considerations

A part-time graduate internship allows flexibility in the resources required to support a program. There are several ways to ensure that the internship is cost-effective, depending on what monies are available:

- *Program Materials:* Whenever possible, the local government should partner with a local college or university and work with the public administration department through websites and online applications.
- *Recruitment Process:* The cost of personnel time to recruit, interview, and manage the intern is the most significant expense. Initial costs include the development and distribution of an ad outlining the internship opportunity. Staff will be needed to review the applications, check references, and conduct the interview process. Phone interviews are a way to minimize costs if the intern is not available for a personal interview.
- *Compensating Interns:* If the resources are available, financial compensation can certainly increase an intern’s accountability and provide supervisors with leverage on deadlines and performance evaluations. If financial compensation is not an option, there are several alternative options for compensation to consider:
 - Course credit from the school
 - A stipend for the overall period of time
 - Paid travel expenses or free lunches
 - Mentoring and career development assistance through staff connections.

- *Supervision:* Staff resources will need to be devoted to managing and mentoring the intern to ensure a valuable experience for both the intern and the local government. A current employee can be assigned to oversee and coordinate the implementation of an internship program. Since this will be an additional duty, the employee should be compensated accordingly by a pay increase, a bonus, or some other benefit. Once the program becomes established, interns can maintain it and recruit applicants for the following year.

While not always feasible, every effort should be made to create funded internships.

6 Supervising and Evaluating Interns

Before and during an internship assignment, where practical, there should be a series of sessions attended by the student, the academic coordinator, and the government representative (in most cases this should be the intern supervisor) to discuss their mutual expectations of the internship program.

Supervision

Interns should not be left unsupervised. Both the local government and the academic coordinator should undertake the supervision. The local government should designate an intern supervisor who maintains regular contact with an academic internship coordinator.

The local government supervisor should spell out work assignments for the intern, should follow up to see that these assignments are completed satisfactorily, and should feel free to discuss assignments with the academic coordinator. The supervisor should be regarded as a partner in the learning experience of the student.

Evaluation

Evaluation should be a continuous, ongoing aspect of the internship program. Some suggestions for the local government to get the most out of the evaluation process are as follows:

- Maintain contact with supervisors and stay informed of intern participation. Look for ways to incorporate interns into various agencies and departments.
- Use the evaluation process to provide feedback not only to the intern but also to the sponsoring jurisdiction and to the academic coordinator to ensure that the internship is meeting the expectations of all concerned.
- Conduct evaluations in light of goals set forth in advance by the program supervisor and the intern. If goals are continually unmet, perhaps they are set too high or not applicable to the situation.
- Ensure that intern supervisors use the same performance evaluation system that is used for other employees and provide the intern with a copy of the evaluation that is sent to the academic coordinator. Occasionally, the academic coordinator will provide the intern supervisor with a specific evaluation form that can be used instead of or in addition to the form used for other employees. Should that happen, the academic coordinator should make clear to the intern supervisor just how the the academic institution will use the evaluation in determining the student's grade.
- Require interns to submit self-evaluations of their experiences. Both supervisors' and interns' statements should include evaluations of the program's effectiveness. This should aid the academic coordinator in determining which local governments have provided (or not provided) desirable supervision and learning experiences.

Written statements by the students should be submitted in addition to any academic paper prepared in conjunction with the internship.

- If desirable, require that students submit an additional evaluation six months or a year after their internships have ended. This will provide a means of assessing the long-term impact of the internships.

Continued success

- Maintain a relationship with school faculty to ensure that both the needs of the government and the student's degree requirements are being met. Offer to guest lecture for a local government-related course.
- Use interns to keep the internship program running. Have them place ads and take responsibility for communicating with future applicants and collecting applications. Former interns are also a great resource for suggestions regarding how to make the internship experience stronger.

7 Top Ten Best Practices

1. **Access.** Allow access to and encourage the intern to attend meetings, events, staff, and the chief administrative official. These meetings could include
 - Department director meetings
 - One-on-one mentoring sessions
 - Board/council meetings
 - Nonpublic/executive sessions
 - Regional manager meetings
 - State association conferences.
2. **Variety and meaningful work.** Provide various projects and participatory experiences in a number of different departments. For example,
 - Set the council agenda
 - Put together a RFP/RFQ
 - Develop a budget for a specific cost center
 - Update a section of the strategic plan
 - Conduct a citizen survey
 - Update the emergency plan
 - Update the hazard mitigation plan
 - Prepare a fixed-asset report.

Tasks that are important to the goals of the organization will attract quality interns. Résumé-building experiences often are more valuable than a paycheck.

3. **Individuality.** Each intern will have his or her own set of career goals. Help meet the intern's needs and interests by eliciting input from various departments and agencies for potential work projects. Discuss the intern's career goals and provide an opportunity for the intern to work with departments in the organization to meet those goals.
4. **Education.** Educate people in the community about careers in local government, and seek out opportunities to promote the internship program. In particular, target nearby colleges or universities to ensure a sustainable internship program.
5. **Frontline Experience.** Provide an opportunity for the intern to learn to appreciate and respect the work of frontline service providers who exhibit good management practices. Such opportunities could include
 - Providing customer service/answering phones
 - Responding to resident inquiries via e-mail or postal mail
 - Responding to a Freedom of Information request

- Providing time in the intern's schedule for ride-alongs with public safety or other service providers. Include the possibility of actually helping to do the work in the field.
6. **Mentoring.** Provide the interns with a stable mentor to offer guidance and encouragement throughout the internship experience. Remember, today's interns are tomorrow's leaders. Avoid putting interns in basements, back rooms, or conference rooms. Instead, provide them with workspaces near as many people as possible so they can engage with other staff.
 7. **Supervision.** Avoid having the intern report to a supervisor who may lack the experience and authority to provide the intern with tools for learning. Have supervisors supervise.
 8. **Flexibility.** Remember that interns may have difficult academic schedules. Discuss projects and deadlines with interns and their academic counselors to ensure that everyone's needs are being met. If necessary, allow for flexible work hours.
 9. **Evaluate.** Give interns feedback throughout their tenure and have them evaluate their own experiences before leaving. Remember that this is a growth experience for them. Help them work through their learning mistakes and offer guidance and/or help when needed.
 10. **Assimilate.** Make the program a routine part of the organization. Train regular staff to expect and appreciate the value added by interns. Continue to seek out qualified candidates and to share enthusiasm for local government. Budget funds each year for internships and, if possible, spread the funds out among several cost centers so that the financial impact extends throughout the organization.

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Fair Labor Standards Act

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) stipulates that interns must be fully aware of and agree to the terms of employment set out by the employer, whether or not the intern is to receive pay or other forms of compensation (i.e., school credit, stipend, or tuition assistance).

If the intern *is* to receive an hourly wage or salary, the intern is classified as an employee and is protected by all terms of the FLSA, including minimum wage standards, overtime compensation, and sick leave. Consult the Department of Labor at (866) 4-USA-DOL, or <http://www.dol.gov/>, with further questions.