

# Chapter 1: Why Internships?

Are you a staff member or volunteer at a library that is considering hosting interns? Perhaps you are at a library that already engages interns but are looking for ways to do so more strategically, thoughtfully and effectively? If so, you've come to the right place.

This toolkit, developed by Multnomah County Library in Oregon (serving Portland, Oregon and parts of the greater metropolitan area), will help you make key distinctions about when to pursue interns. Furthermore, the toolkit will help you design, build, and implement a library internship program that will meet the needs of your library and help you find – and effectively engage – qualified interns for a myriad of potential projects and roles.

Ready to get started? Let's begin with some basic definitions of internships.

## Internship Management Checklist

At the start of each chapter in this toolkit, we'll offer an Internship Management Checklist to help you prepare for each step in the process. You may check these off as you go or you can print/use the full checklist we've included in the appendix.

## What are Internships?

### Definitions

According to [Messiah College and the Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania](#): "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." Expanding on this definition, they then described several common characteristics of internships, including:

- "Duration of anywhere from a month to two years, but a typical experience usually lasts from three to six months.
- 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"<sup>1</sup>

1. "Starting and Maintaining A Quality Internship Program," p. 2

So what do these definitions mean for libraries? Within the field, many schools of library and information science routinely offer their students experiential learning opportunities such as internships or practicums as a means of introducing students to the realities of the workplace and of fostering a sense of professional identity and values. In turn, many libraries accept or actively seek interns to assist with library projects and responsibilities, all while offering opportunities for hands-on learning in a real world environment.

As explained by Cindy Mediaville in “Public Library Internships: Advice from the Field”:

“ Students are placed in libraries or other types of information environments where they work with and observe practitioners. The internship--also called a ‘practicum’ or ‘directed fieldwork’ in some schools--is a structured experience, supervised by a degreed professional and monitored by a faculty member and/or program coordinator... Since the general purpose of an internship is to integrate theory with hands-on experience, most programs require that the student complete the school’s ‘core’ courses before registering for any type of fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>

When staff persons at libraries around the Pacific Northwest were asked in late 2011 to define internships, respondents cited such characteristics as:

- A focus on the career exploration and skill development of the intern, often tied to academic learning goals, objectives, and/or university program requirements;
- The responsibility of the library to provide training, mentorship, and evaluation, often in partnership with and/or according to the guidelines of an academic institution;
- Roles that are generally of a pre-determined length and structure, often project-based; and
- Interns are generally expected to already have the appropriate educational background to take on skilled roles and projects, often with more responsibility and including more complex tasks than might be expected of a volunteer.

## So How Do They Differ From Traditional – or even Skilled, Pro Bono – Volunteers?

There are several ways in which interns differ from volunteers. First, there are such things as paid internships while there are very few instances where volunteers will receive compensation although some volunteers do receive reimbursement for such things as miles traveled.

Second, as pointed out by Messiah College and the Technology Council of Central Pennsylvania, internships are usually a one-time experience over the course of one or more months. While many libraries seek out volunteers who can commit to volunteering over a similar or longer period of time, it is more common for a volunteer to participate for a period of time, take a break for some length of time, and then potentially come back to volunteer again. Alternatively, it is very rare for an intern to come back for a second internship period.

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2. “Public Library Internships: Advices from the Field” edited by Cindy Mediavilla. introduction viii

Third, while many volunteers do indeed experience, and perhaps may even be motivated to volunteer in the interest of seeking, personal and/or professional development as part of their service experience, it is not always a central motivating factor of a volunteer opportunity. However, for internships, professional development – whether academic or career – is fundamentally a part of its *raison d’être*. Indeed, the learning process of the intern is a central component of the internship experience, as important as the work completed by the intern during their term of service.

## How Do They Differ From Staff?

Beyond the issue of pay and benefits (for paid interns), there are other important distinctions between staff and interns. For one thing, interns are often engaged for a specific period of time, making them more akin to contractors than staff persons. In addition, your process for finding, recruiting, and securing interns is likely to be very different than your process for finding, hiring, and retaining staff. For details on the internship recruitment and management process, please see later chapters in this toolkit.

## Interns vs. Volunteers vs. Staff

Characteristic	Interns	Volunteers	Staff
Receive compensation for service	Sometimes	No	Yes
Pre-determined length of project/role	Yes	Sometimes	No (except for contract staff)
Return to do same or different project/role in the future	Rarely	Often	Sometimes
Specific skills required to begin project/role	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
Specific education required to begin project/role	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
Can be hired to replace paid staff	No	No	Yes
Focus on experiential learning of participant	Yes	Sometimes	Sometimes
Focus on career development of participant	Yes	Sometimes	Often
Participation part of academic program	Often	Sometimes	Sometimes

Additional important distinctions between staff and interns can be found in the [U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division’s Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act](#). This short but informative document offers guidance on such topics as when an intern can be employed in an unpaid capacity. Fact Sheet #71 also advises that internships “should be of a fixed duration, established prior to the outset of the internship. Further, unpaid internships generally should not be used by the employer as a trial period for individuals seeking employment at the conclusion of the internship period. If an intern is placed with the employer for a trial period with the expectation that he or she will then be hired on a permanent basis, that individual generally would be considered an employee under the [Fair Labor Standards Act].”

While this fact sheet was designed to help for-profit employers determine whether interns should be paid under the Fair Labor Standards Act, they offer the following clarification at the bottom of the document: “The [Fair Labor Standards Act] makes a special exception under certain circumstances for individuals who volunteer to perform services for a state or local government agency and for individuals who volunteer for humanitarian purposes for private non-profit food banks. [Wage and Hour Division] also recognizes an exception for individuals who volunteer their time, freely

and without anticipation of compensation for religious, charitable, civic, or humanitarian purposes to non-profit organizations. Unpaid internships in the public sector and for non-profit charitable organizations, where the intern volunteers without expectation of compensation, are generally permissible. [Wage and Hour Division] is reviewing the need for additional guidance on internships in the public and non-profit sectors."

To read Fact Sheet #71 in its entirety, please visit:  
<http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf>.

## Partnering with Local Unions

In addition to reviewing Department of Labor rules concerning internships, you might also want to consult with any local unions affiliated with your library. As part of adhering to the Department of Labor rules, your library will have already agreed to not displace any regular employees. Given this commitment, do they have any questions about how interns will join the your current team of staff and volunteers at the library? What roles they will take on? How current staff will be involved in the recruitment and management process? Do they have any concerns that you can address? Having an open discussion with local shop stewards or other union personnel both before you begin hosting interns as well as throughout the development of your program may help to prevent misunderstandings about how interns can best be engaged as part of the team at your library.

## Potential Benefits and Challenges of Hosting Interns

There are several reasons to consider hosting one or more interns at your library. Indeed, there are a number of benefits that can be accrued both the library and the individual intern. Here are a few of those benefits, as collected from sources in the field as well as respondents to the internship engagement survey of libraries in the Pacific Northwest:

### A Quick Note Regarding Paid Internships

This toolkit focuses almost entirely on the development and management of unpaid internships. If you are considering offering paid internships, you might want to read *Public Library Internships: Advice from the Field*," edited by Cindy Mediaville and published by Scarecrow Press, Inc. in 2006, for additional information and possible models.

### Potential Benefits for the Library

- The ability to get more work done with the assistance of skilled interns, including tasks and projects that might otherwise not get done at all (as well as opportunities for staff to try out new projects which they previously would have been unable to try);
- The opportunity to train and invest in the next generation of library leadership (including identifying potential future employees);
- Model career paths to and within libraries to your patrons;
- Access to new perspectives, ideas, and skill sets;
- Access to professional development opportunities for existing staff (for example, developing management skills);
- The opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation, facilitated by sharing staff expertise with interns;

- Opportunities to build and sustain partnerships with educational institutions and communities;
- Furthering the library's mission of reaching out to and providing educational opportunities to the community;
- The affordability and flexibility of engaging interns;
- Interns diversifying the library team, including bringing in younger individuals and individuals representative of the community served;
- Opportunities for positive public relations in the community and with funders;
- To better serve and support your community; and
- Building a cadre of people who better understand the work of the library and can therefore be strong advocates of their importance.

## Potential Benefits for the Intern

- Opportunities for high quality, hands-on experience in a real world library setting, including mentorship, job-shadowing, and exposure to many different kinds of library roles and projects;
- Professional skill development and resume-building in a supportive environment;
- Chance for interns to confirm that they are on the right career path and/or determine specific interests or areas of specialization within library environments to pursue;
- Access to building new professional relationships, networks, job contacts, and potential references; and
- Opportunities to gain and fulfill academic credits and requirements, all while applying real world practice to academic learning.

## Potential Challenges to Consider

So with all of these potential benefits to garner from hosting interns, it might seem like a no-brainer to get started. However, there are also some real challenges to consider before taking the leap, including:

- Lacking the infrastructure to effectively find, train, and manage interns and/or adhere to university requirements;
- Lacking knowledge of and/or time to develop appropriate internship projects;
- Lacking time and/or staff capacity to effectively engage interns;
- Lacking the necessary financial, space, or other types of resources to effectively engage interns;
- Finding and matching appropriate interns given available internship roles or tasks;
- Establishing clear understanding of and agreement to library and intern needs and expectations;
- Staff lacking the necessary skills to train and supervise interns (as well as an understanding of what interns can potentially do);
- Sustaining intern projects after the internship is complete;

- Understanding the culture of your workplace and bringing in someone who will be a good fit; and
- Interns taking the lead on a project that a staff person wants to take on, potentially unintentionally fostering jealousy or resentment.

Having reviewed these challenges though, one of the goals of this toolkit is to help you assess, prepare for, and ideally prevent them from diminishing the benefits your library can experience from hosting interns.

Consider what Cindy Mediaville wrote in “Public Library Internships: Advice from the Field” on this topic:

“ Although internships demand a lot of effort on the part of the student, the school, and the worksite, the benefits of such programs are overwhelmingly positive. Not only does the practicum allow the student an opportunity to put into practice new skills and knowledge learned in the classroom, but this experience may actually lead to one’s very first professional job. In addition, the internship site gains an enthusiastic, if temporary, employee who often brings a fresh perspective to the workplace. Mentor relationships may also develop as new professional networks are formed.<sup>3</sup>

## How Might Your Library Engage Interns?

While Chapter 3 will cover some of the potential projects, tasks, and roles appropriate for library internships, there are a few overarching models of internships to consider.

### Short-Term vs. Long-Term Internships

Internships can be either short-term – ranging from a few weeks to a month or two – or longer-term, lasting up to one year. During these internship periods, some interns might seek full-time engagement while others may work only 5-10 hours per week. Weekly hours and length of the internship will depend on the needs of the library as well as any university requirements a student intern might be seeking to fulfill. Again, for interns serving close to or full-time equivalent, you’ll also want to consult current labor laws to confirm that you are keeping in practice with the spirit and limitations of the law.

### In-Person vs. Online

The vast majority of internships are completed in-person with the intern working physically within the hosting library. However, it is also possible to engage interns remotely via the Internet. This can be an especially valuable model of internship engagement for web-based projects and/or libraries that are located in more remote areas.

### Ongoing Tasks vs. New Projects

Interns can be brought onboard to launch new library programs or take on still-to-be-started tasks. Alternatively, interns can be engaged to assist with ongoing tasks and responsibilities such as collection development or youth programs.

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3. “Public Library Internships: Advices from the Field” edited by Cindy Mediavilla. introduction viii

## External Programs and Services vs. Internal Capacity Building

Interns can take on both external and internal projects. For example, you might have interns assist with community programs or other projects in which they will interact with and be visible to the public. Alternatively, interns might work exclusively on internal capacity projects like updating the library website, assisting with acquisition and cataloging, or training current staff on social media models.

## Paid vs. Unpaid Internships

Whether you are able to offer paid internships will likely depend on your library's budget for engaging them. Should you determine that you would like to offer paid internships, you will need to review appropriate labor laws to confirm that you are in compliance with current rules and regulations. For example, the Oregon State Library internship program categorizes unpaid interns as serving as the equivalent of volunteers while paid interns are effectively hired as state temporary employees. To review current labor laws as they apply to interns, please consult with your library's human resources staff persons, legal counsel, and/or see the "U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act" at <http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.pdf>.

To begin the process of assessing your library's readiness for interns, please continue to Chapter 2. ●

### About this book

Looking for more info about this book? Visit <http://libraryinterns.blogspot.com>, where you can download individual chapters or the entire book, and find other related resources (all free of charge).