By Brent Beggs and Amy R. Hurd

Internships Bring the Classroom to Life

INTERNSHIPS ARE A COMMON PRACTICE in parks and recreation as they are a requirement for NRPA accredited programs. These internships allow students to apply their classroom learning to a real situation. Students spend 4-plus years preparing to become a professional and the internship serves as a training ground where students can build on the skills they already possess and help them make the transition from student to full time employee.

Internships serve multiple purposes including (a) networking with professionals, (b) developing professionalism, (3) demonstrating, refining, and acquiring competencies, (4) preparing to secure an entry level position, and (5) bridging the gap between theory and practice. These are achieved through successful internships which are a result of academic preparation, student motivation, student competency, and the internship site itself.

Key to any successful internship is the people involved. A solid relationship between the university supervisor, the student, and the agency supervisor should exist. While there is a symbiotic relationship between the agency, student, and the intern, there can be very different expectations of the internship from these three different entities. The primary purpose for the university is learning, and the student wants to find a job or has career advancement as a goal, and the agency wants a quality student who can contribute to the agency while also learning about the field.

Student Perspective:
A study by Peretto Stratta outlined many expectations of students during internships. The main theme that prevailed from students was that they wanted access to resources during their internships that would help them get a job. When students are looking for internships, they are going to select them based on compensation, location, and timing. Compensation was defined as monetary and non-monetary compensation. Monetary compensation included salary, tuition waiver, or a stipend and non-monetary compensation encompassed such things as food, housing, and travel expenses. Location was a consideration if it had excessive expenses related to it, and timing referred to the length of time of the internship and the start/end time of the internship. Students were rarely interested in six month to a year internships.

Students also look for agencies that are a good "fit" for them. They want an agency that matches their professional goals and provides the type of experiences they are looking for. They want clear expectations detailed so they understand what will occur during the internship. Students also want exposure to professional challenges by being respected by the staff, given challenging work, and not serving as only menial labor.

Agency Perspective:
Practitioners have their own expectations of internships, and they also have a major impact on the quality of the internship. Agency supervisors expect students to have solid preparation in the classroom prior to beginning an internship position and that interns should expect to do both routine and meaningful tasks during their internships. The students should also understand professionalism by knowing how to dress professionally, being on time, and adhering to deadlines, among other things. Beggs, Ross, and Knapp completed a study comparing intern and agency supervisor perspectives of internships. The agencies included campus

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recreation, commercial recreation, and public recreation. Public parks and recreation internship supervisors felt that students should be able to develop and lead programs, expect to work more than 40 hours per week, be willing to do anything asked, and know how to develop a program budget. They also felt that the agency should provide orientation and training, professional development opportunities, and provide opportunities to plan programs, and prepare a program and a corresponding budget.

Overall, the agencies want quality interns and prefer to be familiar with the level of preparation the student has or know the faculty members at that particular university. Like the students, the agencies are also looking for that good "fit".

University Perspective:
Although the internship is the last step in the academic career of the undergraduate and is external to the classroom, the university is still heavily invested in this culminating experience. Adequate rigor needs to be infused into the internship and that elements of the internship should ensure that classroom theory is implemented within the professional practice. Assignments such as an internship journal, research paper, a semester long project, and an evaluation of the student’s performance, the agency, and the curriculum should be required. Internships should be competency based where students acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities both in the classroom and in the field in order to best prepare them for an entry level position.

The Woodlands, Texas, Parks and Recreation merges the academic and practical sides of education together in their internship program. This agency uses Council on Accreditation Standards and a competency assessment to determine what experiences the intern needs. In addition, during the interview process the student is asked questions that test their academic preparation such as the benefits movement, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and how recreation plays a part in this, and program formats.

Although the perspectives of the three major players in an internship experience differ, it is not difficult to bring the three together to make for a positive experience for all involved. Each party wants the student to have a challenging experience, find an agency that is a good "fit", and apply classroom knowledge to the field.

Research to Practice:
- Develop a relationship between the agency and the intern
  - Create a job description so all internship expectations are outlined
  - Create a project plan detailing the projects and tasks to be completed during the internship
  - Consider the feasibility of paying the intern through a stipend or hourly wage. While the agency feels it is a learning experience, the student sees it as work done for the agency
  - Both parties should meet weekly to touch base on progress toward completing projects and issues during the internship
  - Provide opportunities for the intern to network in the profession. This can lead to finding that first position
  - Treat the student as a part of the staff and not as "the intern". Many have felt being called "the intern" was demeaning while the supervisor found it humorous.
  - Provide a solid orientation for the student. Start with an internship manual the student can read prior to starting with the agency.
- Develop a relationship between the agency and the university
  - Discuss expectations of the internship from both the agency and university perspective
  - Talk throughout the internship about progress and development of the student
  - Agency supervisors should see themselves as extensions of the university and be prepared to teach and mentor students (Steinbach, 2004)
  - University faculty should get to know practitioners in the field to make personal connections so that agencies are more willing to accept their students as interns.
- Develop a relationship between the
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