

The Keys to Internship Success

Tips for Interns from the Professionals who Hire Them

BY RYAN GOWER; CARRIE HAUPERT, CPRP; DAVE HARING, CPRP; RICK HANETHO, CPRP

Illinois Parks & Recreation asked four professionals who are highly involved with placing interns to share with us what makes the internship experience successful from their point of view. The answers will give you useful insights as you prepare for your first foray into the field.

The Value and Purpose of an Internship Program

Congratulations! You are preparing to undertake an exciting and challenging journey. The process of searching for and obtaining an internship is a demanding yet rewarding experience. Done thoughtfully and carefully, an internship has the potential to be a life altering experience.

But you must begin this process with an understanding of why the internship is such a vital component of your undergraduate experience. There are two primary reasons why internships are required of undergraduate students in the recreation field:

1. Because there are pragmatic benefits to the student.
2. Because the internship experience offers an opportunity for enhanced learning.

The pragmatic benefits are fairly obvious. The internship is an excellent opportunity to make the transition between academic life and a professional career. On an internship, you begin to develop your professional network, obtain valuable work-related skills and build your resume. (Not all college graduates will have such a substantial work experience on their resumes.) The internship also gives you a firsthand glimpse of the leisure service industry. You may identify aspects that are particularly appealing or suited for your talents. Likewise, you may learn that portions of the industry are not appealing and that you would like to avoid them in your full-time career. Students have found niches they never knew existed prior to the internship and have gone on to very rewarding careers. All of these are real and valuable benefits to you as a student.

Pragmatic benefits aside, many students (and parents) wonder if there is a valuable educational component to internships. Research and experience suggest there is. Those institutions that require internships do so because they believe that student interns will be challenged in a variety of ways and significant learning will result.

First, the internship will be an opportunity for you to put into practical application the lessons you learned in the classroom. Students often phone back to the university while they are on internship requesting papers they have written for classes, or for chapters out of textbooks they have read. As a traditional student, you often view assignments and readings as a means to earning a grade. As an intern, you realize that

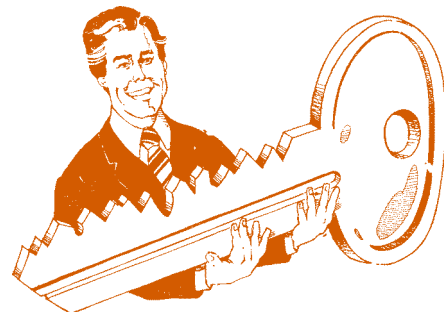
you need to know and apply these assignments and readings to real-world situations. Once you gain practical experience, the materials you learned in the classroom will take on a whole new meaning. Your understanding and appreciation of your academic “book work” will increase.

Second, the internship is an opportunity for you to learn something about yourself. What are your strengths and weaknesses? How do you cope with conflict in the workplace? What kind of leader are you? Self-reflection is an important component of the learning that takes place while you are interning. Armed with a firm understanding of yourself, you are prepared to embark on life’s journey with a firm foundation.

Finally, your exposure to new stimuli (whether it be a new city, a new work setting, or adjusting to the 9-to-5 work schedule) will challenge you. During the first few weeks of the internship it is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed. This is normal. Don’t worry. When you are challenged you must think. This is called active engagement. And it is this active engagement that will encourage you to find creative solutions to problems or to find resources for new information.

In short, the internship process will be the start of a lifetime of continued learning experiences. Best wishes in your adventure.

—Ryan Gower
Lecturer and Internship Coordinator
University of Illinois



The Perfect Intern Interview

I've interviewed many interns in my career, and the "perfect" intern interviews are so incredibly memorable. Here's what they are like:

- The resume and cover letter is addressed to me, with my name spelled correctly, and it is error free. It comes in a laser printed envelope.
- The candidate arrives on time, and even a little early.
- The candidate is dressed professionally – yes, that means a suit (for men and women).
- The candidate confidently shakes my hand.
- The candidate has searched on line, and actually visited my main facilities before the interview so he or she can speak intelligently to me about my agency.
- The candidate brings lots of great things to the interview: copies of his or her resume and cover letter, a list of references, a portfolio with some of his or her best projects from school, and a list of excellent, well-thought questions to ask me about the internship experience.
- The list of questions doesn't include: "Will I have to work more than 40 hours?" "Weekends and evenings aren't required, right?" "Can I wear jeans every day?" "Will I have to get dirty and haul things around in this job?" "Can I have two weeks off for a vacation?"
- The candidate answers the questions I ask without ever using such terms such as "awesome," "rad," or "freak."
- The candidate gives me a great answer when I ask why he or she has chosen my agency to intern with – and it doesn't include "because it's close to my house."
- The candidate seems genuinely interested in learning about as many facets of our business as he or she can during the course of the internship. The candidate doesn't look at the internship as "just another requirement" to get a degree.
- The candidate answers questions professionally, honestly and enthusiastically. He or she never says anything negative about past employers or school.
- The candidate sends a thank you note immediately after the interview so that it arrives at my office two days after the interview.

After all of these things happen with the perfect intern interview, I can barely wait to call the candidate's references, and, if they are positive, offer the candidate the opportunity to learn and grow with our team.

Your internship is "practice" for what you will do when you enter the workforce, and this begins with the interview. Getting the most out of your internship experience is up to you and you alone. Being prepared will absolutely start your career off on the right foot.

Our profession has so much to offer. We need the best and brightest individuals to continue to move us forward in this business making a difference in the lives of others through parks and recreation.

— *Carrie Hauptert, CPRP*
Superintendent of Special Facilities
Wheaton Park District



The Best Intern Ever

I have supervised fifteen interns during my career. I wouldn't want to name one as the "best ever," because many of these interns possessed characteristics that easily could have qualified them as the best. So rather than name names (and possibly offend somebody), I'll concentrate on the skills and attitudes the best interns share.

The best interns are not afraid to ask questions and they are not afraid to fail. They are good listeners who maintain a positive attitude and accept any and all assignments with equal enthusiasm. Rather than wait until they are told to do something, they seek additional responsibilities and try to further themselves by embracing the opportunity to become involved in areas that they are unfamiliar with. Rather than put tasks off (especially those that they are uncomfortable with), they tackle them head on. They take advantage of opportunities to learn throughout the entire district, not just the recreation department. They are confident in their abilities and do not shy away from conflict. They

are punctual and able to deal with the personalities of others. But most importantly, they do whatever it takes to get the job done.

As you can see, these are also the same attributes that translate into being a successful professional. Although they may have not come to us with all of these skills, the best interns took full advantage of the opportunities presented during their twelve-to-fourteen week stays.

The internship is only as good as the student makes it. The best ones realize that.

— *Dave Haring, CPRP*
Division Manager, Recreation Programs
Schaumburg Park District



The Intern From the Planet Doom

Fortunately in my entire career I have not come across the *intern* from "Planet Doom." However, my professional journey has brought me face to face with doomsday employees on many occasions. They inhabit all walks of life, working in every industry, and if an agency is not careful, they bring otherwise productive employees over to the dark side. The following are some of the characteristics consistent with "Doomies:"

- They have no personal vision or plan.
- They lack personal accountability, blaming everyone and everything for their problems.
- They always expect and want more, but only want to give a little.
- We always owe them something.
- They speak in terms "I" or "me," instead "we," "us" and "team."
- They are reactive instead of proactive.
- They are negative to the point of being toxic.
- They look for and recruit other Doomies to share in their pity parties.
- They search for excuses for failure instead of looking for solutions and growth.
- They lack creativity and drive.
- They think the challenges they face are always externally caused when the solutions to any challenge can be found inside all of us.
- They are not resourceful.
- They look for short cuts at every chance.
- They are not honest with themselves or others.

- They sap the energy and creativity from the team.
- They confuse activity and “busy-ness” with efficiency and effectiveness.

To avoid becoming a Doomie, remember the following. There is only one person who will determine your success – you. Work hard, ask questions and give more of yourself than is expected. Think about what you want to do, and then plan for it. Remember your career will be filled with challenges and setbacks. As long as you look at each of these as an opportunity to learn and grow, you will always come out on top. Believe in yourself, even when others don't. Be honest with yourself and others.

Do this, and you will never have to worry about Doomies.

— *Rick Hanetho, CPRP*
Deputy Director
Carol Stream Park District

