

*Essential Components of a*

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*Successful Internship Program*

## A note about the authors...

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## Credits

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Both members of the Ohio Nursery & Landscape Association’s Scholarship & Student Activities Committee, Chris Carlson and Mary Halbrooks originally wrote the content of this book as a two-part article for “The Buckeye” magazine. We thank them for their time in compiling this extensive information for our members!

# Table of Contents

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## *Part One: For Employers*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....                                  | 4  |
| Benefits of Internships .....                       | 4  |
| Characteristics of a Quality Internship .....       | 5  |
| The Training Agreement & Learning Objectives .....  | 6  |
| Internship Duration .....                           | 6  |
| Salary and Benefits .....                           | 7  |
| Student Initiation and Orientation .....            | 8  |
| Site Supervisors and Intern Student “Mentors” ..... | 9  |
| Internship Evaluations and Grading .....            | 10 |
| Legal Issues .....                                  | 11 |
| Conclusion .....                                    | 11 |

## *Part Two: For Interns*

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Introduction .....              | 13 |
| How to choose an employer ..... | 14 |
| Paperwork and preparation ..... | 18 |
| On-the-Job .....                | 21 |
| Looking ahead .....             | 25 |
| Conclusion .....                | 27 |

# Part One: For Employers

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## **Introduction**

The dream—to be able to hire experienced employees who communicate well, want to work, and require very little, if any, training. For many, this may in fact be a dream but it doesn't need to be. Establishing a “successful” internship program may be one of the best practices a company can undertake to not only meet their current employee needs, but also more importantly, prepare the ultimate workforce for tomorrow. This paper was written to help make the “dream” come true.

The objective of most horticulture internships is to enable students to integrate their previous educational schooling with more professional knowledge and skills gained through practical, “real-world” work experience with industry employers. In essence, it is a carefully monitored work experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and objectives that reflect on both the student's and the employer's needs.

## **Benefits of Internships**

Successful internship programs provide benefits for everyone involved including industry employers, student interns, and educational institutions. Internships can benefit employers in many, many ways. For the employer, internships provide a workplace and training ground for a “source” of highly motivated technicians and pre-professionals who want to work and learn more. Internships have also proven to be an excellent way to recruit and evaluate potential employees and provide employers with a flexible, cost-effective work force not requiring a long-term commitment. Internships may also provide freedom for existing staff to pursue new or more creative projects. Interns may also bring new solutions from school to solve old problems and the positive, “education-oriented” visibility and publicity of the employer is greatly enhanced on campus and in your community.



For the student interns, internships provide an opportunity to explore career opportunities with potential “full-time” employers, learn new skills, gain needed work experience for professional certifications, begin to develop a network of professional colleagues, enhance their professional resume, and pursue their future dreams.

For the faculty advisor or internship coordinator, internships provide a mechanism for the school to get needed feedback on course offerings and curriculum assessment. Benefits also arise from the opportunity to network with the varied employers who will be hiring the school’s students. Internships also provide additional field experience that faculty members many times can’t give because of time or equipment restrictions placed on them.

Internships are extremely popular because everyone benefits and most everyone in the “Green Industry” knows; there IS no substitute for “hands-on” experience. That is why most horticulture schools, colleges, and universities have some type of Cooperative Work Experience or Internship recommended or required of their students prior to graduation. Professional organizations such as the ONLA and ISA that “certify” landscape technicians; nursery growers, arborists, etc. have recognized this need for “hands-on” experience for years. This is WHY they require a minimum amount of documented experience before applicants can even take the written test to become “certified”. Education without experience is not good enough. It is the combination of education AND experience that produces the most highly qualified and talented interns and graduates and that usually equates to more efficient work completed and higher profits. It also raises the level of professionalism in our industry.

So WHY then does some internship experiences fail? That answer usually depends on whom you ask; the student intern, the industry employer (site supervisor), or the school’s internship coordinator (faculty advisor). A failure to communicate is usually at the root of most problems but not always. Success can usually be attributed to a well-planned, written contract or training agreement with documented responsibilities mutually agreed upon by each of the three parties involved; student, employer, and faculty advisor.

### ***Characteristics of a Quality Internship***

Just as intern students seriously commit time, energy, and skills to work and achieve benefits for the employer, so must the employer devote the same to the intern student’s growth and learning in the

workplace. Employers must remember that an important element that distinguishes an internship from a short-term job or volunteer work is that an “educational” internship has “measurable learning objectives” structured into the “educational” experience. Interns should not be hired “just to work” but rather to learn as well. They need to be given the opportunity to not only apply and build on previously learned skills but learn new techniques and skills and become proficient in them.

### ***The Training Agreement & Learning Objectives***

A written, work experience training agreement (similar to a contract) with clearly defined and measurable learning objectives for the student is absolutely essential for success. Most schools granting educational “credit” for this experience will have the training agreement form already prepared and require the learning objectives to be established and mutually agreed upon between the student, employer, and school before the internship begins. Many of the school’s internship coordinators can provide a list of past and potential “learning objectives” that are acceptable to the school and that can be used “as a template” by new internship employers and students when filling out the training agreement. It is important that the learning objectives and work assignments for the student be as challenging and diverse as possible while still accommodating the needs of the employer. Timelines with tentative completion dates are usually established for each learning objective as well. This is done so the site supervisor and the school’s internship coordinator can monitor the student’s progress and proficiencies.

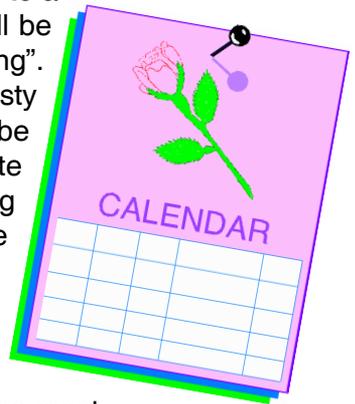
It is also recommended that employers try to initially determine what sort of background and experience they want in an intern before they advertise their needs to a school. This is important because freshmen interns will not have the same education and experience level that a sophomore or junior will have, so try to decide on your minimum qualifications needed from an intern beforehand and be realistic with your expectations of them. Younger, more inexperienced students will usually require more supervision, so plan accordingly.

### ***Internship Duration***

The duration of the internship should be worked out and agreed upon by all parties before the internship begins with the exact starting and ending date stated on the agreement form. Though the duration

may vary from one company to the next, the school or university offering the internship credit must be involved because most schools will have a minimum number of hours of internship required for each credit earned by the student, e.g., 50 hours of internship work experience is worth one (1.0) university credit.

A position description completed by the employer prior to the start of the internship is highly recommended to help students understand the types of jobs and duties that they will be required to do. It is imperative for the employer to be very honest and to tell the student whether or not they will be exposed to a wide-range of work experiences or if they will primarily be working in one or two “specialized” types of jobs. There is nothing more frustrating for a student than to be told they will be exposed to a “wide array of jobs” only to find out they will be doing the same menial task “all summer long”. That is not an “educational” internship. Honest “right-up-front” is the best policy and it may be prudent to tell the student the approximate percentages of time that will be spent doing similar tasks throughout the duration of the internship. Most students want to be exposed to a diversity of experiences that will build on their previous education and employers willing to provide them with those experiences will usually be rewarded with the most applications and higher caliber applicants. Every job has some monotony built into it so it’s best to be honest with the student so they don’t become disillusioned and disappointed. Developing a list of challenging job duties relative to the student’s individual abilities is an essential component of the position description. Most employers will send internship position descriptions to the various schools well in advance of the work season to “market” their needs and hopefully secure the “best” student interns for the coming season. Again, proper planning, timing, and communication are essential components for success.



## ***Salary and Benefits***

Another essential component of a successful internship is to establish (in writing) how much the intern will be paid and how often. Most internship training agreements will require this information and though wages may vary widely from field to field, it is important for

employers to make sure they are competitive or offer competitive incentives. Some internships exist as unpaid positions but they are becoming increasingly rare and most students today will desire some type of compensation for their hard work.

Internships are designed for continued learning and though employers can stress to potential interns that it's "what you learn, not what you earn", at this stage of a student's life, competitive wages are still important and will continue to be important in securing the "best" interns. For those companies not able or willing to pay the higher wages, other incentives may be explored including: reduced or free housing, gas allowances, equipment "price-breaks", personal use of company equipment, or providing free uniforms and hand-tools.



Two of the biggest deterrents for many students securing an internship involve the distance traveling to and from work and finding "affordable" housing and living arrangements. If employers can explore and possibly find nearby, affordable housing "prior" to the internship, that can be a great incentive for many potential intern students. Many internship employers provide additional incentives for interns such as the opportunity to periodically attend staff meetings and attend paid, educational seminars, workshops, and field trips. These "perks" go a long way in increasing student morale and satisfaction and also serve to show how much the company values their interns.

### ***Student Initiation and Orientation***

Once an intern is hired, an additional key component for success involves the need for a proper "initiation and orientation" for the student. This is done so that the student fully understands work rules, office procedures, the company policy and handbook, and standards for professional and ethical conduct. Orientation should also include introductions to existing employees and staff, tours of the facilities, required safety training and testing, and exposure to the labor-saving equipment the interns will be using. Just as "first-impressions" mean a lot to clients, they are just as important to new student interns, so taking the time to make them feel welcome and informed will pay off in the end.

## ***Site Supervisors and Intern Student “Mentors”***

One of the most important components of any internship is establishing who will have the primary responsibility for supervising the intern. An intern needs to know who his or her immediate supervisor is and NOT have to answer to 2-3 different bosses who all want the intern to do something different “all at the same time”. Will the student have an educational “mentor” or just an existing crew boss? The distinction is made because some assigned site supervisors are NOT good mentors, lack needed patience and compassion, and many times expect interns to have their level of education and experience. That type of supervisor can spell disaster with regards to “first impressions” and the ultimate success of the internship. Think about it, who wants to work for a supervisor that views the intern as “an inconvenience” or just “more work”? Site supervisors would do well to remember that they too lacked education and experience at one time.

Industry employers and “management” should screen and choose their intern supervisors with care and understand that with the proper supervisor, the intern’s learning curve and satisfaction level will be higher. That usually results in larger profits for the company, less turnover, and easier recruiting of new interns next year. The intern’s supervisor doesn’t need to be a teacher per se but should be selected because they like to teach or train and they have the management skills and resources to do it well. It will require a commitment from upper level management to find or hire this type of individual, but it is one that is well worth the effort.

Supervisors must be encouraged and sometimes reminded to maintain the academic nature of the internship because credit is awarded for the experience and education is one of the main objectives of an internship, not just work. Faculty internship coordinators will also help in this area by conducting periodic visits and evaluations to make sure the learning objectives are being fulfilled.

Another essential component of a successful site supervisor is to provide constructive feedback to the student AND provide opportunities for the students to ask questions. This is especially important in the early stages of the internship because many students can be initially shy, confused and/or intimidated by a veteran supervisor. New student intern employees want and need to know if they are meeting up to your expectations and there is nothing better to build morale and loyalty than to offer positive feedback.

Constructive feedback and suggestions not only help the student develop good work habits and morale but also help prevent potential problems and bad habits from developing. It should be remembered that for some students, the internship experience may be their first exposure to a real job.

## ***Internship Evaluations and Grading***

A final responsibility of the employer or site supervisor in most internships is to evaluate and report the student's progress and experiences to the school's faculty internship coordinator and the student. Evaluations can be either formal (written) or informal (oral) and be as frequent as every two weeks or conducted only midway through the internship and at its conclusion. In either case, all parties should agree upon evaluation methods and frequency of evaluation before the internship begins. Some schools will require that a grade (A-F) be assigned based on the student's performance while others may only require a pass/fail or "satisfactory or unsatisfactory" grade be given at the end of the internship. For many schools, grades are ultimately assigned by the faculty internship coordinator after consulting with the site supervisor and employer. If the internship is going well, students will appreciate your periodic evaluations and feedback. Continuous encouragement goes a long way in motivating most students. If problems arise during the internship, (poor intern attendance, unsatisfactory work, low motivation, etc.) the internship coordinator from the school should be contacted immediately to help resolve the problem. Employers reserve the right to terminate an internship but it should be done only after consultation with the faculty internship coordinator and the student and all attempts to resolve the problem have failed.



Due to the investment in time and energy spent teaching interns, justification of the internship program will sometimes be needed and require some type of evidence of success. Some companies conduct "exit" interviews or "final" evaluations when interns leave to determine whether or not the interns have had a good or bad experience. Feedback from these interviews and evaluations helps employers evaluate

where they can improve their internship program for the coming year and helps “gauge” their relative success. Other measures of evaluating success include analyzing 1) the number of interns that apply each year, 2) the number of interns that become full-time employees after their internship, and 3) repeat requests for interns from area and district managers.

### ***Legal Issues***

Of course, a safety-oriented company is an essential component of any successful internship and is required not only by the educational institution but also by OSHA. All employees (including interns) are entitled to work in a safe environment and with proper safety training and personal protective equipment provided. Hence, employers should always provide OSHA’s Hazardous Communication safety training and documentation before any student is required or allowed to work or use a piece of equipment. Most institutions reserve the right to terminate the internship if a student is being subjected to unsafe practices, harassment, unethical conduct, etc. but again, it would only be done after attempts were made to resolve the problem.

Because interns generally make substantial contributions to a company, workers compensation boards have generally considered them to be employees and as such, most employers will cover interns under a workers’ compensation policy. Even though it may not be required in some states, many educational institutions will require the employer to provide it on their Internship Training Agreement Contract. Student interns are not generally eligible for unemployment compensation when they conclude an internship and that wording is also included on many internship agreements.

### ***Conclusion***

Establishing a successful internship program is not difficult and results in numerous benefits to the employer, student and school. If an employer establishes a successful internship now, they will have a distinct, competitive advantage in recruiting the best, highly motivated workers for the future because they will already be known by the school and past interns. Employers will be benefiting from student workers who will already be trained and familiar with your workplace. They will be more loyal to your company, you’ll have lower turnover rates and hence recruitment costs and that ultimately means lower training time and costs. Employers will be building a



# Part Two: For Interns

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## Introduction

So you're ready for your first internship! Wow, finally a chance to demonstrate what you've learned in class. All those hours...listening in class, practicing in labs, and observing on field trips weren't wasted at all because you are ready to apply what you know in a real work environment. Great, you're thinking, this will be a PIECE OF CAKE. All you have to do is land a job with the right employer and show them your stuff. That's it, right??? Well, not quite. This paper was written to help you achieve success in your internship and bring your first full-time job a little closer to reality.

Let's begin this discussion by defining the term *internship*. According to the dictionary, an intern is "an advanced student or recent graduate undergoing a supervised practical training". Therefore, an internship refers to the period of time during which you will be learning practical aspects of the horticulture profession with supervision. The key words here are learning, practical and supervised and all of these components must be present in order for the internship to be successful.

The focus of an internship then is on you, the student, but the reality is that you are also an employee. In essence, then, the internship is a carefully monitored work experience in which you, the student have intentional learning goals and objectives that are reflective of your needs and those of your employers. If an internship is an academic requirement for graduation at your school, you will probably have certain academic responsibilities to complete during this time such as maintaining daily diaries of work completed, plant collections, special projects or summary reports. In some cases, the academic course is referred to as an internship, in other cases, it is known as a cooperative work experience.



## ***How to choose an employer***

***Define your interests.*** As you begin to think about what employer to work for, you need first to define your interests. Horticulture is your profession, but within that what are your interests? Some subspecialties within horticulture are education, arboriculture, landscape design, public horticulture, landscape maintenance and contracting, professional grounds management, golf course management, zoological horticulture, or even urban horticulture. It is not imperative to know what your long-term career interests are at this point. In fact, the internship can be a perfect opportunity to explore different areas of horticulture **before** taking full-time employment after graduation.

Having some idea of what interests you is important, however, because you need to match your interests with the potential employer's needs for the internship. If you feel unsure about what your interests are, start by reviewing your classroom experiences. Was there a particular course that you found interesting? Was there a field trip that sparked some excitement for you? Did you write a paper on a topic that you really enjoyed?

Another possibility is that a guest speaker came to one of your classes and discussed her/his line of work that you found interesting. Jot down these potential areas of interest and then prioritize them in some way that works for you. Now start looking around for potential employers. These could be companies or agencies in your community with whom you are already familiar.

You can also look for lists compiled by your academic advisor at the college where you study. Job boards may list potential employers and, of course, there is always the web as a search tool. Call any contacts that you have already made within the horticulture industry and ask those persons for ideas – this is called networking and it is a great way to find an employer now and in the future.

If you are a student who is looking for placement with a national scope, you will be interested to know that public gardens across the United States advertise over 500 intern positions in the areas of garden maintenance and design, administration, education, and horticultural therapy. To aid potential candidates, the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta annually publishes the AABGA Internship Directory, which contains a state-by-state listing of available positions, a description of job responsibilities and requirements, hours, salaries, and deadlines for application. For a

copy of the current directory, you can contact AABGA at [www.aabga.org](http://www.aabga.org).

**Determine your limitations.** In life, there are always limitations that narrow our career dreams. It is a rare individual who has no limitations as to what she/he can do for a job. You may own an older car that limits your ability to commute to a job, or perhaps you own a newer car but can't afford to pay for the gas that would be necessary for a long commute. On the other hand, commute costs may not be a factor for you as much as time is a factor.

If you are balancing work and family (as many people are these days), you may need to work closer to home to minimize time on the road. If commute time and/or costs are no problem, great — you can expand the geographic boundaries of your job search area. Another major area of concern for many students is the pay scale. While this may be very important to you, try to remember that at this stage in your career life, it's "what you learn, not what you earn". In horticulture, unlike many other professional fields, most internship students receive pay. (This is due, in part, to the steady expansion of the horticulture industry and it is likely to continue for the indefinite future.)



The opportunity to work somewhere without pay for the sake of learning may seem ridiculous to you, but in many professions it is the norm because of the high value employers place on work experience as a necessary pre-requisite to full-time employment. If the job is too far from home to make commuting possible, the employer may be able to facilitate affordable housing in the area. Some employers provide on-site housing. This is more likely to be available if the employer is a larger company or public horticulture institution that has an established and nationally known intern program.

**Be realistic.** Your list of interests and possible employers must also reflect certain realities of societal, legal and educational issues in today's world. These issues may include accessibility, language

barriers, diversity issues or occupational hazards. If you are a student who has a documented disability, you have certain rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As a student, your school is required to provide accommodations for you during the internship. You will need to work with your internship coordinator to determine how the accommodations will be achieved during your time on-the-job.

If you work in an area that employs a high number of people who are Hispanic and speak Spanish as their first language, it would be to your advantage to take one or more classes in Spanish prior to your internship.

Lastly, be aware of potential occupational hazards that might occur with some employers. Different jobs have different types of



work associated with them such as chemical spraying, heavy lifting, or tree climbing. All employers must provide you with a safe working environment but you need to be realistic about the expectations of the types of work you will be doing for a particular occupational area.

***Making your list.*** Once you have determined the type of job you are seeking for your internship, make a list and identify the appropriate contact person at the company/agency. If it is a large company there may be a specific person who handles all inquiries related to internships. This person may also manage the internship program. All businesses/organizations have a human resources department manager and this person is always the best contact person.

If the company is very small, the owner and general manager is likely also the personnel manager. It is best to call rather than drop in on the person with whom you need to speak so that you don't interrupt them at a busy time. Explain your interest in an internship and request an interview. Try to line up two or three interviews so that you have an opportunity to compare offers. The company or agency that you thought you really wanted to work for may not make you the best offer. On the other hand, the one that you thought was least interesting, may be the best opportunity. Lastly, you may only get one offer out of three interviews. So remember the rule "Keep your options open".

**Polishing your resume.** You will need to prepare a resume to bring with you to the interview. This should include biographical information, education and work history. Make sure you state your educational objective – an associate degree, a bachelor degree and the semester/year you expect to graduate. You may also wish to include relevant coursework that you have completed or are currently taking. Describe your career goals upon graduation. If you do not have prior experience in writing a resume or interviewing, seek assistance from the college’s career guidance office.

Some larger agencies/companies that have developed an internship program may ask you to complete an application and provide a letter of reference. Your application will be considered among the others they receive and, if no interview is required, you will be notified when they have selected those applicants who will join the internship program. Very often, these are the best and most competitive internships; as a result the application deadlines are often very early (e.g. January for a summer program).

**Interview strategies.** Follow the advice from the career guidance office on how to conduct yourself during an interview. There are some additional strategies that are important for an internship interview, however, that you should also consider. This is important because an internship is an *educational work experience, not a typical job*. As such, you need to determine what the educational component of your internship work experience will include. Keep in mind that an academic internship will require that you and the employer work together to develop a list of measurable learning objectives that are structured into your work schedule.

If a potential employer has prior experience with student interns this may be less of an issue but it is still important to ask questions related to the following: will the work assigned be varied, what different areas of the company/agency will I be assigned to; who will my supervisor be; will I have opportunities to attend meetings; what, if any, housing is available; and what other learning opportunities such as attendance at workshops or participation in field trips might there be? You will also need to ask about pay rate, worker’s compensation (as the university will likely require it in the contract) and the daily and weekly work schedule.

The academic nature of the internship requires that you complete a certain number of minimum hours for each credit hour. Thus you will need to know that you will be able to work enough hours per

week for a pre-determined number of weeks in order to complete the hour requirements.

Also find out everything you can about the company or agency before the interview. Drop by and ask for a brochure ahead of time or if they have a website, look them up. Write up a list of questions/concerns in preparation for the interview and bring them with you. If you don't write them out ahead of time, you may not remember them during the interview due to distractions and possible nervousness that you will experience. You will also make a better impression if you are prepared as it demonstrates that you are taking the job opportunity seriously. These are traits that employers seek in potential employees.

***Interview follow-up.*** It is always a surprise and a treat for an employer to receive a thank you letter after the interview. Far too often, this is a missed opportunity for the employee seeking a job. As a student intern, you can write a brief letter thanking the employer for his/her time taken to meet with you and discuss the potential internship. You can use this opportunity to tell them that you enjoyed meeting them and that you would like to work for them. Wrap up the letter stating that you look forward to hearing from them.

Finally suggest that you will plan to contact them in approximately one week to answer any questions that they might have. When you get an offer, or more than one, select the opportunity that best suits you and let the employer know as soon as possible that you are willing to accept the job. Then contact your internship coordinator to inform him/her of your decision.

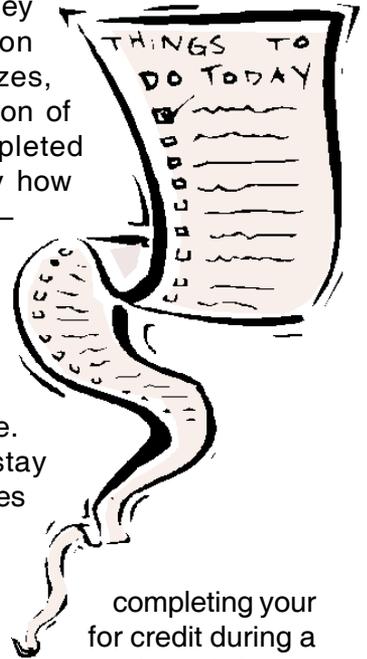
## ***Paperwork and preparation***

***Developing the learning objectives.*** If your internship is an academic requirement for graduation, you will probably be expected to develop specific learning objectives. These objectives are necessary to ensure that the internship retains its educational focus. The objectives should be mutually agreed on by you and the employer and reviewed by your internship coordinator to determine that they are appropriate.

Begin the process of developing your learning objectives by writing down a list of your strengths and weaknesses in knowledge of applied horticulture. In looking at the list of weaknesses, eliminate any that aren't relevant to the type of work you will be doing. For example, turf weed identification will not be relevant to greenhouse

employment. Similarly, mixing soil-less media will not be relevant to work in the golf course industry. I often encourage my first year students to focus on the basics such as improving knowledge in the identification of plant materials, learning how to operate equipment or machinery safely and productively, or learning proper procedures in planting, pruning, soil preparation, etc.

The other aspect of developing your learning objectives is to recognize that they must be *measurable*. This means that there must be some way for your supervisor to evaluate your progress in mastering the identified learning objective. These methods of evaluation may be formal or informal but they must be real and meaningful. Common methods of evaluation are verbal quizzes, written tests, writing of reports, observation of tasks performed, or evaluation of completed projects. You may also need to identify how frequently this evaluation will take place – daily, weekly, throughout the duration of the internship or at the end. I often recommend to my students that several, regular evaluations be planned so as to give the student an opportunity to demonstrate progress throughout the work experience. This also ensures that the internship stay focused on the learning objectives and makes it a more meaningful experience.



**Setting your work schedule.** If you are completing your internship while also taking other classes for credit during a regular semester, you will likely be working a part-time. Ask your coordinator how many hours are required for earning academic credit. For example, 50 hours of work may be required for one academic credit. If the internship course is worth three-credits, this would mean that you would be required to complete at least 150 hours during the semester. This will be important in order to set your work schedule and determine how many hours per week you will need to work so that you have completed the necessary hours by semester's end. Spring and fall semester internships can be hairy because weather conditions will determine when you can work if your employer is involved in landscaping, turf or grounds maintenance.

Your employer must be able to commit to providing employment

for you for a specified duration of time. This will be documented in the contractual agreement (e.g. March 15 to May 1). However, if the spring season starts late, you may need to adjust your work hours and make-up for lost time by working a few more hours per week. If you complete your internship during the summer or if your school's program requires that you work full-time for the entire semester or quarter, you will probably be expected to work 40 hours per week. Be sure to check with the coordinator at your school and the supervisor to discuss these issues.

***Understanding your responsibilities.*** As a student working for a company or organization and completing an academic requirement, you will have certain responsibilities. These should be clearly outlined for you in your syllabus or other supporting documentation from your school. Some of the responsibilities are academic and may include completing a written report on the company/organization, keeping a journal of your daily work, and/or developing a plant collection. Others are professional in nature such as maintaining confidentiality of your employer's business operations and reporting to work as documented in the contract.

Similarly, the college/university and the employer have responsibilities that relate to ensuring a successful, safe and meaningful work experience. Remember that this is a three-way agreement (student, employer, university) and each of the parties is obligated to carry out its respective responsibilities. It is typical to expect your employer to provide workmen's compensation but not unemployment compensation — check with your coordinator on what your college/university requires.

***Expectations, dreams and realities.*** Provided that you have completed the necessary paperwork, have had a meeting with the employer and coordinator to discuss terms of your employment, and your school has officially approved the internship — you should now be looking forward to your first day on the job! What happens next may not be exactly, however, what you thought would happen. It is important to realize that some things that may happen should be taken in stride, or can probably be easily resolved with help from your employer or your coordinator or both. Some things that may happen, however, should not be tolerated and may present a significant problem. While most students and their employer report positive internship experiences, there are always exceptions.

**You must remember that all successful work depends on successful communication.** You will need to take the initiative to communicate about your concerns or problems, small or large. Your supervisor at work will not be at your side every minute and will, in all likelihood, be keeping up with a very demanding work schedule. While he/she may want to do their best for you to succeed, your needs will not be the priority issue all the time. Therefore, it will be essential to be assertive in expressing your need for time with this person to discuss your concerns. That may sound gutsy but, if you are tactful and not aggressive, a good supervisor will appreciate your effort to improve communication.

### ***On-the-Job***

***Professionalism.*** You will need to demonstrate a professional attitude towards your work from day one. Promptness is always appreciated and expected by employers. What else demonstrates professionalism?? The list begins with being courteous in all of your interactions with fellow employees and customers. It is vital to understand the chain-of-command in your workplace and follow the rules that govern the workday such as appropriate time for lunch or work breaks, wearing required uniforms or appropriate attire, and remaining productive throughout the work day. Your employer may have a laundry list of expected behaviors or she/he may be quite informal and relaxed. Find out which kind of employer you have early on and work hard to fit in to the work environment.

Be tactful in your communication. Do not try constantly to impress your supervisor or other employees with your education. The employer already knows that you are working on your degree, but you have not yet graduated! You are, in fact, very much on the learning curve. You will fare much better if you ask more questions than you attempt to answer. You may know the answer or think you know what to do, but the purpose of the internship is to add practical knowledge to the more theoretical knowledge offered by college courses. Supervisors often comment positively on a student who asked a lot of questions



because it conveys that you want to learn and you respect their knowledge. Rare is the supervisor who does not want to teach you and help you become proficient.

**Problems.** If your expectation was that you would not be required to carry out some of the more menial, repetitive tasks that are part of horticultural work, such as weeding, dead-heading or mowing, you may be disappointed to find out that you are assigned such tasks. If this is something that occurs early in the internship and lasts just a few days, try to take it in stride. If it persists, try to talk to your supervisor or call your coordinator to resolve the problem. If you find that the work is extremely demanding physically, you may need to give yourself time to get used to it and get in shape. It is a reality that much of horticultural work is physically demanding. However, if your job is not turning out to be at all what you expected, there may be a problem.

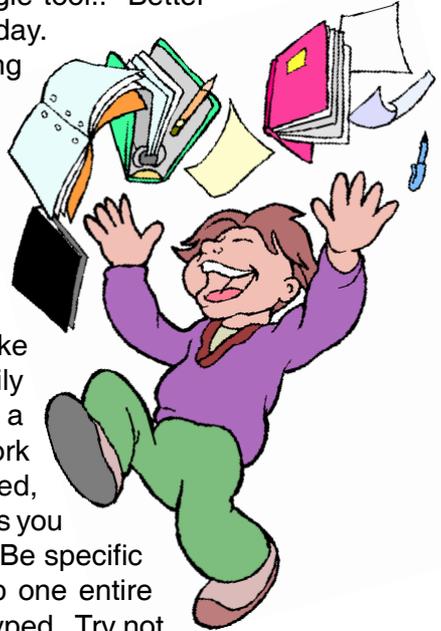
Another valid concern would be lack of adequate supervision, particularly during the first few days or weeks of the internship. For example, your supervisor should be with you most of the time or checking in with you frequently throughout the day with brief periods of time when you work independently or with other employees. After a few weeks, you may be expected to see the supervisor upon arriving at work and at the end of the day. This independence may be quite welcome but for some students can be too stressful. If you are not sure, call your coordinator to discuss the issue. He/she may offer suggestions or talk to the supervisor for you.

Some situations that should be reported to your coordinator immediately include the following: you are left alone at a remote work site; you are expected to drive people home after work hours but are not being paid for the extra time; you are asked to operate equipment without training; you are made to feel uncomfortable by comments made to you by other employees; or you are harassed in some way. *You may need to terminate the internship if working conditions are unsafe.* Your coordinator should be able to assist with a new placement or possibly facilitate a withdrawal from the course so that your GPA is not adversely affected.

**Work ethic.** Unlike professionalism, which governs your overall behavior during the workday, work ethic relates to what you bring to the job — your contributions to the overall success of the company/organization. One way to demonstrate a good work ethic is to show

up for work early every day. Showing up five or ten minutes early tells the employer that you are interested, concerned and committed to your job and thereby to the company/organization — all of this without saying a word or lifting a single tool!! Better yet, stay late at the end of the workday. Before leaving, ask if there is anything else that you can do that would be helpful. Your employer will notice and appreciate these traits.

Students who demonstrate a strong work ethic often garner offers of full-time work upon graduation. If you are expected to submit a work diary at the end of the internship, make it a habit to record your work on a daily basis. The best practice is to write a short essay after work on the day's work including comments on methods used, new techniques learned, or suggestions you would make to improve procedures. Be specific and complete in your writing. Fill up one entire lined notebook page. It need not be typed. Try not to put it off for several days because you will not remember the details of the work done many days prior.



**Orientation and safety first.** Your employer should begin your employment with an orientation program of some sort. If you work with a smaller company it may be informal, whereas a larger company may have a formal period of orientation. Safety training is also essential. Your employer may have regularly scheduled safety meetings that are required attendance. Certainly you should expect to receive safety training before operating any equipment. Some equipment such as chain saws, or larger tractors will require a period of specialized training before use.

Always wear required safety apparel and follow safety protocols established by the company/agency. Ask questions before operating equipment if you have any doubts. No employer wants you or the other employees to become endangered because you were too proud to ask a question!! Furthermore, it could cost you your JOB! Check with your coordinator if you feel that you are being asked to operate any equipment without appropriate training.

**Going beyond expectations.** Some basic advice is to work hard and do more than your share. Volunteer for extra duties that would give you valuable experience or make a difference in the project you have been assigned. Ask for permission to attend all meetings that will help you become familiar with the employer's operations. If granted permission to attend a meeting that is not considered part of the normal workday, be sure to make up the missed work hours at another time. Some organizations/companies that have larger, established internship programs will have meetings, field trips and recreational activities planned into the schedule. You will be expected to attend all of them.

**Performance evaluations.** Depending on your school's internship program procedures, there may be multiple performance evaluations completed by your supervisor(s) or just one at mid-term. Your coordinator may schedule a visit with you at the work site at mid-term. You should receive a copy of the performance evaluations so that you may be aware of your progress. Some employers may use this opportunity to meet with you and discuss your progress. Certainly if you receive a poor evaluation, you should expect to be notified by either the supervisor or the coordinator at your school so that you can make the necessary adjustments to improve your work performance.

You should never expect to be dismissed by an employer without prior notification by the coordinator.

In some contractual agreements, this is specified. It is typical that a student who is having difficulty would be encouraged to improve and given support to do so. If, after some period of time, the employer feels that the employment is simply not working out, it is his/her obligation to contact the coordinator first. The coordinator usually is the person assigned with the sole authority to decide if a student's employment must be terminated from the internship.

**Concluding your work experience.** At the end of your internship, be sure to schedule some time to meet with your immediate supervisor to discuss the internship and your work performance.



Ideally, she/he will initiate such a meeting, but if not, you should ask for one. Write a letter to the supervisor's boss after the internship is over to express your appreciation for the opportunity to work there. Copy your supervisor on the letter. Mention in your letter some of the highlights of the internship and mention, briefly, some important things that you learned. Finally, express, if it is accurate, a desire to work for them in the future, possibly upon graduation or for a second internship.

***Completing your academic work.*** Turn in all of your required academic work on time. It would be a shame to get a low or failing grade after all of the work that you did, because your work was turned in late. Re-read the instructions on expectations of the quality of your work. Reports must meet the expectations as defined by your coordinator including grammatical style and format. Some schools require that you submit successive drafts to the coordinator who will recommend revisions until it is satisfactory. Depending on the method of assigning grades used by your school, the final grade may be a typical letter grade of A, B, C... or it may be simply satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U).

Do not expect the coordinator to extend the due date for submission of academic materials unless you have documentation of an illness, a family emergency or death in the immediate family. Your poor preparation or tardiness in gathering the necessary information will not be an acceptable excuse. Finally, be aware of the expectations for other academic requirements such as a plant collection of pressed plant samples. Plant samples need adequate time to dry in the press before mounting on paper. Improperly prepared samples will mold and are usually considered unacceptable for submission.

## ***Looking ahead***

***Taking stock of what you have learned.*** After you have completed your first internship, you should take some time to reflect on what you learned, what you liked and what you did NOT like about the employment. Why should you consider what you didn't like about the internship? Well, if it was that the work was too hard, or that you don't enjoy getting up early, you will not get much sympathy from anyone in this industry. This is because while horticulture is a profitable business, it is also hard work. But if you found out that

you don't enjoy working with the public or if you don't like being confined to a greenhouse, this can be very valuable information.

I tell my students that internships can teach you as much about what you want to do in your full-time work after graduation as what you do not want to do!! That is the beauty of an internship; it offers you an opportunity to work while you are still a student. You are only committed to the job for a few weeks or months, at the end of which you can move on to something else. Very often, students will seek a closer match to their interests in the second internship. This in turn often leads to an offer of full-time work after graduation. Even if the second internship is not with the company/agency that you want to work for after graduation, it will put you in a more competitive position for getting the job you really want.

***Updating your resume.*** Your next step is to update your resume, adding significant detail about your experiences on-the-job. Be sure to include a list of equipment operated, variety of work performed and any novel or unusual work that you did. You may, for example, have been involved in a landscape project from start to finish. Most importantly, if you impressed your employer, you will want to ask if you can list his/her name as a reference.

As a note of caution, if you survived the internship but did not get along swimmingly with your supervisor, avoid asking for a reference. Even when a student employee doesn't perform admirably, a good employer will probably agree to serve as a reference for you. What she/he will not tell you, however, is that the recommendation will be lukewarm at best. Another reference person for you is quite obviously your internship coordinator. This person may carry considerable influence in the industry and have many contacts as well. You need to cultivate a good relationship with her/him because this person is in a good position to help you after graduation even more perhaps than while you were a student. I am always amazed with students who do not understand that being polite and demonstrating respect for the internship coordinator is crucial. Remember you build one relationship at a time!

***Reviewing your performance.*** When you get copies of your performance evaluations and comments from your coordinator who assigns your grade, look it over carefully and thoughtfully. This is an important opportunity for some self-examination. If you made a few

mistakes, accept the comments about that aspect of your work with humility. We all learn from our mistakes. But take stock of what you did well or satisfactorily and pat yourself on the back. If there are comments about being a know-it-all, or being difficult to work with, you should take heed.

It is relatively easy to learn a new task compared to changing attitudes or communication skills. It would be wise to seek help on these types of issues NOW. Seek help from your advisor at school, a mentor or another person whom you respect. It will help you a great deal in your future employment if you can improve your skills in communication with other.

## **Conclusion**

**In conclusion**, you should know that you have selected a wonderful profession. Horticulture is tremendously interesting and for those of us who love it, the interest easily lasts a lifetime. Upon graduation, congratulate yourself for working so hard and successfully completing your degree. But keep in mind; your education is really just beginning. You will need to seek new educational opportunities constantly. You may even go back to school for an advanced degree at some point in the future.

**Never say never.** Lastly, take some advice from a professional who visited one of my classes earlier this year. *“Set one personal and one professional goal for each month and write them down on a small index card. Keep the card in your pocket, on the dashboard of your car, or taped to your computer screen. Work towards these goals daily. Make this a habit for the rest of your life.”* The results will be very rewarding. Good luck!





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