

MODEL INTERNSHIP GUIDELINES

Adopted by the ICMA Advisory Board on Graduate Education

and the NASPAA Urban Management Education Committee

October 2003

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. NASPAA provides Internship Guidelines as a resource document for its accreditation program, and ICMA provides an Internship Toolkit to help cities and counties develop internship opportunities that benefit both the student and the local government. In the early 1990s, the two organizations collaborated on a set of Guidelines for Local Government Management Education, which also included internship guidelines and models for use by schools.

In 2002, the Internship Subcommittee of ICMA's Advisory Board on Graduate Education, with input from representatives of the NASPAA Urban Management Education Committee, identified a need to adapt and flesh out the NASPAA Internship Guidelines so that they can be used by program directors and faculty to encourage local governments to establish internships. To that end, the guidelines that follow are designed to help local government managers and MPA programs work together to create meaningful internship experiences. While internship content, duration, and other factors may vary, internships should not only benefit the student but also serve as a good investment of time and resources for the sponsoring jurisdiction, which should 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.

PURPOSE OF INTERNSHIPS

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. The local government internship provides students with a work experience to give them a realistic exposure to an organizational/bureaucratic environment. This experience should enhance the student's awareness of the internal dynamics of an organization and the values and attitudes of public employees toward both their clientele and their administrative/political superiors. The internship should give students the opportunity to become aware of their

obligations as professionals and to the public. The internship may be one of the few opportunities students have to test the skills and attitudes developed and discussed in their academic program.

A second benefit of internship programs, particularly those of a year or more in duration, is the opportunity to take advantage of the knowledge and emerging skills of 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 are “part-time” or “temporary” employees and should be treated as such. The assignments and responsibilities of the intern should reflect the needs and priorities of the local government. Interns are a resource, not unlike other positions and functions. The position of “intern” should be integrated into the organizational structure as any other position would be. When the intern is treated as an “employee” both the student-intern and the local government gain the most from the work assignment.

Although the intern should handle real work assignments, it should be remembered by all supervisory personnel--both on the job and academic--that the major reason for the internship is to provide a learning experience. The internship should be carefully integrated into the student's overall academic program. The internship experience is, first and foremost, an educational experience. Both the faculty internship coordinator and the internship supervisor in the local government must function as educators in their dealings with the intern. In particular, supervisors should be conscious of their educator role and should assume responsibility for mentoring the intern (i.e., application of theoretical knowledge from the classroom to real world situations, demonstration of how knowledge affects problem-solving, interpersonal interactions, communications, and task achievement).

DURATION AND TIMING

Internships come in many forms and formats. Most internships that occur as part of the course of study of a student are part-time (typically 20 hours per week). They may last from three months (a summer internship), to the nine months of the academic “year,” or even a full year. Full-time internships, which most often are available after the degree is awarded, generally run for twelve months, though a few run for two years.

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 may not give the student a sufficient range of experience in observing and participating in diverse activities; they provide too little time for the student to grasp adequately the organizational and political cultures of the employing local government.

One difficulty in establishing internships is coordinating them with the academic calendar of the institutions from which interns will be drawn. 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 school calendar. Schools usually have a great deal of flexibility in

allowing students to continue in internships before and after the official start/end of a term, but student interest and availability are often tied to the school terms.

A variation on longer, but part-time, internships now used by MPA programs is to establish a formal link between the MPA program and a local government whereby students are hired as “interns,” but placed on graduate research assistantship contracts. The students work part-time for the local government, but are otherwise treated like research assistants, gaining tuition reimbursement and other academic benefits as a full-time student. Under such arrangements the intern is available approximately 20 hours a week during the two semesters of an academic year. Often such an arrangement can last the two years of a typical MPA program.

PLACEMENT

One of the most important components of internships is the nature of the assignment given the student. The primary responsibility for evaluating the adequacy of the placement of the intern should rest with the academic coordinator, in conjunction with the local government administrator. The placement process should to some extent mimic the job application process. 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, including a clear understanding of the obligations and responsibilities of all parties. While not necessary, we recommend that a brief, formal “agreement” be developed that outlines the responsibilities of the academic unit, the local government, and the student.

Intern assignments should involve diverse responsibilities. Management interns should be exposed to a broad range of management problems; given diverse work assignments; expected to perform daily management tasks as well as long-term research and report preparation; required to interact with other professionals inside and outside the local government and with constituents; given exposure to political meetings and processes; and provided opportunities for interaction in professional association activities. Intern assignments should also allow for the use of a variety of communication skills: written memos and reports as well as oral presentations to groups of various size and composition.

SUPERVISION

Both the local government and the academic coordinator should supervise the intern. The local government should designate an intern supervisor. There should be as much contact with the student as necessary by both the intern supervisor and the academic internship coordinator. Interns should not be left on their own.

The supervisor should spell out work assignments for the intern and should follow up to see that these assignments are completed satisfactorily. When in doubt, the supervisor 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.

Before and during an internship assignment, where practicable, 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.

COMPENSATION

Internships are in many cases one of the methods for the student to finance his/her 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. Local governments that contribute financially to the support of the internship are more likely, over time, 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 as a temporary or part-time employee, the more valuable the internship will be to 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.

EVALUATION

Evaluation should be a continuous, on-going aspect of the internship program. The evaluation should include statements on each student from the intern supervisor, preferably during as well as at the conclusion of the internship. The evaluation process is important feedback not only to the intern, but also to the jurisdiction sponsoring the internship and to the academic coordinator to ensure that the internship is meeting the expectations of all concerned.

Intern supervisors should use the same performance evaluation system used for other employees and should 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. The academic coordinator should make clear to the intern supervisor just how the evaluation will be used by the academic institution in determining the student’s grade.

Interns should be required 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. If written statements by the students are requested, they should be in addition to any academic paper prepared in conjunction with the internship.

It may also be desirable to 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.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Effective internship programs benefit both the student and the community. Internships are an excellent opportunity to make use of very talented people and to assess them as possible full-time employees. They are also an opportunity for managers to demonstrate to interns the potential of a career in local government administration. The following is adapted from a description of the City of Phoenix Management Internship program. This post-degree program has been in existence for more than 50 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 any 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. They observe and participate in the decision- and policy-making process, learn the fundamentals of the budget cycle, and recommend changes to existing policies and procedures based on thorough research analyses. 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, the 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 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 impacting 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 this form of government. Theories pertaining to the policy/administration dichotomy are further expanded by the realization that developing and administering effective policies requires a coordinated effort between elected officials and management staff.