

LEADERSHIP

14 Strategies For Creating An Effective Nonprofit Internship Program



By **Expert Panel®**, Forbes Councils Member.

for **Forbes Nonprofit Council**, **COUNCIL POST** | Membership (fee-based)

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Nonprofit organizations often face the challenge of advancing their mission while operating with limited resources. A well-crafted internship program, specifically tailored for nonprofit settings, can bridge this gap, improving both the organization's capabilities

and the interns' professional development. However, developing such a program requires a deliberate approach.

Below, 14 [Forbes Nonprofit Council](#) members explore how nonprofits can thoughtfully design internship programs to transform enthusiastic learners into key contributors. They discuss strategies for achieving organizational goals while simultaneously providing interns with real-world skills and valuable experience within the sector.

1. Avoid Equating Age With Value

Don't underestimate an intern's value because of their age. Interns can become a monumental force for progress by providing needed perspectives. Have a meeting where you get to know an intern's interests and passions and how that aligns with the gaps in your nonprofit. Have biweekly one-on-one meetings to continue to adjust fit, and include them in team meetings so they become loyal to the team and mission. - [Sydney Montgomery, Barrier Breakers®, Inc.](#)

2. Offer Mentorship Opportunities

One way to ensure the long-term sustainability of your nonprofit is by cultivating homegrown talent. That means introducing aspiring professionals to various aspects of nonprofit management. Mentoring opportunities with senior staff are critical. Consider formalizing your internship experience by establishing a fellowship program, as it will pay dividends for years to come. - [Karen Cochran, Philanthropy Innovators](#)

3. Assign Projects Based On Skill Sets And Goals

Establish a mutually beneficial internship program. Match interns with projects that align with their skills and career aspirations while addressing organizational needs. Regular check-ins and mentorship can help improve their learning, build their resume and enhance their contributions. Develop a structured program with clear objectives to provide guidance and opportunities for hands-on experience. - [Kelli Williams, The BrandLab](#)

4. Ensure Mission-Alignment

Intern programs should be reciprocal by ensuring the work is mission-aligned for both the intern and the organization. This enables all parties to grow and learn together.

Nonprofits by nature are created to be of service to the greater good; therefore, we must maintain the philosophy of "ut prosim," which means that I may serve. - [Libbie Sonnier](#), Louisiana Policy Institute for Children

[Forbes Nonprofit Council](#) is an invitation-only organization for chief executives in successful nonprofit organizations. *Do I qualify?*

5. Make Interns Part Of The Team

Treating interns as we do our regular team members is important in our organization and in our culture. We invite interns to team meetings, include them in special events and recognize their accomplishments, just as we would any valued team member. We have several interns who have come back as paid members of our team once they are ready for full-time employment. - [Duana Patton](#), Ohio District 5 Area Agency on Aging Inc.

6. Offer Shadowing Opportunities To Interns

I enjoy creating opportunities for interns to shadow key staff during their workday, including a chance to engage with them in an informational interview over coffee or lunch. This gives them a chance to see the day and life of team members and explore different career opportunities. - [Nicole Suydam](#), Goodwill of Orange County

7. Consider The Internship A Benefit To All

I've found a successful internship experience requires four ingredients: a salary (yes, pay them!), a warm welcome, a mentorship mindset and an organizational culture of openness and exchange. Be accessible. As much as the internship is an opportunity for the intern to learn from you, it is also a chance for you and your team to learn from them. - [Patricia McIlreavy](#), Center for Disaster Philanthropy

8. Provide Meaningful Work

Interns need to feel valued and embraced from day one. I've found that assigning a staff member as their mentor for the duration and assigning meaningful work that contributes to mission success with no busy work creates intern success. Task them with identifying a research topic of interest and presenting it to senior leaders at the end of the internship.

Also, provide multiple social activities for networking. - [Pat Tamburrino, Jr., NobleReach Foundation](#)

9. Provide Structure

Nonprofits can create an effective internship program by clearly defining roles, providing structured learning opportunities and offering mentorship. Align interns' tasks with their skills and the organization's needs to ensure meaningful contributions. Regularly evaluate and adjust the program based on intern feedback to continuously improve their experience and maximize their impact. - [Nick Lynch, Collidescope IO, Inc.](#)

10. Be Thoughtful When Filling Leadership Roles

Creating a practical internship program begins with intentionality and understanding the role and potential of interns. I suggest organizations assess their capacity for interns, including who is the point of contact for the schools and who will supervise the interns. Look for a supervisor who is friendly with decision-making power. Then create a plan that identifies the desired outcomes for the intern and the organization. - [Ramik Williams, KAVI \(Kings Against Violence Initiative\)](#)

11. Give Interns Work They Can Learn From

Just like with any employee, it is essential we understand an intern's interests, skills and passions. Then, we need to look at ways to maximize those skills and further develop those interests. Look beyond the basic grunt work all interns need to do to ensure that they are also assigned duties that help them grow professionally. Interns aren't free labor; they are an investment for the future. - [Patrick Riccards, Driving Force Institute](#)

12. Provide A Well-Rounded Experience

Determine whether you need an intern and if you have the capacity to make it a learning experience. Work closely with an educational institution to outline what the internship goals need to be, and structure your internal internship plan to fit seamlessly. Immerse the intern in every aspect of the organization. I just hired my marketing intern due to their performance and leadership! - [Erin Davison, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southwest Louisiana](#)

13. Set Clear Expectations

Internships can be more work than they are worth to a nonprofit. To reach a win-win outcome, design a position description that outlines the specific responsibilities of the intern and the desired deliverables. Make sure there is adequate onboarding so that roles and expectations on both sides are clear. Assign a mentor or lead that will answer questions and provide direction when needed. - [Victoria Burkhart, The More Than Giving Company](#)

14. Build A Pipeline Of Talent

We utilize programs for high school students who can progress to varying levels of leadership from year to year. Upon graduation, many want to continue their involvement by applying for coordinator positions, so we have junior and senior positions in three critical areas. The pipeline maintains the core values of the organization while also preserving institutional knowledge. - [Aaron Alejandro, Texas FFA Foundation](#)

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