

Designing and Sustaining a Successful Student-Led Program

Nick Armstrong, Bonnie Chapman, Institute for Veterans and Military Families,
Syracuse University.

ABSTRACT

Student employees are an extremely valuable, but often underutilized asset. An organization must be willing to invest in a student employment program that benefits the organization while staying focused on the responsibility to educate and prepare students for the modern workforce. The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University, higher education's first interdisciplinary academic institute that is focused on advancing the lives of the nation's military veterans and their families, has developed an internship program that is predominately led and managed by the students themselves. This presentation details the development of the student internship program, the types of projects students are given, and the management and cultural elements that the IVMF attributes to its success. In the IVMF program, an experienced graduate student is selected to lead and manage the other students, encouraging their own growth as well as reducing the time costs to staff. Students are responsible for recruiting, interviewing, selecting, and training their replacements within a hiring system the IVMF has refined. Due to the reputation of this program amongst Syracuse University students, IVMF is able to select from among some of the best and brightest students on campus, creating an environment that enhances both the skills of student interns as well as IVMF staff.

INTRODUCTION

An internship can be a life-changing experience for the student, a source for support and innovation for the employer, and an overall good use of resources. However, if the internship is managed poorly, it may be of only marginal benefit to the student and it could cost the employer in time and resources.

Much of the IVMF's success with students can be attributed, in part, to our model for student internships. Students are given high levels of responsibility, they are responsible for selecting and training their replacements, and are given meaningful work. This paper describes a sustainable model for developing student leaders to advance your organization's mission.

About IVMF: The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) is a nonprofit organization situated on the Syracuse University campus. Through its national programs and research, the IVMF seeks to advance the post-service lives of veterans and their families. In recent years through collaboration with SAS®, the IVMF has expanded its capabilities in reporting, analytics, and data visualization. Additionally, students have significantly advanced the IVMF's technological and analytical capabilities. Students developed and then ran an entire data visualization business line for three years. Students learned alongside staff how to use SAS Data Management Studio and they exclusively supported the IVMF with its use. Students were the first to introduce to leadership the need for data warehousing and to begin database schema designs. The IVMF is proud of its students and is constantly searching for new and innovative ways to support student internships.

DEVELOPING AN AUGMENTED STUDENT STAFFING MODEL

There are many ways to implement a student-run program; however, the one described below is best suited for students in a two-year master's program.

ESTABLISHING AND PLANNING FOR CONTINUITY

To begin, the model first requires that at least one student work at your organization (part-time) for at least two years. As soon as this first student starts their second year they assist in the hire of their replacement. The replacement must be able and willing to work for at least two years, as well. The first student trains the second student and manages them for the entire second year. The first student graduates, this second student assists in the hire of a third student, and the cycle continues with one-year overlap between students.

Note: the students mentioned in the above example may wish to diversify their work experiences and work elsewhere for the summer. The student should be encouraged to do this because they will return from their summer internships with greater skills and maturity. However, this will mean that another student may need to be hired specifically for the summer.

Once the student cycle is well-established there are huge efficiency gains when the students are able to train each other and make suggestions for the next hire. However, staff still need to be involved. The following are a few recommendations for staff involvement:

- With many students, appointing a staff member to be the point of contact for the students can be very helpful
- Support students from onboarding to job hiring: organization welcome packets, student-specific onboarding, regular communication, recognition opportunities, professional development opportunities, end of semester thank you parties, letters of recommendation, and alumni connections
- When using a model where students work together with a lead student, it is best that they are working on similar projects, the same project, or the same technology to drive collaboration
- Use the student internship as a trial run for talented students, as a potential source for new company hires

FLEXIBLE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

It is important to be flexible and to assess where you are with your student needs. As the organization or department changes this student model might need to adjust as well. It might mean that more or fewer students are needed. It might be that at one time undergraduate students could get the job done, but now graduate students are needed. Or it could be that students don't need to hold the level of responsibility that they once did because now there are staff who support those roles. It could be that for some large projects or business lines this model is implemented and for other projects students are hired and are not expected to be replaced or led by another student.

At IVMF we have encountered all of the above scenarios and through this model many of our highest quality hires are of former students from all levels: undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs.

FINDING AND HIRING THE RIGHT STUDENT

Finding a pipeline for student talent can be a challenge and even more so for organizations who are not located on or near a university campus. Once a student pipeline is found it can

then be daunting to sift through resumes. Ideally, you don't want to spend more time than you have to on either of these activities.

ESTABLISHING A STUDENT PIPELINE

If you want to be efficient about finding the right students you have to decide where you want to get the students from and how to recruit them.

Where to look

Student abilities and competencies vary widely. It is wise to decide which type of student is needed so that recruiting efforts are focused and efficient. The following aspects should be considered:

- Undergraduate students – these students are generally great with routine or simple tasks (e.g. data entry, simple excel spreadsheet use, basic graphing)
- Graduate students – these students can be more independent and forward thinking (e.g. suggestion solutions, anticipate needs, problem solve, learn and use more advanced software, manage other students)
- Sustainability - look for students who are able to work with you for more than one year
- Ph.D. Doctoral Candidates – these students can support and drive research (e.g. conduct literature reviews, design research projects, apply for grants)
- School or college specialty – a student's major(s) and minor(s) can be good indicators of their capabilities
- Competitive degree programs – students who are enrolled in rigorous programs typically outperform students from less competitive programs

If you're able to recruit from a competitive program, you may find that an undergraduate student will perform similar to a graduate student. If a diverse skill set is needed, consider the college/school that might foster a diverse set of skills. For example, if both data analysis and written content about the results is needed, you may be more successful recruiting from a business school than from an engineering and/or technology school.

Channels for recruitment

Once you've identified which academic level or school or college you'd like to recruit from, the following is a list of recruitment methods:

- Professors – if you convince a professor that your student opportunity will provide students a great experience and greater employment opportunity, they will be your greatest asset and send only the best students your way
- School/department internship coordinators – if the school requires internship credit for graduation, connect with the coordinator of this program for referrals
- School/department listserv – find the administrator in the department you are interested in and ask them to post your student opportunity on their listserv
- Word of mouth/social media – once your student opportunity is well established and known, there is nothing more powerful than student word of mouth or student social media posting
- Class project - Some professors require students to do class projects in the community and these can either be individual or team projects
- University career center job posting – this is your last resort because this casts a wide

net and you may need to spend a great deal of time finding the needle in the haystack. All of these methods have been used widely at the IVMF, with the exception of the last two. While targeted class projects might seem attractive, they can take a lot of staff time for the return. The student's ability to provide value in these situations rests heavily on the professor.

It may also be beneficial to choose a recruitment method based on the time of year.

When to recruit

The time of year in relationship to the student's academic calendar greatly affects the available student talent. Below are some recommendations for timing to consider when recruiting:

- At the beginning of the academic year or well before the summer: This helps find the student as soon as possible before they take other opportunities and stops looking for employment or internships
- Midway into a semester or right before summer: This tends to be a time when students may have exhausted other opportunities and will take anything

These two recommendations might seem at odds. First, if your opportunity is a good one for students relative to other opportunities the student might have, then you should advertise at the soonest a student might start looking. Otherwise, ambitious students who are hardworking may find a job and start working as soon as they can, even if it means a job in a field unrelated to their degree or interests, such as a data science student working in campus food service.

For graduate students who come to campus several weeks before classes start, the listserv method might be optimal. If a professor will recommend students, then you may want to ask for recommendations at the end of the semester before you want the student to start.

Second, if you know that your student opportunity is inferior to other opportunities a student might have, then it makes sense to wait until most of the desired opportunities are exhausted and the remaining students will be quick to apply. For example, if students are looking to work at large companies over the summer and your small non-profit wants a student for the summer, then late April might be a good time to advertise for the summer opportunity. If you choose to post an "inferior" job too early, ambitious students may apply and then even if they accept your offer they may still leave anyway to go elsewhere when they receive a more desirable offer.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN HIRING THE RIGHT STUDENT

Once the right student pipeline is identified and you have a list of students to choose from, there are several ways to narrow down the list of applicants. The following is a list for consideration:

- First look for student emotional and business intelligence that will enable the student to work independently, solve problems, and anticipate needs
- Work experience, even if unrelated to the position, is valuable
- If the role is technical, you could test the student's capabilities
- Consider the student's availability to work with you for more than one year

Technically competent students can perform poorly in the work environment if they lack emotional and business intelligence. Students who have strong emotional and business intelligence can better anticipate your needs, work independently, quickly understand the

bigger picture, and suggest new solutions, all while needing minimal supervision. Often those with prior work experience, even if not in the field, can better demonstrate this level of awareness and independence. For master's students, work experience of at least one year in their field makes them a much more valuable intern.

It is not uncommon for students to pad their resumes or suggest that their skills with a particular software or language is better than it really is. If the position will require coding or working with a specific software, it may be enlightening to have a student either solve or present on a problem you have designed. This could be accomplished by giving the student a "homework assignment" with a very specific time frame or it could be accomplished in person during an interview.

Just like hiring an employee, interviews are valuable and necessary to find the right student. Students also often appreciate the chance to do the interview as it is good practice for them.

This point cannot be stressed enough. If you're going to build a student rotational model, the student's willingness to work at least two years must be assessed. Students often like the security of a job from year to year, but this cannot be assumed. Depending on the size of the internship cohorts you take, getting the right student who can work for more than one year is crucial.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Now that you have selected your student, you have to decide how to manage the student. Providing that you have made the correct choice, if the student is given enough responsibility and autonomy, the amount of work that can be accomplished without direct oversight can be astonishing.

LEAD STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

The following are a few student responsibilities that provide great student development and increase efficiency to the manager:

- If possible, designate a lead student
- Lead student can answer questions for other students and bundle issues together to bring to the manager
- Lead student is responsible for recruiting, interviewing, and recommending to the manager which students should be hired
- Students typically do well when they either have a discrete project to complete or they have a routine set of responsibilities they are to work on/maintain
- Depending on the type of student, asking them to learn new technologies and later train staff within your department can be effective

The bottom line here is to treat the student well and provide them with ample opportunities to take responsibility. Students, like staff, thrive when they have autonomy and are given ownership over their work. If you have more than one student working at a time, designate one of them as the lead. The lead student can oversee the work of the other student(s) and bring relevant concerns to you. This develops the lead student's leadership capabilities while saving you from spending time answering simple questions.

STUDENTS FIND THEIR REPLACEMENTS

Similarly, the lead student can help in the recruitment and review of new students. The lead student may enlist the help of the other students. When the students are given the

task to hire their replacements for an organization they have come to love, they will take this assignment very seriously.

Students are perfect for this role because they know their classmates, they know which ones are qualified and hard workers, they know which ones are less diligent, and by their connections alone they can weed students out. The students can also post the internship opportunity through their social media channels. If you found a student you love, consider asking if that student has close friends that are interested in a student job. Students' close friends typically share the same work ethic, approach, and mental fortitude.

STUDENTS WITH HIGH LEVELS OF RESPONSIBILITY

While it's risky, students can temporarily support areas of the organization for which you're lacking staff competency. If this becomes the case, then using the cycle student model becomes imperative and the type of student work is best if it is maintaining a discrete set of responsibilities.

Giving students high levels of responsibility should not be taken lightly. None of the responsibilities the IVMF gave the students at the time were mission critical. As the students gained experience and built up documentation for their work, the organization began to rely on their expertise more and more. It is wise not to give students mission-critical work until their reliability and competence is well established.

The lead student cannot take the place of having student-friendly staff and management that is open and supportive of the student model. A balance must be found between giving students discretion and maintaining a close watch over their work.

CONCLUSION

Hiring student interns can be a highly rewarding experience for all. However, it is not without its challenges. Establishing a model or system of student management is important to drive operational efficiency and sustainability. Finding just the right type of student and figuring how to best manage the student takes a bit of trial and error. Taking small risks and testing different student models, pipelines, skill sets, and student levels on your organization is worth the effort to find a good fit. Asking for student input and feedback along the way will also ensure that what is intended to benefit the student actually does. Finally, maintaining humility and a willingness to learn from the students through this process is the surest way to build an internship program that launches careers, supports the company, and drives innovation.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Bonnie Chapman
Institute for Veterans and Military Families, Syracuse University
(315) 443-5860
Brchapma@syr.edu