

## **Internships: Educating Tomorrow's Growers**

Lane Greer and James L. Gibson

*This article is the first of a two-part series. Below are guidelines for initiating internship programs. In the next issue, Jamie Gibson will present unique insights into intern experiences.*

Internships are popular! For students, internships offer a test run at a company. Professors will tell you that returning interns have a different approach to their classwork, and internships are now required by many universities, including 8 in the Southeast. These internships usually require prior approval from the student's advisor and a minimum GPA.

There are two primary types of internships available. The most common internship is one summer long. However, more students are realizing the value of a spring or fall internship. In co-op programs, students work for more than one semester, alternating between school and work. This gives them an opportunity to see production of everything from poinsettias to spring bedding plants.

Universities may have co-op coordinators (usually in the Career Services Office) to organize "tours of duty". These coordinators are great, because they deal with the red tape and paperwork involved in internships. They can also work with professors to develop new jobs. Many conduct resume and interview workshops to prepare students for these tough situations. And, perhaps best of all, they can run interference with the university, especially the dreaded Financial Aid Office.

On campuses without co-op coordinators, it is the responsibility of the professor to find and allot jobs for students. Professors know their students well and can find the best student for your program. Speaking from a personal standpoint, however, professors can be absent-minded, and growers may spend as much time reminding professors of their needs as training the student!

Before beginning an internship, students need to be oriented. Universities may conduct orientation sessions that focus on setting reasonable expectations for an internship experience. At the University of Arkansas, for example, the orientation leaders also encourage social interaction among co-workers. Often, students are away from home for the first time, and they feel some hesitancy about life in another state or in a larger city.

Orientation sessions, whether formal or informal, should also be conducted on-site. Supervisors should set goals and guidelines during this initial contact. Students usually have forms that must be completed before they can receive credit, and these will give supervisors an idea of what to expect during the coming semester.

For growers and businesses, interns can offer fresh, new ideas and new approaches to problems. They have access to new technologies. Interns may free up other employees for in-depth projects. After students return to school, they are your word-of-mouth advertising source. Growers may not fully realize that their reputation can be greatly helped or severely hurt by word-of-mouth publicity from their previous interns, because students talk. A lot.

Interns may also attend conferences or visit other growers in the area, offering them wonderful networking opportunities. And, should you decide you hire your intern as a permanent employee, much of the training has already been done. This is also part of the down side, however. Training time is an investment, so choose the best interns for the work you want done.

The problems you can expect students to have outside the work place include:

- Housing. If you want good interns, **offer help with housing in any form you can**. There may be on-site housing available, or you can offer to pay a security deposit. Work with a local apartment complex to arrange housing beforehand.
- Travel time. If students are traveling between work and school, or between work and home, they will quickly begin to feel a weekend time crunch. Encouraging social interaction will help students feel at home in their new position, so arrange get-togethers or suggest outings.
- Financial aid. There's not much that growers and businesses can do about this one. You can encourage your university to develop a special policy to cover internships and co-ops, whereby their loans are not activated when students do not enroll in a full course load. This is less of a concern for summer internships.
- Significant others. This may mean boyfriends, girlfriends, close friends, and pets. Find housing that allows pets, and one of your problems is solved. Keep your interns busy with social gatherings, planned outings, and weekend work. Make them feel appreciated.

#### Setting Up a Successful Program

- Choose the right student for the job, which may not mean choosing the student with the highest GPA or most experience.
- Create a social group. This is especially important if you have only one or two interns. Often they feel out of place because of their age or geographic location.
- Choose a mentor, preferably one who has dealt with young people before. Choose someone the intern feels comfortable going to with problems. Choose a mentor before the student arrives.
- Have specific learning objectives. Be realistic about the work that can be done in a semester. Choose three obtainable, measurable goals and have weekly meetings or progress updates. Evaluate these objectives halfway through the semester, and be sure the mentor is present at this meeting.

- Expect a seminar at the end of the internship. Let the student know that you expect this, so he or she can be taking pictures and setting up story lines throughout the semester.
- Work with professors and the program coordinator, especially when problems arise. They need to know if and why you are unhappy with a student. They can help with administrative problems such as financial aid, too. Professors and coordinators may request an on-site visit; work with them.
- Remember, learning is a two-way street. You really can learn as much from your interns as you can teach them, if you keep an open mind.

Welcome your interns with a small party. Introduce them to other employees. Provide maps of town, give them a list of local activities, invite them to an upcoming event.

At the end of the internship, allow the student to give his or her seminar. Meet again with the student and mentor to review the learning objectives. Evaluate the student and allow him to evaluate his internship with you.

Texas A&M University offers an excellent resource, the Essential Components of a Successful Internship Program at their Web site (<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/internship/Forms/Internship/20book.pdf>), and see Oregon State University's Web site (<http://oregonstate.edu/dept/hort/intern/studeval.htm>) for a Sample Student Evaluation Form. Following these guidelines will lead to happy, productive internships.