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Partnerships to Support Nonprofits and Interns: Expanding the Pipeline of Diverse Talent for Nonprofits

By: Jessica Mendieta

As summer breaks wind down, many students preparing to go back to school are likely to start an internship. **Some nonprofits may still be looking for interns** in the fall or for the entire academic year, while others are starting internship programs for the first time.



Jessica Mendieta,
Policy Associate,

Work culture changed over the last two years, and there is an ongoing adjustment to the COVID-19 and monkeypox public health emergencies, which impacts the expectations students and employers have for internships and what it takes to make them rewarding experiences.

For charitable nonprofits, interns can become future employees or colleagues, making internships a key entry point into the sector. In this article, we cover some of the **benefits of internships for students and nonprofit employers**, partnerships between universities and charitable nonprofits, and other resources on successful internships.

Why Paid Internships Matter

There are barriers to internships for many students, such as access to networking, mentorship, and skill-building placements. A [survey by the Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions](#) (CCWT) found that 64 percent of students who did not take an internship had “desired to do so but could not due to scheduling conflicts with work, insufficient pay, and lack of placements in their disciplines.”

Charitable nonprofits have a role in bridging these gaps....

The [National Association of Colleges and Employers \(NACE\)’s 2022 Internship & Co-op Survey](#) found that most interns are men who identify as white. Their brief also found that “although **women and students of color are underrepresented** in internship cohorts, when they are provided internship opportunities, they are more likely to receive full-time job offers. This supports the idea that internships can democratize access to first jobs post-college, particularly for historically marginalized groups.”

Charitable nonprofits have a role in bridging these gaps as they are often working on the frontlines to address challenges in minoritized communities.

Paid internships have been shown to help students secure employment after graduation, access a wider network, and benefit from economic mobility. By offering more paid placements for students, there is progress in closing earnings gaps over a period of time. It all starts in college, when students need income to afford tuition,

housing, books, and food. Many don't have the luxury of accepting an unpaid internship.

Internship Experiences During COVID-19

Another report by the CCWT found that one in five college students completed an internship in 2020, and these internships were split between in-person and online. For those completing online internships, more were unpaid, and students cited "lower levels of overall satisfaction, career and academic developmental value...and high-skill tasks than in-person interns did."

Given the nonprofit workforce shortage crisis, finding ways to connect with students can be an important way for nonprofits to build a pipeline into their organization. Cumulatively, we can all help attract young talent to the sector.

For students, the structure of an internship program can determine whether they pursue a similar field or position, as well as whether they would consider working at a nonprofit after graduation. One of the main recommendations from the survey was for support services and training for employers and sponsoring postsecondary institutions to improve these programs.

The National Society of High School Scholars' [2022 Career Interest Survey](#) sheds some insights into the goals and values of Generation Z and can guide prospective employers' recruitment and retention efforts. For instance, students indicated that they are "most interested in impacting the world in the areas of human rights (35%) and social justice (34%), but also science/technology innovation (34%), and healthcare and health-related issues (34%)." An estimated one in four (27%) expect to stay in their first job after college for less than a year, and 36 percent expect to stay between one and two years. Given the [nonprofit workforce shortage](#) crisis, **finding ways to connect with students can be an important way for nonprofits to build a pipeline into their organization.** Cumulatively, we can all help attract young talent to the sector.

Nonprofit Partnerships with Universities

The pandemic and ongoing crises that stemmed from it have impacted the ability of students to find internships and for employers to provide a rewarding experience. Based on the existing research, there are lessons to apply that will help design programs that allow for learning new skills, applying one's interests, and feeling like a staff member. In the last two years, partnerships have emerged between universities and local nonprofits to encourage students to engage and learn from frontline organizations, and some of these programs are the first of their kind at the institution. These opportunities allow students to find a placement that in turn can develop into a career, or connect with mentors and peers who share similar values.

- **Boston University's** [Yawkey Nonprofit Internship Program](#) is the university's first permanent fund that supports sophomores and juniors during an unpaid internship at nonprofit organizations. Some of the focus areas for the program include health care, education, human services, arts and culture, and conservation and wildlife. While students must secure placements on their own, nonprofits in the Boston area are encouraged to post internships through the University's recruiting system and connect with their career services offices for other recruiting events. Internships can be in-person, remote, or hybrid, so long as they provide an exploration of career options and acquisition of transferable professional skills, among other benefits.
- **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** [Honors Program](#) launched a pilot program in the spring 2022 semester that allowed the cohort to intern at one or more local nonprofits for ten hours each week and attend professional development workshops that covered topics like career development. One student, Zuha Qadeer, completed an internship with OutNebraska. Reflecting on her experience, she said, "The advocacy work I did with OutNebraska was very hands on and really allowed me to interact with the political process.... [It] showed me the impact that advocacy can have on the way laws are made in our country." Students who participated are also on the path to receive a professional certification in nonprofit work at no additional cost. The University Honors Program is planning to expand this cohort to 20 students next spring while they identify and train nonprofit partners and their projects.
- **Pace University's** [New York Recovery Internships](#) program was launched in the summer of 2020, when many internships were shut down or organizations were unable to continue paying student wages. Undergraduate students were connected to 27 nonprofits in New York City and Westchester. In just the first 24 hours, more than 300 applications were filed, Marvin Krislov, President of

Pace University, wrote in a [column reflecting on the impact of the program](#). During six to eight weeks, students were matched with organizations that supported the social safety net in areas that include housing insecurity, child and youth services, and cultural institutions, among others. Krislov noted the role universities play in driving economic mobility, the impact nonprofits have in the lives of New Yorkers, and the role other partners have in funding these opportunities. Alexis Curio, a student who completed an internship with the Council of Peoples Organization, [expressed](#) that the internship gave “more awareness of the economic impact of food insecurity and has broadened my career search to include the nonprofit sector.”

- **Kenyon College** has a [Community Internship Program](#) that supports internships at nonprofits, where students work five to ten hours a week with a nonprofit in Knox County, Ohio. The goal of the program is to provide students more than two “transformative experiences” through internships, off-campus study, research, or community-engaged learning. Funding for otherwise unpaid internships connects students to nonprofits engaged in community-based work and projects that align with their interests and values. Mark Ramser, one of the donors for the program, hopes this program help students “spark their interest in being involved with nonprofit organizations in their community.”

Additional Resources on Internship Programs

[Interns: Employee or Volunteer](#), National Council of Nonprofits

[Getting Ready for Interns: A Checklist for Success](#), National Council of Nonprofits

- Manage expectations by clarifying whether the internship is paid/unpaid from the beginning.
- Before the first day, share specific information so the intern knows what to expect.
- Incorporate the intern into as many discussions about impact/outcomes and the difference your nonprofit is making in the community as possible. You could be cultivating the next generation of nonprofit leadership and encouraging someone to choose a career in the nonprofit sector for the long-term!

[Key Steps for Boosting Diversity Hiring of Interns](#), NACE

- Cast a wider net: employers should examine the demographics associated with the students at the schools at which they typically recruit and expand beyond

that list as needed. Employers also can incorporate virtual recruiting options to reach schools that are not feasible to visit in person.

- Conduct an equity audit of the internship cohort. An equity audit will help employers determine if they are indeed recruiting a sufficiently diverse internship cohort, bringing to light discrepancies in the composition of the cohort, pay rates, and possibly even the tasks and responsibilities given to interns.
 - Use the internship program as a diversified pipeline to a diverse workforce: as employers make efforts to diversify their workforce, their internship programs should be the starting point for this diversification. Ensuring a diverse group of interns will aid in diversifying newly hired employees.
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Our Series on Creative Approaches to the Nonprofit Workforce Shortage Crisis

This article is part of [a series describing creative, practical approaches to the workforce shortage crisis](#) that can elevate equity, address burnout and stress, and discover, nurture, and develop talent in nontraditional ways.

One of our five [core values](#) at the National Council of Nonprofits is “Honoring the Nonprofit Workforce,” which reflects our deeply held belief that “Nonprofits and their employees should have the respect and the resources needed to get their work done.”

That core value shapes our work creating and curating information to assist frontline nonprofits with their operations and capacity-building. It also drives much of [our advocacy work](#) promoting public policy solutions at the federal, state, and local levels to get more funds to nonprofits stretched by the combination of growing needs, decreasing revenue, increasing costs, and rising salaries.