

FEATURE I

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Getting Their Hands Dirty Adding value to student internships

As Bud White, Director of the Mid-Continent Region, USGA Green Section, and I reviewed applications and began interviewing turfgrass students this past week for our internship, we found ourselves talking about how important it is to provide a well-rounded internship experience, how important internships are, and what their ultimate goal is. In fact, during Turfgrass Advisory Service visits and at many conferences throughout the year, internships are a regular topic. Sadly, many well-respected golf facilities are frustrated with the recruiting process. And, while some top-tier, nationally recognized courses with internship openings will be inundated with dozens and dozens of applications, other quality facilities that are not as prominent will fail to receive more than one or two applications, if any.

During my travels, I frequently ask superintendents about internship possibilities at their facilities. Do they have quality interns? What type of program is in place? Is it working? It has been surprising to learn that a number of great golf courses either lack internship programs or have given up on the idea of interns altogether, because few students showed an interest, even with an offer of free housing. Many of these facilities are notable or have fairly substantial annual operating budgets. This article summarizes some of the key points and areas of concern that have been prominent in these discussions of internships.

An internship in turfgrass management is a specified period of time during which a student works under a professional in return for instruction. For golf, internships are available at a wide variety of facilities and associations, and they offer an even wider array of experiences.

The most popular internships are offered by nationally recognized, private or resort golf facilities. Many of these facilities have more than eighteen holes of golf and host major championships. Others have moderate to large budgets but may or may not be nationally recognized. These facilities may host a championship from time to time, but, in general, their

emphasis is on daily golf whether it is private, public, municipal, corporate outings, etc.

While there are advantages and disadvantages to each, it is important to realize that students benefit the most from diverse experiences. Currently, students prefer the nationally recognized facilities, which do not always guarantee the best experience. Depending on the structure of the internship, there can be voids in skill development and in gaining an understanding of course management. When the student enters the workforce, these voids become obvious, positions can be jeopardized, and the ability to successfully transition from school to full-time employment can be undermined.

Voids in training occur when the student experiences only a small range of activities during the internship. There can be a greater risk of this at larger, rather than smaller, facilities. In smaller facilities, with a limited number of employees, assistance is always needed across the course. Weaknesses in training also tend to be more frequent if a major event is on the calendar, since tournament preparations demand a great deal of time from course supervisors. This can leave little time to spend one-on-one with interns. For these reasons, mid-range

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facilities should never be discounted, as they may offer a better internship, greater experiences, and more challenges for better student development.

An investment is required on both ends to ensure success. The superintendent must invest just as heavily in mentoring interns, as the intern must invest in the learning experience. While there are great internships where much of the golf operation is explored, there are also programs where an intern does little more than an hourly summer employee would, performing just one or maybe a few mundane tasks repeatedly throughout the duration of the internship. These tasks often include raking bunkers, changing cups, and so on. Again, the objective is to experience a broad range of activities and preferably as many aspects as possible of golf course management. Internships should cover all areas of golf course maintenance practices, including irrigation and equipment repair, as well as budgeting and personnel management. If at all possible, educational seminars, university turfgrass research field days, local association meetings, and meetings with key staff and course officials should be included in a quality course internship.

It is also important to vary the internship experience, nationally (not just locally) and at both public and private facilities. Many four-year turf degrees and two-year programs require six months of internship experience as part of the curriculum. Students can vary their experience by doing two, separate, three-month summer internships.

Superintendents can collaborate with other facilities, whether they are across the street, across town, or across the country and share interns by splitting the summer in half or by recommending an intern for the following season. In addition, a student's internship experience can be enhanced by volunteering for a week at a major championship, if it is not possible to do a full summer internship at a facility, but remember to plan this type of involvement well in advance. While all interns generally agree that taking part in the preparations for a major golf championship is exciting and special, not all will be motivated to seek employment at these types of facilities, not all will be fulfilled. Some may even find that the added demands of such tournaments are not enjoyable and that they prefer a smaller facility.

We all play a part in promoting the game of golf and our industry. We are all responsible, in one way or another, for its overall success. Internships play an important role. The following thoughts are offered for improving the internship process:

For Students - Internships provide education, experience, and career opportunities. A well-rounded placement that offers involvement in all aspects of golf course management should never be overlooked. At times, this means looking past nationally recognized facilities and identifying prominent regional facilities. While name recognition can be important, a range of activities and responsibilities is equally important. Therefore, try working with course officials, and particularly the superintendent, to take an active role in setting objectives. When considering internships, ask questions, ask for more responsibility, and try to obtain a broad range of experiences. Spend

time at different types of facilities, in varying geographical regions, with a range of climates, and with various turfgrass species, budgets, management styles, golfer expectations, etc. This will maximize your experience and provide the background and credentials needed to compete for a full-time position at the course of your choice.

For Student Advisors or Program Coordinators -

Advocate for internship experiences that are comprehensive and balanced. Doing so will better prepare students for a successful transition into the workforce following graduation. In addition, students will begin to develop the network they need to find a job and build a career. Look ahead and determine if championships will be in the area and if volunteers are needed. This can be an excellent opportunity for networking and gaining practical experience. Work with local courses and make contacts outside the region so that you can help your interns become aware of opportunities.

For Superintendents -

If you have struggled with setting up or maintaining a quality internship program in the past, do not give up just yet. This is a great time to take another look at recruiting

and design a better internship experience. Some superintendents attend university career fairs to recruit interns. For those limited by budget, consider working with nearby superintendents to create a shared internship with another facility or facilities. Quality internships require investments of time, effort, and patience. Challenge interns to think critically. Encourage questions. Internships can be a screening process for future assistant superintendents. They can help you assemble a dedicated, talented, hard-working staff. There is a direct relationship between course conditioning and the quality of the staff.



In addition to the typical internship activities, consider allowing an intern to shadow your movements for a week. This could be a benefit earned from a long summer of effort. With supervision, provide the intern with an opportunity to feel the responsibility of handling day-to-day planning of golf course activities. Include conducting a morning meeting with the crew where tasks are assigned and daily objectives discussed. Following the meeting, allow the intern to assist in managing daily activities and monitoring course conditions throughout the day. During this week, a meeting or two with the general manager, senior department heads, or key personnel would also be very beneficial.

For Future Employers - Open up your course for internship opportunities and help design programs not only to teach turf management skills but also to develop the characteristics you look for in your employees. When interviewing applicants for an assistant superintendent position (or any other skilled position, such as irrigation or spray technician or crew foreman), critically review résumés and job applications. Avoid placing too much emphasis on name recognition of the golf facilities where the applicant has past experience, as this does not automatically qualify someone to be an assistant superintendent. The best candidates are those with the capacity to perform a variety of duties and a skill set that is broad. Read between the lines and ask the right questions to ensure that the applicant is an ideal fit for your facility. The best candidates are generally those who have internship experiences at facilities with resources and expectations consistent with yours.

It is important for golf facilities to find motivated interns. Furthermore, internships should be evaluated for what can be learned and achieved. "As seen on TV" does not necessarily mean, "experienced in person." While some students appear to have the preferred internship experience, they may lack the necessary training and qualifications to succeed.

All of us can and should be advocates for the game of golf and our industry, and this includes promoting quality internships. Better internship programs strengthen our industry and improve our golf courses because individuals are more experienced, better qualified, and more likely to be placed in the right positions for success.

For complete details on developing and experiencing a quality internship program, GCSAA has an Internship Handbook that is available on the Internet for employers at the following address: www.gcsaa.org/jobs/employers/interns/internshiphandbook.aspx and students at the following address: www.gcsaa.org/students/InternshipProgram.aspx. To search and post internship opportunities, visit www.gcsaa.org (select "Internships" under the "Students" tab) or contact faculty advisers at a university or school with a turf program. Several good articles on mentoring that specifically pertain to internships include the following:



MAXIMIZING STUDENT INTERNSHIPS:
Make the Summer Rite of Passage a Win-Win for Students and Superintendents (Bakalyar, Andrea C. 2004. *Golf Course Management*. November. 72(11): p. 76-78 <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/tic/gcman/article/2004nov76.pdf>)

SUCCESSFUL RECRUITING: Building Your Crew Around Student Interns (Brame, R. A. 2000. *USGA Green Section Record*. May/June. 38(3): p. 4 <http://turf.lib.msu.edu/2000s/2000/000504.pdf>)

HELPING HAND: Building Up the Next Generation of Superintendents (Grys, Lucie. 2009. *GreenMaster*. March/April. 44(2): p. 34-35 <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/tic/grnma/article/2009mar34.pdf>)

TEACH YOUR INTERNS WELL: Two Superintendents Team Up for the Ultimate Program (Myers, Jim. 2008. *Golfdom*. April. 64(4): p. 96-98 <http://www.golfdom.com/golfdom/Professional+Development/Teach-Your-Interns-Well/ArticleStandard/Article/detail/512889>) -OC

TY McCLELLAN is an agronomist with the USGA Green Section's Mid-Continent Region. He has seen many great internship opportunities overlooked by students in recent years.



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