Cultivating Organizational Partners for Internships

While in graduate school, collaborating with organizations allows students to connect their learning and interests with real-time issues and community needs. As a graduate student, you may design an internship in consultation with an organization or other community entity.

Certain organizations may not be overtly recruiting interns but open to co-designing an internship once they understand the skills and expertise you have to offer. Organizations often have a traditional view of internships where the student spends a specified number of hours at the site, requiring ongoing supervision and training. As a graduate student, internships can look differently. Students may act as consultants, working with organizations on a project basis with pre-established goals and deliverables. Logistically, students may interact flexibly with community partners, often working off-site with regularly check in points.

Benefits

If you’ve identified an organization or sector where you would like to work or grow your career, internships allow an opportunity to demonstrate your skills and earn credibility while gaining relevant experience and industry contacts. Internships can also be an important part of your career discernment process, providing valuable information which may impact your career direction. Additionally, internships enhance the learning process by bringing classroom theory into the realm of practice.

Key points on working with organizational partners:

1. Organizations are more likely to enroll as partners if your interests and/or ideas address their organizational priorities, and in particular, unmet needs. If an organization deems an issue important but does not have the staff capacity to address it, outside assistance may be very welcome. Conversely, you may identify an area that the organization has not considered exploring, and when presented with the idea, they may see it as very worthwhile because it addresses organizational priorities.

2. Before approaching organizations, consider the degree to which you are open to their original ideas and/or augmenting your interests to meet their needs. Potential partners may not be interested in your ideas for a variety of reasons, but they may value your skills and be interested in collaborating with YOU.

3. Organizations are more likely to engage with you and to utilize the products of your internship if the internship duties or projects were generated by them.
How do you identify and approach organizations?

1. Consider organizations whose missions intersect with your interests. If you need ideas, ask around. Faculty, the Graduate Office, and other students can be great resources.

2. Before approaching an organization, do your homework. Familiarize yourself with the organization, their history, mission, and key programs.

3. As you identify organizations, consider your networks. Do you have contacts within these organizations? Do you have secondary contacts that could make introductions?

4. Ideally, you will have a contact within this organization, or you will know someone who has a contact within the organization and will ask him/her to make an introduction. If you don’t have contacts, start with the organization’s volunteer manager or an employee who seems connected to your area of interest (you will know this because you’ve done your homework 😊).

5. **Send a brief email.** Email allows you to be clear with your intent and gives your contact time to digest your inquiry. Introduce yourself and the X program (a short overview). Tell her/him about your interest in their organization, community, and relevant issues. If you have experience in this sector, make sure to mention this.

6. If you have ideas for collaboration, share them and ask whether your contact would be interested in further discussion. If you are open to exploring other organizational needs, let your contact know!

7. Give your contact at least one week to respond to your inquiry. If you haven’t heard back within this timeframe, follow-up with a phone call, and begin by asking whether s/he received your email.

8. If your contact responds positively, ask to meet in person for further discussion – either at their work site or off-site over coffee.

9. The meeting should be framed as an opportunity to learn more about one another and to EXPLORE the possibility of working together. Be sure to mention that a faculty member will be supervising your internship.

10. Before making any decisions or commitments to your contact, discuss this internship possibility with the faculty member who will be advising your internship. If you haven’t recruited this person yet, contact the Graduate Office for guidance: kosmond@uw.edu.