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Teaching Young Conservatives

4 Elements of a Great Intern Program

By Heather Sexton

Every year, 150 or more young minds come to The Heritage Foundation to learn first-hand the kind of work that a conservative think tank does. We like the *New York Times* description of our interns as “young and bright and ardently right.” Past Heritage interns have gone on to write for *National Review*, work for the White House, and get elected to state legislatures. We never know what the future holds for our interns, but we always aim to equip them with the intellectual tools and the job skills they’ll need to make a difference in the conservative movement and the fight for freedom.

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A number of factors help make Heritage's Young Leaders Program a success. Here are four elements you should focus on to make *your* intern program a success too:

1. GET THE DETAILS DOWN

Whether you're hosting intern number one or number one thousand, make a decision every year about:

- how many interns you want to hire;
- how much (if anything) you are going to pay them;
- what dates or semesters you want interns;
- what the eligibility requirements will be (e.g. education, age);
- what materials the applicants should send you and when they should send them (e.g., resume, recommendation letters, transcript);
- what type of work the interns will do; and
- to whom the interns will report.

In order to run a top-notch intern program, there are countless details to have in order for each intern group. Put together a guide on how to run the program. This guide should include best practices, a timeline of key dates, and information about specific components of the program. With so many moving parts, being organized ensures nothing drops through the cracks. Keeping track of what works and doesn't helps you become more efficient and eliminates repetition.

For example, you don't want to forget to

send a rejection letter or notice to someone who's applied for your program. Frequently, donors or other individuals you work with will recommend students to the program. And you want to demonstrate you are running an efficient program that treats intern applicants in a businesslike manner.

2. TEACH FROM THE START

Since many students are new to nonprofits and the policy scene, it is important to give them the necessary grounding from the start. Make sure they understand, for example, that "501(c)3" and "501(c)4" nonprofits face different rules on political activity. Give examples. You can tell your interns not to have any "direct or indirect participation in a campaign," but most situations are not that cut and dry. Point out, for instance, that copying campaign information or forwarding candidate e-mails to friends is not permitted on work computers. Make sure they understand what activities can be done only on their personal time and the restrictions they must follow when at work.

Interacting with the media—especially social media—should be another teaching focus. Young people these days are constantly Facebooking, Tweeting, and blogging. Once they start interning, they are excited to talk about what they are doing or to argue for a policy position. Each organization has its own rules on the individual use of social media. Make sure your interns learn the rules. And if your interns are going to Tweet

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or blog about a policy issue, you need to impress upon them the importance of exercising due diligence in getting the details of your organization's position correct. A related area of concern is attendance at conferences that are heavily attended by the media. Make sure your interns know what they can and can't do in terms of representing your organization at such forums.

Always cover more rather than less. Take the time to teach the rules throughout the internship to reduce the possibility of an embarrassing misstep.

3. PROVIDE A WELL-ROUNDED EXPERIENCE

You should provide your interns with both a work experience and an educational experience. Equip, train, educate, and develop each of your interns. Most staff members are not only willing but also enthusiastic to give a talk to interns. Set up briefings with a variety of experts to focus on different policy areas. That way interns get to learn more in-depth information about issues and interact with different staff. You should regard your internship program as an opportunity to fill any deficits in the education your interns may have received in college. The basics of economics, the rule of law, and the American Founding are neglected at many American universities.

Your non-policy staff can contribute as well. For example, a member of your communications team can teach a workshop on how to write a great op-ed. Someone from personnel can talk about what a great resume looks like and how to look for a job in the conservative movement. While not every

intern will write an op-ed or start a blog, these workshops can hone their skills and get them thinking about where they would like to work in the movement.

Depending on your location, your program can include a trip to either the U.S. Capitol or your state capitol. And if your organization hosts public events, make sure your interns know about those opportunities as well. By balancing the work and educational opportunities, the interns will have a well-rounded experience. The more you take the time to invest in them, the more they will be able to contribute to your organization and the conservative movement.

4. STAY IN TOUCH

Frequently, your intern alumni will turn out to be the best advocates for your organization. You'll want them to promote the intern program to fellow students and to talk up the organization generally, so make sure you don't lose touch with them. Set up a system for capturing each intern's permanent contact information. Many interns provide their school e-mail addresses (which expire) or their campus addresses, but those addresses are not helpful after they graduate.

If you can afford it, host an annual alumni event. This event can be for both staff and interns. Also, send out a quarterly e-mail, updating them on what's happening at your organization. This practice keeps them connected and up-to-date on new initiatives your organization has launched.

Ms. Sexton is Director of The Heritage Foundation's Young Leaders Program.

