

Intern Support Guidance Document

PURPOSE

This document is intended to guide nonprofit and social impact organizations in determining their readiness to host interns or establish partnerships with universities/colleges. It also outlines key considerations to ensure that these partnerships are mutually beneficial, well-structured, and supportive of meaningful student learning and organizational impact.

Use Case

- ▶ You are considering hosting an intern or establishing a partnership with a college or university and want to assess your organization's readiness.
- ▶ You want to design an internship experience that is structured, meaningful, and mutually beneficial for both the student and your organization.
- ▶ You are preparing to onboard an intern and need guidance on how to support their learning, define their role, and create a positive and productive experience.



ABOUT BSRI

BSRI was created to support informed and effective decision-making for our partners with tools, resources, and data for action. As we wind down operations, we are creating these resources for the community to continue the work. We use our guiding principles in engaging with partners and communities, putting people first through accountability and reciprocity, communicating transparently, and sharing our knowledge widely.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

BSRI developed this guidance based on our experience hosting interns and creating opportunities for them to engage in real-world, impactful work. We've seen that the most successful internships are grounded in reciprocity, where students gain meaningful skills and professional development, and organizations benefit from fresh perspectives and contributions. This document is designed to help organizations approach internships with that mindset by providing practical guidance to support structured, thoughtful, and mutually beneficial experiences.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Our organization utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance efficiency, support data analysis, and strengthen evaluation practices. We also encourage our partners and clients to thoughtfully explore AI as a means to build future-ready evaluation capacity.

All AI use is governed by strict data privacy and ethical standards. We do not input any personally identifiable information (PII), protected health information (PHI), or other sensitive data into AI systems in a manner that would violate HIPAA or other applicable privacy regulations.

Additionally, we exclusively use licensed AI tools and platforms that explicitly prohibit the use of submitted data for model training or retention beyond the intended task. This ensures that all information remains confidential, secure, and protected.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Guiding Principle: Mutual Benefit

Well-designed internship and university partnerships can be powerful tools for both workforce development and organizational impact. However, they require intentional planning, clear structure, and a commitment to mutual benefit.

The very first question your organization must answer prior to engaging with academic partners is identifying the specific mutual benefits for the student and the organization. This must go beyond “furthering the mission” and should be specific enough to create a tangible value. Internships should not be designed primarily for administrative or repetitive tasks (e.g., data entry) unless they are part of a broader learning objective. Organizations should approach these partnerships not as short-term labor solutions, but as investments in learning, capacity-building, and the future of the social impact sector. A well-designed experience should allow the student to engage in substantive, skill-aligned work.

Examples that can be tailored to the specific student and organizational needs may include:

- ▶ **For the student:** Skill-building, mentorship, exposure to real-world applications, and fulfillment of academic requirements.
- ▶ **For the organization:** Meaningful contributions to projects, fresh perspectives, and potential talent pipeline development.

HR Note

Organizations should decide on their definition of an intern (e.g., someone in school) and then make the decision as to whether they will offer any monetary compensation to interns. As needed, organizations should confirm that unpaid roles meet legal criteria and prioritize equitable access by offering compensation where possible. Remember that interns ≠ junior staff. Intern responsibilities should prioritize learning and development, and not replicate the responsibilities of a full-time role without appropriate support and compensation.

Table 1. *Types of interns*

	Monetary	Non-monetary
Student	Paid student intern	Unpaid student intern (often receives school credit/required hours)

Non-student Paid non-student intern Unpaid non-student intern (may be in need of experience)

Organizational Readiness Assessment

Before onboarding an intern, organizations should assess their capacity to provide a high-quality experience. If the answer to these is unclear, it may be worth delaying the partnership until systems are in place.

- ▶ Do we have the staff capacity to supervise and mentor a student?
 - ▶ Are key staff willing to mentor? Do staff have mentorship in their professional development plans/goals?
- ▶ Do we have clearly defined projects or roles suitable for a student?
 - ▶ And clarity on how the intern's role will be integrated into the team?
- ▶ Can we provide regular feedback and structured learning opportunities?
- ▶ Do we have the necessary infrastructure (technology, workspace, systems)?

Although interns may offset work load at the task level, hosting them does create more work in other arenas, such as reviewing and providing feedback, guiding and mentoring, and fostering the completion of work towards specific learning goals. Still, this oversight can be a strategic way to support your internal team on their mentorship and management practices, and help them to hone, test, and refine their own leadership styles.

Schedule a Meet and Greet

If you answered yes to the organizational readiness questions, you should proceed to a virtual or in-person meeting with the potential student or a representative from a university or college department. The meeting serves multiple purposes, including:

- ▶ Establishing whether the pairing is a cultural fit for your organization (e.g., values alignment, working styles)
- ▶ Understanding what the requirements are from the student's side (e.g., a report, a Capstone, hours sign-offs)
- ▶ Designing opportunities that are inclusive and accessible (e.g. flexible schedules, remote options where possible)
- ▶ Introducing your organization to the individual, along with the potential staff who will be supporting them
- ▶ Describing the scope of work and types of work the student might engage in to determine whether the interests are a match

Define the Role with a Scope of Work or Workplan

If the meeting goes well and you move forward with a formal internship/practicum arrangement, your organization should draft a short scope of work or work plan that aligns the student's needs with your organization's needs. This should include at a minimum:

- ▶ Defined responsibilities of both parties
- ▶ Potential deliverables
- ▶ Communication/support structure (e.g., who the student will be coordinating with and reporting to)
- ▶ Specific learning and skill development goals (the student can also support drafting these!)

Onboarding Processes

Sufficient time should be provided for the intern to become acquainted with your organizational tools, systems, and processes through a set onboarding period. Adapting this process to meet the needs of interns (e.g., by shortening it from a staff version) sets the tone for the experience and reflects your organization's capacity. Key components of a typical onboarding experience can include:

- ▶ Orientation to the organization's mission, programs, and culture
- ▶ Introduction to team members and key partners (e.g., website links)
- ▶ Clear explanation of expectations, timelines, and communication norms
- ▶ Access to necessary tools, platforms, and documentation
- ▶ Training on any required systems or protocols (e.g., mandatory reporting)

Provide Feedback

It is essential that the organization encourage reflection and learning, not just task completion. Doing this through structured feedback and performance evaluation supports both learning and accountability. Inform the student about the structure and process for receiving feedback at the organizational level, and discuss your personal leadership or supervisory style.

- ▶ Establish clear expectations at the beginning
- ▶ Provide ongoing, constructive feedback through structured touchpoints (e.g., midpoint and final evaluations) to ensure consistent reflection and alignment
- ▶ Complete any required formal evaluations for the academic institution
- ▶ Invite feedback from the student on their experience

Offboarding Processes

A structured offboarding process supports closure of the internship/practicum and protects your organization's integrity. Components of a successful onboarding include:

- ▶ Final deliverables and knowledge transfer
 - ▶ Where are documents being saved?
 - ▶ What can the student take/reuse?
- ▶ Collection of feedback on the experience
 - ▶ Qualitative and quantitative feedback from both parties on the process and opportunities for improvement can be used to improve the process and to market your organization and your program to future interns and universities for future intern/university collaborations.
- ▶ Discussion around offering career support elements (e.g., references, LinkedIn recommendations, or resume feedback) to support the intern's next steps.
- ▶ Discussion of future opportunities (if applicable)
- ▶ Removal of system access and return of equipment (if applicable)

Maintain Strong Partnerships

Remember that interns and academic partnerships are networking and marketing opportunities for your organization. A social impact organization with systems and capacities in place to successfully house interns is a strong presence in the community. Keep this going by continuing to engage academic partners in your organization's mission so they are aware of new initiatives or expansion projects, and so you are aware of their students' development needs. Scheduling short meetings at a regular cadence (e.g., once a semester) with student development offices or with specific department heads keeps needs and expectations clear. If you collect feedback from interns, you can also use this data to communicate your organization's approach and the partnership's benefits. Finally, academic and social impact collaborations provide ongoing opportunities for recurring placements, research collaborations, or pipeline development.

Clarify Work Structure

Supervision

Clear supervision is critical to success and necessary to support the student's professional development. At a minimum, the student should know their primary point of contact, their backup point of contact,

and the check-in cadence. Additionally, your organization should outline the expectations for the intern supervisor, including providing mentorship, coaching, timely feedback, and creating a supportive learning environment, not just task oversight.

Logistics

The student should have clarity on whether their role is in-person, remote, or hybrid; the expected days and hours of work; and whether a workspace and/or equipment will be provided. Other specific considerations include whether the student will be traveling for the role and whether travel is reimbursed (and, if so, what tracking is required for reimbursement).

Security & Privacy

- ▶ Are background checks required?
- ▶ Are there confidentiality agreements or data-sharing protocols?
- ▶ Are there any required trainings (e.g., working with minors, HIPAA, etc.)?

Duty to Care

- ▶ Do you updated policies on harassment-free environments and clear reporting pathways if issues arise?
- ▶ Do you have clarity on your organization's responsibility to ensure a safe and respectful workplace?

Create Meaningful Contributions

To provide a meaningful experience for the organization and student, the partnership needs to result in meaningful contributions to both parties. To get started, the student and supervisor should have a discussion about the following:

- ▶ Is this tied to a course, practicum, or capstone project?
- ▶ Are there any required deliverables (e.g., reports or presentations)? Do these align with organizational deliverables (e.g., a grant report)?
- ▶ Is there a required number of hours?
- ▶ Will the organization need to complete evaluations or provide supervision documentation?

- ▶ Who is the university point of contact/faculty advisor?
- ▶ Beyond the requirements, what does the student hope to gain out of this experience (e.g., experience presenting, academic writing, networking)?

Whenever possible, the organization should strive to involve students in decision-making opportunities and/or include them in internal and externally facing meetings, which supports meaningful professional development.

Appendix

Case Study: BSRI's Approach to Intern Support in Applied Settings

CONTEXT

As part of BSRI's applied research and evaluation work, we engaged interns with diverse goals, structures, and levels of formal affiliation. This case study highlights two distinct internship experiences to demonstrate how intentionally tailored support strategies can strengthen intern development, enhance project outcomes, and prepare emerging professionals for careers in applied research and community-based work.

INTERN PROFILES

Intern Profile 1: Experience-Seeking Intern (Non-Credit)

- ▶ Intern motivated by gaining hands-on research experience
- ▶ No formal academic requirements or deliverables required
- ▶ Interest in maternal health and the Black Mothers Care Plan project

Intern Profile 2: Graduate-Level Intern (Capstone Requirement)

- ▶ Required to complete a structured capstone project for graduate school credit
- ▶ Clear academic expectations and deliverables
- ▶ Needed alignment between academic goals and specific project scope
- ▶ Needed alignment between academic work and real-world application

THE APPROACH

This is how strategies for each intern were intentionally tailored and supported:

For the experience-seeking intern, support focused on

- ▶ Exposure to real project workflows
- ▶ Guided participation in research activities (e.g., qualitative analysis, meetings)

- ▶ Ongoing mentorship and check-ins to build confidence and skill development
 - ▶ I do → We do → You do, moving from modeling to guided mentorship to finally independent practice. This created a clear development pathway and engagement of interns. It is a structured approach that essentially builds confidence and competence for the experience-seeking intern. (e.g. Rapid Qualitative Analysis, final report write-ups, RQA write-up)



For the graduate-level intern, support included

- ▶ Aligning the capstone project with existing BMCP research goals and graduate school standards.
- ▶ Establishing clear milestones, deliverables, and timelines
- ▶ Providing structured feedback to meet academic and professional standards
- ▶ Culminating Capstone presentation of work with invited guests in the field

1. Key Differences in Supervision

This experience highlighted the importance of adapting supervision based on intern's structure:

- ▶ Interns without academic requirements benefit from exploratory, mentorship-driven engagement
- ▶ Interns with formal academic expectations require structured project management and deliverable alignment
- ▶ Flexibility in supervision style is critical to ensuring both intern growth and project efficiency

2. Outcomes

- ▶ Both interns gained meaningful, applied research experience aligned with their goals

- ▶ The organization benefited from intern contributions to ongoing project work
- ▶ The tailored approach increased engagement, accountability, and overall effectiveness across both internship experiences

3. Recommendations for Organizations (Practical Takeaways)

- ▶ Before creating an internship program, clearly define organizational goals and consider prospective interns' needs to ensure the program is designed to provide meaningful, coordinated experiences.
- ▶ Distinguish between internships focused on general skill-building and professional workforce exposure and those structured around specific deliverables or academic requirements.
- ▶ Build flexible supervision structures rather than a one-size-fits-all model
- ▶ Integrate interns into real projects while scaling responsibility based on readiness and requirements
- ▶ Make sure your organization has the capacity and leadership to properly support interns, providing a structured, supportive environment for learning and growth.
- ▶ Establish regular, planned touchpoints with interns to provide ongoing guidance, monitor progress, and create space for questions, reflection, and support.
- ▶ Develop a clear process for reviewing intern deliverables that incorporates strengths-based feedback, while also identifying opportunities for growth and skill development.
- ▶ Create spaces for professional exposure by allowing access to professional networks and resources, and involving them in client engagements, events, and meetings. This can include encouraging participation in client meetings, organizational events, and networking opportunities, as well as coaching interns on how to engage, build connections, and navigate professional environments.
- ▶ Acknowledge that intern development is both personal and professional. Leaders should adapt their approach and interactions to support skill development, confidence, communication, and overall personal growth throughout the internship.