



Student Internships: Moving Beyond the “As Seen on TV” Mentality

How we can all improve internship programs and why the industry benefits.

BY TY McCLELLAN

Internships mark one of the single most important and exciting experiences for a turfgrass student's education. It is their opportunity to put classroom training into practice, achieve new experiences, further develop a network of professional contacts, and ultimately begin advancing their careers. For superintendents, it provides an opportunity to mentor the next genera-

tion of turfgrass professionals, and, in doing so, serves as a screening process to identify potential assistant superintendents.

Given their significance, the topic of student internships is common during Turfgrass Advisory Service visits and at many educational conferences throughout the year. Sadly, many well-respected and notable golf facilities

have become frustrated with the recruiting process. As a result, they now lack internship programs or have given up on the idea of interns altogether because too few students showed an interest. Although some top-tier, nationally recognized courses that post internship openings will be inundated with dozens or hundreds of applications, other high-quality facilities



An investment is required on both ends to ensure success, and a superintendent must invest just as heavily in mentoring interns as the intern must invest in making the internship a well-rounded learning experience. This investment can pay great dividends in the future when looking to fill open positions at your facility.

that are not as prominent on a national level will fail to receive more than one or two, if any at all.

The intent of this article is to summarize key points and areas of concern with respect to internships that have been prominent in discussions with superintendents and university personnel. In doing so, it will, to some degree, outline what a quality student internship program at a golf facility could look like. This article does not provide a detailed checklist of goals, objectives, and activities that make up a successful internship experience. For this and a reference list of excellent resources about successful implementation and ideas for internships, please note the resources section near the end of this article.

An internship is defined as a specified period of time that a student agrees to work under a professional in return for instruction. The goal is not merely employment; rather, an internship should provide supervised, practical, on-the-job training. For golf, internships are available at a wide variety of facilities, associations, etc., and they offer an even wider array of experiences.

Far and away, the most popular internships for turfgrass students are those at nationally recognized, private or resort golf facilities. Many of these facilities have more than 18 holes of golf, and often they host championships and tournaments. Others have moderate to large budgets but may or may not be well recognized nationally. 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.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each type, and it is important to realize that students benefit the most from diversified experiences. Currently, students tend to focus on only the nationally recognized facilities, but they do not always guarantee the best experience. Depending on the structure of the internship, there can be voids when it comes to skill development and a true understanding of course management that do not come to light until the student enters the



Student interns benefit the most from diversified experiences that include exposure to all aspects of golf course management. Name recognition of the golf facility does not always guarantee the best experience.



workforce. When these voids become known, their position can be jeopardized and the ability to transition successfully from school to full-time employment is undermined.

Voids in training typically occur when the student experiences only a small range of activities. This can be a greater risk at larger, rather than smaller, facilities since smaller facilities tend to have a limited number of employees who are 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 facilities should never be discounted, because they may offer a better internship, greater experiences, and more challenges for better student development.

Regardless of facility size, the best internships require an investment on both ends — the superintendent must invest just as heavily in mentoring interns as the intern must invest in making the internship a well-rounded learning experience. While there are instances of great internships where much of the golf operation is explored and experienced by an intern, there are also many instances where an intern does little more than an hourly summer employee who performs just one or a few mundane tasks repeatedly throughout the duration of the internship. These tasks often include raking bunkers, mowing greens, changing holes, and so on. This is not an internship.

Again, the objective for an intern is to experience a broad range of activities, preferably as many aspects of golf course management as possible. Internships should cover all areas of golf course maintenance practices, including irrigation, equipment repair, budgeting, and personnel management. Furthermore, and 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.

For a student, it is best to vary internship experiences. This is achievable if one looks 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, so students can accomplish different internship types through a pair of separate three-month summer internships. Furthermore, and with enough advanced planning, students may enhance their internship experience by volunteering for a week at a major championship, if it is not possible to do a full summer internship at that facility.

Participating in a broad range of internship experiences helps students not only determine their skill level, but also an interest level in pursuing a career within turf management, especially given the different types and levels of facilities. 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, and not all will be fulfilled. Some may even find that the added demands of these tournaments are not enjoyable and instead prefer a smaller facility.

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

FOR STUDENTS

As a student pursues internships for the purposes of education, experience, and career opportunity, a well-rounded placement that offers involvement in all aspects of golf course management should never be overlooked. At times, this may necessitate looking past nationally recognized facilities and identifying prominent regional facilities. Although name recognition can be important, a range of activities and responsibilities is equally important. Therefore, try working with course officials and the superintendent to design and take an active role in setting objectives. When considering

internships, ask questions, ask for more responsibility when and where possible, and try to obtain a broad range of experiences. This would include spending time at different types of facilities and in varying geographical regions with a range of climates and various turfgrass species, budgets, management styles, golfer expectations, etc. Doing so will maximize your experiences to 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

Just as you devise curriculum and advise students in earning a well-rounded educational degree, so too should you advocate 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 necessary network that they will 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 students become aware of opportunities.

FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

If you have struggled with setting up or maintaining a high-quality internship program in the past, do not give up just yet. This is a great time to take another look at recruiting by designing a better internship experience. Some superintendents attend university career fairs to recruit interns and promote their golf facility in person. For those limited by budget, consider working with nearby superintendents to create a shared internship with another facility or facilities. High-quality internships require investments of time, effort, and patience. Encourage questions and challenge interns to think critically. Internships are also great screening methods to find potential assistant superintendents in the future, and they



Interns should be encouraged to volunteer during the week of a professional tournament to gain a broader perspective of course maintenance objectives and managerial demands.

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 an earned benefit following 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. This experience might also 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

If you haven't already done so, strongly consider opening up your course for internship opportunities and help design programs that not only teach turf management skills, but also develop the

characteristics you look for most 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 golf facilities where the applicant has past experience, as this does not automatically qualify someone to be an assistant superintendent. The best candidates are generally those who have demonstrated the capability to perform a variety of duties and crafted a broad skill set. 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.

For complete details on developing and implementing a high-quality internship program, GCSAA has an [Internship Handbook](#) that is available on the Internet for employers, as well as a [Student Handbook](#). To search and post internship opportunities, visit www.gcsaa.org (select "Internships"

under the "Students" tab) or contact faculty advisers at a university, college, or school with a turf program. The [USGA Green Section Internship Program](#) also offers outstanding turfgrass management students the opportunity to travel with Green Section agronomists on Turf Advisory Service visits for one week during the summer.

Several good articles on mentoring that specifically pertain to internships include the following:

- [Helping Hand: Building Up the Next Generation of Superintendents](#) (Grys, Lucie. 2009. *GreenMaster*. March/April. 44(2):34-35).
- [Teach Your Interns Well: Two Superintendents Team Up for the Ultimate Program](#) (Myers, Jim. 2008. *Golfdom*. April. 64(4):96-98).
- [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):76-78).
- [Successful Recruiting: Building Your Crew Around Student Interns](#) (Brame, R. A. 2000. *USGA Green Section Record*. May/June. 38(3):4).

It will always be 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 at your facility.

All of us can and should be advocates for the game of golf and our industry, and this includes promoting high-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 to be successful.

TY McCLELLAN is an agronomist with the Green Section's Mid-Continent Region. He has seen many high-quality internship opportunities go unfulfilled in recent years.