The Intern–Mentor Experience: A Sample of the Real World

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Key Points

- Internships provide unique opportunities that contribute to the professional, academic, and personal growth of both intern and mentor.
- As an intern, be open to new ideas, people, and personalities, and make the most of your time by becoming involved in all facets of the workplace.
- As a mentor, be a good listener and offer direction and guidance to your interns, but allow enough freedom for them to learn on their own.

Prologue

The internship experience, a temporary work period lasting three to six months, holds many meanings for undergraduate students. Some view internships as fun times with friends or opportunities to explore new places. Others may dread them because, despite months of time and effort, the monetary benefits are often limited. Mentoring an intern represents opportunities—chances to work with new people and to give back to the profession—and challenges—attempts to balance busy schedules with intern needs while providing both structure and freedom to foster intellectual discovery.

To break down an internship into navigable steps for emerging professionals, we highlight our own story from written application to professional connection. We describe this journey from two different viewpoints: one from Molly Good (MG), a graduate student, and the other from John Kocik (JK), a mid-career fisheries scientist. We hope this combined approach helps both interns and new mentors understand how they can make this journey a smooth and successful one.

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Search and Expectations—*Finesse your internship search and look at the internship details. Make expectations clear in your announcements. Find the right match!*

MG: In college, you hear about the benefits of exploring internship opportunities through conversations with professors, graduate students, and peers. To be competitive, I felt pressure to secure an internship as a freshman. From July through October, I began to research fisheries internship opportunities. I searched through agency Web sites; many had an Education section that listed opportunities for students. I consulted with my professors, advisors, and teaching assistants for their personal resources and guidance. Some upperclassmen in my program had already been interns and were willing to share samples of their application packets with me. I also browsed on-campus posting boards for internship advertisements. Early in my sophomore year, I accumulated enough information to prioritize internship possibilities based on my personal capabilities and career interests.

Because employers offer a limited number of positions each year, pursue multiple opportunities for which you believe you are qualified. You will be competing for positions with other highly qualified students who share your interests and academic histories. Do not limit yourself in the number of applications you complete, even though some opportunities might excite you more than others. If you generate questions during your internship search such as, "What daily tasks will I be responsible for?" and "Who will I be working with?" or just wish to learn more about a particular internship position, contact the agency or internship coordinator(s) directly via phone call or e-mail message. In my experience, potential mentors were glad and willing to communicate with me about their available internships. Remember, conduct yourself professionally, and demonstrate that you are familiar with the positions being offered—you are making your first impression!

JK: I start to think about internships at the beginning of project and annual planning cycles. What type of help do we need? Will our current project(s) provide professional growth for an intern? Will an intern enhance our group's research capacity? Once those questions are answered, it is important to correctly classify intern roles and expectations. Molly's internship had a mix of field, laboratory, and analysis roles. In internship announcements, I classified the time to be spent in each role with estimated percentages. This allowed candidates to match their interests and enter a position with shared expectations.

Application and Selection—*Stand out in the crowd, make your resume and reference letters pop, and prepare for your interview*

MG: There are many essential pieces to an internship application, and it is crucial that each section is done exceptionally well. To make things easier, I have designed a checklist (see Application Checklist) to help you visualize the application pieces and allow you to budget your time efficiently.

While I was completing internship applications, I focused my time and effort on requesting reference letters and finessing my resume—the two most impactful pieces of the internship application. First, choose your references. People are busy, and you want to be sure to contact them in advance so they have ample time to do an excellent job for you. Choose them wisely because lackluster recommendations could weaken your application. If your references do not know you well, they will be limited in what they can say about your capabilities. So, you will benefit most from choosing a person that is able to confidently comment

Application Checklist

- ☑ Cover letter (not always required)
- ☑ Personal information (name, addresses, family information)
- ☑ Academic information (GPAs, coursework, program information)
- ☑ Official/unofficial transcripts from high school and college
- ☑ Resume or curriculum vitae (include your references)
- ☑ Written statements (likely to be one to three per application, approximately 250–500 words each)
  - ☑ Personal statement—an outline of your diverse background, academic credentials and recognition, and/or other relevant experiences that have shaped your interests
  - ☑ Statement of interest—an outline that describes your area of interest and your career aspirations, and your personal and professional goals or objectives for the future
- ☑ Reference letters (usually one to three)

on many aspects of your academic work and personal attributes. Second, include a current resume. Your resume should be up to date and highlight your past experiences that are relevant to the position. Third, spend time writing, editing, and rewriting statement essays; colleagues, professors, and even your parents can make outstanding editors. Remember, these pieces can be completed ahead of time; adhere to a schedule because the deadlines approach quickly.

JK: I review candidates and internship applications with a team. Each one of us has our own style and intern attributes that we prioritize. I look for eagerness in the cover letter, a concise description of skills, and references that highlight a candidate's experience and passion for fisheries resources. Others are more focused on grades and the comprehensiveness of the resume. We talk through the candidate packages, serving as advocates for our choices, and debate selection criteria. Discussing applicants with a team highlights strengths and weaknesses that not all of us notice. Also, though interns with impressive prior experience are often great assets, I also work to provide candidates without experience an opportunity. This is where the passion of a statement of interest is essential. When MG was selected, we had two other interns with a mix of experience and that added a good balance to our laboratory. A word of caution to interns: deadlines can shift, an application may be incomplete, or an interview window may be very short so monitor e-mail daily.

MG: I knew that my interview was going to be conducted over the phone, so I had time to prepare. My preparation would have been similar for an in-person or video-conference interview, but I would have limited my notes and dressed in appropriate business attire. I made sure to have a comprehensive understanding of the two projects and an idea of the duties expected of me as an intern. I also generated a list of questions about the projects and the people with whom I would be working. These questions show the interviewing panel that you have done your homework and have already started to think about your involvement in their research. Most importantly, I tried to showcase my personality by expressing my sincere excitement

about the potential opportunity. I recall that one of the last comments I received from my interviewer was "Your enthusiasm is so refreshing." Make your passions and interests known! Once your interview is complete, the ultimate decision is now out of your hands.

JK: As a mentor, remember it is natural to be nervous, and part of a panel's job is to remove those nerves from the process. Personality types can impact interview dynamics so we try to have extroverts and introverts on our panels. I start with a general question: "Where did you grow up?" This helps the interview become more of a conversation. My goal is to have a structured conversation. I limit questions (six to nine) and use the same order of questions for each applicant. After the interviews, our team ranks and discusses the candidates. Based on the interview, we match the top candidates to specific slots. MG's experience and enthusiasm in the interview led her to a position on the research team that was very interactive with other team members.

Interns should remember that they will have an opportunity to ask questions. Having zero questions leads to an interview ending flat and telegraphs a lack of preparedness. Always be yourself and be honest, and do not overstate experience. It is a delicate balance. An interview is not a time to be humble. So, what is the difference? Overreach: "I have aged fish before and can age any fish without any instruction." Right balance: "I have aged about 300 fish and think I am getting better; I enjoy improving my skills." The second response shows level of experience and the desire to learn more. MG nailed these elements by discussing her stream ecology work. Finally, it is okay to use some fisheries jargon, but there is no need for big words. Relax and tell us about yourself and your experiences; we have all been on the other side of the table before so we really do understand.

The Internship—*Make the most of your time and work, build relationships, and learn about your professional self*

MG: In April of my junior year, I was awarded a Bradford Brown Student Internship position in the little town of Orono, Maine. Three weeks later, I had my driving route set, my car packed to the brim with my belongings, and a smile on my face as my dad and I began the trek from my house in Cincinnati, Ohio to Maine. I was eager for this adventure.

Eleven hundred miles and many Combos snack packs later, I was finally in Orono and ready to begin my internship the next day. By 10 a.m., I was standing outside in the middle of the freezing cold waters of Sedgeunkedunk Stream in waders and raingear while tallying Alewives *Alosa pseudoharnegus* migrating upstream. I was having the time of my life. Sure, the weather conditions could have been better. And yes, I was annoyed that my Smartwool socks were already soaked through. But I was appreciative of this first day. This particular situation taught me, as a new employee, the importance of adaptability in the workplace– it also taught me to keep an extra set of dry clothes nearby! From that point on, whether I was scheduled to tend fyke nets on the Penobscot River Estuary or track salmon movements using ultrasonic telemetry and sonar, I approached each day of my internship with the same earnestness and enthusiasm as I did on that first day in May. You will find that some days are tougher than others, but I wholeheartedly believe that a positive mental attitude is essential for a successful internship experience. You and your fellow interns are all going through the same thing, so rely on each other and talk to each other when the work gets difficult.

My first week in Orono was a busy one with introductions, driving and safety trainings, and daily fieldwork assignments. But once the work started to kick in, it did not take long for me and the other interns to acclimate to a regular schedule. After finally adjusting to my

new position, I sat down with JK and his team to discuss the individual research project I would spearhead. I was provided some initial help, but I was also expected to do most of the work on my own. You will realize that you are not your mentor's sole responsibility. To save time on his or her end, try to conduct your research independently, and if questions or complications arise, be prepared to address these on your own before you seek assistance from your mentor. Some days will be hectic, when knowing what to do and sticking to the schedule is nearly impossible. At these times, use your positive mental attitude and help in whatever facet you may be needed. For example, if someone needs you to drop everything and assist in fish surgeries, you do it!

JK: The arrival of interns is both mundane and exciting. First, we have a checklist of must dos: paperwork and training. Then, it is time for science. I give interns a complete overview of our program. It is a lot of information and can be overwhelming, but experience has shown that understanding the big picture helps them appreciate their vital role. Our interns often form the core of field crews (June through August), enter much of our data, and complete a majority of our scale measurements. So while they learn, they perform essential duties and quickly appreciate that there is no busywork. The first week immerses interns in laboratory culture and hands-on work experience. The next week, I engage them in planning and selecting an independent research project that combines our needs and their interests. The remaining weeks combine assigned tasks and their research projects. For us, MG's project was very successful because of effective communication. I facilitate independence (my travel and workload help, too), but also try to monitor to see if interns are struggling. This is a balancing act—challenging someone compared to overwhelming them is a thin line and highly variable between individuals. Because of my travel schedule, I make a point to stop into the interns' workspace, even it if is only for five minutes each day. Valuable insights for me and lessons for them have happened through this unstructured check-in. My biggest tip for interns is to not be afraid to ask questions–the busier someone is, the more likely you can learn a lot from them. One-on-one time with interns is my favorite part of my job. The energy, enthusiasm, and free-thinking of young professionals gives mentors a boost equivalent to a Starbucks visit and reminds us of why we got into fisheries in the first place. I initiate regular meetings with interns and encourage interns to plan them, too. MG initiated meetings and always had her questions outlined and organized, which resulted in effective outcomes.

We both believe a key to making the most of your internship opportunities is expecting to learn from everyone, not just your mentor, but also biologists, technical professionals, staff from other agencies, and your fellow interns. These people are your resources–use them. An effective intern asks questions of everyone and treats everyone as a valued resource. This leads not only to learning about the science and techniques used, but also to learning about the best ways to deal with people in a workplace.

Beyond the Internship—*Expand your network and maintain your newfound professional relationships*

For many interns, their experience is ephemeral and becomes part of their resume with limited mentor interaction other than a couple of years of references requests. As mentors, we hope all experiences are useful educationally to the intern and provide our team with added short-term capacity. Sometimes, this professional relationship continues and adds to the professional network of both intern and mentor. This has been our experience, and cowriting this personal vignette is possible because of the relationship we have maintained outside of

the internship. The mentor–intern relationship can evolve to a more collegial connection over time, but growing this connection involves effort on part of both intern and mentor.

When MG entered graduate school, she worked to build and sustain many professional relationships she made in Maine. She kept JK informed of her latest accomplishments and what was going on in her career and life. In turn, JK kept MG updated on the status of Maine fisheries and passed along notices of professional opportunities. Sustaining these connections is sometimes difficult, but each person gains from an expanded network. From an intern's perspective, when you ask for a reference letter three years after your departure it lets your mentor provide a current perspective. For the mentor, it is great to see the professional growth of the former intern. For both, it may open up new networks in other parts of the country or world.

We both encourage becoming or staying active in professional societies like the American Fisheries Society. At annual meetings, you can catch up with each other and introduce members of your new professional network. You can also volunteer in these groups and sometimes work long distance with each other to further expand your network. The fisheries field is a small world, and before you know it, your network will be a web that truly extends from coast to coast.

Social networking sites now serve as tools for maintaining connections. Although combining your personal and professional worlds can be tricky, it is a current reality. We see a continuum of social networks from the professional LinkedIn to the more unreserved Facebook. Both can have a role in networking, depending on how you use them. LinkedIn is like a living resume, and content there is meant to be profession-related. Facebook is trickier: the type of posts you write and banter you engage in is exposed to both personal and professional acquaintances. Our suggestion is that if you are Facebook friends with your grandparents, then you probably could consider "friending" your mentors and interns.

Concluding Remarks

The process of obtaining an internship seems daunting. We believe that all science-based internships, whether they may fit your interests perfectly or only roughly, are worthwhile for your personal and professional growth. In your internship, remember that a positive attitude in all types of situations, even those unfamiliar and uncomfortable, goes a long way. Be game for anything and everything, and always be willing to pitch in and assist your colleagues and fellow interns. For the mentor, make the internship process a group endeavor. Involve your team in the selection process, encourage them to mentor, and help them become independent mentors. Interns not only add capacity to your team, but also help your team become more cohesive by providing fresh perspectives and new questions. Remember that an internship is usually only a 10-week-sample at one location, but still a meaningful learning experience. We feel that every intern grows and learns about the real world of fisheries and gains an experience of working with folks with diverse personalities and management styles. Discovering that fisheries science offers what you want is important, but discovering what elements are not for you is also valuable. We encourage you to consider an internship that helps you with that realization.

Biographies

Molly J. Good is a doctoral student in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability at Michigan State University. She is working with

University Distinguished Professor Dr. Bill Taylor and Dr. Ed McGarrell to improve fisheries enforcement strategies on a global scale. Molly earned her M.S. graduate degree in the School of Marine and Environmental Affairs at the University of Washington and her B.S. undergraduate degree in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University. After graduate school, she will continue her learning internationally and hopes to one day serve as a mentor to students and emerging professionals in the fisheries community.

John F. Kocik has been a supervisory research fishery biologist at NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service Northeast Fisheries Science Center for more than 20 years. He works on salmon population dynamics and anadromous ecosystems. His current interests include expanding marine animal telemetry networks and data systems to better understand the ecology of anadromous and other fish across seascapes. John earned his biology B.S. at the State University of New York Plattsburgh where his first mentor was Gerhard "Gerry" Gruendling. Also a Spartan, John earned an M.S. and Ph.D. in fisheries science from Michigan State University where his most influential mentor, Bill Taylor, was his advisor.