

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Education: The Real-World Classroom

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All the sweat and toil you put in as a college student is meant to prepare you for the real world. But every student and future employer agree that some experience outside of the classroom is vital—not only to get you ready for life after graduation, but to either justify (or change) the career choice you've made.

Internships are an obvious way to get that real-world experience. The right ones look great on a résumé, offer priceless new skills, and even end with some new friendships and future contacts.

And the value isn't just for the student—employers and businesses can gain a lot by offering internships. Sure, you get a few extra hands during the busy season, but you're also supporting the industry by helping to train a future talent ... who could one day be a permanent employee at your business.

The benefits of offering internships

There are many industry businesses that offer internships—some of them for many years: Longwood Gardens has had interns since 1957, and Tagawa, Ball Horticultural Company and Midwest Groundcovers has each had an internship program for over 30 years.

The success of their internship programs speaks to how valuable they've been to both the business and the students who've spent time there during countless summers. And there are four primary benefits to opening your doors to students:

"It's our way of supporting the industry because we're providing future talented individuals summer work experience tied to their academic training," explained Mike Williams, Director of Human Resources for Ball.

"It's good for the students—we want bright young people coming into this industry," said Cara Teuber, Human Resources Manager for Midwest Groundcovers. "We want to build a relationship with all the students in these schools because it is a small industry and we could cross paths with any of these students somewhere down the road."

"The interns come into departments that sometimes are relatively small and have a very low turnover. As a result, those departments have an opportunity to review their training efforts," said Bill Kluth, GM at Tagawa Greenhouses.

And lastly, "if we got an outstanding student and we have an opening that the student is interested in, we would be foolish not to offer a job opportunity," Bill said. "And as such, we have hired interns fairly regularly and have enjoyed having them with us."

All of these businesses have well-established programs that offer students from all around the country options

where they can get some hands-on experience, regardless of where their concentration of study is. Midwest Groundcovers and Ball hire most of their interns to work in specific areas during the summer, based on the student's interests. At Tagawa, the student spends time in every area of the company—from production to sales to customer service—to get a more well-rounded view of how to run a horticulture business. Longwood Gardens offers three-month summer internships or year-long internships for students who are in between undergrad and graduate school or who can take a semester off to work.

Having interns at their companies is a positive experience for the managers and staff, who always look forward to learning who the new interns will be every year. Bill said it's nice to get some fresh blood in to shake things up a bit.

"The students come with a very enquiring mind and they're asking questions. They're sometimes silly and that really brightens up a department and gets everyone laughing and having a good time," said Bill. "We take our work seriously—and they do, too—but they come with a little bit of a different angle. They ask, 'Why are you doing that?' and we have to step back and ask, 'Why are we doing that?'"

Campus recruitment

So where do they find these students? Or more aptly, where do the students find them? The most important point of contact is the faculty at the local colleges and universities. These professors and teachers are invaluable to the people who are coordinating these internship programs. And they help connect them to students in a variety of ways.

Mike and a few colleagues at Ball visits about seven or eight universities every year where they can meet with the students face-to-face and see who may be interested in a summer internship. They interview about 10 students per visit, which amounts to a lot of interviews, but it's a great way to get to know them and maintain a good relationship with the school.

Every year, Longwood Gardens has about 35 internship spots to fill, including six to nine for the summer, so they do a fair amount of recruiting to fill them up. Dr. Brian Trader, Director of Domestic & International Studies for Longwood, said that one of the biggest events they attend is the National Collegiate Landscape Competition. There are over 60 schools there every year, so it allows them to choose from the best students. Brian also guest lectures at the schools to promote Longwood Gardens to the students. And it doesn't hurt that their internship program is so robust and over 50 years old. Good old word of mouth works, too, so they don't have to do much local advertising, he said.

Midwest Groundcovers attends career fairs, but Cara likes to reach out to the schools a couple of times a year to really get to know the students. "We reach out to the schools and sometimes put on tours. And we'll attend their Horticulture Club meetings as well," she said.

There also are many industry scholarships and grants available for horticulture students, which helps connect students to businesses. Bill said that Tagawa recruits heavily from the Vic & Margaret Ball Scholarship program.

But all of the onus isn't just on the businesses to go and find interns—one group of students from the University of Florida has taken it upon themselves to help their peers connect more with plants and find internships and jobs in agriculture horticulture and plant science. The Collegiate Plant Initiative (CPI) is an organization founded by Virginia Frazier, Abbie Clark, Samantha Nuzzi and Gabriela Crista Perez with a goal to "get more plants into the hands of students." The idea came from one of Dr. Dave Clark's classes, so last year, the students decided to develop a program that would get them more involved that was different than their typical hort school projects.

"I was looking for something new in the plant world," said Virginia. "We started to do more social media and having the students in class connect with other students studying horticulture and we realized everyone was really active,

so we decided to expand to other universities.”

The program is only a year old, but they’ve already partnered with Penn State University and are working on adding more schools to the project. CPI plans to have a portal on their website where they can list job and internship opportunities for ag and hort students. Virginia said they’re also in the process of collecting résumés so they can share those with industry businesses looking for students.

“Through CPI, our main focus is getting that next generation, so within one to four years, your future employees and future consumers,” said Virginia.

Our industry may be small, but there are many opportunities for horticulture students to learn new life and career lessons outside of the classroom. And you don’t have to look for just those studying plants—there are options for business, marketing and communications majors to get internships in larger companies that have those departments.

Putting an internship program together is a large undertaking, but those businesses that have continued theirs for many years can tell you how much they get out of it. Brian explained that it’s another way for them to support the industry by providing career skills to the next generation.

“An internship absolutely should be providing that hands-on learning and the discipline—whether it’s growing greenhouse crops or doing retail,” he said. “There’s a ton of different avenues one can take in horticulture.”

Dos and Don’ts of Having an Internship Program

If you’re thinking of developing your own internship program, here are a few pointers from the experts I spoke with:

- **Start small.** Begin with maybe one or two interns. And “evaluate where your strengths are and where you can truly accommodate a young or novice learner,” said Dr. Brian Trader, Director of Domestic & International Studies for Longwood Gardens.
- **Have someone be in charge of the program.** If you’re just starting out, you can add it to someone’s current responsibilities, but “you’ve got to have someone who’s directly coordinating that educational experience, is a liaison with the school or college, and a resource to the intern,” said Brian.
- **Reach out to local schools and colleges.** You can start with the community colleges, and then once your program is more established and if you want to add more interns, you can contact the four-year universities. Maintain those relationships—college professors and faculty are vital; they know their students best and can help point you in the right direction.
- **Make sure you have an actual project for them to do.** Don’t hire college students to fill in the hole where you’re missing regular labor—dragging a hose around for three months isn’t an internship. “It needs to be meaningful work,” said Mike Williams, Director of Human Resources for Ball Horticultural Company. “And it needs to be something that they can either write a paper about or go back and make a presentation in class.”
- **Make sure the project is challenging and valuable to both you and the student.** If you’re creating busy work for them to do, then it will be a waste of both of your time. The project should be something that you’d be doing anyway and that you need a skilled set of hands for.
- **Train your staff.** Make sure the people working with the interns know what’s expected and to make sure it’s an educational learning experience.
- **Be truthful on the job description.** Virginia Frazier, co-founder of the Collegiate Plant Initiative, said

a common complaint she's heard from her peers is that the internship description said one thing and when they arrived they were doing something completely different ... and not in a good way.

- **Conduct interviews.** At the very least, talk to the potential interns on the phone. Don't just accept the first couple résumés you get. Skype or FaceTime interviews are ideal.
- **If possible, provide housing or other type of benefit.** Many businesses provide free or inexpensive housing and Longwood even allows their interns to use a company car. It's a very nice benefit to have and allows you to choose from a bigger pool of potential students, said Mike. Brian said Longwood also provides health insurance for interns that are there for more than nine months. Smaller operations may not be able to provide housing, but maybe a meal or two a week could be a nice perk for a cash-strapped college student.
- **Keep tabs on the student.** Check in often to make sure things are going well and that the student is staying busy and engaged. You can also address any issues or concerns they have that maybe they were too reluctant to bring to your attention before. Plus, some students have a hard time being away from home for months at a time, especially if they're from out of state. They may find themselves feeling lonely or isolated, said Bill Kluth, GM at Tagawa Greenhouses, so make an effort to try and connect with them, guiding them to go out and explore their temporary homes outside of work.
- **If you can, don't keep the internship to one area.** Allowing the student to spend some time in different areas of your business offers them a well-rounded experience and may help them better focus on a path they want their career to take.
- **Be respectful and don't patronize the young folks.** Just like you don't like being pigeonholed into a category, neither do the young men or women you'll be mentoring. One industry professional told Virginia that "Millennials are lazy and too stupid to operate a shovel." There are good and bad workers of every age, so don't paint the students with a broad brush of pre-conceived notions.
- **Be flexible.** Remember that they're a student that's an intern, not a regular employee, said Bill. Things will come up where they'll need to take a weekend off or have a friend come to visit. As long as it's not significantly interfering with their work, you can give them a little scheduling leeway.
- **Invite them to activities outside of work.** Yes, they're there to work, but make sure they don't become summertime hermits. Make sure they have things to do on their day off, said Mike, especially if they're not from the area. "Let them gain from the cultural experience of being in the community," he said. "Social time is important for them." **GT**