Landing an Internship with a Non-Profit

1. **How would a student get started on their internship search within the nonprofit sector?**

   - **Be clear about the kind of work you’d like to do:** One thing people tend to underestimate is the sheer size and diversity of the nonprofit sector. On the one hand, this is exciting as there really is a place for everyone! On the other hand, this means there is no single path to landing an internship or building a career in this sector. Of course, you don’t have to have it all figured out, but there is a huge difference between “I want a nonprofit internship” and “I want to intern at an education-focused nonprofit in Cleveland where I can put my writing, research, and social media skills to work.”

   - **Reach out to current interns:** If you have a particular organization or industry in mind, find a few interns who are already there. Ask them about their experiences, what they’re learning, what their next steps are, and how they landed the opportunity.

   - **Ask your network for introductions and guidance:** Does your career center know about nonprofit internships? How about your alumni office...can they introduce you to grads who are hiring at nonprofits? Or outside of school---are there nonprofits you volunteer with or that your family and friends support? Let people know you’re looking for opportunities, you’ll be surprised by the advice and support you might receive.

   - **Hop online:** Idealist.org has over 13,000 (!!!) internships listed by nonprofits, government agencies, and social enterprises from around the world.

2. **When interviewing for a nonprofit internship, how can a student set themselves apart?**

   - **Do research about the organization before you arrive:** In addition to understanding their mission, has the organization been in the news recently? Who are the organization’s leaders and what have they accomplished? Good research helps you craft better answers and questions and gives you a sense of how you might fit in. Additional information can be found here: [http://idealistcareers.org/5-things-to-research-before-your-job-interview/](http://idealistcareers.org/5-things-to-research-before-your-job-interview/)

   - **Emphasize what you can contribute AND what you hope to learn.** Yes, an internship is a learning experience, but hiring someone is a big deal. It can’t be all about what you want.
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- **Ask smart questions:** What would you consider to be the most important aspects of this internship? What are some of the characteristics of past successful interns? Do you have any concerns about my qualifications as a potential intern? Here is a list of job interview questions:

- **Prepare for common questions:** Why this internship? What are your strengths and weaknesses? I recommend Jenny Blake's interview spreadsheet, which helps you gather information to common interview questions.
  [https://drive.google.com/a/idealist.org/previewtemplate?id=1DcQfctOvJp-PA5T_YKr04zQ_8ZOlyG8-HvUBSaYwk&mode=public#](https://drive.google.com/a/idealist.org/previewtemplate?id=1DcQfctOvJp-PA5T_YKr04zQ_8ZOlyG8-HvUBSaYwk&mode=public#)

- Be nice and professional. Seems obvious, but I’m putting it here anyway.

  3. **I’ve heard that many internships within the nonprofit sector are unpaid. Is this true? What might be the value of having an unpaid internship for a nonprofit organization?**

  It’s called the job-seeker catch 22: You need experience to get a job but how can you get experience if you can’t land a job? Internships give you a leg up in terms of getting the experience you need to land better jobs in the future. However, there is a big debate in the nonprofit sector about the ethics around unpaid internships, specifically how they exclude people who can’t afford to take on an unpaid opportunity and how it can be hypocritical to support social change yet not pay people for their labor. Read about this debate here:

  4. **What makes an intern different from a volunteer in the nonprofit world?**

  **Legally?** You can learn about that here from the Department of Labor:
  [http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm](http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm) and here
  [http://form1023.org/what-are-employees-interns-volunteers](http://form1023.org/what-are-employees-interns-volunteers)

  **In terms of your career:** How volunteer opportunities and internship opportunities look vary from org to org but internships tend to be a bit more structured in terms of duties, title, support, and time than volunteer opportunities. The article I reference
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above from Nonprofit Quarterly also explores the difference between an intern and volunteer in terms of how they work within a nonprofit.

5. **What skills could a student focus on developing in their classes and/or activities that might be valuable to showcase on their resumes when seeking an internship in the nonprofit sector?**

Two things:

1. **A commitment or interest in the social sector, demonstrated through volunteering or praxis.** Yes, courses are important, but getting hands-on experience is always best.

2. **The ability to start and complete a project that has compelling and successful results.** You want to demonstrate that you’re a high achiever and can get things done.

6. **What are some tips that will help them have a successful internship with a nonprofit organization?**

**Make sure you get tangible accomplishments under your belt.** You want to show future employers you can be successful so work with your manager on setting clear goals. Here’s how to keep track of your accomplishments at work [http://idealistcareers.org/are-you-keeping-track-of-your-accomplishments-at-work/](http://idealistcareers.org/are-you-keeping-track-of-your-accomplishments-at-work/)

**Set personal goals.** Outside of what you need to do on the job, are there skills you want to learn? People you want to meet? Leverage the internship to help you get there.

**Network with your coworkers.** I still keep in touch with people I interned with. You can meet a lot of wonderful people.

**Learn how to manage your manager.** Best piece of advice I’ve ever gotten, not just for internships but for work in general. This is likely the most important relationship you’ll have at work so getting a good sense of his/her needs and how you’ll best work together is key. [http://idealistcareers.org/the-dos-and-donts-of-managing-up/](http://idealistcareers.org/the-dos-and-donts-of-managing-up/)

**Good luck!**

Allison Jones is the editor of IdealistCareers.org, a publication of Idealist.org that shares tips and tricks for people who want social impact careers. Join Idealist Careers on Twitter @IdealistCareers or on Facebook at facebook.com/IdealistCareers.