

# Establishing An Intern Program

*A valuable activity that can benefit the student and your course.*

by GEORGE HAMILTON

**T**HE ROLE of the golf course superintendent has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Not only has turfgrass management evolved into a very technical discipline, but the superintendent's role has expanded to include many responsibilities far removed from turf-related topics. These changes have created a seasonal demand for experienced workers within the golf course industry.

Turfgrass management students are helping to meet this demand. Many colleges and universities offering a turfgrass science curriculum make internships a requirement or elective for their programs. Internships can vary from being project-specific to an on-the-job training or apprenticeship. For project-specific internships, the students develop a plan of action for a particular project with the help of their academic advisor and the golf course superintendent for whom they will be working. The student completes a report upon returning to campus and is given academic credit for the experience.

The on-the-job training internships may or may not be for credit. Although there is no particular project to complete, the students usually have general guidelines to follow and certain goals to achieve.

Internships in either form can be of great benefit to both the student and the internship provider. Some graduates return to their internship golf course to gain additional experience or to fill vacant supervisory positions. This hiring practice is usually successful because the graduate is familiar with the people and the operation, and vice versa.

## Important Accommodations and Considerations for an Internship Program

The most important accommodation of an internship program is housing. The housing can be on- or off-site, although on-site housing is much more convenient and efficient. If housing is not provided, the intern must locate and secure housing before the employ-



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ment begins and then must consider a lease, furniture, and other necessities. Most students don't have the time during school to take care of all of these arrangements, especially if the golf course is a great distance from school. It's much easier for students to show up at the internship site with a trunk load of dirty laundry.

Other accommodations that courses can provide are meals, golfing privileges, limited or unlimited overtime, and a competitive wage. The hourly wage is always an item for consideration, but most interns do not make it the most important factor of their decision. They do, and rightfully so, contemplate the type and quality of experience that they are going to receive.

The superintendent can attract potential students by defining and developing an intern position within the management hierarchy. It is very important that management characterizes the intern position as one very different from a regular crew position. **If management does not utilize turf**

**students differently from other seasonal employees, then the turf students are really just seasonal employees.** Superintendents need to structure internships so that the students not only gain new knowledge and experience, but also contribute to the operation with their knowledge and experience.

Internship positions should have some level of responsibility associated with them. After all, most interns should only be a year or so from being in a position of responsibility. They should be put in a position that requires long hours and an *on-call* status. The interns should realize they will be the ones who will be expected to come in early, stay late, or work weekends in order to get tasks completed. Too many students have gravitated into assistant and superintendent positions believing the work week consists of 40 hours during the week and three hours on Saturday morning! When interns experience true-to-life working conditions, they have fewer surprises early in their careers.



Interns also should be involved in chemical and fertilizer applications to some extent. They should be far enough along in their education that they have a good understanding of equipment calibration and pesticide handling. Students also should be exposed to irrigation system operation and repair, and water management philosophies and techniques. Interns also could spend a couple of days with a mechanic and in the shop to gain mechanical experience. All of the golf course management staff can provide educational opportunities for interns.

One thing that most interns are interested in is spending time with the golf course superintendent. They like to have the opportunity to discuss *why* things are being done or *how* things are being done. Students appreciate the opportunity to have good lines of communication between themselves and the upper-level management. It allows them to learn more and makes them feel like they are part of the *team*.

Interns can learn and benefit by being a part of another team as well. Many times golf courses rely on volunteers or crew members from surrounding courses for tournament preparation. Allowing interns to work at local, regional, or national tournaments broadens their experience and gives them an opportunity to meet and work with other people in the industry.

### Tips on Recruiting Interns

First, management should develop a true internship program with some of the aforementioned components. Students have more interest in internship programs that are well developed and organized. Some schools have abundant requests for interns. For example, at Penn State University, we had more than 150 requests last year. Our students were seeking internships that were well-established and had a reputation for providing good experience.

Students have different internship objectives and requirements. However,

most interns are seeking a **mentor**. Interns want someone who will take interest in the needs of a developing professional. They want to work for someone who will go out of their way to teach and train them. This point sounds good and seems easy enough to do, but it is very difficult to implement in the hectic world of golf course maintenance. The company line can quickly become "we don't have time for that now; we'll do it later on in the season." But the season is never long enough to have those learning opportunities happen, and the intern ends up dissatisfied. The golf course may have difficulty getting interns in the future if it establishes that type of reputation.

Golf courses can seek interns by communicating with academic institutions that offer a turfgrass management curriculum. Some schools place their interns, and others provide their students with internship opportunities and allow the students to select for themselves. Also, some schools have active student turf clubs that have booths at state and national trade shows. Many times the turf clubs will have a binder of student résumés of those who are looking for employment.

The Golf Course Superintendents Association of America is offering an internship referral service for members who are seeking interns. The World Wide Web is another resource that can be used to locate students looking for internship opportunities. TurfNet ([www.turfnet.com](http://www.turfnet.com)) is one of the turfgrass-related sites that posts employment opportunities.

Developing a quality internship program takes time and dedication. It doesn't happen in a year or two. It takes planning and aggressive recruiting to get started. Once your program has been viewed as successful, word-of-mouth will send students to you. However, the competition for interns is on the rise and even the best programs will not get all of the interns they need every year. An internship program is a valuable activity that benefits both the student and the golf course.



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