

# INTERNS: A Valuable Resource with the Upper Hand

There may be more internships available than there are students to fill them, but a well-defined internship program can successfully attract interns to almost any golf facility.

BY JOHN KAMINSKI



*Interns are a valuable resource to the golf course operation.*

**A**ttracting an intern can be a frustrating process for golf course superintendents. Despite the declining job market and declining or flattening game of golf, filling an internship position is one of the few instances where the students have the upper hand. Most universities receive hundreds of requests from golf facilities looking for interns, but they have only a limited number of students and can nowhere nearly fulfill the requests. While the high-end private clubs may get dozens of applications and have their pick of available interns, most golf facilities have given up on the idea of attracting career-oriented students to work for the summer.

So how do superintendents attract individuals from this limited pool of students? I think that the first place to

start is to recognize the resource that an intern can be for the facility. After recognizing the benefit to the facility, superintendents should then focus on developing an internship program *and* ways to attract potential candidates.

## **INTERNS ARE A VALUABLE RESOURCE TO THE GOLF FACILITY**

Career-oriented turfgrass students may serve as a welcomed addition to any golf course maintenance crew. They generally bring with them some positive characteristics that, when utilized, produce another leader on your crew instead of just another crew member.

Turfgrass interns are usually willing to take risks, are generally hard working, and, in many cases, have prior golf

course experience. While I put a lot of qualifiers in there (e.g., “generally hard working”), I find that, given the opportunity, students meet or exceed the expectations of their supervisor. In addition to learning, students can be a great resource to the facility. They often bring with them new ideas and insight into new media and technology, all of which may benefit the golf course.

With many of the positive qualities that interns can bring to a golf facility, they are too often hired in the role of a seasonal employee and not given the opportunity to contribute or develop the much-needed skillset required for them to become future turfgrass managers. Providing students with a clear outline of what they will accomplish in addition to providing them with



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extra incentives for their role on the crew can result in a win-win situation for both the intern and the golf course.

## DEVELOP AN INTERNSHIP PLAN

Just like any well-run business, golf course maintenance departments must define what their mission will be when it comes to hosting interns. Simply telling students that they will be exposed to “all facets of the golf course maintenance program” is not a defined plan. A well-written “Internship Program” should give the students a better idea of what they can expect from the supervisor and the internship, as well as motivate them to want to be a member of your team.

Some things to consider for your internship packet include the following:

- Define the mission of your internship.
- Share your agronomic philosophies.
- Outline your management structure, including where interns fit within the team.
- Outline the expected duties and responsibilities of the intern.
- Describe educational opportunities offered (e.g., guest lecturers, tournament experience, etc.).

- Provide details of the golf facility.
- Summarize the benefits offered (salary, housing, etc.).

A part of the internship plan should recognize that not every student is going to bring the same set of skills to the internship. Having a single internship philosophy for everyone will likely result in a less-than-ideal internship for the student and for the golf course.

This should be looked at as an opportunity to fine-tune your internship program to the level of student that may apply to work at your facility. I have tried to simplify the categorization of the internships into three levels.

**1. Basic Internship.** Students have to start somewhere, and this should not be looked at as a hindrance but as more of an opportunity for supervisors. In fact, many superintendents are happy to take students with limited to no experience. There are some considerations, however, when hiring an entry-level intern. You should be clear with students and let them know that you will attempt to expose them to a variety of experiences while making it clear that they will be part of the general crew. This career is not for everyone, and students should be



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challenged and tested to ensure that they are certain this is going to be the right industry for them. Over promising the opportunities that these students will be exposed to will likely result in a failed internship or, at the very least, a disappointed intern.

**2. Intermediate Internship.** Perhaps the most difficult to accommodate are those students who have some, but limited experience. This level usually provides an opportunity to be involved in a variety of tasks, but this often

depends on the individual student. Students who are hardworking, willing to take risks, and are career-oriented will likely excel and be given more responsibilities, while those who lack the motivation and drive will likely be given the duties typical of an entry-level intern. The latter usually pertains to students who think that raking bunkers for two summers at a high-end club gives them the skills necessary to lead crews in year three.

**3. Advanced Internship.** Internships falling into the “advanced” category usually are developed to take advantage of students with several years of golf course maintenance experience. These students are often involved with the management staff, take on leadership roles among the crew, and are relied upon heavily for important duties on the course. While not every student is ready for this role, those who are ready can be an invaluable and often relatively inexpensive resource for the facility.

Too often, I find that golf course superintendents want to lump student interns into a single category that comes with the same pay, the same responsibilities, and the same expectations. With the creation of all types of positions on a golf course (e.g., first assistant, second assistant, assistant in training, etc.), I find it entirely reasonable to do the same with the various degrees of internships.

Regardless of the internship category, it is important that the golf facility deliver on the promises made to each student. If the student leaves disappointed, you can be assured they will share their experience with other students. The trickle down of this can result in a three- to four-year period during which interns avoid that particular facility.

### HOW DO I GET AN INTERN TO WANT TO COME TO MY GOLF FACILITY?

So now that you have come up with a formalized internship plan that details

the expectations of each intern, it is time to figure out how to get them to want to work for you. Remember, the students have the upper hand since there are many more internships than there are interns. While this can seem like a painful process to some superintendents, the bottom line is that you have to sell your golf facility and your internship program in order to attract a student.

With my experience in developing a more structured internship program within Penn State’s golf course turf-grass management program, I have come to find that students are motivated by very different things when it comes to selecting an internship. Here are just a few examples of things my students look for from an internship:

**Education and mentoring.** By far the number-one feature that students seek in an internship is a mentor who will take the time to educate them on the golf course. Career-oriented students are hungry for experience but



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also for insight into why tasks are done certain ways or how decisions are made. Simply assigning daily tasks and expecting students to perform them is not mentoring.

**Wide range of duties.** Interns want to be involved in as many different aspects of the maintenance program as possible. Having and sticking to a plan to involve them with a variety of tasks ranging from agronomics to management to networking will enhance their portfolio and marketability upon graduation.

**Potential positions in future.** Believe it or not, this is another factor taken into consideration by students who are completing their final internship prior to graduation. For golf facilities seeking interns, this should be seen as a positive trait. Students interested in being hired following graduation will likely be looking to work hard to impress their potential future employer, while future employers are given the opportunity to screen applicants for an entire season prior to deciding whether or not to hire them.

**Housing and salary.** I find these to be the least motivating aspects of an internship, but they often represent a necessity for some. The rising costs of tuition and the desire to work and live away from home often dictate what type of internship a student can choose. While many superintendents are not willing or do not have the capacity to put students in on-site housing, simply paying skilled interns a higher wage or providing a housing subsidy can be enough to persuade them to join your team.

**Recruitment.** This is where I get into hot water with golf course superintendents. Unless you're a top-10 golf course, simply posting an advertisement on a website or sending in a one-page flyer to a university is most likely not going to attract any students. In today's environment where the number of internships far exceeds the number of interns, golf course superintendents must be active in their recruitment efforts. Interaction with students at job fairs, communication with faculty members, and creative marketing via social media networks (search "Glencoe Turfcare" on You-



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Tube) are all ways to increase your chances of getting an intern. Students want to feel that they are going to be an important member of your management team, and you need to let them know that in fact they will be.

Attracting an intern is not always an easy task and requires a considerable amount of effort on the part of the golf course management team. In some cases, it can take several years for your internship program to gain the momentum needed to start attracting a steady stream of new students. In time, however, a well-defined internship program can

successfully attract interns to almost any golf facility.

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