



Intern Tips for Students

A guide to making the most of your internship experience

If you will have an internship, how can you make the most of your time at the organization? Whether this is your first professional work environment, or you have had multiple internships already, it is time to apply your coursework in a real-world context! This guide contains information about:

- Elements of a Quality Internship and Benefits for Students and Employers — pg. 1 - 2
- Creating Learning Goals — pg. 3 - 5
- Maximizing Each Stage of your Internship — pg. 6 - 9
- Questions for Reflection — pg. 8 -9

Implement these tips to maximize your personal and professional development while interning. Have fun!

But first, what is an internship?

*A form of supervised experiential learning that combines critical thinking and intentional reflection within a framework of a liberal arts education. By completing internships, students are able to sharpen professional skills, develop career interests and employer contacts, assess strengths, and connect classroom theories to practical, real world settings. Internships offer employers the ability to evaluate and mentor upcoming talent.*¹

Components of a quality internship include:

- The experience must be an **extension of the classroom**: a learning experience that provides for applying the knowledge gained in the classroom.
- The skills or knowledge learned must be **transferable** to other employment settings.
- The experience has a **defined duration**, and a **job description** with desired qualifications.
- There are **clearly defined learning objectives**/duties outlined by the employer prior to the intern beginning the internship.
- There is **supervision by a professional** with expertise and background in the field of the internship.
- There is **routine feedback** by the experienced supervisor.
- There are **resources**, equipment, and facilities provided by the host employer that support learning objectives/goals (e.g., computers, desk, training materials).

Can I earn academic credit? Do I have to earn credit?

At NDMU, academic credit-bearing options vary by professional school or department. It might be possible for you to get credit for your internship! You must pre-arrange this *before* the internship; students cannot retroactively receive credit for a completed internship. Many students get this important experience without the structure of a faculty-supervised internship course. If that is the case, reach out to career@ndm.edu for additional support.

How are internships mutually beneficial?

¹ Note. Based off of the "[NACE Position Statement on U.S. Internships](#)," Adopted by the NACE Board of Directors July 2011.

Benefits for students	Benefits for Employers
Gaining an understanding of different careers and evaluate their career path.	An opportunity to strengthen recruitment and hiring efforts with a continuous pool of highly qualified students
Setting and accomplishing work-related goals	Interns are enthusiastic, bring new ideas and provide fresh perspectives
Developing professional skills and experience that make them more attractive candidates to recruiters	Supervising interns allows employees to gain supervisory/mentorship experience as a professional development point
Confidence gained when they have tangible evidence of their contributions and growth	Internship programs promote community involvement by teaching the prospective work force—a great public relations tool
Connecting with professionals in a field or organization of interest	Interns can support projects that employees otherwise might not have time to complete
Chance to apply classroom knowledge and training to professional context.	

Common internship expectations

Students expect from their employer:

- A clear job description
- A chance to apply classroom knowledge and training
- An opportunity to contribute ideas
- Effective supervision / mentorship
- Assigned work that is meaningful
- Support towards meeting the learning goals that they define at the beginning of the internship
- An opportunity to earn credit and/or be paid
- An opportunity to build relationships and network
- The ability to reflect on course learning in the context of the experience

Employer site provides intern:

- A clearly defined role in the organization and workspace. This includes a complete job description, defined start and end dates, and expected hours per week
- Thorough onboarding and orientation to the organization
- Defined learning objectives that are consistent with the student’s academic course of study
- Exposure to as many parts of the organization as is possible
- An opportunity for consistent mentoring, training and feedback
- An opportunity to see realistic professional tasks representative of the industry

Faculty supervisor provides (*only if student is receiving academic credit for the internship*):

- A means to earn academic credit
- A well-crafted set of learning objectives connecting student learning with experience in the field
- Advising for the duration of the internship
- An assessment of the intern’s performance
- Varied course assignments that provide guided learning and reflection applying classroom theories to a professional work environment



Learning Goals

To make the most of your internship, a key first step is to outline what you plan to gain out of it by setting learning goals! In addition to building skills, internships are valuable because they create a **sense of purpose** - both personal and professional - based on what you learn and the types of activities that you accomplish during your internship.

Why is goal setting important?

At its core, goal setting helps you build the framework for a valuable internship learning experience.

Goals assist you in your internship by keeping you:

1. Motivated while moving through the transition of student life to professional life;
2. On task so that you have direction and clarity about your day to day duties;
3. Aware of a standard against which to measure your growth and progress as an intern;
4. **Focused on getting what you want to develop out of the internship - not just what the employer wants!**

Goals should be mutually beneficial!

Your supervisor's input will be valuable in determining the feasibility of goals to make sure that you are carrying out agreed upon activities and projects that meet both of your needs for the internship. You have specific goals that you want to accomplish and your supervisor has specific duties that need to be done.

You may be confronted during your internship with changes in what you are doing from day to day depending on the needs of the organization. If you have solid goals set prior to the internship, you will be better equipped to gear your day to day performance towards meeting those goals. *Research has shown that the act alone of setting goals has the ability to ensure that you meet at least some if not all of what you want to achieve.*

How do I set goals?

Based on the mutually agreed upon job description which outlines your tasks and responsibilities, you can create goals that focus on different areas of development:

- **Knowledge development:** understanding factual information associated with the industry or profession, and application of discipline-specific theories or concepts ("I will learn, understand, develop, etc.")
- **Professional career development:** exploring different career interests and learning about professions ("I will explore, talk to, etc.")
- **Skill development:** gaining skills and competencies that employers look for; this can be a combination of technical skills and [career competencies](#) ("I will acquire, conduct, create, schedule, build, etc.")

The best goals will be specific, actionable, and measurable. Consider the following as you develop your goals:

- **Specific:** What exactly do you want to achieve or develop? How? When? What is your timeline to achieve this overall goal? Are there milestones needed along the way?
- **Action Steps Needed:** Is your goal realistic and attainable given the available time and resources? What steps are needed? Who you will consult or shadow? What resources will you need?
- **Measurable:** How will you objectively measure your success? How will you know when you have met this goal? What tangible outcomes will you see (metrics) or hear (feedback) when you reach your goal?

Here are some example learning goals:

- ***I will understand the complete development and testing process for an iOS application by writing high quality source code for the beta release of the HealthNET Application at the end of July.***
 - This is a knowledge and skill-based goal. It is specific in learned outcome, deliverable, and timeline.

- ***I will meet with and shadow managers in different departments of marketing and product development to see which area interests me more.***
 - This is an exploratory professional development goal. The activity itself is specific and measurable in that it either will happen or not, but open-ended in terms of *how* and *when* it will happen.
- ***I will improve my public speaking and presentation skills by delivering a cumulative presentation on my research and findings to key stakeholders at various levels of the company, after weekly presentation-updates to my team for the entirety of the project.***
 - This skill development goal has a very specific deadline and tangible outcome, as well as weekly milestones outlined along the way.
- ***I will develop an understanding of fundraising event work by helping organize and run the OMSI Fundraising Gala event in August.***
 - This is another knowledge and skill-based goal. It is focused around one particular event with a timeline.
- ***I will write and distribute a press release by drafting and submitting one for the upcoming product launch pop-up party happening in October.***
 - This is a skill-based goal that is specific, measurable and has a timeline.

Communicate early and check in often!

Share these goals with your supervisor at the start of your internship so they can give meaningful assignments to you and incorporate relevant learning experiences throughout your time at the organization. When you communicate these goals to your supervisor and team, it creates transparency about what you are hoping to gain from the experience. Together you can evaluate your goals and create a roadmap towards achieving them. They cannot help you meet your goals if you have not communicated them.

It is recommended that you have regular check-ins with your internship supervisor. One topic you should periodically check in about is progress regarding your learning goals.



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Create your own Learning Goals

Intern name:

Intern Title:

Organization:

Learning Goal #1:

Action Steps – What, when, where and how will you accomplish your goal?

Measurement of Goal – How will you objectively measure your success? What are the metrics?

Learning Goal #2:

Action Steps – What, when, where and how will you accomplish your goal?

Measurement of Goal – How will you objectively measure your success? What are the metrics?

Learning Goal #3:

Action Steps – What, when, where and how will you accomplish your goal?

Measurement of Goal – How will you objectively measure your success? What are the metrics?

Learning Goal #4:

Action Steps – What, when, where and how will you accomplish your goal?

Measurement of Goal – How will you objectively measure your success? What are the metrics?

Intern Stages of Development

Understand the developmental stages of an internship: **Anticipation**, **Exploration**, **Contribution**, and **Culmination**. While everyone has a unique internship experience, there is a common progression of confidence, learning and participation for most interns. As you navigate and familiarize yourself with this new professional work environment, your self-confidence and abilities will develop over time. However, this is a journey and there will be different obstacles and opportunities for you to grow through and learn from.

1. **Anticipation:**

In this stage, it is normal to feel: eager, hopeful, motivated, anxious, and self-doubt.

You might wonder: What if I can't connect with my coworkers? What if I can't handle projects? How will I manage work-life balance? What if my supervisor thinks I know more than I actually do? Remember that they hired YOU because they believed in your abilities and wanted you on their team! Use that confidence to frame defining realistic expectations of your internship and communicate those to your supervisor to make sure you are on the same page regarding your role.

While some internships are structured and have established programs, others might be more informal or loosely organized. Wherever your internship falls on this spectrum, you'll want to do as much as you can to prepare for it before you start, and to maximize your experience once you begin! Follow these guidelines and you should be well on your way to a successful internship!

- **Set learning goals.** Spend some time setting learning goals that you want to accomplish during your internship. Goals could incorporate desired industry-related knowledge, skills, or abilities required for successful career advancement. Work with your supervisor at the beginning of the internship to develop expectations and a plan to ensure that the established goals are met, and check in regularly throughout the internship to see if you are on track to meet these specific goals.
- **Be a sponge during orientation.** The beginning of your internship will be focused on orientation and training. This will likely consist of: touring the facility, meeting other employees, learning about the organization, reviewing communication standards and workplace expectations, and meeting with your supervisor. During this period, you will learn a *lot* of new information and begin establishing a workplace identity and understanding of the organizational culture.
- **Ask questions!** While the employer expects a certain level of work from you, you are not expected to know everything. Take initiative to ask questions—don't expect anyone to read your mind if you're lacking information or are confused. Be open-minded about new ideas and procedures. Remember that you don't know everything and that your professors didn't teach you everything; be open-minded.
- **Be patient.** At the beginning, you might feel overloaded with all of this information, while simultaneously feel underutilized and underwhelmed by routine tasks. The sooner you understand what the organization does and how it operates, the sooner you can assume responsibilities and be productive. Workplace structure and pace is very different than the classroom and might take some adjustment.

Note generational differences: As a Gen Z'er, your communication style and workplace values might be different than those of your supervisor, who is likely to be at least one generation older than you. Work to see things from their perspective, and ask clarifying questions if you don't understand where they are coming from.



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2. **Exploration:**

In this stage, it is normal to feel curious, open, unsure, and underwhelmed/overwhelmed.

You might wonder: Who is my internship support system at and outside of work? How can I get more projects and meet other departments? Am I comfortable in this setting? Keep track of your questions, and take initiative to find answers. Continue to examine your expectations, goals and role to in order to feel grounded and have a sense of purpose.

A few weeks into your internship, it's common to feel like you have things generally under control. You're getting more familiar with your coworkers, your job duties, and how the organization operates. As self-confidence in your workplace identity grows, you might start to picture yourself working in this field or industry someday! As you get into a good rhythm, guard against overconfidence and continue to seek support when needed.

- **Schedule regular meetings with your supervisor:** This might seem obvious, however if your supervisor is hard to get a hold of during the average work day or travels quite a bit, get regular check-ins on the calendar. You can share what you've worked on, ask clarifying questions, and get a sense of what work might be coming up next. Get feedback on areas of strength and ongoing areas for development, as well as check in on your learning goals.
- **Take advantage!** Use every opportunity presented to you to attend company or industry meetings, conferences, and events; participate in training workshops and professional development opportunities; and read all company materials.
- **Explore the field.** Internships are a way to explore industries and job functions that you have not yet had exposure to. Set up informational interviews with colleagues to learn about their role and career journey. Shadow different departments to see what else within the organization interests you.
- **Maintain an upbeat, positive attitude.** You will undoubtedly love some duties and projects more than others, but the key is to complete all your work assignments with the same level of positivity and professionalism. Successful interns demonstrate enthusiasm and a sincere interest in the company and their role.

When things go wrong, talk about it sooner rather than later.

If expectations and the reality of your internship are not aligning, have an honest conversation with your internship supervisor. Or, if you are struggling to communicate with your internship supervisor, ask for help! Reach out to people at NDMU to help you navigate communication with your supervisor so that you can have a fulfilling internship.

3. **Contribution:**

In this stage, it is normal to feel: accomplished, excited, independent, invested in the work, and more able to confront challenges.

As an emerging professional, you have a platform of performance within the workplace. You might be given more responsibilities from your supervisor, and can demand more from yourself too. Avoid being too hard on yourself and expecting perfection with every assignment—remember, you are there to learn!

You are more than halfway done with your internship! This is a great time to reflect on your experience so far. Think back to the expectations you had and the learning goals that you set at the beginning of your internship. With those in mind, here are some tips to help you make the most of the rest of your internship.

- **Document your contributions.** A goal with any internship is to leave it with some tangible results. Maybe you created a guidebook, computerized an inventory system, organized a fundraising event, met with clients, etc. Keep a journal to help you remember all you accomplished during your internship. Please check with your supervisor to see what work samples you can keep for future reference, and what are confidential company materials.
- **Acknowledge skill development.** It can be difficult to recognize and articulate the skills (“soft” and technical) developed while interning. These will be transferrable to future experiences inside and outside the classroom. Process with your supervisor or mentor: *what* do you do at work? But more importantly, *how* do you do it? How have you *gotten better* at it over time? Be confident that you have learned and grown during this experience!
- **Speak up!** If there are projects you’d like to work on or experiences you were hoping for, now is the time to advocate for yourself! Express your hopes and present thoughtful solutions as to how those items can be incorporated into the remainder of your internship.

Questions for mid-point reflection

- Which of your strengths are becoming apparent as effective tools in this internship and why? What affirms you in this role?
- In general, would you say the tasks you have been given so far have over-challenged you, under-challenged you, or been about right?
- Take a look at the Learning Goals you set for yourself at the beginning of the internship. Which of these has been met, not met, or is in process? Do you feel proud of what you’ve accomplished, disappointed in what you thought you’d be doing but haven’t yet, or a combo of the two?
- What else have you been learning?
- Have you and your supervisor disagreed yet? If so, how did that happen? How did it make you feel? How was it resolved?
- How is your confidence level now compared to the start of the internship?
- How has the organization compared to your expectations? What are the unwritten values or norms that you’ve learned about the workplace?
- How does your role, within this organization, impact the greater needs of the community?
- How are you growing professionally through challenges that you’ve faced in this role?



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4. Culmination:

In this stage, it is normal to feel proud, confident, sad, unfinished and not ready to leave.

You might wonder: Did I make a difference? Will I be missed? Did I learn what I wanted to? How can I apply my experience and expertise to future coursework? It can be confusing and hard when experiences come to an end, especially if you are transitioning back to an academic setting after your internship. Mixed emotions are common—identify and talk about them with your support system and peers.

As your internship comes to a close, consider how to end on a good note with your employer. One of the keys to navigating the lifelong career journey is utilizing your network to find your next step. This starts now, by connecting with professional contacts you have made during this internship. Your future self will thank you!

- **Arrange final feedback.** Towards the end of the internship, it's important to get some final feedback from your supervisor. Ask to arrange a time where you can have an informal discussion about your accomplishments, strengths, and opportunities they see for continued growth. If you are completing this internship for academic credit, both you and your supervisor will be asked to complete confidential evaluations, however we would encourage you to review these together after they've been completed.
- **Thank people.** Who has invested in you and made a positive impact on your internship experience? Thank your supervisor and any colleagues who you've appreciated. Handwritten cards are always a nice touch.
- **Stay connected.** Connect with your supervisor and colleagues on LinkedIn, and reach out periodically throughout the academic year just to stay in touch. These professional relationships are also a good source for getting other job-hunting advice and tips from their years of experience in the industry. If anyone you've worked with would be willing to write you a letter of recommendation or serve as a future reference, ask them now.
- **Prepare to tell your internship story.** Now that you've documented and reflected on your contributions, how will you remember and share these experiences in future applications and interviews (for another internship, job, post-grad service, or graduate school)? Consider updating your resume or creating a portfolio of your work while this is fresh in your memory. The Career Center can help you with these!

Questions for continued reflection

- What did you like best about the internship and why? Least?
- How are you different now than when your internship first started?
- What progress did you make on the learning goals you established at the beginning of your internship?
- What do you consider your greatest accomplishment? Were there any goals that you did not accomplish? What are your plans for working on them?
- What are your thoughts on how the work you've done during your internship connects to your vision of your future self?
- What new knowledge, skills, insights, and professional vocabulary have you gained from this internship?
- What interests have been sparked as a result of this experience?
- Was there anything that this internship confirmed you **do not** enjoy doing? Does this surprise you? Why?

For information and guidelines for **virtual or remote internships**, please review the [Virtual Internship Guidelines handout](#) on our website.

Adapted from:

Bridge.Jobs' "Employer Guide: Creating a Meaningful Learning Experience for Students"

University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts' "CLA Career Readiness Internship Guide: Making the Most of Your Internship"

University of Nebraska – Lincoln "Internship Toolkit for Employers"