Student Interns: Are They Worth the Bother?

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STUDENT INTERNSHIPS can provide valuable resources to criminal justice agencies. These internships, in which students work part-time for college credit, can be a "win-win" proposition for the students, who gain work experience; for the criminal justice professionals, who get help with many of their day-to-day duties; and to the clients, who benefit from the extra attention students can provide. If they are recruited, managed, and supervised properly, undergraduate and graduate student interns can make significant contributions to the agencies they serve. This article is based primarily on our experience with undergraduate interns in a juvenile justice setting.

Persons who oppose using student interns in probation, parole, or institutional settings make a good point. Students can be a bother. They come in as blank slates and need considerable time, attention, guidance, and encouragement. In the first few weeks, student interns are not much help to the overburdened probation officers or staff members to whom they are assigned. And when they finally are given some responsibilities, they ask numerous questions and even may make a few mistakes. But student interns can be highly productive. They can help accomplish important tasks and contribute skills useful to the agency.

Internships usually work this way: The criminal justice agency or institution essentially forms a contractual relationship with the local community college, four-year university, or graduate school. The agency agrees to provide students an opportunity to learn about the field. Students generally are matched with career professionals to learn what they do and to assist them. If they are successful, students leave after a semester or an academic year with a thorough understanding of the particular justice system field and an ability to perform the functions performed by their mentors.

The student should not be expected to be an expert, but should be comfortable in assisting with the day-to-day tasks performed by the probation or parole officer or the staff member in the residential setting. These tasks might include diagnostic interviews, report writing, presentence planning and assessment, or implementing case plans and goals developed with the client. Other activities might include surveillance and supervision functions, group treatment programs, and even court appearances. The graduate student might even help with staff development or training, agency needs assessment work, and programs and services analysis.

As with professionals hired, interns selected sometimes bring special skills and talents to the court or correctional setting. Not all interns are young and inexperienced. The intern who has already completed a career as a military officer or the intern who knows two or three languages can be a real asset and can offer specialized services.

No matter how talented or experienced, the intern still is somewhat of a drain on the professional during the first few weeks or months. The cost in the beginning or passive stage is real and often discourages professionals from wanting an intern. Some professionals simply do not see themselves in the teaching role. Others value their freedom and independence. Having an intern requires the professional to plan for two. It also requires that the professional be followed around, questioned, and occasionally even challenged. Some career probation officers or residential counselors do not relish anyone wanting to know why they do what they do or say what they say. The student intern's sponsor has to be open-minded and willing to teach good scheduling, case planning, service delivery, and job understanding. Not all professionals seek to share what they do in such an open and didactic fashion.

While some professionals may resent the young and inexperienced intern who brings in new thoughts, practices, and theories, other intern sponsors thrive on the energy and enthusiasm of students and welcome the opportunity to learn from them. The professional teaches the intern and the intern reciprocates by sharing what he or she is learning in school and other intern settings. Such benefits, however, usually are not realized until later in the internship. The cost accrues while the professional is helping the intern build a foundation to understand the agency, its mission, and the clients the agency serves. After this initial phase, the intern is given more independence and a hands-on role. When the intern can work independently, the true benefits are realized. Then the cost diminishes when compared to the benefit.

Only after a significant period spent building a foundation for the intern, answering a multitude of questions, and submitting to the logistical problems of being followed around from day to day does the professional begin to reap the rewards. Just as clear writing leads to clear thinking for the professional, having to explain clearly what he or she is doing often results in better thinking and planning. The simple fact that an intern is looking over the employee's shoulder may lead the employee to better practice and performance. Sharing goals and methods to reach them helps clarify them for the employee and inevitably produces a better employee.

When the intern becomes *active* and able to assist is when the agency, the employee, and the client most benefit. For instance, the probation officer can attend court hearings while the intern sees clients in a detention center. The

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residential staff members can tend to other duties while interns assist in running sports or recreational activities. Interns occasionally can attend court hearings while the probation officer is on vacation or away from the office. Interns can assist by taking residential or group home clients to medical and dental appointments and thus allow the probation officer or residential staff members to work with the larger group. Probation officers, therefore, save time and have the support of an unpaid assistant. Such time-saving need not be equated with a decrease in the quality of service. It is important to realize that probation, parole, or other justice system interns are working for recognition, encouragement, a future job, a positive job reference, and a good school grade. These are very strong motivators.

Frequently, student interns outperform career professionals. Interns are often willing to go the extra mile because they only have a very small group of clients to work with. The intern works only several days a week and is not overwhelmed with a high caseload. It is not uncommon to hear clients express appreciation for being able to spend several months working with an intern. Interns may give the impression of having more concern for the client and more time to spend with the client. Clients benefit from such attention.

Interns raised in another culture or in a family where English is not the first language can serve as an outstanding bridge between the agency and the cross-cultural client. The Spanish-speaking and Spanish-heritage intern can do a great deal to develop a working relationship with the Hispanic client who may find the non-Hispanic probation or parole officer threatening or difficult to trust.

Interns also have been known to bring technological expertise to an agency. The intern who walks in with a laptop during the first few days of an internship may have many talents that could benefit staff throughout the agency. Perhaps this intern can help redesign outdated forms and streamline paperwork. Or, perhaps, with the right computer software, this intern can convert the presentence report from English to Spanish in a matter of seconds.

Better service to clients and the court are not the only benefits. Some benefits are intrinsic, including the probation officer's ability to teach others his or her profession and to learn from the experience. Another intrinsic benefit is the senior status, generally uncompensated, that is afforded to the field training officer who is asked to and specifically recognized as an intern sponsor.

Less tangible benefits occur in the areas of goodwill and future networking. Not every intern who comes to a criminal justice agency will want to stay in that agency's line of work. In fact, colleges and universities wisely seek to place student interns in a variety of settings. A well-trained student should know something about law enforcement agencies, hospital social work, geriatrics, alternative education, and a variety of other human service fields. After a semester or two in a justice system placement, the student may seek employment in a totally different field. But, if the internship was successful, the student has both a clear understanding and an appreciation of the work done in probation and justice settings.

It is quite useful—and satisfying—to be able to contact intern alumni for casework assistance. For instance, the local alcohol and drug counselor, deputy sheriff, Immigration and Naturalization Service or Drug Enforcement Agency agent, school social worker, or even judge *could* have served as your intern. The agency can only benefit from a reputation for reaching out and being available to teach and assist persons from other disciplines. Cross-agency training and the development of interagency programs and projects are another possible benefit of supporting internships.

An intern-friendly atmosphere does not come by chance. Agencies can learn to develop intern programs from professional or full-time volunteer program coordinators. Recruiting and managing interns is not an exact science. But you can take some steps to ensure a ready supply of interns and a good working relationship with local colleges and universities.

Having one designated contact person for the agency is a good idea. This provides a focal point for screening interns and referring them to professionals from various segments of a large criminal justice agency. The intern coordinator also ensures that a prior criminal record check is completed and the intern is afforded liability insurance, an identification card, and maybe even a parking space.

Having an employee or even the intern coordinator serve as an advisory board member for internship programs at the local university has advantages. Such an agency-college relationship opens the door to requesting interns with special skills and abilities. It is not unreasonable to request students who have mastered foreign languages or have grown up in other cultures. It also is not unreasonable to request students who have specific skills and abilities. It might be unreasonable to make such requests if a strong working relationship with the educational institution does not already exist. Agency staff sometimes are allowed to participate in free university training programs. The two programs, the agency and the university or school, develop a mutually beneficial relationship just like the professional and the individual intern.

The agency representative need not have a great deal of experience in internships. The department representative at the school is already an expert in working with a wide variety of agencies and has experience in matching students with programs. At a large university, a working relationship with more than one department may be necessary. Some schools offer student interns in criminal justice, sociology, psychology, education, and conflict resolution. Administrators should not rule out using law students. The first- or second-year law student could easily learn about the justice system by teaching street law, helping in domestic violence programs, or even serving in a clerkship for intake staff or judges.

Occasionally, special education student interns can be recruited to work in alternative schools or special high school programs operated within the justice system. Perhaps student teachers with special emphasis in physical education can be used to work with residents in correctional settings. The boundaries of the program are limited only

by the vision and creativity of agency professionals and academic advisors or professors associated with the internship programs.

Perhaps the most obvious benefit to the agency is in the area of recruiting and hiring the best possible employees. Student interns already have been closely scrutinized by the agency. They have been trained and presumably are almost ready to work. The intern who does a good job while placed with the agency has an obvious advantage when it comes to the competitive interview and hiring process. On the other hand, the agency can identify mediocre interns and avoid hiring them.

In planning intern programs, administrators generally can rely on the local college or university to provide expertise. A literature search on the World Wide Web will reveal journal articles found in social work and criminal justice publications. Even more exciting is the recent growth in web sites being created by students and educational institutions seeking appropriate placements. Good sites to visit include:

www.corrections.com,
www.rsinternships.com/students/ crimjus.htm, and
www.sso.org/ncja/internsh.htm.

Some jurisdictions and large agencies now recruit interns through web sites.

There are a number of helpful books on the use of interns and internship programs. A well-regarded handbook is the Dorothy E. Peters contribution of 1979, *Staff and Student Supervision*. The most recent and relevant may be Dorothy L. Taylor's *Jumpstarting Your Career: An Internship Guide for Criminal Justice*, published in 1999 by Prentice Hall.

Internships in a criminal justice agency help students determine whether they are in the proper career field. The importance of this cannot be overestimated. Internship programs might prevent employees from deciding they made a terrible career choice and are miserable in their "chosen field." We often forget that there is a tremendous amount of emotional burden that goes with the work we do. We sometimes ask ourselves how those who do child protective work can deal with the sad and traumatic child abuse they respond to on a daily basis. When we ask this question, we too easily forget that our own jobs make many uncomfortable. We have daily encounters with the discord, dysfunction, and distress that would shock and overwhelm those in other professions. The intern experience may show students that they lack the heart or the stomach for our work. Perhaps human services work is not meant to be their calling or career. This realization is best made before one spends a few years pursuing a career. Not all individuals can adjust to visiting with incarcerated youths or dealing with drug-addicted or HIV-infected patients, clients, or probationers. The life stories of our clients should overwhelm or at least sadden us all. Fortunately, career professionals learn to deal with the stress and emotional trauma with a sense of detachment. There is also more than the emotional part of the job. Some interns find that they simply do not like the paperwork, stresses associated with going to court, or the highly flexible schedules that are found in institutional settings that require evening and weekend work. It's easy to see that another benefit of an internship is to appropriately weed out those who could best pursue another career.

In one respect, it is only natural to find interns in criminal justice. John Augustus, considered the founder of probation services, took an individual into his workplace to give him a second chance, to provide instruction, to offer training in social skills, and to better equip him for future employment and living. The goals of an internship—to teach, guide, and encourage—are very similar.

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