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The Benefits of Internships

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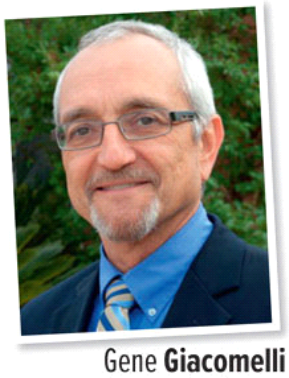

Student internship employment provides experiences that can create competent future CEA employees for the industry. Knowledge from the classroom is an important educational beginning, but the benefits of “hands-on” experiences with commercial plant production systems should be required for all CEA programs of study. An academic program may educate the student with horticultural and technical skills, but most program educators lack the experiences of commercial production, which an internship can fulfill.

Unique to every production facility are the people who establish the social norms of the workplace. This cannot be taught or experienced in the classroom, but it can be learned in a production facility with an internship. In addition, the commercial production facility is organized with distinct priorities, schedule deadlines, best practices and safety procedures, while requiring team collaboration and immediate responses to problems (not waiting to survey the internet!). All contribute to the student learning through an internship, while the employer learns about the student (and potential future employee) within an extended “working interview.”

A recent student intern spoke highly of the benefits he gained—in this case within a large greenhouse company. He noted traveling to live in a new location as good but added the challenge of obtaining housing. His solution was utilizing the dorm rooms of a local college, which are readily available in the summer. His benefits included meeting others with similar interests, making friends, working in a team toward applied goals, accessing people with positions of responsibility to determine if he would aspire to achieve the same, and learning of the hierarchy of employee working relationships. However, despite a successful and enjoyable internship, the student is now considering graduate school after recognizing greater opportunities would be available by earning an advanced degree. Thus the internship served another important purpose: confirming that a change of professional course was desirable.

Internships have application requirements. The perspective intern should check the website for information and procedures about the company, as well as its mission. After initial communication with a resume and statement of purpose, an interview is a must. A personal interview to discuss the realities, expectations and details of the position should reduce misunderstandings and help ensure an appropriate hire. The potential intern must proactively and clearly define themselves. They must explain their purpose such as personal interest, preparation for graduate school, paid employment, etc., for wanting the job position and whether they desire research-oriented work or primarily production experience.

A smaller, local facility allows for a local student to work for experience and to prove their capabilities without the added concern for relocation. A good internship experience can later provide a strong letter of recommendation for a future job and it enhances the student's resume.

If you want to offer an internship, feel free to contact your local agricultural school or college. I spoke with the Plant Sciences department and was informed about the online posts of employment opportunities on their list-serve available to their horticulture students. Simply submit a description of the position expectations, indicate as paid or volunteer, location, dates of employment, etc. and then review applications and interview the best applicants. For a summer intern (May to August) submit the information by early March.

Internships are required for all students in the Biosystems Engineering program at the University of Arizona. Considerations include eligibility (rank as a junior or senior in good academic standing), possibility of academic credit, paid position or volunteer, a plan for the learning job experience, a means to evaluate the internship by the student and the supervisor (employer) and a final report detailing the achievement of the work, primary activities and engineering design content. Essentially a structured contract is established between the student and employer.

As the UA-CEAC reaches its 25th Anniversary of student education, research and outreach, the number of on-campus opportunities for internships has expanded. Initially there was only the 2,800 sq. ft. Teaching Greenhouse used for the introductory and advanced hydroponics crop production courses required for the hands-on crop production laboratory of CEA students. The teaching faculty manages greenhouse education, in part, by offering student employment opportunities to maintain the production of 1,000+ tomato, cucumber and pepper plants within a commercial-style setting for 10 months each academic year. Today, student internships and research venues include the Rooftop Greenhouse located on the student center building serving the Campus Pantry with fresh veggies; Mushroom production facility; Mars-Lunar Prototype Greenhouse demonstration; and the student association (CEASA) that operates a production greenhouse for produce sales at local farm markets … all offering unique experiential opportunities readily accessible on campus.

An internship at a commercial production facility offers valuable experience, so consider offering an internship at your facility. Come on, growers! Help develop a young person within CEA! **IG**

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