

# Help wanted! 10 steps to getting a successful internship program underway



**Students can be valuable assets to your workforce—but finding the right ones and setting up meaningful experiences can be daunting**

*by Marilyn Larkin, MA*

At the most recent International Council on Active Aging® (ICAA) Strategy Session—a think tank of leaders that meets yearly to identify needs in the active-aging industry and actions to address them—the focus was on the workforce. According to Pat Ryan, ICAA’s vice president of education and a delegate to the meeting, “organizations are having trouble hiring people who are qualified to work with older adults, and

who want to work with older adults.” Developing internship programs that position active-aging organizations as sites for student field work was recommended as part of the solution. Internship programs can provide an additional source of workers and, over the long term, help overturn negative stereotypes of aging among young people, Ryan agrees (see “Research” on page 27).

But setting up a viable internship program, such as the one featured on pages 32–39, is easier said than done. Whom do you contact at a university—the head of a department, a dean, a human resources person? What field do you consider—social work, fitness, gerontology, administration? How do you make it

known that you're looking for interns? What exactly do you want the interns to do? Who will supervise the interns? How will they be compensated?

Addressing all these issues can be overwhelming. So, in an effort to streamline the process and help active-aging organizations get started, the *Journal on Active Aging*<sup>®</sup> talked with people who have successful internship programs ongoing in various settings. Their feedback is the basis of the 10-step plan presented in this article.

ICAA has also taken action on the Strategy Session recommendation to forge links itself with universities, colleges, and other education programs<sup>1</sup> to help facilitate connections between active-aging organizations and potential sources of interns. The result is a growing database of institutions and ICAA members with an interest in partnering—the ICAA Student Intern Directory—which is now live on the ICAA website (turn to “Resources” on page 26).

Consider implementing the following steps suggested by your colleagues, along with the directory, to start building and/or growing an internship program in your organization.

### **1. Write a job description**

This critical first step is arguably among the most difficult. Start by accepting the fact that students are not “free help or an ‘extra body’ to be used at the organization’s discretion,” stresses Andrew Carle, an assistant professor and director of the Program in Assisted Living/Senior Housing Administration at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Carle runs the only program in the United States for administrators for assisted living and senior housing, and provides interns to organizations willing to train undergraduate and graduate students in this discipline. “Our students are paying tuition and receiving college cred-

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it, so they can't spend a semester just calling bingo,” he emphasizes.

Adds Ryan, “Writing a job description forces a community to think and define more specifically the particular skills they want from an intern, versus a wide range of skills. It's a hallmark of a successful program.” In fact, many universities expect a job description and won't place an intern without one.

Of course, in the wellness field, organizations may expect an intern to do tasks that cross disciplines—for example, assisting the physical therapist, taking groups on excursions, teaching a fitness class, helping to lead a book club, and so forth. “Often, staff are doing all those things,” Ryan acknowledges. “But whereas in the real work world there's a merger of disciplines, academia is not set up to produce a person with multidisciplinary skills. People are trained in a single area.” (For a look at job descriptions related to the wellness function, some of which may be adapted for internship programs, read Ryan's article on industry directions in the January/February 2009 issue of the *Journal*.<sup>2</sup>)

Although it's important to have a job description, it also makes sense to be flexible, according to Reed Engel, direc-

tor of Wellness Strategies at the Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging in Evanston, Illinois. The organization works primarily with graduate students at the Fisher Institute for Wellness and Gerontology at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, and at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, and is expanding its internship programs to other institutions as well. “We know, for example, that we prefer to have an intern working full time for a semester,” says Engel, “but sometimes we'll take a part-time person. We prefer a master's degree, but will take individuals working on a bachelor's degree. We prefer certain fields like health/wellness, psychology, sociology, and gerontology, but we once had an intern in social policy. We leave it open because there are many different fields that can result in a good fit with organizational and individual needs.” The organization also keeps a list of potential projects, so if an intern comes in with a special interest, they can “find common ground between what we're seeking to accomplish and what the intern's interests are, beyond the general job description.”

### **2. Decide on the terms**

Another crucial decision involves the kind of compensation an intern will receive. “In a competitive environment, you want to pay a stipend,” Engel affirms, noting that Mather LifeWays pays its interns depending upon their availability (full- or part-time). “We also provide the same transportation subsidies we give to our employees—that is, partial subsidy for public transportation or parking in our garage.” Jane Ellery, PhD, director of wellness management at the Fisher Institute, oversees the internship program. She says her graduate students have many opportunities and a key reason they cross a potential site off their list is lack of compensation. “Sometimes free housing may be all that is needed to make an attractive internship site a realis-

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tic option for an intern relocating from another part of the country.”

By contrast, Lisa Bloder, wellness coordinator in the management office of Westminster Communities of Florida, Orlando, says most of her organization’s interns—who come from more than a half dozen Florida universities—are unpaid. However, she adds, they may receive free meals at the community they’re working in. The main thing, Bloder says, “is to decide and specify up front what compensation you’re offering, if any, to avoid misunderstandings.”

### 3. Identify a mentor

Someone in your organization must assume responsibility for supervising the intern. That individual, often referred to as a “mentor,” is also the liaison with the intern’s supervisor, or “preceptor,” at the university. A mentor should be knowledgeable and prepared to take on responsibilities that may include one-on-one sessions with the intern, regular contact and at least one conference call and/or an on-site visit with the preceptor, as well as an end-of-semester evaluation.

Might the mentor consider these responsibilities a burden on top of his or her regular job? “It’s all in the presentation,” believes Bloder. “It helps if you present it this way: ‘We’re going to bring in this person [the intern] who can be your tool, and who can lighten your day-to-day workload. You need to know, however, that the person has to be able to do X, Y, and Z when he or she is here, and it’s your responsibility to ensure that happens.’ So, we set the expectations upfront,” Bloder explains. “If you get staff buy-in from the start, it works well; if the internship is shoved down their throats, it won’t work.” Thus far, she hasn’t received complaints from staff feeling overloaded, although the amount of time dedicated to the intern may be substantial (see the sidebar on high school interns on page 31).

### 4. Select an outreach person

Setting up an intern program “takes a lot of legwork,” acknowledges Arnold Eppel, director of the Baltimore County Department of Aging in Towson, Maryland. The County’s seniors centers work through the department to secure

university interns for their fitness centers, a relationship that has been in place for a number of years.

Eppel recommends that organizations give their human resources person or someone else in the organization responsibility for making the necessary connections. That person should feel comfortable investigating, for example, whether local departments or area agencies on aging are already serving as conduits for internship programs in the area. If not, the individual would be responsible for contacting local community colleges and/or 4-year universities to start making connections. “Cold-calling and email sometimes results in recruitment for all kinds of areas,” Eppel says. “For interns for your fitness center, call the heads of departments and/or deans in areas such as physical education, health education, or nursing services,” he suggests.

For functions other than fitness, the outreach person may be faced with a bewildering array of options, Ryan observes. It’s difficult enough to define *staff* definitions in wellness, as she wrote in her

## Resources

**Ball State University: Fisher Institute for Wellness and Gerontology**  
[www.bsu.edu/wellness/](http://www.bsu.edu/wellness/)

**Baltimore County Department of Aging**  
[www.baltimorecountymd.gov/agencies/aging/index.html](http://www.baltimorecountymd.gov/agencies/aging/index.html)

**Classic Residence by Hyatt, Chevy Chase**  
[www.hyattclassic.com/go/chevy-chase.html](http://www.hyattclassic.com/go/chevy-chase.html)

**Corporation for National and Community Service: Resource Center School-Community Partnerships**  
<http://nationalserviceresources.org/pro>

[gram-management/school-community-partnerships](http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/gram-management/school-community-partnerships)

Effective Practices: Using work-study to build community partnerships  
<http://nationalserviceresources.org/practices/17293>

**George Mason University: Program in Assisted Living/Senior Housing Administration**  
<http://chhs.gmu.edu/hap/assisted-living-home.html>

**ICAA Student Intern Directory**  
[www.icaa.cc/networking/studentinternshipdirectory.htm](http://www.icaa.cc/networking/studentinternshipdirectory.htm)

Link to this database and find other helpful resources, including examples of intern job descriptions and internship schedules.

**Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging**  
[www.matherlifeways.com/re\\_researchandeducation.asp](http://www.matherlifeways.com/re_researchandeducation.asp)

**Westminster Communities of Florida**  
[www.westminsterretirement.com/](http://www.westminsterretirement.com/)

**Thomas W. Wootton Senior High School**  
[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/SCHOOLS/WOOTTONHS/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/SCHOOLS/WOOTTONHS/)

# Research supports connecting older adults and students

recent industry trends article highlighting ICAA research.<sup>2</sup> According to Ryan, within 21 job descriptions ICAA received for wellness director or wellness coordinator positions (not counting 3 that required a nursing degree), there were, among other differences:

- 11 variations on job titles
- 9 different departments that were home to the wellness coordinator or director
- 5 variations of high school, 2-year or 4-year degrees and experience for wellness coordinators
- 6 variations or combinations of certificates and licenses for coordinators (including drivers licenses)
- 7 degree fields suggested for wellness director
- 19 degree fields suggested for coordinator

That means much of the initial groundwork for an internship program will involve identifying the appropriate department, and then the appropriate person within that department.

Our interviewees advise that starting with smaller institutions—including community colleges and technical schools, which are often overlooked—may be easier than trying to tackle the big universities.

## 5. Start recruiting

Various recruitment strategies can yield appropriate interns.

*Do direct outreach with faculty.* The individual doing direct outreach should make it clear immediately “what’s in it for the intern,” Engel emphasizes. “For example, we would say, ‘Here’s an opportunity for an individual to make a difference in the lives of older adults in various settings and of our staff, who also participate in our wellness program. We’ll also make

Several studies covered in *ICAA Research Review* newsletter show the need for better intergenerational understanding to overcome stereotypes, and demonstrate that when young people work with older adults, as they do in internship programs, everybody wins:

- A study of college students majoring in advertising revealed that, when assessing the power of product ads (a sports drink, a luxury automobile, a nasal spray for colds, and adult-sized diapers) to influence behavior on themselves, people in their mid-40s, and people in their 70s, 30% of students drew upon negative stereotypes to make their decisions. For example, the students rated the luxury car and cold remedy as having the greatest influence on people in their mid-40s, but adult-sized diapers as having the most influence and the sports drink as having the least influence on people in their 70s. **Source:** *Educational Gerontology*, 33(4), 309 (April 2007)
- A study of business administration college students who taught computer skills classes to 77 residents at a nearby continuing care retirement community (CCRC) found that several of the residents purchased their own computer so they could use it more frequently. The CCRC also upgraded to a high-speed Internet service because residents went online more often and became impatient waiting for the dial-up connection. Families and staff reported some individuals had more topics to discuss, were proud of their accomplishments and made new friends. The students who taught the course reported feeling a more positive relationship with older adults. **Source:** *Educational Gerontology*, 33(7), 573 (July 2007)
- Another study showed that college students have ageist attitudes. At an average age of 22 years, 166 college

students visited a health club, a restaurant or a webpage development seminar with people of different age groups. The students were less likely to positively evaluate the service and less likely to patronize the restaurant and health club if older age groups were present. However, the presence of older adults did not affect the students’ impression of the Web seminar. **Source:** *Journal of Retailing*, March 2008

- Who will make up tomorrow’s workforce once Boomers and oldest adults retire? A recent study underscores the immensity of the challenge of transferring skills and knowledge from aging employees to the next generation. An online survey captured opinions and behaviors among four sets of employees: Gen Y (born 1980–1988); Gen X (born 1965–1979); Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964); and Matures (born 1900–1945). The results revealed that 51% of Boomers and 66% of Matures reported little to no interaction with their Gen Y colleagues. Little to no interaction with the most experienced workers, the Matures, was reported by Gen Y (71%), Gen X (67%), and over half of their nearest age group, the Boomers (58%).

Commenting on the findings, Eric Buntin, managing director, marketing and operations for Randstad USA, observed, “Based on their self-described generation personality, Gen X has the potential to bridge the generational gap between the youngest and oldest generations of workers. Leveraging this knowledge about generational strengths and value is part of employership [encouraging employee collaboration to achieve company goals], and something employers should act on to be a great place to work.” **Source:** 2008 World of Work, Randstad (May 2008)

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sure there are opportunities to work with other departments—marketing, human resources, safety, and risk management—so they'll get a well rounded experience.' Positioning it that way, we can attract interns interested in working in work-sites, or with older adults directly, or in organizational development." The bottom line, he says, "is to make the internship so exciting and enticing that a student would have a hard time saying no to it."

*Use online services.* In addition to using the ICAA Student Intern Directory, several of our interviewees suggested posting internship opportunities with sites such as HPCareer.net, the National Wellness Institute, and various chapters of the American College of Sports Medicine.

*List your program in a directory.* Some schools, such as those that Bloder works with, publish internship catalogs that students can look through and decide where they may want to intern. Make sure your program is included in these directories and any other career bulletins the university might produce.

*Post flyers.* Although Mather LifeWays has ongoing relationships with several universities, "we're always trying to further those and establish new ones," Engel states. "Even at one university, you might have a relationship with the kinesiology department, but not yet with the sociology, psychology or gerontology department. There's always more you can do." Posting flyers about your program on the bulletin boards of these departments can help establish awareness and word of mouth. In Carle's program in assisted living/senior housing, he gladly accepts email flyers, which are then forwarded directly to the department's internal student email list.

*Talk with students.* Making direct contact with students is critical, advises Ellery. "At the Fisher Institute, it's the student's responsibility to find an internship pro-

gram, so most of the relationships we have were initiated by students." Some active-aging organizations "reach out to students at conferences to find out what they're interested in, and visit with heads of our programs to see how they can best help students," she adds.

Regardless of the strategies you use, "Remember that you're not going in like a supplicant," Eppel stresses. "Schools are as anxious to have you as you are to work with them—that's the key," he observes. "Colleges are promising their students options and opportunities when they graduate, so they need places to put them for interning. You may think your organization isn't worthy of an internship, and I'd say, 'Never underestimate your organization.'"

## 6. Know the school's expectations

Universities may require fairly robust documentation before they will place students with your organization. "Some institutions let you know what you have to submit to get started," Bloder says. For Westminster's internship program with the University of Florida, "we had to do a complete profile of every one of our locations, outlining our business and our job expectations. We also had to clearly establish our requirements for a successful internship."

Equally important is understanding the school's requirements for its students. Otherwise, you risk setting up the kind of disappointing situation that occurred a number of years ago. "We had a social work student interning with us who spent the majority of her time in our residential assisted living setting," states Bloder. "But her internship requirements stated that she should learn more about Medicare and Medicaid, and so she didn't get credit."

Bloder adds that every school she has dealt with either has a protocol in place for working with internship sites "or does

not have formal programs." On occasion Westminster's outreach efforts have included smaller colleges that hadn't considered having internships, but ended up responding to the community's outreach.

Ellery stresses that "philosophical similarities are key" to the successful internship relationship that the Fisher Institute enjoys with Mather LifeWays. The latter "really focuses on the seven dimensions of wellness and aging as a life span issue, and that's what we focus on at the Institute, as well," she notes. "So it has to do with what we think they're doing right in the work setting, and what we would like to have our students experience and be exposed to."

## 7. Draw up an agreement

Our interviewees agree that organizations should not embark on an internship program without a formal agreement with the school. Some, like the Baltimore Department of Aging, draw up a memorandum of understanding that outlines broadly the responsibilities of the school and the organization. Others, like the organizations that work with Carle's program at George Mason University, will be required to sign a legal document that "establishes the formal arrangement for the internship, as well as the responsibilities of all involved parties [host organization, university, and student]." The document also states, for liability purposes, that the student is not an employee of the host organization (and therefore the organization isn't liable to pay worker's compensation in the event of an accident) and is covered by insurance through the university. Separately, the host organization signs a Rotation Schedule, according to Carle. This document spells out the specific duties the intern is expected to complete in all functional areas of the organization, as well as expectations regarding weekly reports and the type and extent of supervision the intern will receive on site.

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## 8. Go through a selection process

When your outreach efforts yield one or more candidate interns, don't simply take them on board. Treat the intern as you would any potential employee, advises Carle:

- Interview the individual to get a sense of whether he or she will be a good fit for your organization.
- Have the person complete an employee application form.
- Do a background check.

If you decide to embark on the internship, "have the student go through the same orientation that new employees would go through," he suggests.

Going through this process will help you weed out potential interns who may not be appropriate for your needs, and will also help the student get an idea of what to expect in the work world.

## 9. Be sure you can fulfill your responsibilities

In addition to requiring ongoing supervision, many schools have formal review processes that require the mentor's participation. For example, the Fisher Institute requires a mid-term review of each student, as well as a final evaluation. As noted earlier, sometimes the university coordinator will visit the site during the semester, as Carle often does; for other schools, a phone conversation suffices. In addition, interns may need references for jobs or other internship programs.

"Make sure your organization has the time and resources to fulfill your obligations to the university and to the intern," Eppel emphasizes. "If you give poor supervision or you don't give students feedback to help them further their career, they'll tell the next person and no one will want to intern with you."

## 10. Make a long-term commitment to internships

As you embark on an internship program, "remember that some interns are good and some are bad; it's no different from anyone else you hire," says Ryan. "You may get one person who's fabulous and another who's not. So you'll need to coach and counsel—you may even have to let an intern go—but whatever you do, don't give up," she urges. "Instead,

## Introducing the FAME Project



The International Council on Active Aging and the National Fibromyalgia Association have collaborated to provide a FREE online training program for fitness and health professionals on how to most effectively work with people who have fibromyalgia.

For more information or to register, visit our website at [www.Fibromyalgia-CME.com](http://www.Fibromyalgia-CME.com).



The FAME (Fibromyalgia Assessment, Management and Education) Project, supported by a grant from UniHealth Foundation, is co-sponsored by the National Fibromyalgia Association and the Fibromyalgia Research & Education Center at California State University, Fullerton.

## High schools: an overlooked resource

take a close look at the situation and think about whether you might need to change the job requirements, or do a better job at orienting or supervising—or accept you may have chosen someone who just didn't work out. Regardless, it's important to try again," continues Ryan, "because the next time could be a positive experience. And positive experiences, even if they involve only a few people at a time, will eventually help move the whole industry in a positive direction."

Adds Bloder, "Establishing a relationship with a school doesn't happen overnight. You need to develop a quality product, ensure accurate and timely communication, and get your reports back on time. Then you'll get the kind of word of mouth that leads to repeat business," she advises. "The important thing is to get started—to not be afraid to ask. The worst you can get from a school is a 'no,'" she reminds readers. "The best thing you can get is some great people." ☞

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1. ICAA directions. Industry input leads to ICAA Student Intern Directory. *Journal on Active Aging*, 8(1), 92–93; January/February 2009.
2. Ryan, P. (2009). Industry directions: philosophy, roles and income for the wellness workforce. *Journal on Active Aging*, 8(1), 24–32; January/February.

Although universities traditionally offer internships to their students and provide most of the interns in active-aging organizations, Susan Bick, lifestyle director at Classic Residence by Hyatt in Chevy Chase, Maryland, has a successful internship going with the psychology department at Thomas W. Wootton Senior High School in Rockville. "We're really lucky to have a great relationship with this school," Bick enthuses. "And it all started because someone at Classic Residence knew someone whose daughter was going to enroll in the psychology program, and thought that perhaps she could do an internship here."

That first internship was a success, so the company continued with the program. Each year, students are referred by the head of the internship program at the high school, and Bick interviews them to get the best fit. "I look for somebody who's friendly, a self-starter, presents well, articulate, and has an interest in seniors," she explains.

The intern is at the community 10 hours per week. During that time, this person is responsible for weekly one-on-one sessions with a resident (e.g., doing computer training); leading a group activity with independent living residents and with assisted living residents; a long-term project; and a daily journal that is turned into the high school internship coordinator. (The school requires only a weekly log sheet with hours worked and highlights, but Bick finds a daily journal more helpful.)

Bick also keeps a binder for every student, containing copies of their daily journals, flyers they make for activities they lead, and any other contributions that can be part of an historical reference. "When I get a new intern, I can show the binder and say, 'These are

some of the activities our other interns were involved in.'"

As organizations try to do for their college interns, Bick makes an effort to incorporate the interns' interests into the types of activities they lead with residents. For example, one young woman was interested in the personal histories of the residents. "So for her long-term project, I had her make a 'getting-to-know-you' book for the assisted living residents. She interviewed them, took pictures, and put it all together in a photo album."

With high school students, it's especially important to be clear about your expectations, including details about what to wear, Bick advises. "You don't want a midriff top or short shorts in the workplace, even though these are things they might wear to school," she says. Bick also stresses the importance of being available to help as needed. "Even if they're taking the lead on a project, you need to know how they're going about it. For example, one intern worked on setting up a walking tour of Washington, DC. But we had to work together to select specific destinations, calculate mileage from point to point, and then incorporate that information into a trip for residents that would coincide with an event at that destination, like cherry blossom time. It was a lot of work," she acknowledges. "So you have to give them the responsibility, but also be available to troubleshoot if they get stuck."

The return on that investment is worth it, in Bick's view. "We get activities for the residents, and in the one-on-ones, we help them learn about email and attachments so they can stay in touch with family. And, as a mentor, I feel that if being here can help the students decide what they want to do in college, then we'll have done something good for them as well," she concludes.