**STARTING YOUR INTERNSHIP: HELPFUL TIPS**

***Social Innovation Graduate Program***

**Ready (or not)!**

You’re about to start your internship, so you’re probably feeling some combination of excitement, curiosity, and nervousness. Review these tips to ensure you’re as prepared as possible and to maximize your learning and professional development. At the same time, don’t forget about the requirements and expectations detailed in the SI 661 Internship syllabus, including journal entries, the final reflection essay, and evaluations (which you and your site supervisor should receive via email about 3 weeks prior to the end of the semester). Stay connected with Dr. Azfar Hussain, Graduate Program Director ([hussaina@gvsu.edu](mailto:hussaina@gvsu.edu)), throughout your placement.

**Prior to Day 1**

Confirm the address of your internship placement and know who to ask for when you arrive. If you are using your own vehicle, find out where you should park and any other necessary information for entry into the building. Bring identification (i.e. state ID) with you on your first day as some organizations require a photocopy.

In addition to giving you a jump start, doing some additional research about the company or organization and industry ahead of time would definitely impress your new supervisor. You could even email your future supervisor to ask about any reading or prep work they recommend. The more knowledgeable you are, the more comfortable and confident you’ll feel on the job.

**Job Description & Responsibilities**

Know the roles and responsibilities of your internship position. If one is not provided to you, request a job description from your supervisor. A conversation at the start of your internship about goals and expectations ensures all are on the same page and reduces possible misunderstandings. Keep in mind that all jobs entail menial tasks at times, paid or unpaid, so be prepared to do some grunt work. If, however, the majority of your shift is solely and consistently making coffee and filing, ask to meet with your supervisor to respectfully share your concerns.

Although you do not have full control over your job description, to some extent your internship is what you make it. Be proactive! When you finish a task or project, reach out to your team members for opportunities as opposed to waiting for someone to come to you.

**Supervision**

Know who your direct supervisor or task coordinator is, as well as their supervisor. Obtain email addresses and phone numbers, and save this contact information in your phone as you’ll likely need to communicate with them at some point when you’re away from the agency. For instance, if you are sick and unable to intern on a scheduled day, you’ll need to inform your supervisor. If an urgent issue arises and your supervisor is away, be sure you have another point of contact.

Keep your supervisor informed of any required internship paperwork and their due dates. Inform them of your schedule and any dates you will not be present (i.e. spring break). Discuss your supervisor’s preferred means of communication; do not assume (e-mail, in-person, phone/voice mail, text). Being mindful of appropriate, professional boundaries, you may wish to disclose something about you or your learning style that could help foster a productive, working relationship.

Use supervision effectively. Discuss responsibilities on an ongoing basis as they may change and evolve. Ask for feedback from your supervisor and co-workers and respond in healthy, respectful ways. Keep in mind that your supervisor could serve as a professional reference in the future.

**Professionalism and Communication**

Workplace culture can be very different from one agency to another and even from program to program within a large organization or company. Norms and styles of communication can also vary from team to team. Professionalism, however, is not optional. Err on the side of *more* professional in your communication and behavior. Your words, whether spoken or sent via email, should be communicated in a positive, respectful tone.

Be timely for your scheduled shifts, meetings, and deadlines. Know the policy at your agency regarding time spent on personal calls/texting, which should be very limited. Social media should not be accessed during work time unless requested for a specific task or project. In general, treat your internship like it’s a real job. Although a few factors differentiate an intern from a paid employee, you’re in a real-world company, so the work you do will have an impact on the company and its customers or service recipients. Make it a *good* one!

Take the initiative to introduce yourself to co-workers, and make a conscious effort to build quality relationships. Professional connections can lead to future job opportunities. Your internship supervisor or a co-worker could become a great career mentor.

**Orientation and Training**

If you haven’t already been provided a tour, kindly request one on your first day. If there is a general/front desk phone number and email address, take note in case you need them later on.

Given the often unpredictable nature of employer resources and client/customer needs, your training, and learning in general, is unlikely to occur in a linear manner. Agencies will vary in the amount of formal and informal orientation that is offered. Some will have an orientation manual or require certain training for interns, and some will not. Find out where to access helpful information and resources you may need throughout your placement. Ask about important policies you should know. Inquire about policies, such as:

* Emergency procedures (weather-related and other)
* Worker safety
* HIPAA
* Confidentiality
* Mandated reporting
* Documentation
* Agency vehicles
* Mileage reimbursement

Employers do not expect student interns to know everything about the job or industry, so ask questions. If, at any time, you are faced with a task or project you feel ill-equipped or uncomfortable doing, speak up! Ask for the clarification or guidance you need.

**Working with People of Diverse Identities and Backgrounds**

Irrespective of where you are placed, it is your responsibility as human to continually grow your cultural self-awareness and increase your comfort and abilities to work well with and competently serve people of diverse identities and backgrounds. We all have biases to overcome, and given the multitude of factors that shape a person’s identity and culture (nationality, language, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, family, abilities, environment…) we’re going to make mistakes at times when interacting with people. Aim to *reduce* your mistakes, *catch* your mistakes, and over time, shrink the time between making a mistake and realizing it. Fostering growth in cultural awareness, cultural humility, and cultural competency is lifelong learning through:

* Education about and exposure to people of diverse identities and backgrounds
* Examining assumptions about and labels used to describe people
* Assessing personal biases
* Valuing diverse modes of communication (languages other than our own, sign language, communication assistance through interpreters, and differences in non-verbal communication across cultures)
* Understanding individual differences and the effects of trauma (reframing from “What’s wrong with them?” to “What happened to them?”)

**Support**

If you need guidance or support outside of the agency, connect with the Graduate Program Director, Dr. Azfar Hussain, at [hussaina@gvsu.edu](mailto:hussaina@gvsu.edu). Do not wait until the end of your internship to speak up if you have a concern or your placement is not going well.