

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
August 13, 2018  
Washington, DC**

**Member Comments on  
Best Practices for Internships / Volunteers  
(Prepared by Felicia Owens)**

**BACKGROUND**

At the May 2018 Council meeting, President Tanya Zanish-Belcher noted that the *Best Practices for Internships as a Component of Graduate Archival Education* and the *Best Practices for Volunteers in Archives* had been due for regular review in January 2017. She directed staff to launch a call for member comment to determine if substantive revisions are needed. Staff published a call for member comment<sup>1</sup> on the SAA website and distributed through all communication channels; the call was open from July 16 through August 1, 2018.

**DISCUSSION**

All comments received to the SAA Headquarters email box and via the comment section of the call for comments on the SAA website are attached (Appendix). The email responses were anonymized, assuming that, if commenters wished to have their name and comments made public, they would have used the comment box on the news item.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Given the comments received, and your own review, do these best practices require substantive revision at this time?
2. If so, to which SAA group should this review and revision be assigned?

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2018/call-for-member-comment-best-practices-for-internships-best-practices-for-volunteers-in-ar>

## Comments Submitted to SAA HQ Email Box

---

*[Response 1]*

Greetings,

As an archivist since 1987, I have had a great deal of experience in a variety of archival institutions, and have worked with a large number of colleagues, supervisors and subordinate staff members. I have also worked with many volunteers, interns and student employees. In fact I wrote an article on the subject of supervising archival interns and volunteers, which appears in the winter 2009 issue of the *Journal of North Carolina Archivists* (pages 73-83). I would very much like to participate in this discussion as well as any task forces or working groups.

A few things that I can mention about this subject matter:

- 1) The experience should be mutually beneficial. The institutional staff, which will be devoting a certain amount of time and effort, should benefit from the intern's work, and the project that the intern performs should be something that can appear on a resume.
- 2) The intern should already have a certain level of knowledge of the kind of work that researchers do when using archival records and collections. (Once, when I was working at the Kansas Historical Society, a member of the Board of Directors—who also happened to be a university history professor—sent to me a college freshman to work as a volunteer. This professor sent this student to me without any fore-warning or announcement or anything. The student just showed up one day, and I was supposed to do something with this student right then and there. The student had no prior experience with research and could not, even after a few weeks of my instruction and guidance with him, understand what he was doing or even why anyone would even want to do research. The whole thing was a big waste of time. The moral to this story is that interns should be graduate students with some understanding of research.
- 3) When I worked at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, I sometimes was given the assignment to either hire a student employee or take on an intern or volunteer. In order to train these students for their future careers, I always put candidates through a rigorous hiring process right from the start. I required candidates to submit a resume, cover letter and list of references—just as if they were applying for a professional-level position. I also conducted telephone interviews, and of those that I invited for in-person interviews, I required that they arrive wearing a suit and tie or a nice, business-like skirt-suit or dress. The interviews that I conducted were as professional as I could make them—all for the purpose of finding the best candidates and also for teaching these candidates what they could look forward to after graduation. All of these candidates were thankful that I put them through this process—even those that I did not hire.
- 4) Once I hired a student employee or brought on a volunteer or intern, I provided them with a lot of mentoring and encouragement for their future careers. I taught them about professional organizations (like the SAA), I introduced them to prominent people in the archival profession and I encouraged them to attend conferences and seminars. Then I provided them with a great deal of instruction with the archival project that I wanted them to work on. I am proud to say that two of the people that I have mentored are now working at the Library of Congress.

- 5) Lastly, on the last day that these volunteers, interns and student employees worked with me, I required them to make an oral presentation to the rest of the library staff, so that they could elaborate on the project that they worked on, how their work was beneficial to the institution, and what they intended to do following graduation.

I hope these comments and observations are useful to you.

---

*[Response 2]*

Hi,

I'm interested in the section on intern compensation. I don't think academic credit alone is sufficient compensation, especially when many colleges require payment to enroll for the internship course in the first place. This places another burden on students who may have scarce financial resources to begin with.

Also, I think stipends should be more clearly defined to being at (minimum) to above (ideal) minimum wage when total stipend is divided by hours worked.

---

*[Response 3]*

Hello,

I think this version of the guidelines for internships is in good shape. I recently had this question from a Prospective Student to our program (paraphrasing):

Would an internship lead to being hired by the organization?

Perhaps there should be a guideline for organizations that they should make clear to students engaged in an internship what role, if any, internships play in any prospect for future employment

---

*[Response 4]*

Below are comments I have on the current document:

Compensation for Student Internships: Compensation is becoming a very big issue. Though the document currently says internships with no compensation (academic credit or stipend) should be rare, frankly there should be NO internship without any form of compensation! Unpaid internships (even those for academic credit) are problematic because they act as a gatekeeper from diversifying our profession. The fact of the matter is, one can only afford to undertake an unpaid internship if they have financial support to do so. This ensures that only wealthy people (or those, like me, willing to undertake tens of thousands of dollars of student debt that I will likely never be able to pay off) can participate.

Onsite supervisors: Though the current document states that "Onsite supervisors will meet regularly with interns to answer questions, provide feedback on work and mentor them", this is not something that happens with every internship. A number of my peers have expressed that their internship experiences during grad school were quite the opposite, and they had very little contact with their direct supervisor. I wonder if there is a way to word this with stronger language, or guidance to provide students with recourse if their supervisor is failing them in this regard.

Interns Do Not Replace Professional Staff/Post-Graduate Internships: These fall in line under my comments above. I worked for two months as an intern after graduation for \$1,000. While I did get some good experience at this position, it did not provide the same kind of mentoring and education that I received at my academic internships. Essentially, I was paid far less than the position was worth to do work that should have fallen under a professional's responsibilities.

---

*[Response 5]*

My only comment is to add [https://www.marac.info/assets/documents/marac\\_technical\\_leaflet\\_6.pdf](https://www.marac.info/assets/documents/marac_technical_leaflet_6.pdf) to the list of resources at the end under "For Additional Information."

---

*[Response 6]*

Hello,

I agree with the comments in the comment box that point out the problems with unpaid internships and how they perpetuate inequality, as only more wealthy and privileged students can afford the burden of unpaid work, transportation costs, paying for the academic credits, etc.

I would also like to point out that another component of privilege is being a full-time student and being able to work an internship during business hours. Students without the financial resources to leave their day jobs may be doing an online or night program and already are very busy, and have difficulty finding time for an internship – especially during usual work hours. The document states that "For the majority of archives positions available, practical experience is a requirement," yet some students may have far more hoops to jump through to get such experience than privileged students with flexible time and finances. Archives programs and institutions with internships should think very carefully about how their requirements and practices may be hindering some students, and think about ways to make internships more accessible – perhaps a remote work component, weekend hours, fewer hours over a longer period of time, or a semester/class/school year dedicated only to a paid internship.

Overall, I just want to add another vote to address the inequalities perpetuated by traditional internships, both unpaid and during business hours over a semester or a school year.

---

[Response 7]

I echo previous feedback about unpaid internships and agree that course credit should not be considered a substitution for compensation.

I suggest that a discussion of internships that are not a component of formal archival graduate education should be included in the Best Practices. In my experience, only a small portion of internships in the profession are "sponsored by archives graduate programs" and include involvement of a faculty member or advisor from a graduate program. During my graduate studies (I completed my masters in 2017) it was very common for students to work as an intern at an institution unaffiliated with the graduate program with no oversight from the graduate program. My graduate program did offer a "practicum" course that required an internship component with oversight from the practicum course professor. However many students had already been interning without any professor involvement before enrolling in this course. And many students who completed internships while in graduate school never enrolled in the practicum course.

It would be very helpful if these Best Practices, or an additional best practice document, discussed internships in which the intern and the onsite supervisor are the only involved parties. If SAA's position is that an internship should never be undertaken without the involvement of an academic advisor or professor, this position should be stated and defended clearly. And I suspect that such a position may be untenable given the current realities of internships in the field. I see that the Best Practices for Volunteers addresses the difference between an internship and a volunteer position. This should also be discussed in the Best Practices for Interns. The line between internships and volunteer positions is extremely blurry and is rarely considered by institutions looking to hire graduate students and recent-grads as interns.

I also suggest that the "Interns Do Not Replace Professional Staff" section of the Best Practices be expanded. Students and recent grads accept internships for which they do not earn course credits because experience is a requirement for gaining employment as an archivist and there are very few entry-level and early-career professional positions available through which they can gain this experience. I suspect one reason for the lack of entry-level and early-career professional positions is that many institutions rely on interns to complete professional work instead of hiring additional staff. I understand the reality that budget issues cause many archives to turn to unpaid intern labor, but SAA should be working to change this reality and SAA's best practices should better emphasize the fact that archives must not hire interns to replace professional staff.

## Comments Submitted on the SAA Website

---

[RWoody](#) says:

[Comments Regarding: Best Practices for Internships](#)

A new comment I've not seen yet is: This document is predicated on internships being offered "as a component of graduate archival education", yet many internship opportunities offered and promoted by SAA are not in partnership with an academic authority who can provide educational benefits and proper oversight to an internship experience. I would like to see this clarified and addressed in the best practices. I have two suggestions: 1. If this document remains strictly tied to "internships as a component of archival education" I recommend that having an academic advisor be a REQUIRED feature of all internships promoted by SAA; and/or 2. This document is

opened up to cover ALL internships and gathers additional checks and balances in order to safeguard interns who are in situations where they are receiving internship experience but not under the purview of an academic advisor.

Comments I agree with and want to expand upon:

I agree with Neely2014: "I suggest we consider making it mandatory, to discuss these guidelines with host institutions prior to the start of an internship, to ensure the experience is clearly beneficial for all parties."

Many host institutions, especially those outside of established cities on the east coast, are often ran by volunteers and/or professionals not in close association with the archival field. It would benefit SAA membership, interns, and organizations if the host institutions received support from SAA and/or archives professionals. Providing education to host institutions in these circumstances should be considered a priority as they need additional professional assistance to understand: 1. What their (as the host institution) needs are in archival terms; and 2. What's reasonable and lawful to ask interns to do.

I agree with mattfrancis: "As others have already mentioned, due to the level of work produced by graduate interns, academic credit alone should not be viewed as fair compensation for internships. Most interns are not only having to pay tuition for the academic credits that they receive, but there are often other additional costs that an intern must shoulder, such as transportation. Finally, it should be noted that many labor studies scholars have researched and written on how reliance on unpaid internships help perpetuate structural inequalities in our society and professions due to how the financial realities place less of a burden on individuals from more affluent backgrounds (and it should also be considered what this means for SAA's commitment [sic] to increasing diversity within our profession)."

Unpaid internships are still considered a requirement within archives graduate work - a tradition that is becoming increasingly outdated. It is known that unpaid internships perpetuate inequality as those who aren't affluent cannot afford to spend money AND give away unpaid time to an unpaid internship. This is a known cause of our professional homogenization, and further sustains a lack of diversity and representation within the field. As diversity is a stated SAA priority, I would like to see this substantially addressed.

As kwmorse states: "Echoing @matienzo - The problem with considering course credit as appropriate compensation for work done during an internship is problematic specifically because schools offering internships for course credit usually (always?) require the intern to pay tuition for those credits."

Not only is the internship unpaid, the student must pay money for the internship opportunity. This isn't compensation. This is pay to play - an unfair and unreasonable practice, and one that shouldn't be supported by SAA.

Listed on this page (<https://www2.archivists.org/standards/best-practices-for-internships-as-...>), end of the statement: "In response to one comment suggesting that only paid internships are

acceptable (i.e., granting of academic program credit is not acceptable), the drafting group determined that this position is untenable given the ways in which graduate programs currently are organized."

The drafting group states that "this position" aka "only paid internships are acceptable" is "untenable". In reply to this decision and statement of position, I counter that requiring students to pay for their internship experience (in order to receive credit) is even more untenable. Paying for academic credit in order to receive an unpaid internship is a luxury - it is NOT compensation.

In order to address this, I like kw Morse's suggestion of: "Compensation for Student Internships: Given the value of archival work and the skills possessed by archival graduate students, interns should receive compensation (in the form of an hourly wage, tuition waiver, or stipend) for their work commensurate with the qualifications required for the position. Graduate internships without compensation should be ..."

Conclusion: Unpaid internships is a practice that devalues the archival profession, even if academic credit is provided. I encourage SAA and its membership to remain vigilant in what we allow as best practice in our field. I ask SAA as job posters and promoters to implement this document as a means of vetting internship opportunities as there have been several questionable internship posts over the last couple of years. We need to do better.

I thank SAA for opening up comments on these guidelines, especially as it's 19 months past due for the stated January 2017 review. I look forward to seeing a more robust best practices document - one that is used by SAA and host institutions so that we may ensure the integrity of our profession.

SUBMITTED BY [RWOODY](#) ON JULY 30, 2018 - 3:53PM.

**[Neely2014](#)** says:

**[Best Practices for Internships as a Component of Archival Gradua](#)**

Thinking back to my experience as an internship supervisor, I would suggest that the Best Practice Guidelines, be given to, and discussed with, the host institution prior to the start of an internship.

It's easy for archival professionals to gauge what can and cannot happen, given the parameters of a proposed internship. The gray area lies in the expectations of the host institution: their needs, which can be more expansive than originally outlined, and the fine line of not turning an archival educational experience into a substitute for unpaid work.

The guidelines as drafted, are broad enough to cover many types of internship opportunities.

I suggest we consider making it mandatory, to discuss these guidelines with host institutions prior to the start of an internship, to ensure the experience is clearly beneficial for all parties.

SUBMITTED BY [NEELY2014](#) ON JULY 26, 2018 - 7:01PM.

[mattfrancis](#) says:

[Best Practices for Internships -- feedback on "fair compensation"](#)

In the text of the webpage that contains the PDF attachment for the Best Practices for Internships it states that after receiving comments the drafting group "added language specifying that unpaid internships are not acceptable, particularly as replacement for paid staff." Unfortunately, the attached document does not contain language reflecting this statement, and instead states: "Given the value of archives work and the skills possessed by archives graduate students, interns should receive compensation (in the form of academic credit or a stipend) for their work commensurate with the qualifications required for the position. Graduate internships without any form of compensation should be rare to avoid devaluing the professional nature of archival work."

As others have already mentioned, due to the level of work produced by graduate interns, academic credit alone should not be viewed as fair compensation for internships. Most interns are not only having to pay tuition for the academic credits that they receive, but there are often other additional costs that an intern must shoulder, such as transportation. Finally, it should be noted that many labor studies scholars have researched and written on how reliance on unpaid internships help perpetuate structural inequalities in our society and professions due to how the financial realities place less of a burden on individuals from more affluent backgrounds (and it should also be considered what this means for SAA's commitment to increasing diversity within our profession).

SUBMITTED BY [MATTFRANCIS](#) ON JULY 20, 2018 - 10:34AM.

[kw Morse](#) says:

[regarding course credit as compensation for internships](#)

Echoing @matienzo - The problem with considering course credit as appropriate compensation for work done during an internship is problematic specifically because schools offering internships for course credit usually (always?) require the intern to pay tuition for those credits.

How about rewording that paragraph (from [BPF IaaCoGAE](#), page 2) as follows? -

Compensation for Student Internships: Given the value of archives work and the skills possessed by archives graduate students, interns should receive compensation (in the form of an hourly wage, tuition waiver, or stipend) for their work commensurate with the qualifications required for the position. Graduate internships without compensation should be ...

SUBMITTED BY [KWMORSE](#) ON JULY 19, 2018 - 11:37AM.

[matienzo](#) says:

[Review of both documents](#)

Regarding the [Best Practices for Internships](#), the version linked from that page does not reflect any of the additional language regarding unpaid internships. The language instead appears to be much softer and identifies "fair compensation" as a target. A clearer definition for this would be

useful. It is also inappropriate to view academic credit earned through internships as *compensation* (which is specified in the link draft on page 2), given that students within an internship likely have to pay for the credit hours they would be earning from their program. Finally, I'd remove the reference to Omeka itself (see top of page 2) and perhaps replace that with it relating to metadata guidelines for a digital collections project.

Regarding the [Best Practices for Volunteers in Archives](#), recognition of volunteers choosing to work in archives as a means to complete court-ordered community service is also worth some degree of mention. In my view, this directly relates to points 2 and 8 in the recommendations. Clearer guidance here is welcome and worthwhile.

SUBMITTED BY [MATIENZO](#) ON JULY 18, 2018 - 1:10PM.

[morrisst](#) says:

[internship best practices](#)

The guidelines correctly stress the professional nature of an internship. While working with several interns, I included a review of the intern's resume. A project proposed to the internship faculty supervisor anticipated a "complete project" resulting in a finding aid or a simple digitizing project.

The guidelines look well done.

SUBMITTED BY [MORRISST](#) ON JULY 17, 2018 - 5:33PM.