

Best Practices for Internships as a Component of Archival Education¹

1 Internships in Archival Environments

Archival internships allow students and new archivists to gain new insights into the nature of archival practice by engaging in meaningful work under the mentorship of experienced and knowledgeable archives professionals. Archival internships provide students with a unique opportunity to connect the skills and knowledge gained in their archival education with practical experience supervised by a professional archivist. For the majority of archives positions available, practical experience is a requirement and internships are a valuable way to gain such experience.

Archival internships are opportunities that can be valuable at various points in a person's educational journey, whether undertaken as part of an educational program or outside of a formal program. SAA hopes that these guidelines will prove helpful to all parties engaged in internship activities, as they cover issues that are of importance for interns, host institutions, and educational partners at all levels of higher education. Institutions hosting internships should follow these recommendations to the best of their ability.

1.1 Archival Internships Offered as Part of Educational Programs

Archival internships are commonly offered by academic programs as a way of earning credit that may be applied toward degree requirements. They may be listed as internships, practicums, culminating experiences, capstones, or fieldwork, but all of these formats imply the same thing: work experience gained in the field under the supervision of a practitioner and faculty advisor. When archival internships are offered for academic credit, they must be designed with clear educational objectives. Archivist supervisors need to collaborate with teaching faculty to evaluate student interns appropriately and to determine whether students have met the course's educational objectives. Work may be accompanied by additional assignments as required by the faculty supervisor.

Although archival internships are first and foremost intended to educate students, internships are partnerships among all involved: students, supervisors, and faculty advisors. No two internships will be exactly alike, so it is vital that students, supervisors, and faculty take the time to discuss the goals for the internship and to establish clear expectations about what will take place during the course of the internship. For internships where students earn academic credit, it is the responsibility of the academic program to ensure that both the student and the supervisor at internship sites are well

¹ For the purposes of this standard, archival education refers primarily to programs taught at the graduate level that lead to an MA, MLS, or MLIS degree and that offer a curriculum which supports an archives specialization or concentration. For a list of such programs, please consult the SAA Directory of Archival Education, found at: <https://www2.archivists.org/dae>. SAA recognizes that archival education may also be obtained through degrees in related fields such as public history, via post-baccalaureate and postgraduate certificate programs, and through continuing education programs such as the Western Archives Institute and SAA's Digital Archives Specialist and Arrangement & Description certificates. This standard aims to provide general guidance for archival internships, whether offered for credit as part of academic programs or outside of formal educational programs.

informed about what is expected from a successful internship and to guide the design of feasible, mutually agreeable learning outcomes. Once an internship begins, it is vital for student interns, faculty members, and site supervisors to maintain open lines of communication to address any problems that arise. Successful internships balance the needs and goals of all partners.

Academic faculty can use these recommendations to shape internships that meet their unique missions and pedagogical goals. SAA recommends that individual institutions and programs use these best practices in conjunction with SAA's *Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies* to develop their own specific policies for internships.

1.2 Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Independent Internships

1.2.1 Undergraduates and Post-Baccalaureate Students

Undergraduates and recent graduates of Bachelor's programs often have their first exposure to archives and archival work through employment while still completing their Bachelor's degree, as part of activities associated with a course in which they are enrolled, or through an internship completed after the completion of their undergraduate degree. SAA encourages institutions to consider offering internship experiences to undergraduate students and recent graduates when feasible, as they often are formative experiences that lead undergraduates to consider a career in archives. Institutions should consider how to tailor internship activities to undergraduate educational goals, as interns at this stage of their education may be more interested in exploratory activities and less concerned with attaining specific marketable skills than graduate or post-graduate interns.

1.2.2 Independent and Post-Graduate Internships

While this document focuses primarily on internships offered as part of a formal archival education program, SAA acknowledges the value of other types of internships organized independently of such programs and also considers these recommendations to be applicable to internships for individuals considering entering a graduate archival education program, certificate seekers, working archivists seeking specialized knowledge in particular areas, and those who have recently completed graduate degrees and are looking for more work experience. In all cases, supervisors should find these recommendations to be useful for creating valuable internship experiences for these emerging archivists and working professionals, even when such internships are not for academic credit or part of a formal academic program.

2 Defining the Nature of Archival Work

Internships engage students in professional-level work that supplements formal archival education and core knowledge, strengthens or introduces new skills, encourages collaboration and teamwork, expands the student's network, and helps to develop their understanding of how archival theories and methods are applied in practice. Such work is performed under the supervision of experienced archives professionals willing to share their knowledge and insights with student interns. An internship must include enough hours to ensure the intern gains experience and exposure to aspects of archival work, as well as academic credit if applicable, as outlined in the goals and scope of the internship.

Supervisors and students should work together to design internship work activities that help students gain skills and proficiencies in particular areas of competency and/or interest. Examples of such proficiencies might include processing a collection, digitizing archival materials, developing or drafting a finding aid, or designing and implementing an exhibit. The intern may also contribute to regular, ongoing activities of the archive such as catalog and database record creation and maintenance, revisions to existing archival descriptions, and various types of public service work, such as monitoring the reading room, answering reference inquiries, designing and coordinating events, and other forms of outreach and service to an archive's communities. Suggestions for potential internship activities are included below in the Resources section of this document.

Internship work is often project-oriented, but some internships may involve group-based work. When a site is hosting multiple interns, the supervisors and students might design a group project that allows each intern to play a significant distinguishable role on a group project; examples of such projects might include drafting a preservation plan for a set of maps to be digitized or creating metadata guidelines for an Omeka implementation. In all cases, internship work activities should be designed so that a student can later refer to their discrete role and accomplishments when presenting their work in academic or professional contexts, such as when creating a portfolio to meet their academic program's culminating requirements, presenting their work at a professional conference, or when applying for employment. Where possible, interns should be allowed to use work products generated during their internship as part of a portfolio or job application, and to discuss the skills, tools, and methods they used during their internship on their resume and during job interviews.

3 Accessibility and Fair Labor Practices for Internships

Note that all recommendations relating to labor practices included in this section are not meant to supersede any existing federal, state, or local labor legislation or existing collective agreements in force for an organization and its employees.

3.1 Interns Do Not Replace Professional Staff

Work performed by interns must be educational and provide students with hands-on experience. The work of interns must not replace the work of professional staff, but rather should complement it. According to the Fair Labor Standards Act, the primary beneficiary of an internship should be the student, not the employer, meaning that students must receive educational benefits from their internship in exchange for the work that they complete for their employer. Work should be related to learning outcomes as defined by the academic program and the student's professional learning objectives.

3.2 Compensation for Student Internships

For all types of internships, SAA strongly favors offering fair monetary compensation for such opportunities. Given the value of archives work and the skills possessed by archives students, particularly those with prior education or experience, interns should receive compensation in the form of an hourly wage or a stipend for their work which is commensurate with the qualifications required for the position and the intern's prior experience. While academic credit is often the end result of completing an internship under the guidance of an academic program, academic credit typically involves tuition payments. Such credit should not be considered sufficient as the sole form

of compensation except in cases where interns are not allowed to accept monetary compensation (e.g., international students who have visas that do not permit them to work off-campus). For students not allowed to accept monetary compensation, institutions may be able to provide support in other ways, such as housing or travel stipends. Other than such special cases, internships without any monetary compensation are wholly unacceptable, as such unpaid opportunities devalue the professional nature of archival work. Institutions that cannot offer monetary compensation for experiential opportunities should identify such offerings as volunteer work, rather than as professional internships. Unpaid volunteers should never be used as replacements for professional staff.

3.3 In-Person vs. Virtual Opportunities

Internships do not need to be exclusively in-person, onsite experiences. While archival work has traditionally involved handling of physical collections to engage in appraisal, arrangement, description, and other archival activities, there are many tasks that can be completed virtually, without requiring an intern to be physically present onsite such as metadata transformation, descriptive work, and remediation. Most students in hybrid or 100% online archival studies programs are much more likely to take advantage of internship opportunities when there is flexibility in terms of hours and geographic proximity to sites.

Given the evolving preferences of students, sites are encouraged to think creatively about increasing accessibility to archival internships by creating hybrid and virtual opportunities in consultation with archival teaching faculty (when internships are for academic credit) and with the students themselves. As part of the design of such experiences, faculty, site supervisors, and students should think carefully about ways to include regular communication, social interaction, and mentoring, as these should be essential components of all internship experiences, in addition to skill development.

3.4 Nondiscrimination and Inclusive Equity

Academic programs and internship sites can and should work collaboratively to provide internship opportunities that are welcoming to students from all backgrounds by removing barriers, whether they be physical, financial, logistical, legal, or institutional.

Academic programs can aid students in identifying internship opportunities at sites where diversity, equity, inclusivity, and accessibility are valued. Employers should communicate their commitment to nondiscrimination and inclusive equity principles by providing a link to their official policy in any archival internship advertisements and indicating their willingness to provide accommodations when needed.

An important first step in making internships more accessible is by offering financial compensation for internships, as noted above. Paid internships level the playing field by allowing students to take advantage of internship opportunities based on their skills and qualifications, rather than their financial circumstances.

The employer should advertise the internship via a variety of distribution channels in order to attract a diverse pool of potential applicants. While recommendations from colleagues and recruitment from current volunteers can both be helpful in generating interest, do not rely solely on such channels.

Also, job advertisements should be examined carefully to remove any wording that might discourage the disabled from applying, such as unnecessary physical, educational, or experience requirements.

Another important step for increasing accessibility is to carefully examine and adapt internship activities for those who may have physical limitations, neurodivergence, or other challenges such as limited availability during the typical Monday through Friday work week common for many archives.

In the case of physical limitations, employers might be able to accommodate an intern's inability to lift heavy objects, climb ladders to reach materials on high shelves, or bend to reach things on the floor by assigning these duties to other employees.

For interns with neurodivergence, there may be opportunities to tailor work to the person's strengths and abilities. Some students may benefit from alterations in their work environment to reduce potential stressors such as noise.

For those who must work during the week or who have childcare or eldercare responsibilities during an archive's regular operating hours, employers might also be able to offer flexible scheduling or remote work.

More information and suggestions on how to increase accessibility to archival internships can be found in the resources included in this document.

4 Recommendations for Successful Archival Internships

4.1 Before Beginning Work

4.1.1 Internship Agreements

Before a professional internship begins, the student intern, the site supervisor, and, where applicable, the faculty internship supervisor must agree to a clear set of guidelines for the internship. These specify the conditions of employment, including the educational objectives of the internship, the compensation provided by the institution, the expected final work product of the internship, and the evaluation criteria that will be used by the site supervisor and the faculty supervisor (where applicable). This agreement may take the form of informal letters of agreement or a more formal written contract signed by all parties, but the parameters of the internship should be in writing and approved by all parties before the internship begins. Archival education programs may also find it useful to provide both students and host sites with online or printed information explaining the role of internships within their curriculum and the academic requirements for student internships.

4.1.2 Qualified Site Supervisors

Interns must be supervised by individuals with sufficient training or experience in archives to ensure that interns are exposed to methods and procedures consistent with the best practices in the field. Site supervisors must commit to meeting regularly with interns to answer questions, provide feedback on their work, and mentor them.

4.1.3 Faculty Internship Supervisors (for Students Earning Academic Credit)

Internships for academic credit must be supervised by faculty members who are knowledgeable about the field of archives and who can appropriately evaluate all of the components of an internship. Faculty members should be available for consultation with the student or site supervisor as needed to discuss internship requirements and student performance.

4.2 Onboarding

4.2.1 Intern Orientation and Training

Supervisors should provide interns with an orientation to the facility and the resources at their disposal. Interns working onsite should be given a tour and be assigned a designated work area where they have sufficient space to accomplish tasks as assigned. Interns should receive credentials such as a name tag or badge that identifies them as an archive employee and, where feasible, the intern should be issued keys, keycards, or passcodes to enter areas they must access to do their work. Additionally, when interns require access to the archive's information systems for their duties, make sure to create accounts for them so that they can get started on their assigned work without delay.

Depending upon their duties, onsite interns should have guaranteed access to required technology and resources such as digitization equipment, and supplies needed for processing, preservation, and exhibit preparation work, as necessary. Whether onsite or remote, interns should be provided with all policies and procedures needed for their work. Such documentation may include manuals for processing and digitization, instructions for rehousing materials, guidelines for various public services work such as paging materials for users or supervising the reading room. Where necessary, interns should also receive training on the use of specialized equipment used for digitization tasks or collections care work.

4.2.2 Health, Safety, and Security Concerns

Intern supervisors and their institutions have a responsibility to ensure a professional and safe work environment and should keep the well-being of the intern in mind when assigning and supervising activities. Interns working onsite with archival materials should receive health, safety, and security training that incorporates the following topics where applicable: 1) building-related safety such as fire, disaster, and emergency entry/escape routes and protocols; 2) information and resources to mitigate or eliminate hazards related to collections or their care, such as: the use of chemicals and their proper storage, use of fume hoods and eye wash stations, and management of contaminants known to be in the air, materials, or work area; 3) training and supervision of safe handling practices for equipment and tools used in the workplace; and 4) collection security practices for handling, storage, and tracking of materials used and work completed by the intern.

4.2.3 Working with Sensitive Materials

When interns work with sensitive materials (such as cultural or religious materials, or materials related to human rights violations or social justice issues), they may need support from employers to develop coping strategies and mitigate emotional harm from such work. In some cases, employers should be prepared to offer alternate work assignments if interns feel that they are unable to work with such materials. Ideally, the presence of these materials in potential assignments should be disclosed by the site supervisor as early as possible, i.e., before the intern begins work on such

materials, to give interns the ability to request other assignments (or pursue other internships if need be).

4.3 Keeping on Track and Finishing Strong

4.3.1 Regular Communication

Regular contact between the intern, the site supervisor, and the intern's faculty supervisor (where applicable) must be maintained during the internship. If possible, hosting sites should provide interns with opportunities to share their experiences with others and to reflect on how the internship experience connects to current or prior coursework and issues of archival theory and practice. This communication may take many forms, including face-to-face meetings, virtual discussions, keeping a blog or social media page about internship experiences and projects, writing up reports to circulate internally to staff members, and making presentations about their internship activities to internal staff or at professional meetings.

4.3.2 Evaluation

All internships should include evaluation methods that allow institutions and students to determine whether students have met the educational objectives of the internship as established in the internship agreement. Evaluations may be in written form, in the form of an exit interview, or both. Evaluation methods and procedures should be clearly defined at the outset of the internship and include written input from site supervisors. Interns should be given an opportunity to discuss their performance and experiences with both the academic advisor (in the case of internships for academic credit) and the site supervisor at the end of the internship. After completion of an internship, both students and site internship supervisors should evaluate the internship experience to identify areas for future improvement. The conclusions of these surveys can be used by academic programs and sites to recognize intern achievements as well as to identify problems to be addressed at a site before it hosts additional interns.

5 Additional Resources and Guidance for Archival Internships

In the following bibliography, faculty members, supervisors, and students will find additional information and sample policies, handbooks, and other documents that may be helpful in developing their own materials.

- Design and Management of Archival Internships
 - Bastian, Jeannette A. and Donna Webber. *Archival Internships: A Guide for Faculty, Supervisors, and Students*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008.
 - Cornelius, Don, Barker Ray, Laura Cleary, and Sheridan Sayles. "Session 14. You Gotta Start Somewhere: Leveraging Education and Collaboration to Create Meaningful Internship Experiences." Session presented at the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Virtual Meeting, April 12-16, 2021.
<http://hdl.handle.net/1903/27011>
 - Farrell, Jess, Sheridan Sayles, Meg Tuomala, Hannah Wang (BitCuratorEdu Project), *BitCuratorEdu Guidelines for Hosting Remote Internships*,

<https://bitcuratorconsortium.org/bitcuratoredu-guidelines-for-hosting-remote-internships/>

- Expectations for Graduate Archival Education Programs
 - Society of American Archivists, *Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies*: <https://www2.archivists.org/gpas/curriculum>
- Increasing Accessibility to Archival Internships
 - Bayir, Didar, “Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Experiential Learning: Development of a Community-Grounded Online Internship Program,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* (JELIS) 63, no. 4 (2022): DOI: [10.3138/jelis.2020-0108](https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2020-0108)
 - Kobert, Elizabeth, “Outlying Internships,” *Library Journal* (April 2021): 30-32.
 - Society of American Archivists Accessibility & Disability Section, “Archivists at Home” [online resource]: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1O_Xgi7_PhB1m_8hl4OjcPOCO1wDD_LjEfznKPYpZ6WSo/edit
 - Tang, Lydia, Bridget Malley, Chris Tanguay, and Zachary Tumlin, “Toward Inclusion: Best Practices for Hiring People with Disabilities,” *Archival Outlook* (July/August 2020): 4, 17. <https://mydigitalpublication.com/publication/?m=30305&i=667849&p=1&ver=html5>
 - Thomas, William Joseph, and Kaye Bennett Dotson, “Internship Pivot @ ECU: Responding to Our University’s Transition,” *Serials Review* 47, no. 3-4 (2021): 151-156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00987913.2021.1940720>
- Internships and Labor Issues
 - Leonard, Kevin B., “Volunteers in Archives: Free Labor, But Not Without Cost,” *Journal of Library Administration* 52 (2012): 313-320. DOI: 10.1080/01930826.2012.684529
 - U.S. Department of Labor. *Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act*. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/71-flsa-internships>
- Additional resources for internship design, including sample policies, templates, etc. (to be completed after call for contributions from community)
 - https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1VpacofFef9wfPtI6XWNdprYcYeeuWO_zGMez_CSWok/edit#gid=0

Revision History

The Best Practices for Internships standard was revised in 2024 by the Graduate Archival Education Subcommittee of SAA’s Committee on Education, and was approved and endorsed by SAA Council in November 2025. The first version of this standard was approved and endorsed by the SAA Council in January 2014. It was originally adapted from *Public History Internships*, a set of recommendations prepared by the National Council on Public History’s Curriculum and Training Committee and endorsed by the NCPH Board of Directors in 2008.