BEST PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING BIPOC & FIRST-GEN STUDENTS IN THE WORKPLACE
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Adapted, in part, from “Don’t Hire Me as a Token: Best Practices for Recruiting & Supporting Student Externs from Historically Marginalized Backgrounds,” (South Carolina Law Review, Vol. 72, No. 357, 2020), by Alexi Freeman, Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Social Justice Initiatives at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law. Additional gratitude to Future Map and Success Cohorts for their input and collaboration on these topics and themes, and to RS alumnus Zoe Hardwick for her contributions and interviews with student interns.
Rainier Scholars leadership and career development work is grounded in our anti-racist mission and orientation. **We strive to provide programming and support that benefits and reflects the experiences of students of color in professional and leadership settings, and we expect that our partners commit to their own anti-racism work as part of supporting our scholars.**

What follows is a set of principles and strategies that internship and early career programs should consider and work to implement in order to best support students from underrepresented backgrounds. These practices are designed to elevate and enrich scholars’ opportunities to grow and thrive as future professionals. Many of these principles and strategies flow directly from student experiences and feedback, and we’ve drawn on student voices throughout to illustrate and underscore their impact.

Finally, these are just a sampling of recommended actions and reflection points as you prepare to support students from underrepresented backgrounds. **Expanding access to professional opportunities for First-Gen/BIPOC students is critically important, however should occur alongside intentional planning, processes, and organization-wide efforts to expand and meaningfully address diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.** Additionally, while this resource is focused on supporting BIPOC and First-Gen interns and young professionals, this is not a monolithic group and intersects with individuals also living within different genders, sexualities, abilities, nationalities, etc. Having initiatives and synergy around being a more inclusive workplace is critical to meaningfully fostering equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice.
1. Make sure job descriptions are clearly worded and focus on actual position responsibilities and required qualifications.
   • Be mindful of language or jargon/acronyms that may not be familiar to individuals without previous experience in or exposure to a particular field.
   • Include salary ranges per jurisdiction’s pay transparency laws.
   • Focus descriptions on actual job requirements (not dream/wish lists, which may scare some students away). Consider whether skills can be learned on the job.

2. Use authentic images and inclusive language on your website and promotional materials.
   • Avoid staging to enhance the perception of diversity/inclusion if it’s not authentic (and used with permission of clients, staff, and interns).
   • Embed equity and inclusion throughout your materials, not just at the end (e.g. adding “people from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to apply.”).

3. Avoid requirements that anchor on assumptions, such as GPA cutoffs or school tier preferences.
   • Data shows that not only is GPA rarely correlated to performance but is often a barrier to entry for a more diverse workforce.

4. Make sure internships are paid at a competitive wage.
   • Students perform better when they are not juggling multiple jobs/priorities, as is often required when internships are unpaid.

5. When evaluating candidates, look beyond technical skills and take a holistic approach. You might consider questions like:
   » Can we work with an 85% skill match and provide training to bridge the gap?
   » What transferable skills does the candidate possess from their lived or other work experiences?
   » Which individuals or groups would benefit the most from this opportunity?
   » What intangible qualities, such as unique perspectives, traits, or experiences, could the candidate bring to the team and contribute to the organization?

“There is nothing like being paid fairly. A lot of interns pass on unpaid internships especially if they need to earn an income. Companies should know they could be missing out on great future employees that way.”
6. Prioritize transparency in the application and interview process. Be proactive about discussing the value of incorporating diverse voices/perspectives into the workplace generally, and to your work and workplace culture in particular.

- Ensure that staff/interviewers involved in hiring and recruitment are well-versed on DEI matters and work to minimize bias throughout the interview/hiring process.
- If possible, share interview questions in advance.
- Provide a clear timeline for the hiring/decision making process at the outset.

- Discuss diversity and inclusion in the interview process with all applicants – underrepresented or not – as it encourages dialogue on such topics and signals to students that these topics matter to you and your office.
- Some, but not all, first-gen/BIPOC students may have engaged in service or political activism that focuses on identity. Students may shy away from discussing these activities at work or including them on application materials (especially if not directly related to the job). Even so, you can signal interest in such activities by inquiring about them during an interview process and/or expressing support.
- Offer to provide feedback to applicants, whether or not they are selected for the position.

7. Be clear about your ability to support students who require accommodations.

- You may also consider asking students whether they have additional needs to be successful in the work environment.

8. Explore whether you can provide opportunities for undocumented students and if so clearly advertise this availability.

- Consider creating a fellowship or stipend as an alternative form of payment that may be accessible to students without a Social Security Number.
Consider offering stipend-based “micro-internships” that are open to students regardless of immigration status. For more information visit: https://info.parkerdewey.com/thedreamus

For additional guidance on how to structure/facilitate opportunities for undocumented students (+ a range of concrete examples) visit the Higher Ed Immigration Portal (resource website).

9. **Communicate clearly why your organization has a Diversity Statement, Diversity Recruitment Plan, and/or values diversity, inclusion, and social/racial justice.**

   - If your organization has done (or is doing) internal work to advance goals related to diversity and inclusion, make this evident. It signals to the student that you are taking diversity outreach, as well as internal equity & inclusion, seriously and have thought deeply about it.
   - Consider sharing diversity-related programming and resources, and/or details about upcoming meetings or activities.
   - Be open about where your organization stands on diversity recruitment, retention, and philosophy (and be willing to share actual data, whether or not it represents your aspirational goals). This will avoid unexpected surprises for students, and also allows you to share where you want to go (even if you are not there yet).

10. **Conduct targeted outreach to organizations that work to support and facilitate opportunities for BIPOC/First-Gen students, including college-access non-profits, identity-based professional student organizations, or workforce development organizations.**

   - Consider holding designated internship or early career spots for students/alumni of these organizations.

“It is motivating to hear similar or different reasons why people have chosen to work for a company, especially if they come from an under-represented background. This can also help solidify an intern’s own reason for applying, accepting, and working hard at the internship.”
1. Have a dedicated welcome & orientation session. Make sure students feel welcome, comfortable, and included.
   • Make sure you know how to properly pronounce interns’ names (it’s fine to ask!)
   • Explicitly explain office lingo, norms, and dynamics. Avoid unwritten rules and excessive use of jargon. Clarify dress code/expectations.
   • Let students know who they should approach if they have questions/concerns.

2. Identify mentor(s) and/or establish a buddy system.
   • Where possible, match students with a mentor or buddy who also identifies as BIPOC or first-gen, or at a minimum ensure that the mentor is equipped and interested in supporting a student from a historically underrepresented background.

“The long-term value of connections with mentors cannot be understated, whether an intern stays at the assigned company or not. Setting up regular check-ins is helpful because the company can do temperature checks on the intern and how they are doing over the summer, but it also makes the intern feel more connected and like they are part of the team.”

3. Think holistically about how you’ll make sure students have the support they’ll need to succeed.
   • As a manager or team member, it’s easy to forget what it feels like to be new as well as how much institutional knowledge you may have.
   • Approach onboarding with empathy and take steps to help students understand how they fit into the bigger picture and how your company or team works together.
   • Before students start, reflect on questions including:
     » What would help students feel connected to the rest of the team?
     » Do they have access to all the information they need?
     » How are we creating a space where students feel allowed and encouraged to bring their authentic selves to work?
4. Where possible, provide templates and concrete examples of work products. Consider developing an internship handbook or resource guide.

5. Have one or more concrete projects lined up in advance. This might be one overarching internship project, or a set of clearly delineated tasks/activities that the intern is responsible for.

6. Prepare to ensure equity in knowledge as much as possible.
   - First-generation professionals may not have had as much exposure to certain fields as some of their peers. Consider organizing group trainings or facilitating access to professional development opportunities. Relatedly, be mindful about who is delivering such trainings in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.

“I have had internships where I was super idle and without projects (even while getting paid well). This left me feeling disengaged. At first, the free time was fun, but after a while, it didn’t feel good. It doesn’t feel good to just sit in the office, in the cubicle for 8 hours a day not feeling engaged or valuable. It becomes draining instead of fun and stimulating.”

“Interns can struggle with feeling as if they don’t have much to contribute to the company because they are new. Having various smaller projects and/or a baseline project gives them something to show, talk about, and share with others that is of importance.”
1. Set up ongoing, two-way street feedback and evaluation measures.
   • Attempt to provide ongoing, contemporaneous feedback throughout the internship where possible (from multiple voices, if applicable).
   • Have a process for actively soliciting feedback from the student – both general and DEI related.
     It can be hard for a student to share honest feedback given workplace power dynamics (and potential employment aspirations) but asking students for their input also demonstrates your valuation of their opinion and commitment to cultivating a supportive and inclusive workplace.

“Make it abundantly clear to the intern that they can come up with ideas to improve the internship experience or the company. Give them a structured way to share feedback and suggest ideas. Say this at the beginning so the intern’s brain is always thinking of ways to improve the company, which is good for the company, and good for inviting creativity and growth mindset into the space.”

2. Prioritize giving interns real projects based on actual workplace needs.
   • The opportunity to contribute to the actual work of the organization/company not only motivates interns, but makes it easier for them to imagine themselves working there.

3. Be mindful of different learning styles and take steps to learn about your intern’s learning preferences, interests, abilities, and strengths.

“One time I had a boss who had lunch with me every day, and even when he knew I wasn’t happy at my internship he didn’t hold it against me. Instead, he encouraged me to try marketing or other roles. He was very unselfish. He was concerned with my growth and real career path rather than solely attached to his role or company.”
4. Encourage students to attend professional meetings and conferences and invite them to contribute or present if/when possible.

5. Cultivate and help facilitate networking and skill-building opportunities (ideally inside and outside your company or organization).

6. Promote culturally conscious community-building, networking, and social events.
   - Organizations should explore multiple ways to foster community with staff and interns and should diversify both what they do and where they do it. For example, thinking critically about where events are held (location & venue), what cuisine is served, or what materials are discussed/referenced can help ensure different groups and cultures are represented and feel welcome to engage.

   “For example, bring in someone who is good with resumes, or a co-worker who can help interns develop a skill that may or may not be directly attached to the job they are doing, but will help them grow professionally.”

7. Check your own biases and assumptions and encourage colleagues to do the same.
   - Avoid assuming skills/interest areas based on racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds.
   - Ensure equity in types of assignments, distribution, access/exposure to a range of staff, etc.
8. Avoid “flaunting” the “diverse intern.”
• While it’s no doubt a positive step to work with and expand access for students from underrepresented backgrounds in your field, it can be counterproductive (and alienating for students) to continually publicize their diversity status.

“Few things are more off-putting than feeling tokenized or having one’s difference on display and used for the benefit of others.”

9. Be mindful of news/current events that might particularly have an effect on interns and/or employees of color. Be supportive of candidates’ experience and interest in activism.
• Consider whether your office addresses local or national incidents/issues that affect historically marginalized communities (e.g. Incidents of police brutality, hate crimes). It can be helpful to facilitate organization-wide active conversations about these incidents, and at a minimum acknowledge and condemn their occurrence.

10. Demystify the postgraduate job search process within your organization or field and do so early to give students a genuine opportunity at employment.
• Consider scheduling a meeting or hosting an info session to go over employment pathways/ opportunities and steps students can take to increase their competitiveness in your organization or field.
• Consider guaranteeing an interview for interested students who have interned with you in the past (as a means of tempering the implicit and sometimes explicit bias that research shows exists when reviewing resumes from applicants of color).

11. If possible, have interns give an end of internship presentation to staff of the organization. Consider pairing this with a celebration to honor the interns’ contributions.
• Final presentations enable interns to synthesize their learning and practice their public speaking skills. They also allow you to highlight the work interns have done to a broader range of staff and stakeholders.

“Interns are looking for validation. They are looking to be valuable assets to the company. Reassure them! Reward them for good, hard work and give them a real chance to do good, hard work.”
In the past few years, we have learned a tremendous amount about what works (and what doesn’t) when it comes to remote and hybrid work setups. Most of the best practices highlighted above still ring true, but remote/hybrid setups require even more intentionality when it comes to facilitating robust and well-supported experiential learning opportunities. The suggestions below flow directly from student experiences navigating remote/hybrid internships both during and after the Covid pandemic:

1. **Make sure interns have what they need to meaningfully engage.**
   - This likely includes technology/tech support, a dedicated workspace, access to communication/messaging platforms like Slack or Teams, and a clear system/structure for receiving assignments and receiving support.

2. **Set up a holistic onboarding process.**
   - When possible, meet in person first. Investing in relationship building up front helps lay the foundation for trust and smooth communication throughout the internship.
   - Schedule welcome/get to know you meetings with a range of staff members during the first 1-2 weeks. This will provide some structure as well as give interns a broader understanding of the organization’s work and their role.
   - Consider assigning an “onboarding buddy” who checks in regularly to make sure things are going smoothly and answer any questions.
   - Make sure interns have clear assignments/expectations and know what to do when they are not in meetings or at the office.

3. **Communication is KEY! Don’t let interns be “out of sight, out of mind.”**
   - Set up a regular check-in system – ideally daily, but no less than weekly.

“I really enjoyed being paired with another intern for a project. Group intern projects can be good for bonding, team building, and makes the intern feel more comfortable. It can be hard being a younger person around older, more experienced employees, and having the support of a fellow intern is really good.”
• Make sure interns know how to ask questions/access support when they are working outside the office.

• Incorporate aspects of accountability, where possible (e.g. going over work at pivotal points, internal deadlines to make sure projects are moving along...)

4. Be thoughtful/intentional about facilitating “on the job learning” in a remote/hybrid context.

• Many skills that you learned “on the job” current students or recent grads haven’t had the chance to because of retracted opportunities during the Covid pandemic. Think about what early career learning you can facilitate – whether through meetings/conversations, shadowing, or access to learning/exposure opportunities.

• When possible invite interns to join for meetings, events, or trainings (whether virtual or in person).

• If possible, incorporate at least some in-person touch points (could be weekly, monthly, or even just 1-2 times during the internship).

5. Make sure interns feel like part of the team.

• Even in a remote/hybrid context, camaraderie matters! Invite interns to team meetings, facilitate social/community building opportunities (even virtual!), and if your organization has multiple interns cultivate opportunities for interns to connect and trade notes on their work and experience.

6. Know that there may be bumps in the road, and it’s ok to course-correct!

• This can be true for any internship, but especially in remote/hybrid settings where there may be fewer communication touch points and figuring out what works may take some trial and error. Build in opportunities to check in with interns about how things are going, and be open to revising systems/expectations/accountability structures if needed.
1. Keep in touch with your interns and mentees.
   • Check in with them and offer to provide support as they advance in school/their careers.

2. Consider your ability to be a mentor, or perhaps more importantly, a sponsor!
   • Studies show that women and people of color are least likely to have a sponsor at work (mentors provide advice/guidance, whereas sponsors actively seek to open doors and provide opportunities). Where possible, be open to serving as a mentor, and ideally also a sponsor for former interns from underrepresented backgrounds.

   “Many of my mentor relationships have lasted. Even for those that have not, if my mentor or supervisor had been supportive and checked-in throughout I know I could send a LinkedIn message or an email and that relationship would be just as strong today as it was when interned.”

3. Be willing to facilitate networking connections and access to your network.

4. Share internship leads/job postings (plus be willing to advocate and put in a good word!).

5. For interns with an interest in graduate school or continued study, consider whether you can support them in their application/exploration process.
We thank you for taking the time to review this guide and hope you found the information shared informative and actionable.

For additional information regarding Rainier Scholars Career Development programs please contact Sara Jackson at:

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