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## Nonprofit Social Media Internships: A Handbook

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## Nonprofit Social Media Internships: A Handbook

### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the Department of English and the Honors College, particularly to Sarah Springer and Dr. Amy Clukey. Thank you to Dr. Megan Poole and Dr. Thomas Riedel, for agreeing to be a part of my thesis defense committee, and thank you to Dr. Mary Sheridan, for agreeing to advise me on this thesis and encouraging me along the way. Without the guidance and support of professors and advisors, this project would not have been possible. Finally, to all my family and friends, thank you for your unending love and support through this process. I couldn't have done it without you!

# Nonprofit Social Media Internships: A Handbook

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## ABSTRACT

This brief research report provides details on a study that examines how nonprofits can best prepare their interns and how interns can best prepare themselves for a role in engaging audiences through social media. Through a literature review on nonprofit social media and internships, a series of qualitative interviews with interns and supervisors, and the researcher's lived experiences as a social media intern, a handbook was developed for nonprofit social media internships. This guide is relevant to the specific experiences of nonprofit social media internships, includes advice on training, mentorship, and best practices, and finally, it incorporates further resources on nonprofit social media that interns and supervisors can access. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature and work to manage expectations between interns and supervisors before, during, and after their internship.

**KEYWORDS:** Nonprofit, social media, internship, intern, supervisor, handbook

## INTRODUCTION

Nearly every company, nonprofit organization, school, and club has some kind of social media presence. Social media allows these groups to connect with customers, donors, members, and potential employees, all the while changing the way individuals interact with each other every day. Due to the pervasiveness of social media, it is natural that there are a variety of internships that include social media tasks. Internships are a common way for students to gain experience in their field, while the company receives support and the chance to mentor potential future employees. Despite its importance, many nonprofits grossly undervalue social media, failing to make use of the opportunities that digital engagement creates while assigning social media to interns with little preparation, often due to a lack of funding or personnel within the organization. Interns, on the other hand, are assumed to be (and might expect to be) experts on the subject because of their age and personal social media use, and therefore enter their role with limited training or knowledge about the organization or about how to use social media in professional settings. To explore this gap, this study answers the following questions: What do nonprofits do on social media? What are they not doing? What do interns know? What do they not know? How can we manage expectations between these two groups so that interns are both prepared for their roles and meet the needs of the organization? Without answering these questions, nonprofits will not receive the level and quality

of work that they require from interns, and interns will not have a fulfilling experience.

Of course, there are many more individuals involved in the internship process in addition to interns and supervisors, including other nonprofit professionals in the leadership of the organizations; communication, English, public administration, and other departments at universities; and even previous interns. However, this study primarily focuses on interns and immediate supervisors, as these are the two individuals who make up the core of that internship. In order to improve the internship experience, both for the nonprofit and the intern, this research must first examine the gaps in knowledge and communication between these two groups. While there needs to be a fundamental shift in how both nonprofits and interns approach a social media internship, there are short-term solutions present in this research and the following handbook that can improve the immediate experience while working towards that shift in the future.

## METHODS

A qualitative study was developed that would examine what successes, challenges, advice, and regrets that interns and supervisors have experienced in nonprofit social media internships, as well as how improve the communication gap between the two groups. For this study, a series of qualitative interviews were conducted, guided by a literature review as well as by research on autoethnography, institutional ethnography, and interview techniques. Coding these interviews, for which

this study provides a detailed explanation of the process, allowed for the creation of a model that incorporates data from the literature review and the researcher's experience as an intern to closely examine the lived experiences, relationships, and complexity of nonprofit social media internships. This process culminated in a graphic handbook for interns and supervisors that shares the findings in an approachable way. As this section will explore further, this study illuminates the depth and variety of experiences within this population even as it describes common trends among them.

### *Interviews*

To investigate how to merge the knowledge of interns and supervisors, and to illuminate what makes nonprofit social media internships successful, qualitative research was conducted through seven in-depth interviews with interns and supervisors. Because COVID-19 meant that interviews had to be conducted virtually, and due to time constraints for this study, seven individuals were able to be interviewed. Among these seven, there were three interns and two supervisors, as well as two individuals who had fulfilled both roles at some point in their careers. These participants were selected through snowball sampling and by sending out the research information through social media and departmental Listservs. This study attempted to interview a variety of individuals, but a majority of the participants that the researcher had a network with and who responded to the outreach were relatively young, white, and/or women. Each lasted between 15-30 minutes. These interviews were semi-structured, as there were specific questions asked about their experience, level of preparedness, and advice, all pertaining to their history with social media. The information these supervisors and interns provided was triangulated with the researcher's personal experiences and the literature review, which created heavy researcher involvement. This involvement plus the small sample size leads to a lower level of generalizability among the population, but it also provides a more in-depth investigation of nonprofit social media internships that may be useful for other interns and supervisors to consider.

Because the interview pool was kept small due to COVID-19 and time restraints, it is necessary to examine the makeup of the sample and how that might have influenced or qualified the findings. Perez (2019) provides a helpful example of why this examination is important. In *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, she analyzes a trend where women are commonly left out of the research process, drastically changing the conclusions. It was important to examine the interview pool and consider whose voices are and are not included in the data, as well as how that may influence the

findings. Out of the seven participants, five were women, and five were white. This was somewhat expected, as white women are a large demographic within the nonprofit sector. However, as a white woman, it is also important to consider how demographics influenced who received invitations, who responded, and how both of these considerations affected the findings. Furthermore, out of the seven individuals interviewed, only two were solely supervisors – the other five were either interns or supervisors who also had internship experience. While this difference is partly due to a small sample size, it is still important to note the relative lack of the supervisor perspective alone. Perhaps this difference is a reason for the increased emphasis on the intern perspective in the findings, as well as the researcher's internship experience creating a bias. Here is another important moment to qualify that the findings and handbook of this study should not be taken as a representative or final documentation of the nonprofit social media internship experience – instead, the handbook acts as a guide for future internships, somewhat limited due to sample size, based on the patterns found across interviews, personal experience, and the literature.

### *Coding*

After all the interviews were completed, transcribing and coding the data began. Then, these codes were combined and abstracted to distill them to their most meaningful parts and to begin to formulate the findings. The coding process was primarily guided by Hsiung's (2010) framework, and therefore, it began with a round of open descriptive coding on the sentence level. These codes were then categorized to identify major themes and relationships. After this initial categorization for each interview was complete, the researcher began to break these codes down further into their most essential pieces of meaning, a process called combining and abstraction (Saldaña, 2015). All of the essential meaning behind these codes were maintained, but they were made more abstract to create fewer, more meaningful categories. This abstraction process allowed the codes to become more manageable and begin to reveal the larger patterns.

Then began a round of focused coding for the key codes identified in the first round, this time tracking the frequency of the codes. The researcher recoded the interviews and added a second layer of analytical codes that tracked thoughts on major themes, connections to the literature and personal experience, or contradictions. Overall, the coding process allowed for triangulation of several sources of data: the researcher's experiences, the interviews, and the literature, while recognizing how the researcher's experiences influenced the conclusions. This triangulation was crucial to the analytical coding process,

and using that final set of codes and the Hsiung (2010) handbook, a framework was created.

### *Creating a Framework*

After examining the codes, a model was generated that reflected which pieces are relevant before, during, and after an internship – a chronology which became apparent in the revised set of key themes. At the same time, this model recognizes the importance of both intern *and* supervisor preparation, as well as the cyclical nature of the internship process. Therefore, the element of time is a driving force in understanding both the findings and the handbook.

By considering institutional ethnography, the model has an emphasis on the relationships between the intern and supervisor across different points in time and across institutions, which can be influenced by factors particularly during the internship. Institutional ethnography involves using qualitative data from everyday experiences to describe social relationships as they are organized by institutions, in this case, internships and social media teams in the nonprofit sector (Smith, 2002). Intern-supervisor relationships are crucial to this experience because this is how interns and supervisors can communicate most immediately to improve the internship experience. Consequently, this study focuses on these social relationships, as well as how the institutions organize them. It is also useful to keep in mind that the point of institutional ethnography is not to generalize about a population using a small sample, but to demonstrate how the differences in individual experiences among the sample contrasts with the institution's generalizations about those individuals. This framework can help resolve individual differences across interviews rather than attempt to force them into a consensus, creating a much more holistic and well-rounded framework.

### *The Handbook*

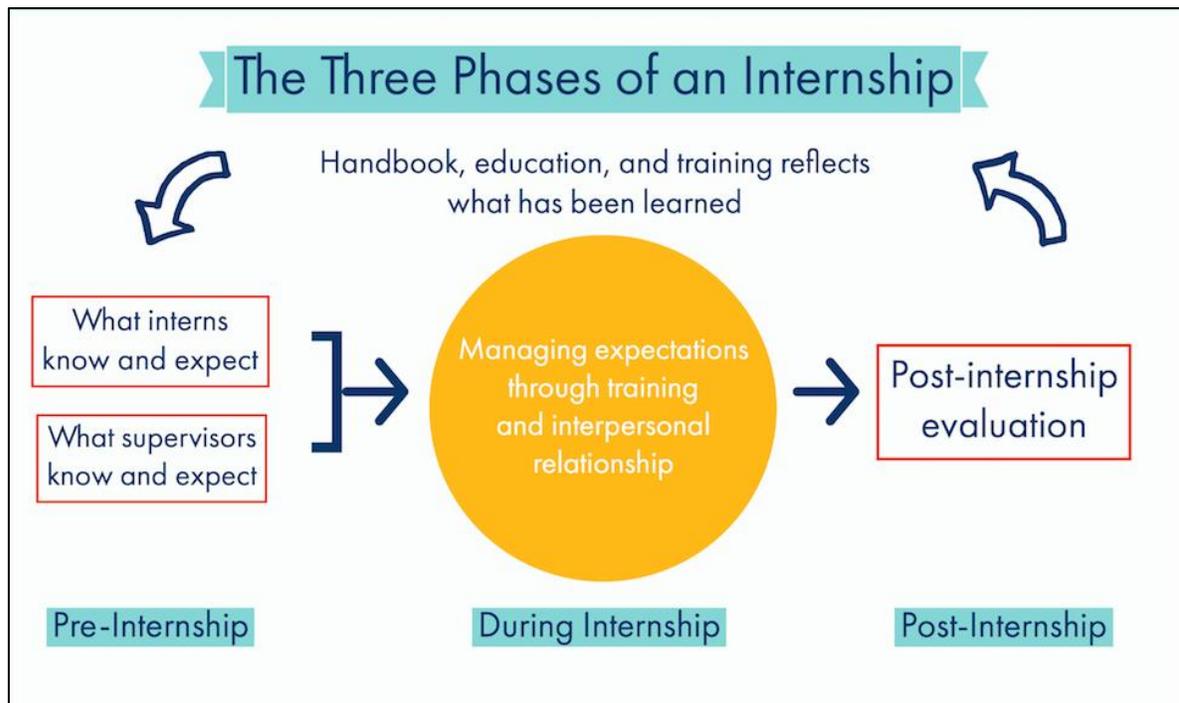
To make the findings of this study more portable, consideration was given to what interns would prefer. Rather than a seventy-page paper, the researcher considered that she would want to read a condensed handbook that looked like an infographic – with images, diagrams, text boxes, and other visual elements that allow the reader to skim through the information much faster. With some graphic design experience in hand, the researcher also drew from an educational tool on multimodal writing. Lupton (2017) analyzes design as a form of storytelling and characterizes the kinds of responses produced by both design and storytelling: action, emotion, sensation, and aftermath. Lupton then applies several narrative techniques combined with theories of visual perception to create what amounts to a

manual of design for storytelling. This was a paradigm text as this study considered how best to convey the results of this research in a handbook for interns and supervisors. The researcher chose a bright color scheme and playful, artistic design elements to emphasize that this handbook is engaged in a larger process of learning and change over time within the nonprofit sector. This handbook effectively presents the findings of this study to nonprofit interns and supervisors in a format that is much more approachable than the written text.

## **RESULTS**

This section explores common problems that supervisors and interns face before, during, and after the internship, along with potential solutions to those problems that can improve the experience for all. Naturally, every internship has its challenges. What some interns and supervisors described as a problem, others described as a success. By analyzing these differences across interviews, this study categorized them into several main problems, as well as several main successes that can act as potential solutions to those problems. These problems and solutions are situated along three main categories: the expectations and preparation prior to the internship (both intern and supervisor), the interpersonal relationship and training during the internship, and the post-internship evaluation. The relationship between these categories can best be presented in Figure 1.

The interviews reveal that in any internship, there may be flaws in any or all of the three phases of this model, but the aspect of time influences what can be done about those flaws. The nonprofit may not be able to change what education the interns come in with, while the intern or supervisor may not be able to change the organization's strategy right away. What is in the immediate control of both supervisors and interns, however, is how they interact with one another during the scope of the internship. Therefore, while the pre-internship and post-internship processes may require long-term strategies to improve, short-term changes are most possible during the internship. That is not to say that all three phases do not have short- and long-term strategies, but that certain phases are more accessible for immediate improvement. Despite the importance within the interviews and in the researcher's experience as an intern, the interpersonal aspect of social media internships is almost entirely absent from the literature, which focuses mostly on the long-term.



**Figure 1.** *The Three Phases of an Internship.*

The handbook, which draws from the interviews and the researcher's experience, is an opportunity to fill that gap in the short-term by revealing the problems that many interns and supervisors face as well as several strategies to improve the experience. Institutional ethnography is crucial to understanding how to improve the relationship between the intern and supervisor within these institutions at different points in time. Suggestions for post-internship evaluation and strategy are also included that can work to make the long-term solutions possible, which is another gap in the literature. The results of the study, therefore, are in problem-solution format, with consideration to the qualifying elements of time and feasibility.

Overall, there is a lack of formal training for interns, which makes them feel uncomfortable, and at the same time they wish there was more empathy and understanding for their position. Supervisors want to support their interns, but they might feel uncomfortable giving feedback or unsure how to manage their intern's time. These problems complicate the interpersonal relationship between supervisor and intern while preventing them from achieving the goals of the organization.

## DISCUSSION

There are good and bad aspects of every internship, therefore it is too simplistic to say that nonprofits and interns can or should immediately adopt all of the suggestions in these findings. However, what interns and supervisors alike should take away is that before, during, and after the internship, there are several problems to look

out for, but communication and unpacking assumptions are often key to solving them. The framework provided here is based on ways that other interns have solved those problems, but supervisors and interns should discuss what works best for them and modify this framework as needed. That is perhaps why the interpersonal relationship category had the largest number of problems; without communication and guidance between interns and supervisors, problems in all three categories cannot be addressed.

Because of the limits of this study, there is much room for further research. This study offers few suggestions for how institutions can use the post-internship evaluation to improve the first two aspects of the cycle, for example. In addition, the sample pool of participants is small, so it would be interesting to survey a larger portion of the population to determine if these findings hold, or whether there are other factors involved in nonprofit social media internships like pay or academic credit that may be revealed. Nonprofit social media internships is such a specific category that there is relatively little research out there, and there is much to be done going forward.

This research reviews the literature relating to nonprofit social media internships, explores new research on the experiences of nonprofit interns and supervisors through interviews, draws on autoethnographic methods to incorporate the researcher's internship experience, and uses institutional ethnography to describe how the intern-supervisor relationship is codified through its institutions. As a whole, this study works to highlight areas for improvement in nonprofit social media internships,

suggest potential solutions based in research, and makes these problems and solutions accessible in a handbook format for quick and easy reference. Presently, the handbook that follows will be useful for both interns and supervisors to begin to improve the nonprofit social media experience for all those involved.

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