

HOSTING A BIOMEDICAL COMMUNICATION INTERN: FROM IDEA THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION

By **Barbara Gastel, MD, MPH**

Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

In the March issue of the AMWA Journal, Ann Marie Weber-Main and Heather Haley described their experiences with a biomedical internship.¹ In this second article in the 2-part series, Barbara Gastel, who has been hosting interns and coordinating internships for almost a decade, provides some practical tips for developing a successful biomedical communication internship.



A biomedical communication internship can provide valuable education to the intern, valuable help to the host, and great satisfaction to both. However, it also can pose frustrations. How can hosts maximize the former and minimize the latter? The current article addresses this question. To do so, it draws on discussions over the years with hosts and interns, some of the literature on internship hosting, and my experience hosting and placing many interns.

BENEFITS OF INTERNSHIP HOSTING

Internships can benefit the host, the intern, and the field of biomedical communication. For the host, an intern can inexpensively supply assistance. (However, given the need for training and supervision, even unpaid interns are not free.) Hosting interns is a way to evaluate potential employees. It can provide useful contacts with professors who can suggest job candidates and with biomedical communicators in countries where one wishes to estab-

lish professional ties. Hosts also gain the satisfaction of helping the intern.

The experience can help the intern in a variety of ways. Internships provide opportunities to gain knowledge and skills difficult or impossible to obtain in the classroom. In addition, they give interns chances to explore types of work, build their resumes and portfolios, and evaluate and impress potential employers. Internships also can provide useful contacts, including professionals who can serve as references. Thus, internships increase marketability. Indeed, in some communication fields, they have become almost prerequisites for employment.

For the profession as a whole, internships increase the pool of potential employees with experience in biomedical communication. They also increase the number of applicants for whom evaluations are available from those in the field.

Successful internships do not just happen, however. For all parties to gain the most, the host should devote careful attention to planning, supervision, and follow-up. This attention need not be very time-consuming, but it should be thoughtful and timely.

ESTABLISHING AN INTERNSHIP

Whatever your setting, you may be able to host an intern. Sites of internships in biomedical communication have included pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies, medical journals, popular media, academic institutions, health care facilities, government agencies, and offices of freelancers. Usually, funding for the internship comes from the internship site. However, some intern placement programs pay interns' expenses, provide

stipends, or both.

The first step in establishing an internship is to determine its nature and scope. Other preliminaries include considering the logistics and seeking candidates. In some cases, the potential host also needs permission from a supervisor.

In designing an internship, questions to consider include the following.

- What could an intern do that could both help you and contribute to the intern's education? Therefore, what should be the main internship activities?
- What background should the intern have? Would the internship best suit an undergraduate, a graduate student, or someone later in his or her career? What knowledge and skills should candidates have, and what educational background would be best? Does the intern's native language matter?
- How long should the internship last, and what timing would be best? Would full-time or part-time be preferable? In addressing these questions, consider the activities anticipated and the rhythms of your year, for example regarding workload and conferences. Also consider potential interns' constraints, such as those relating to the academic calendar.
- What about paying the intern? If possible, pay the intern, even if the amount must be modest. Paying for work is the right thing to do. Payment also aids in attracting strong candidates, including those who cannot afford unpaid internships, and it helps engender interns' commitment. "You get what you pay for, and unpaid internships are rarely in employers' best interests," argued freelance writer Laura Vanderkam in *USA Today*.²

Early on, start thinking about logistics. Consider who will supervise the intern and what the roles of the supervisor(s) will be. If others will

participate in supervision, involve them in the planning.

Unless the internship comes with outside support or is unpaid, consider how it will be funded. If possible, build the funding into your budget. For example, my budget as editor of the Council of Science Editors periodical, *Science Editor*, includes funds for an intern; depending on the intern's circumstances, interns have received a stipend as either a graduate assistantship or a consulting fee. If your budget does not include funding for an intern, you may be able to draw on other resources. For instance, a biomedical communicator recently mentioned using funds earmarked for writing projects to pay an intern whose work included those projects.

Consider workspace and computer access. An exceptionally mature intern with focused tasks can work at home and meet periodically with the host. Usually, though, the intern should have a workspace onsite in order to receive a well-rounded experience and adequate supervision. Increasingly, interns arrive with their own laptop computers. However, access to the computer network at your site may need to be arranged. If an intern is not local, items to consider can include travel, housing, health insurance, and library access.

OBTAINING AND EVALUATING CANDIDATES

How can you find internship candidates? Avenues to consider pursuing include the following.

- Network through professional organizations such as AMWA.
- Draw on other contacts.
- Participate in internship fairs, such as those at local universities and that which the National Association of Science Writers holds at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.
- Contact directors of relevant academic programs.
- Consider placing announcements in professional publications and

publicizing the internship through e-mail lists and Internet bulletin boards.

- Post an announcement on your Web site.

In general, candidates should apply in writing. This requirement can aid in evaluating candidates' writing skills—and can eliminate potential applicants too unmotivated even to take this step. An application form may not be necessary; requesting a cover letter, resume, and writing samples can suffice. Normally, finalists should be interviewed and references should be checked. One longtime host asked candidates whether they had looked at her journal. If they said they had not, or if subsequent discussion revealed lack of familiarity, the candidates were unlikely to be considered further.

In evaluating applicants, attributes to seek can vary among biomedical communication internships. They can include a "professional demeanor and excellent interpersonal skills, including a good e-mail presence";¹ skills in writing, editing, and related realms; appropriate computer skills, such as those in word-processing programs; familiarity with types of documents to be worked on; medical knowledge; ability to work both independently and with others; receptiveness to feedback; flexibility, productivity, and reliability; and eagerness to learn. Relevance of the internship to the applicant's career goals can be worth considering as well. Because rapport between intern and host can affect the success of an internship, consider whether you and the candidate could work happily together. Use your intellect but do not ignore your intuition when choosing an intern.

PLANNING INTERNSHIP ACTIVITIES

After choosing a candidate, you can plan the internship in more detail, taking into account both your needs and the abilities and goals of the intern. An intern may be able to help with ongoing tasks, thus freeing some of your time for new endeavors. Also, he or she

may be able to do special projects for which you or your staff lack time, knowledge, or skill.

Examples of using interns' specialized background or gearing activities to their interests have included the following: Chinese interns at the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases* have drafted Chinese-language abstracts for its Web site. At *Science Editor*, interns with backgrounds in medicine, earth science, and mathematics have written pieces relating to their respective disciplines; an intern from South Korea has written about science and science editing in her country; interns have prepared articles relating to their interests, such as freelance editing, telecommuting, history of science, and broadcasting; and an intern who liked proof-reading received extra assignments in this realm. For the Other Than Editing department of *Science Editor*, interns have profiled individuals with outside interests similar to their own: An intern active in vocal music wrote about a science editor who directs a choir, and one with a penchant for motorcycles profiled AMWA's Harley-riding Jim Cozzarin. Not every assignment will be such a match, however. Indeed, important lessons for interns include the value of venturing into unfamiliar realms and the need for professionals to do some work that they do not prefer.

As you plan, devise ways for the intern to "shadow" you. For example, identify meetings to which you can bring the intern. Consider giving the intern copies of professional e-mail appropriate to share.

Plan activities such that recipients build their portfolios, resumes, and contacts. Even some internships that do not focus on writing include writing a piece for potential publication. For example, with guidance of her host, an editorial intern at *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* wrote and published an article about medical editing in her home country. At *Science Editor*, the interns, who serve mainly as staff writers, write vari-

ous types of articles in order to obtain a range of both experience and writing samples. Many hosts take interns to AMWA chapter meetings or other professional gatherings and introduce their interns to colleagues when occasion arises.

INTERACTING WITH THE INTERN

Now the intern has arrived. How can you best interact with him or her? Several suggestions follow (Table 1).

Orient the intern, both to the internship and to the internship site as a whole. When the intern arrives, make introductions, provide a brief tour, supply context for the internship, and discuss logistics and plans. Items to address can include goals and functions of your unit and of the institution; goals and objectives of the intern; office arrangements, computer use, and access to other resources; types of

required and optional activities; initial assignments; and administrative details, such as paperwork for payment. Plan an agenda for your initial meeting with an intern to ensure an appropriate orientation (Table 2).

Provide some structure, but don't structure the internship excessively.

Initially, provide relatively detailed instructions and timetables. Also, supply models of types of work desired. As the internship progresses, allow the intern more autonomy and provide more chances for initiative. Of course, gear the amount of structure to the intern's capabilities.

Establish regular times to meet. Also be available for informal consultation. To help ensure that the intern receives continuing guidance, have regular times to meet. For example, schedule a weekly meeting to which you and the intern bring lists of items to discuss. If you will discuss writing that the intern has drafted, have the intern submit it in time for you to review beforehand. Also be available for consultation between meetings. Often the "teachable moment" occurs when the intern has a question, so try to be accessible at least by e-mail. If there are times that generally you should not be interrupted, let the intern know.

Don't assign only menial work. However, don't hesitate to assign some menial work. A biomedical communication internship should not consist only of making photocopies, running errands, and performing other routine chores. However, it can include some such routine work—especially if it frees time for the host or others to talk with the intern. A rule of thumb: If routine tasks are ones that you or other staff members also do, the intern can spend some time doing them. However, such tasks should constitute only a small part of the intern's work.

Include some projects that especially suit the intern's interests. For example, if an intern enjoys Web design, photography, or copyediting, seek a way to apply this interest. If an

**Table 1. Interacting with an Intern
10 SUGGESTIONS**

1. Orient the intern, both to the internship and to the internship site as a whole.
2. Provide some structure, but don't structure the internship excessively.
3. Establish regular times to meet. Also be available for informal consultation.
4. Don't assign only menial work. However, don't hesitate to assign some menial work.
5. Include some projects that especially suit the intern's interests.
6. Include some "goodies."
7. Allow the intern to take increasing responsibility.
8. Remember to provide feedback.
9. Include the intern in activities of the internship site as a whole.
10. Be available as a mentor.

Table 2. Sample Agenda for an Orientation Meeting with an Intern*

Welcome
Office/Keys/Computer Password
Paperwork for Payment
Background Items
Campus Map
Production Schedule
Departments
Overview of Internship Activities
Serving as Staff Writer
Other
Preparation: Looking at Back Issues
Possible Initial Assignments
Presentations to Consider Attending
Weekly Meeting Time
Other

*Adapted from the agenda for the initial meeting with a recent Science Editor intern.

intern likes and knows about a relevant topic, try to have the intern write or edit something about it. Such matching can motivate the intern and help make the internship most valuable to both intern and host.

Include some “goodies.” For example, invite the intern to AMWA chapter meetings and other events of professional interest. If you attend a conference, bring back materials for the intern. If you receive professional publications, share them with him or her. Occasionally take the intern to lunch or for a coffee break. Especially if an intern is from out of town, consider inviting the intern for a home-cooked meal or to a cultural event. Such “goodies” can both enhance the intern’s motivation and help integrate the intern into the professional community.

Allow the intern to take increasing responsibility. As the internship progresses, allow the intern to work more independently. Doing so will help the intern continue developing his or her skills. It also will help prepare the intern for the transition to a job.

Remember to provide feedback.

Giving feedback takes time. Also, many of us shy away from providing unfavorable feedback. Yet feedback is crucial to interns. A word of praise from a host can make an intern’s week. And to improve their performance, interns need to know how they can do better. Therefore, make a point of providing feedback, either during regularly scheduled meetings or at other times. If possible, “talk through” some of the intern’s writing; doing so provides valuable one-on-one teaching, allows both intern and host to obtain clarifications, and helps interns to understand reasons for changes and so improve performance. When giving feedback, remember to mention items the intern has done well rather than only noting those needing improvement. Doing so both reinforces strengths and helps maintain morale. Also, try to relate feedback to the intern’s goals and objectives.

Include the intern in activities of the internship site as a whole. Is your department or institution holding a picnic? Is a distinguished visitor giving a presentation? Is there a party for an employee? Invite the intern to such events. Doing so can enliven and enhance the internship experience. It also can provide helpful visibility for the intern and for you as internship host.

Be available as a mentor. Once rapport has been established, an intern may seek your guidance on items extending beyond the activities at hand. Questions that may arise are as follows.

- What additional courses should I take?
- Which professional organizations should I join?
- What career opportunities exist in this field?
- How can I make myself marketable to employers?
- How can I balance my career and other aspects of my life?

If an intern approaches you with such questions, accept the compliment

and take the time to address them. Also make clear that you remain available to discuss such professional issues later in the internship and after it ends.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULTIES

If the suggestions in this article are followed, major difficulties are unlikely to occur. Yet even in well planned and well run internships, challenges can arise from time to time. Three areas that can present problems are adaptation of the intern to a relatively unstructured environment, outside demands on a part-time intern’s time, and competing demands on the host’s time. In addition, hosting international interns can pose special challenges.

At least at the undergraduate level, interns may pass through 3 phases: Before the internship, they may be excited and idealize what will occur. Then, early in the internship, they may be disoriented and frustrated as they struggle to master new tasks in a new setting, often with much less guidance than in the classroom, and as they contend with differences between academic ideals and professional realities. Lastly, interns tend to reach a stage of resolution as they adapt and come to value what is being gained.³ Awareness of this pattern can aid internship hosts, for example by alerting them that many new interns want considerable structure, feel insecure about their performance, and seek perfection at the expense of the productivity needed in the workplace.

If an internship is part-time, difficulties may arise because of other demands on the intern. Student interns sometimes miss internship hours when class work requires more time than expected. Of course, the host should make sure the intern realizes that the internship is a commitment, not an activity to pursue only when convenient. Guidance in time management also may help. Sometimes, a host can adapt requirements, for example by letting an intern work extra hours beforehand and then be absent for another activity. If, however, an intern

cannot consistently devote the time and effort required, reducing the internship hours or ending the internship can be best.

For internship supervisors, too, competing demands can pose challenges. At your workplace, new responsibilities may reduce your time available for internship supervision or require you to travel more than before. Likewise, unexpected events such as family medical problems and personal illnesses may decrease your availability. With commitment and creativity, however, such obstacles can be overcome. Through e-mail and cellular telephones, hosts and interns can transcend limitations of time and place. Colleagues may be able to help supervise the intern, often with benefits to all. Also, your increased workload may offer new opportunities to your intern.

Special considerations can arise regarding international interns. Be aware that time may be needed for the intern to get a visa. Realize, of course, that language barriers may exist; some activities may therefore need to be adapted or eliminated, but, on the other hand, the intern's linguistic background can be used to advantage, for example in obtaining translations. Know that cultural differences may exist, for example regarding expectations about the role of the host, and thus that some aspects of the internship may need to be made more explicit than otherwise. Despite the adaptations sometimes needed, supervising an international intern can be very rewarding—and especially enriching for the internship host who is ready to learn.

Approach internship-related challenges with the same ingenuity and initiative you bring to other aspects of your work. And include the intern in the problem-solving. Thereby, you are likely to devise good solutions and contribute to the intern's learning.

ENDING AN INTERNSHIP AND FOLLOWING UP

When an internship is ending, bring it

to closure. Complete an evaluation of the intern if required by an academic program or others. Provide final feedback to the intern, and have the intern identify strengths of the internship and suggest improvements. If the intern has performed well, make clear that you are willing to serve as a reference; perhaps write a letter of reference for the intern's files. Consider providing a certificate of completion, especially if the intern comes from a culture where such items tend to be sought. Have a closing event, such as a lunch or farewell party. Perhaps give the intern a small gift, such as a professionally related book or an item with the logo of your institution.

After the internship, follow up. Let the intern know that you are willing to remain a resource—and, in turn, call on former interns as resources as they advance in their careers. Stay in contact with continuing sources of interns,

such as academic programs, and feel free to give feedback that could help ensure that candidates are well prepared. Reflect on your experience supervising the intern, and consider how the internship could be refined. Meanwhile, prepare for your next biomedical communication intern—for in a skillfully hosted internship, the benefits can be considerable for all involved.

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