

A close-up photograph of a person's lower legs and feet. They are wearing blue denim jeans and tan boat shoes with dark brown accents and laces. The background is plain white.

# STARTING ON THE

A well-designed internship program offers multiple benefits for both students and parking organizations.



# RIGHT FOOT

By Casey Wagner, PE

**W**hen I first set out to choose a career, I didn't picture myself as a parking professional. In fact, as a college student in 1993, I probably didn't even realize that there was such a thing. But more than 20 years later, I'm a confirmed parking lifer and **I owe it all to an internship program.**

Like millions of other young professionals, I sought out internship opportunities during my freshman year in college as a way to make a little money and learn about the design industry. I had just finished my first year at the University of Illinois and didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I had always been fascinated with buildings and looked at structural engineering firms close to my hometown, hoping an internship would give me a chance to learn and confirm whether engineering was for me.

One of the most interesting opportunities was offered by Walker Parking Consultants. My coursework had revolved around basic engineering and chemistry, physics, and drafting. I certainly wasn't learning how to design parking garages! The thought of learning a new type of engineering—one that plays such an important role in our communities—was intriguing, so I decided to accept an offer to intern at the company's headquarters in Elgin, Ill. I soon found that my internship was like an after-school program that rounded out my education. I was learning design

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lessons and approaches they didn't teach in my college engineering classes! Exposure to budgets, design process, quality control, and the importance of effective communication was incredible for my growth as a budding engineer and sparked an entrepreneurial identity.

### The Internship Experience

From the beginning, I knew it was a great fit. I fell in love with the people and the corporate culture, and I fit right in. While I mostly handled office work early on, I eventually got an opportunity to learn all facets of the parking business, including design, consulting, client management, and firm management. I was interacting with firm clients every day and gained a new perspective on what they needed, not just in terms of design but in terms of client service as well. This wasn't just learning how to design structures; it was a series of lessons on how to operate a business.

The firm's leaders generously offered me access to their time and expertise. They were some of the best and brightest professionals in the parking industry, and the lessons they taught me were invaluable.

I continued to intern with Walker the next two summers and worked on many interesting projects. Some of the most enjoyable revolved around special events, which let me oversee data collection that included car and occupancy counts at Chicago Cubs, White Sox, and Bulls games. Getting to work at professional sporting events was a treat, but more importantly, presented a chance to learn about all the elements of parking consulting, not just engineering and design. This experience was putting me on the fast track to firm management with a three-year head start on other engineers at my level and experience in firm management that came from the industry's most accomplished and experienced leaders.

Walker offered me a job after graduation, and there was never any doubt about whether I would take it. I didn't even solicit or consider any other job opportunities. That internship program had an extraordinary effect on my career. In fact, it set in motion a life-long love affair with the industry. But the benefits of an internship program flow in both directions. Organizations can also derive extraordinary benefits.

### Internship Benefits

The most obvious benefit, of course, is that internship programs provide an opportunity to give promising young parking professionals a try-out. Book smarts are

one thing, but not every straight-A student is marked for success. Internships give organizations a chance to see how prospective stars perform in a business environment, away from the ivory towers of the college world.

Equally important are the corporate culture benefits. Internship programs provide an opportunity for organizations to immerse promising interns in their corporate culture. Not only does this give organizations a chance to determine whether the intern is a good fit, but it also serves as a sort of cultural training ground that ensures the prospect will be ready to seamlessly fit into the corporate culture if and when he or she officially joins the team.

Also, as important as internships can be in providing young engineers a head start on their careers, these programs also give organizations a head start in preparing rising stars for leadership roles. Organizational leaders are in a position to identify those interns who show the most promise to become leaders and then provide mentorship to help them learn the skills and gain the experience they need to start on a management path. As in my case, an internship can be the first step toward helping run an organization in the future.

Finally, internship programs are essential to creating tomorrow's parking professionals. Colleges aren't currently turning out parking professionals—they are turning out engineers, architects, and urban planners, some of whom find their way to parking. The parking industry needs young stars who live, eat, and breathe parking. The industry needs people who recognize the vital role that parking plays in our communities and who want to be part of that. As I experienced firsthand, an internship program can be the perfect way to introduce young engineers, architects, and planners to parking and turn them into parking professionals.

Unfortunately, too many organizations treat internships as sources of inexpensive labor. They restrict students to doing grunt work, rather than letting them get involved with more important functions like design, planning, or even client relations. Organizations that treat internships like entry-level temp agencies don't just shortchange their interns; they shortchange themselves as well.

Organizations that make a commitment to assuring that the internship experience is meaningful and productive for students will also find that the business or institution itself will derive extraordinary benefits. And they will help create the next generation of parking professionals. **P**



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## Three Ways to Ensure a Successful Internship Program

By Christopher Brennan, PE

Internships can offer a win-win situation for organizations and young professionals alike. Organizations benefit by having early access to young potential stars, being able to see how well they perform away from the classroom, and having an early opportunity to introduce the organization's culture to them. At the same time, students benefit by having a chance to learn skills that aren't taught in the classroom and get a head start on their careers with potential employers. Many organizations have internship programs, but all too often, these programs fail to make the grade.

Here are three tips for making sure your intern program is a success:

- **Give Interns Responsibility.** Too many organizations view their interns merely as inexpensive office help. If your interns' workdays revolve around filing and other menial tasks, you are wasting a tremendous resource and doing a disservice to the students you are supposed to be training. Give interns an opportunity to do real work. If your organization designs parking facilities or creates parking plans, let students participate in the creative process. If you develop parking technologies, let them help write code or participate in development meetings. Not only will the students get more out of their experience, but you'll likely find that they have useful skills and good ideas you can use.
- **Treat Interns Like Members of the Staff.** Let your interns sit in on staff meetings and let them work with firm leaders. They are there to learn your business, and that includes how to run it. Give them full access to the business side of what you do, including how decisions are made and how leaders behave. For many organizations, this is the first step to creating future leaders.
- **Partner With The Right Colleges And Universities.** This may seem obvious, but not all universities are created equal. Nor are all schools the right fit for every organization. Our office, for instance, partners with local universities with co-op programs. This gives our interns an opportunity to incorporate their internships into their degree programs. The benefits to the student are obvious—they receive guidance from educators and earn credit for their work with us. But it also benefits our organization by providing a more formal structure to the intern program and input from our interns' educators.

A successful internship program benefits both the intern and the organization. Organizations that follow these three simple rules will find that they and their interns will have a more meaningful experience.

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