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CULTIVATING A STRONG IE NONPROFIT WORKFORCE  
An IE Community Collaborative Initiative

# Equitable **Internship** Program Toolkit

*A Practical Guide to Building Equitable Internship Programs for Nonprofits*

# IECC

Inland Empire Community Collaborative

APRIL 2026

# WELCOME

This toolkit was created to help nonprofit organizations design and run internship programs that are fair, meaningful, and rooted in equity. Whether you are launching your first internship or strengthening an existing one, this guide provides practical tools, templates, and step-by-step guidance to ensure every intern has a quality experience.

Equitable internships go beyond simply offering a position. They require intentional design, clear expectations, strong supervision, and a commitment to removing barriers that have historically excluded young people from professional opportunities.



**Internships are most powerful when they are not treated as one-time projects, but as part of how an organization builds long-term value and future talent.**

*Laura Love, Strada Education Foundation*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This toolkit was made possible through support from the Thrive Inland SoCal Catalyst Fund. Funding was awarded to the Inland Empire Community Collaborative for the Inland Empire Nonprofit Policy and Workforce Empowerment Initiative, with the Inland Empire Community Foundation serving as Fiscal Agent designated by the State of California.



# WHY INTERNSHIPS MATTER FOR THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Internships can be far more than short-term staffing support. When designed intentionally, they strengthen nonprofit capacity, create meaningful career entry points, and help build a stronger, more prepared nonprofit workforce over time.

For nonprofit organizations, internships can create room for work that often gets delayed because of limited staff capacity - research, evaluation, policy analysis, communications planning, data cleanup, community engagement preparation, and other strategic projects. When scoped well, an internship can move something important forward while also improving the organization's own habits around supervision, onboarding, and feedback.

For students and emerging professionals, internships can make the nonprofit sector visible as a place to build a career, contribute to the public good, and develop practical skills. For the sector as a whole, internships help expand who sees nonprofit work as a viable and valued pathway.

Without intentional design, however, internships can reproduce inequities. Access may depend on financial flexibility, prior exposure to professional norms, or insider knowledge. Expectations may remain unspoken. Support may vary based on personality rather than structure. This toolkit is designed to help nonprofits build on their strengths and create internship experiences that are clear, supportive, and impactful.

**When nonprofits host interns well, they are not only advancing a project. They are also making the sector more visible, more welcoming, and more prepared for the next generation of talent.**

## What this Toolkit Helps Nonprofits Do

- Understand how internships can support organizational growth and improve the quality of the nonprofit workforce.
- Establish internship programs that provide both organizational value and academic value.
- Launch or refine internships using practical, ready-made tools and templates that can be adapted to different nonprofit contexts.

## Who This Toolkit is For

- Nonprofit organizations building internship programs for the first time.
- Nonprofit organizations that already host interns and want to improve clarity, equity, and consistency.
- Supervisors, managers, and program leads responsible for intern projects, support, and performance feedback.

## How to Use this Toolkit

- Use the Foundations section to understand the core conditions of a strong internship.
- Use the Program Design Modules to deepen one part of your internship model or to build a complete program from start to finish.
- Use the tools and templates to support launch, supervision, feedback, and closure.
- Use the Quick Start section when you need to move quickly but still want to preserve quality.

## SECTION 2: Core Design Principles

# FOUNDATIONS

Before building your internship program, it is essential to establish a strong foundation. These six core principles should guide every decision you make.

### Access is designed, not assumed.

Opportunities do not become equitable simply because they exist. They become equitable when they are structured so that participation does not depend on insider knowledge, personal financial flexibility, or prior professional exposure.

### Clarity reduces inequity.

Clear expectations, project scope, timelines, and communication norms help prevent success from depending on who already knows how to navigate workplace ambiguity.

### Supervision is a core input.

Regular supervision is not an optional add-on. It is one of the primary conditions that determines whether an internship becomes a meaningful learning experience or a confusing one.

### Growth should be visible.

Interns should be able to point to what they learned, what they produced, and how their work advanced the organization's goals.

### Equity requires concrete decisions.

Compensation, transportation, technology, food, scheduling, and communication all affect who can participate and thrive. A clear compensation model and proactive communication is essential.

### Feedback improves people and programs.

Strong internships build feedback into the experience so that interns receive guidance and organizations gather information to improve future cycles.

## MINIMUM STANDARDS

Every equitable internship should include: a clearly defined project that has value to the student and the intern, a structured learning plan, a dedicated supervisor, clear start and end dates, and an evaluation process that includes intern voice.

Clearly Defined Project



Structured Learning Plan



Dedicated Coach or Supervisor



Clear Start and End Dates



Intern Centered Evaluation



## SECTION 3: Internship Design Modules

# Developing an Internship Opportunity

Designing a strong internship program requires more than good intentions. It requires structure, clarity, and a thoughtful approach to how interns are welcomed, supported, and engaged in meaningful work. This section provides a practical set of modules to help nonprofits build or strengthen an internship experience that is both organizationally useful and developmentally valuable for the intern.

The modules in this section are designed to be used as a flexible system. Some organizations may move through them in sequence as they build an internship program from the ground up. Others may use them selectively to strengthen an existing program, address a challenge, or improve a specific aspect of the internship experience. In either case, the goal is the same: to help organizations create internships that are well-scoped, well-supported, and aligned with both nonprofit capacity needs and intern learning.

Each module focuses on a core area of program design, from readiness and project planning to supervision, equity in practice, and evaluation. Together, they help translate broad goals into concrete decisions about roles, supports, expectations, and outcomes. Rather than treating internships as informal or one-time arrangements, these modules encourage nonprofits to approach them as intentional learning experiences that can strengthen staff practice, build future talent, and contribute to a healthier nonprofit workforce overall.

**Module 1:**  
Readiness & Capacity

**Module 2:**  
Role & Project Design

**Module 3:**  
Hiring & Onboarding

**Module 4:**  
Supervision & Support

**Module 5:**  
Learning & Growth

**Module 6:**  
Inclusion & Belonging

**Module 7:**  
Troubleshooting

**Module 8:**  
Continuous Improvement





## Purpose

Before launching an internship, an organization must honestly assess whether it has the capacity, culture, and commitment to support an intern equitably. This module helps an organization determine if they are truly ready to host an equitable internship.



## Minimum Standards

At minimum, the organization should have a designated supervisor, a realistic and meaningful project scope, and a support structure that can be sustained throughout the placement. That means someone has protected time to supervise, there is enough internal clarity about the project to explain it before recruitment begins, and the organization has thought through how the intern will be onboarded, guided, and supported week to week.

## Key Actions

1

Assess whether staff have the actual capacity, not just the intention, to host an intern well.

2

Identify one or more projects that are meaningful, appropriately scoped, and feasible within the internship timeframe.

3

Define the types of support the organization can provide, including supervision, feedback, and access to meetings, tools, or information.

4

Make an explicit go or no-go decision before recruitment begins.



## Equity Risks

When readiness is weak, interns with less familiarity navigating professional settings are affected first and most. A student with prior internship experience, stronger professional confidence, or insider knowledge may be able to work around ambiguity. A student without those advantages may experience confusion, underperformance, or exclusion through no fault of their own. Poor readiness therefore reproduces inequity by rewarding prior access rather than potential.



## In Practice: An Example

The organization has confirmed its readiness to host an intern by identifying a designated supervisor, a meaningful and appropriately scoped project with clear deliverables, and the tools, information, and staff access needed to support the work. The internship is structured as a supported learning experience, not as coverage for routine staffing needs.



## Use These Template(s)

- Internship Capacity Assessment



Once capacity is confirmed, define the internship role and project(s).



### Purpose

This module helps organizations move from a general idea of wanting an intern to a concrete, well-designed internship experience with clear outcomes, responsibilities, and expectations.



### Minimum Standards

At minimum, the organization should have documented learning goals, core responsibilities, one to two meaningful projects, deliverables, milestones, and success criteria. An intern should be able to understand what they are there to learn, what they are expected to do and produce, and how progress and success will be assessed. The work should be realistic for the internship period, appropriately scoped, and aligned with the intern's skills and the organization's needs

### Key Actions

1

Define three to five learning outcomes that reflect what the intern should learn or practice

2

Identify one to two meaningful projects that align with organizational priorities and can be advanced during the internship.

3

Clarify the intern's core responsibilities, expected contributions, and day-to-day tasks in plain language.

4

Define concrete deliverables and break the work into milestones that can guide progress over time.

5

Identify the tools, systems, documents, approvals, and access the intern will need from the start.



### Equity Risks

When projects are not intentionally scoped, some interns may receive meaningful work while others are directed toward low-impact or administrative tasks. This can limit an intern's ability to build confidence, demonstrate capability, and leave with tangible accomplishments. Clear role and project design helps reduce this risk by ensuring the internship offers substantive responsibilities, defined deliverables, and a more consistent standard of opportunity across participants.



### In Practice: An Example

A small community health nonprofit created a 12-week summer internship with a clear project scope, weekly check-ins, and a \$18/hour stipend. They used the Program Design Worksheet to map out every detail before recruiting, resulting in 40% more applicants from underrepresented communities.



### Use These Template(s)

- Internship Role Description
- Project Design Worksheet



With roles defined, an equitable hiring and onboarding process becomes essential.



## Purpose

This module helps organizations move from internship design to implementation by ensuring that candidates are recruited through an equitable process, assessed against clear criteria, and welcomed into the organization with the structure and support needed for a strong start.



## Minimum Standards

A strong internship can be undermined by a weak start. An organization must have a clear recruitment and selection process, role-aligned criteria to assess candidates, and a structured onboarding process that introduces the intern to the organization, project, expectations, and support systems. At minimum, the intern should begin the placement with clarity about their role, schedule, supervisor, communication norms, and first steps.

## Key Actions

1

Develop a clear role description that outlines the internship purpose, responsibilities, qualifications, compensation, and supervision structure.

2

Use a fair and consistent process to recruit, assess, and select candidates based on role-related criteria and alignment with the internship's goals.

3

Communicate clearly with candidates throughout the selection process, including timelines, next steps, and final decisions.

4

Prepare for the intern's arrival by confirming workspace, technology, access, schedule, and key onboarding materials in advance.

5

Conduct a structured onboarding that introduces the intern to the organization, project, expectations, and support systems.



## Equity Risks

Recruitment and hiring processes can unintentionally advantage candidates who already understand professional norms, have stronger networks, or are more familiar with nonprofit hiring language. Without consistent recruitment and onboarding practices, access, clarity, and early confidence can vary significantly across interns. A structured process helps create a more equitable starting point by making expectations, timelines, and supports visible to all candidates and participants.



## In Practice: An Example

ABC nonprofit posts a clear internship description, uses a standard set of interview questions tied to the role, and selects a candidate based on defined criteria. Before the start date, the supervisor confirms the intern's schedule, technology access, and first-week agenda. During onboarding, the intern is introduced to key staff, oriented to the organization and project, and given clear guidance on communication, supervision, and immediate next steps.



## Use These Template(s)

- Interview Guide/Candidate Evaluation
- Onboarding Checklist



Now that you have your intern placement, consistent supervision becomes the key driver of quality.



## Purpose

The purpose of this module is to ensure that the internship is actively supported through consistent guidance, feedback, and accountability. Supervision is not an optional enhancement. It is one of the core conditions that shapes whether the internship becomes a meaningful developmental experience.



## Minimum Standards

At minimum, the organization should have weekly check-ins, established communication norms, and provide timely feedback. The intern should know when they will meet with their supervisor, how to ask questions between meetings, and what kind of feedback process they can expect. Support should be regular enough to help the intern stay on track and adjust quickly when issues arise.

### Key Actions

- 1 Schedule recurring one-on-one check-ins, ideally on a weekly basis.
- 2 Use a simple and consistent structure for supervision meetings to review progress, challenges, and next steps.
- 3 Provide specific, actionable feedback on work products and professional habits.
- 4 Create an environment where questions are welcomed and support is easy to access.

**The quality of supervision determines whether an internship is transformative or merely transactional.**



## Equity Risks

When supervision is inconsistent, access to support becomes uneven. Some interns may feel comfortable pushing for clarification or seeking informal help elsewhere, while others may not. This means that the quality of the internship experience becomes dependent on an intern's confidence or familiarity with workplace culture rather than the program's design. Unequal support produces unequal outcomes.



## In Practice: An Example

A nonprofit assigns the intern to a program manager who blocks 30 minutes each Tuesday for a standing supervision meeting. During that time, they review completed work, discuss questions, give feedback on drafts, and confirm priorities for the coming week. The intern is also introduced to other staff who can provide topic-specific guidance, and is told how to reach the supervisor between meetings if issues arise.



## Use These Template(s)

- Weekly Supervision Agenda



With strong supervision in place, focus shifts to long-term value for interns.



## Purpose

The purpose of this module is to ensure that the internship experience leaves the intern with clear, transferable skills and a meaningful body of work they can articulate beyond the placement itself. This module focuses on helping the intern convert experience into professional growth, confidence, and future opportunity.



## Minimum Standards

At minimum, organizations should build in intentional reflection points rather than waiting until the very end to discuss growth. They should help document accomplishments and outputs as the work unfolds. They should support the intern in translating their work into resume-ready language and professional talking points. They should also create some space to talk about next steps, whether related to career interests, networking, or additional opportunities.

## Key Actions

- 1 Provide access to professional development opportunities, peer learning, and cross-team exposure.
- 2 Build in intentional reflection points throughout the internship.
- 3 Document accomplishments and outputs as the work unfolds.
- 4 Help the intern translate their work into resume-ready language and professional talking points.
- 5 Create space to discuss next steps related to career interests, networking, or future opportunities.



## Equity Risks

Not all interns arrive already knowing how to present their experience professionally. Some may have had fewer prior opportunities to build resumes, prepare for interviews, or receive coaching on how to frame their work. Without explicit support, the internship may benefit those who already know how to package their accomplishments while others leave undervaluing their own contributions.



## In Practice: An Example

In practice, this may look like asking the intern to maintain a simple accomplishments log, complete a final reflection, and work with the supervisor to convert one or two major outputs into resume bullets or interview examples. It may also include a closing conversation about what the intern learned and where those skills could apply next.



## Use These Template(s)

- Learning Goals Worksheet



To make growth accessible, inclusion and belonging must be operationalized in practice.



## Purpose

This module helps nonprofits move beyond simply welcoming an intern into the organization and toward creating the conditions in which the intern feels included, valued, and able to contribute fully. It is meant to reinforce that belonging is not automatic, rather it is shaped by everyday practices, communication, and how power operates within the workplace.



## Minimum Standards

At minimum, the organization provides an environment in which the intern is treated with respect, oriented to workplace norms and context, included in relevant conversations and opportunities, and supported in asking questions, sharing ideas, and participating meaningfully. At minimum, staff avoid making assumptions about what the intern already knows, explain organizational language and norms, and intentionally create space for the intern's perspective to be heard.

## Key Actions

1

Avoid assumptions about what the intern already knows regarding nonprofit work, professional norms, jargon, or unwritten expectations.

2

Provide context, orientation, and explanation so the intern can understand both the work and the organizational environment.

3

Use inclusive practices such as explaining acronyms, inviting questions, and including the intern in relevant meetings and opportunities.

4

Create opportunities for the intern to contribute ideas and perspectives rather than limiting their participation to observation or note-taking.

5

Be attentive to how race, gender, age, class, and role may shape whose voice is heard, and actively make space for participation.



## Equity Risks

Inclusion and belonging are often shaped by informal norms and power dynamics that can silence interns. Because interns are newer, less senior, and dependent on the organization for learning and future references, they may hesitate to ask questions or share a different perspective. These dynamics can be further shaped by race, gender, age, class, or other identities. Without intentional inclusion practices, interns may be present but not fully included.



## In Practice: An Example

In practice, a nonprofit may explain acronyms and insider language during meetings, invite the intern to attend relevant discussions, and ask for their perspective in ways that feel supportive rather than performative. A supervisor might say, "I'd love to hear your take on this based on the research you've been doing," or make sure the intern is included in informal team spaces where relationships are built alongside the work.



## Use These Template(s)

- Inclusive Onboarding Checklist
- Belonging and Participation Check-in



Even strong programs encounter challenges; structured response matters.



## Purpose

The purpose of this module is to ensure that when challenges arise, the organization responds early, consistently, and fairly. Problems are normal in any internship. What matters is whether they are addressed in a structured way that protects learning, performance, and equity.



## Minimum Standards

At minimum, there should be a clear process for identifying, documenting, and responding to concerns. This includes noticing issues early, clarifying expectations, assessing root causes, and agreeing on support steps or corrective actions. The organization should not rely entirely on informal judgment or ad hoc reactions when concerns emerge.

## Key Actions

1

Identify concerns early using specific observations rather than vague impressions.

2

Assess root causes, including whether the issue relates to project scope, supervision, expectations, communication, or intern performance.

3

Develop structured support plans when concerns arise.

4

Document key actions, follow-up steps, and outcomes to ensure consistency and accountability.



## Equity Risks

Subjective or inconsistent responses can introduce bias. An intern may be judged harshly for challenges that are actually caused by unclear scope or inadequate support. Different interns may also be treated differently based on race, age, gender, class background, communication style, or perceived professionalism. Structured troubleshooting reduces the role of personal bias by requiring documented observations and deliberate response steps.



## In Practice: An Example

In practice, a supervisor might notice that milestones are being missed and respond by documenting specific examples, checking whether the work plan is clear, asking what barriers the intern is experiencing, and then agreeing on a support plan with check-in points. That is very different from concluding the intern is simply not performing without investigating the context.



## Use These Template(s)

- Intern Support Plan Template



Each challenge is also an opportunity to improve future programs.



## Purpose

The purpose of this module is to ensure that the organization uses feedback and data to strengthen each internship cycle over time. This module turns the internship into a repeatable learning system rather than a one-time experience that begins and ends without reflection.



## Minimum Standards

At minimum, feedback should be collected, reviewed, and used to inform changes. This should include midpoint and end-of-placement feedback, at least from the intern and the supervisor, and ideally some record of what patterns emerged and what adjustments will be made next time. Evaluation does not need to be complex to be useful, but it does need to be intentional.

## Key Actions

- 1 Collect midpoint and exit feedback from interns and supervisors.
- 2 Center intern voice in all evaluation processes.
- 3 Identify recurring patterns, strengths, and gaps in the feedback.
- 4 Implement a small number of targeted improvements after each internship cycle.
- 5 Update materials, templates, and expectations based on what was learned.



## Equity Risks

When participant feedback is ignored, inequities often remain hidden or unaddressed. Interns may surface issues related to access, belonging, supervision, or hidden costs that staff did not fully see. If that feedback is not reviewed and acted on, the program may continue to work better for some participants than others. Evaluation is therefore an equity function as much as a quality function.



## In Practice: An Example

In practice, a team might review midpoint and exit reflections, notice that multiple interns were unclear about deliverables during their first two weeks, and respond by revising the onboarding checklist and project work plan template before the next cycle. Small, concrete improvements like that are what make the internship model stronger over time.



## Use These Template(s)

- Mid-point Feedback Form
- End-of-Internship Evaluation



If you need a quick start guide, we have got you covered...

## SECTION 4: Tools and Resources



## TEMPLATES

These tools are designed to be used alongside the modules. Each one is ready to customize for your organization.

### Readiness & Capacity

1

- Internship Capacity Assessment

### Role & Project Design

2

- Internship Role Description
- Project Design Worksheet

### Hiring & Onboarding

3

- Interview Guide/Candidate Evaluation
- Onboarding Checklist

### Supervision & Support

4

- Weekly Supervision Agenda

### Learning & Growth

5

- Learning Goals Worksheet

### Inclusion & Belonging

6

- Inclusive Onboarding Checklist
- Belonging and Participation Check-in

### Troubleshooting

7

- Intern Support Plan Template

### Continuous Improvement

8

- Mid-point Feedback Form
- End-of-Internship Evaluation

# QUICK START GUIDE

If you need to launch quickly, follow this condensed pathway. It covers the minimum steps to create a viable, equitable internship structure.

**Step 1:** Assess readiness: confirm supervisor, budget, and organizational support

**Step 2:** Define the role: write a clear description with learning objectives

**Step 3:** Scope 1-2 projects with milestones and deliverables

**Step 4:** Build an onboarding plan for the first week

**Step 5:** Schedule weekly supervision check-ins

**Step 6:** Create a simple learning plan with 3 goals

**Step 7:** Plan mid-point and final evaluations with intern input

## REFERENCES USED IN DEVELOPING TOOLKIT

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[internbridge.com](http://internbridge.com)

**Bolder Advocacy: Nonprofit Advocacy Resources**

[bolderadvocacy.org](http://bolderadvocacy.org)

**CalNonprofits: California Nonprofit Resources**

[calnonprofits.org](http://calnonprofits.org)

**BoardSource: Nonprofit Governance and Leadership**

[boardsource.org](http://boardsource.org)

**Independent Sector: Civic Engagement Resources**

[independentsector.org](http://independentsector.org)

**National Council of Nonprofits: Internship Program Guidance**

[councilofnonprofits.org](http://councilofnonprofits.org)

**U.S. Department of Labor: Fair Labor Standards for Interns**

[dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets](http://dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets)



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