



6 Steps you can take as a mentor to ensure that you and your intern have a great, productive summer!

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1. Prepare - By applying to mentor an IRIS Intern you have already gotten a head start on setting up a highly successful intern experience. Our application form requires you to clearly define the project, specify the role and probable activities of the intern, and to lay out goals for the first, second and final thirds of the summer. Before your intern arrived, revisit these and modify them as necessary. Sure, it might be convenient to just have her/him do whatever small tasks seem immediately valuable or read research papers because you have been slammed at the end of the semester. However, by creating and using a structured plan, you create an atmosphere that conveys your belief that the intern is important and that this summer is going to be a valuable research and career experience.. You will also be ensuring that you are using her/his limited time well. Finally, at the orientation we coach the interns to refer to their “plan” throughout the internship so they can develop the skills necessary to learn to keep track of and assess progress, and make adjustments as necessary during the summer. This will be the first serious research experience for many interns, and our evaluations indicate that having some structure in place to get them started is appreciated by the interns.

2. Make them feel welcome – Have a pleasant workspace that is neat, clean and ready to go the day your intern is to arrive. This simple gesture conveys that you have been expecting the intern’s arrival and that you are excited that they are there. During your intern’s first few days, plan to be available in person to give him or her proper training and instructions. Include an overview of the organization and tour of the department, introductions to your colleagues and other students, and discuss recreational opportunities on campus (e.g. Outing Clubs etc). Consider taking him or her to lunch or coffee—this is a great time to learn more about your intern personally and their career goals. It is also a great way to help both of you become more comfortable and informed before the real work begins.

At some point on the first or two day, review the work plan that you’ve developed, including specific assignments and goals. Make sure this is a two-sided discussion, and encourage them to give feedback and ask questions along the way. You can use this to begin to fully assess their level of prior knowledge as well.

3. Develop a plan for regular check-ins - For an intern, there’s nothing worse than being forgotten about or left to flounder with broken code or some other obstacle for way too long. You should plan to check in with your intern on a very regular basis, perhaps daily at first, in addition to a more formal sit-down meeting about once a week to keep them informed about upcoming projects and make sure they have clear direction on existing ones. This might seem like an added constraint on your time, but it’s important to help your intern feel like part of the team and stay on track with the goals you have developed together. Remember, while IRIS interns are frequently capable of completing graduate quality research, they are still only undergraduate students, and a bit of extra care at first provides the solid footing that enables them to increase

in confidence and transition to a more independent arrangement by summer's end. This also increases the likelihood of a great project by the end of the summer and a very worthwhile chapter in your intern's evolving career.

4. Don't assume prior knowledge of anything - Keep in mind that this may be your intern's first specialized foray into the world of research, so things that seem self-explanatory to you might not be to them. Because they are the new kid on the block and want to impress you, interns often don't always ask questions for fear of appearing dumb. This even includes basic information such as expected work times, safety issues, using the computer system, and how to best get in touch with you.

Avoid confusion by assuming that everything needs to be explained, and then give clear instructions for your expectations, the process for completing the task, and the deadline. After you talk through a project, ask if they have questions, and reassure them that they can come back to you with more after the fact, too (if they do, make time to answer them patiently).

5. Be the boss when you have to – As mentioned previously, your intern is an undergraduate with a handful of weeks in *your* lab to work for *you* during the summer. Thus, situations may arise where it is critical to hold the intern accountable and keep progress moving forward. While IRIS provides the student with their financial support, the intern's day-in, day-out guidance and performance is up to you. If you find that you don't like how things are going, talk to the student about it promptly and in person, and make a plan to remediate the situation by empowering the student in a way that brings out their talents and alleviates any issues. If such issues persist, please don't hesitate to communicate with the program (Michael Hubenthal; hubenth@iris.edu), as IRIS EPO is available to support both internship mentors and interns throughout the internship..

6. Be a MENTOR! - Above all, strive to be someone who is genuinely interested in the growth and success of your intern and someone they can learn from. Take the time to answer questions and teach the things you perhaps wish someone had taught you at that stage of your life. Consider aspects of your workplace or career that you might take for granted—teaching and grading, writing proposals and papers, searching the literature, giving and receiving critique from peers. Even helping your intern to grow their network of professional connections could be a learning experience for your intern. Providing for both formal and informal growth opportunities is part of helping someone learn—and part of being a great mentor!

Remember, making sure your intern has a great experience is crucial for their careers. However, it is also important for yours, too! Working with IRIS interns helps you to move your research agenda forward, helps you recruit future graduate students, and provides you with the opportunity to develop skills and strategies that will generally help your educational efforts and your research group run smoothly in the future.

Adapted from:

Aimee, B. (2012, March 14) 6 Ways to Be a Great Boss to Your Intern. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailymuse.com/career/6-ways-to-be-a-great-boss-to-your-intern/>