

**Written Testimony before the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress
United States House of Representatives**

**“Professionalizing & Enriching the Congressional Internship and Fellowship Experience”
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Chair Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and members of the Select Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Emily Hashimoto and I’m the Director of Career Content at Idealist, a nonprofit organization founded in 1995 to inspire, connect, and support the social impact sector. Our primary platform, Idealist.org, serves over 100,000 organizations and over one million members in the United States. About five percent of our organizations are federal, state, and local government agencies and offices, from parks & recreation departments to the State Department. Our members have a wide variety of professional experience and interests, from communications roles to research positions. Our community is also racially diverse, with 20% of users identifying as Asian, 20% identifying as Black, and 12% identifying as Hispanic.

Organizations and individuals meet in the shared space of Idealist.org, coming together to take action on issues they care about, like education, public health, environmental sustainability, immigration, and human rights. Nonprofits and government agencies can post jobs, internships, and volunteer opportunities. In addition to these services, we also offer graduate school fairs and programming to highlight educational opportunities for professional advancement in public policy, social work, and more. Finally, to support all of our audiences, we offer helpful and actionable content that allows social impact job seekers to grow in their careers, and for already employed professionals to develop their skills as hiring managers, staff managers, and internship managers.

In Idealist’s over twenty-five years of experience, we’ve learned a thing or two about successful internships programs, by running our own and observing those in our community, and by having been interns ourselves. As the committee seeks to improve the quality of congressional internships, what I share today is the cumulative wisdom of over two decades of devoted concentration on attracting top talent, what makes work meaningful, and how to inspire others to do their absolute best.

Draft a compelling internship listing. Finding great interns starts with a great listing that’s specific and inclusive. We recommend that hiring managers:

- Make explicit where the intern will physically do their work, whether it’s in person; remotely, for now; permanently remotely; and so forth. This is particularly important in this time of pandemic, but as we go back to “normal,” clarity will continue to be key.

- Include a description of what interns can expect to get out of the experience. This might be participation in an important event or credit for contributing to a major project. While it might seem less important to document, it's important to remember that the difference between jobs and internships is that an internship is an educational experience. Letting candidates know what they can expect will provide better matches when offices are ready to hire.
- Identify role requirements and role nice-to-haves, and then remove the nice-to-haves from listings. As you may know, potential candidates may take themselves out of the running (especially Black, Indigenous, and other people of color; women; and other traditionally marginalized groups) if they have, for example, everything a listing asks for except for one thing that could be taught on the job. Candidate pools are typically larger, richer, and more diverse if using this tactic.

Diversify advertisement. We recommend sharing opportunities broadly and outside of traditional networks, like on [Idealist.org](https://www.idealists.org) or internships.com, or developing relationships with local colleges and universities. This strategy will allow offices to advertise internships in front of larger audiences, bringing more potential candidates into the talent pipeline.

One option for a large applicant pool: before starting interviews, or even as a part of the application process, offices could request a sample task. (When hiring a communications intern, it stands to reason that a great task might be a brief writing or editing assignment.) Understanding candidate strength prior to an interview is a great way to shrink the applicant pool to only the most qualified, interested candidates.

Streamline hiring processes. Managing applications can be an arduous process, especially when hiring managers already have enough to juggle in the regular course of their work. As a small nonprofit, we used to accept applications via email, but grew tired of ad hoc organization in an email inbox and in spreadsheets. We turned to a paid applicant tracking system, which improved our hiring processes, until we built our own homegrown product that serves our hiring needs as well as the thousands of organizations looking for a free, lightweight system. We recommend using these tools to make this part of hiring much easier on hiring managers.

Create clear onboarding plans. Good internships hinge on the first few weeks and start with the onboarding experience. For offices, a strong onboarding plan can help interns acclimate quickly and contribute to their internship fully. Some important components of onboarding plans include:

- A short overview of an office and conversation about impact to provide context for an intern's work and projects.
- In-person (or on-video) introductions to staff members.
- A demonstration or introduction to one or more of the tasks they will perform in their role.

Pay interns for their work. Offering compensation enables interns to dedicate more time and focus to their internship as they are less likely to seek out additional part-time work to meet their financial needs.

Beyond this, compensating interns is a strong move toward equity. The practice of offering unpaid internships can unfairly advantage people who can afford to provide their time and labor for free, thereby providing less access to those who cannot.

(I offer my own story, as someone who had three unpaid internships in college. I'm grateful for those experiences, in part because they launched me into the social impact career I have today. But I am deeply aware that the opportunities I was able to apply for and accept were only an option because my parents could afford for me to work for free. Not everyone is as fortunate.)

Compensating interns will bring offices more candidates of diverse backgrounds and may ultimately broaden the talent pipeline into the social impact sector.

Manage with intention. Supervising an intern is often a responsibility given to a new or junior staff person to help them gain management experience. Since interns usually have a longer learning curve due to less professional experience, managing them can be a tall order. Those managing interns may need more resources, or strategies to try if their intern isn't meeting performance expectations.

Specific plans to try, to ensure for a fruitful work experience, include:

- Collaborating with the intern to set three to five goals and offering support, resources, and examples of past projects. Devising due dates and milestones that allow for progress toward a goal, as well as a clear idea of what success looks like.
- Meeting weekly to confirm that interns are on track and have an opportunity to ask questions and receive feedback. Regular meetings help to address any issues before they become bigger problems.
- At the end of the internship, conducting an exit interview to reflect on management practices and internship programming. Internship managers could ask about what goals and projects were successful, if any didn't meet their targets, and what interns learned. Perhaps most importantly, managers can ask if interns have suggestions or comments about working relationships, office culture, and anything else they might want to add. They'll feel heard, but more than that, offices have a lot to gain from this vital feedback.

Offer remote-optional internships. What this difficult time has taught us is that there are ways to bring offline work online. In that way, we increase opportunities to hire geographically diverse candidates, or candidates with disabilities who may not easily integrate into a physical office. Offices will want to consider some of the unique needs of remote working situations: equipment, digital onboarding materials, and how to include interns in opportunities for remote meetings and social events.

Consider the whole experience. A meaningful internship that is the start of someone's social impact career is about the entire package—from a thorough and clear internship listing that reaches beyond the normal outlets, to a strong onboarding, to fair compensation, to goal-driven projects that allow for growth and reflection.

There are other facets of an internship that might ensure an intern stays connected to an office, such as:

- Offering mentorship opportunities, whether from an intern's supervisor, someone else in the office, or opportunities in the field.
- Providing space for interns to talk about their career goals and interests.
- Inviting interns to meetings with other staff, clients, or partners as well as to events and presentations.
- Opportunities to share projects, showcasing their growth in front of the whole staff.
- Coaching and training that helps them move forward in their career.

[You can learn more here: "How to Turn Interns into Your Biggest Ambassadors."](#)

While we have a lot to say on this topic, it's something we put into practice at Idealist, best exemplified by our Director of Career Programming, Kevin Kennedy, who started off eight years ago as an intern. He says that his Idealist internship was the best one he ever had. It wasn't just about getting paid, or that the work was exciting and meaningful. Kevin felt supported by his manager and manager's manager. He felt like he was a part of the team, invited to lunches and meetings. He was offered exposure into the details and inner workings of the program. He wasn't just the intern. He had real responsibilities and ownership over his work. All of this made him care, deeply, and he wanted to be there everyday—a choice he continues to make almost nine years later.

I mention Kevin, because he's the capstone of this whole topic. It behooves all of us who already work in social impact, who spend our work days reaching for a better good, to pave the way for others to join us: younger voices, traditionally marginalized voices, people who also want to build a better world but don't have the lived experiences or connections that enabled people like me, Kevin, and many of you here, to move from fulfilling internships into careers that matter.

Again, thank you for the opportunity and I look forward to answering any questions you might have.

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Learn more about our internship program recommendations [here](#).