Ogallala Commons – Community Intern Program

“It’s a win-win for both the community and the interns who participate.”

-Director of Ogallala Commons, Darryl Birkenfeld

On how the Intern Program is a positive experience for both communities and individuals who are involved.

The Context

In 2006, Simone Elder was the first of two newly graduated high school students to participate in what is now renowned as the Ogallala Commons Community Intern Program: an outreach initiative which encourages youth involvement, educational cultivation, skill-building, and forward thinking throughout the Great Plains Region of the United States.

Darryl Birkenfeld, the Director of Ogallala Commons, had previously met Elder at a conference in Colorado, and was more than happy to oblige when Elder approached him about the possibility of an internship with Ogallala Commons. There was one minor problem: up to that point OC had never hired an intern with her particular situation before. Birkenfeld, determined to include Elder, created a position for her and one other young adult which consisted of various tasks such as travelling to rural communities throughout the area, learning about them, and discovering the necessity of businesses which are so vital to the Great Plains Region. The creation of this position in 2006 for those driven young people was the beginning of what is now a successful program which places a major emphasis on the ‘commons’ in order to cultivate healthy and fulfilling community opportunities, relationships, and business ties.

The Process

The foundation of the Intern Program, as well as the Ogallala Commons grassroots organization, is the belief and incorporation of the ‘commonwealths’ in all communities throughout the nation.

“Commonwealth is:
Gifts of the natural world and human society that have monetary and non-monetary value in supporting life and well-being for both human and natural communities.

Wealth we inherit or create together, which we desire to pass on, as undiminished and regenerative as possible, to our children and future generations.

A sector of the economy that compliments but is also distinct from the market and government sectors.

Communal assets that increase or decrease depending on management.” (Ogallala Commons)

The 12 commonwealths are: education, health, leisure and recreation, spirituality, history, sense of place, arts and culture, water cycle, wildlife and natural world, soil and mineral cycle, foodshed, and renewable energy.

The basis for the Intern Program begins with these commonwealths and incorporates each of them in unique ways throughout the process.

Each internship opportunity in the OC Intern Program is highly individualized and requirements for each depend on the area of commonwealth matrix that the sponsor aligns with. Each year young
people (predominantly high school and college age, but also some adults) are matched with sponsors (private, public, and non-profit) in their own hometowns for summer internships of 200-400 hours within 8-10 weeks, though some are as long as 6 months. The sponsor pays the cost of the intern stipend, which must be earned on an hourly basis, and Ogallala Commons handles all the legal, paperwork, and administrative issues, with funding support from a couple of foundations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Stipend</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school intern</td>
<td>$1,700</td>
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<tr>
<td>(210 max. hours @ $8 per hour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>College Intern</td>
<td>$2,100</td>
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<tr>
<td>(230 hours @ $9 per hour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Older Adult or Grad Student Intern</td>
<td>$2,400</td>
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<tr>
<td>(240 hours at $10 per hour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Apprentice</td>
<td>$5,000-6,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>(500-600 hours @ $10 per hour)</td>
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(Ogallala Commons)

Ogallala Commons also conducts a 2-3 day orientation for the interns (including one day for sponsors) with some light-weight skill development exercises and a lot of orientation to the 12 place-based or ‘commons’ assets (commonwealths) found in every community. During the internship, each intern must complete 4-5 skills development and community exploration exercises in addition to the hours and duties required by the sponsor. The intern must then compose a 200-250-word blog (published on the OC website) about those experiences.

In addition to work experience hours, OC requires Interns and Apprentices to complete 8 Products that equip them with professional tools and references:

- Attend an Orientation Retreat in Dumas, Texas on June 2-4, 2015
- Craft and execute a Work Plan
- Publish 5 online blogs with 10 photos during program time frame
- Conduct an “Commonwealth Mapping” exercise
- Do 10 hours of Community Service
- Prepare Internship Portfolio (via PowerPoint)
- Present a Harvesting Ceremony (using Portfolio slides)
- Submit an Evaluation of the internship or apprenticeship and receive an evaluation from your Supervisor

(Ogallala Commons)

This program has grown from 2 interns 8 years ago to 60-70 now, and more recently, Ogallala Commons has developed skills enhancement opportunities for alumni and an ‘apprenticeship’ program that matches former interns with potential
employers in their field of interest for 6-month paid job trials. Underlying the entire experience is a come-back give-back and hometown career exploration motif that addresses the chronic loss of young adults in so many small, rural communities (the ‘brain drain’ phenomenon).

This grassroots program uses the internship model as a platform to promote an array of goals for the benefit of young people and their predominantly small hometowns: skills such as blogging and speaking, understanding of the concept of the ‘commons’, appreciation of place and local assets, and exploration of home town career opportunities … all of this in addition to the benefits of the internship itself. There are ample testimonials from interns who say this program changed their lives, and the number of interns who took permanent employment in their home towns is still growing.

The Outcomes

The Intern Program forms and maintains healthy, workable relationships and partnerships to make things happen. The program also brings together new communities, sponsors, and organizations each year and continues to attract attention from potential collaborators. The program has strengthened OC’s relationship with communities and the community members while connecting communities throughout the region, while giving participating individuals an opportunity to gain skills, recognize talents, and cultivate meaningful professional relationships that have the potential to transfer to future collaboration. Because OC focuses on community and opportunity, it sends the message that they value young people, skillful education and community relationships and unity. The Intern Program has led to partnerships and strong community ties because it relies on the trust and participation of visionary partners who can see past short-term gratification and quick-fixes to ensure a future filled with meaningful innovation.

The Intern Program is structured to be a replicable model for youth skill development and community engagement. The model places a high reliance on community ties and relationships, so communities which may be considering launching their own intern program first need to consider establishing strong community partnerships and bonds with local organizations, businesses, and potential sources for funding. There should also be collaboration with schools and other alike entities to assist in recruiting potential interns.
One of the most important aspects of the Intern Program is its role in strengthening the ability of interns to be resilient: to bounce back from and overcome obstacles. At first, communities were hesitant to participate, but the title of ‘internship’ made the program more appealing to community businesses and more fun for employers to train these new additions to their workforce. While they had trouble recruiting interns at the beginning, OC began traveling to college career fairs and alike to promote the Intern Program. This outreach has built a reputation for the program among local institutions and allowed for more students to join the program and partake in its success.

The main thing that OC stresses when recruiting potential collaborators and interns is to build a personal connection and relationship to communities, organizations, and interns. The program also encourages interns and supervisors to continuously refer back to the 12 commonwealths, as they are a part of every community and essential to the survival and sustainability of small communities.

It is quite possible that young people can grow up in their communities and still not know much about what goes on there in terms of business or civic process. The OC community youth intern program gives young people the opportunity to learn about the interworkings of their communities while actively engaging with businesses and discovering the benefit of the incorporation of the commonwealths matrix. The OC is a mutual, positive situation for both businesses and interns, and Ogallala Commons continues to see the positive impacts of a large group of rural young youth engaging with the local business environment.

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References Cited