

Up “Grade” Your Volunteer Program with Academic Internships

By KATHERINE COMER SANTOS

The Science Exchange (TSE) creates academic sea turtle research internships for undergraduate and graduate students from around the world. Interns work for about two months at a camp or research lab under the supervision of a professional mentor, for which they can earn up to nine units of credit from San Diego State University or any of a dozen U.S. universities that have participated to date.

TSE has observed over the past 10 years that volunteers and interns at sea turtle projects are personally transformed and report life-changing experiences. Beyond enhancing the lives of the students, academic internships can also boost the success of a volunteer program while benefiting sea turtles and the nonprofits and local communities that work with them. The main reason is that earning credits toward graduation is a major incentive for students and their families, and the drive to get a good grade (or the threat of a low grade) creates strong motivation. One project reported “Claire spent a few hours minimum every day working on her papers, research, presentations, and more, while also helping around the house and performing nightly patrols, morning censuses, and hatchery work.”

In our experience, students and universities often rely on the turtle project supervisor (or on TSE, if we are involved) to organize the internship and to evaluate the intern’s work. Therefore, we have compiled the following tips for others who are interested in creating a successful academic internship program:

1. **Research the college’s requirements for issuing the credits that the intern needs.** It is best if the credits count toward graduation requirements or completion of the major. TSE frequently negotiates with academic counselors to obtain pre-departure approval for credits to give peace of mind to the student. The most frequent requirement from colleges is assurance that the activities provide a learning experience and are not just manual labor. Schools may also ask for the supervisor’s qualifications or education level, proof of a minimum number of hours worked, a paper from the student, a supervisor evaluation, signatures on forms, or an internship plan.
2. **Create a written internship plan.** In addition to the normal volunteer orientation packet (e.g., waivers, insurance, and travel logistics), the intern, supervisor, and school should agree on what will constitute an internship and how performance will be evaluated. Scholarship and loan offices may also require a formal plan. The following are some important plan components:
 - **Internship topics**—The topic of the internship should be relevant to the turtle project and, ideally, benefit the

Academic interns are long-term, invested, and intellectually engaged volunteers who earn college credit while giving back to a turtle project in more ways than just labor and fees.

community. Some examples of successful TSE projects include implementing a small section of a larger thesis or ongoing research project, analyzing existing data, performing water quality testing, and piloting new protocols (e.g., SWOT Minimum Data Standards, NOAA marine debris surveys, WWF climate change monitoring). TSE teaches the scientific method, so even our social science and business majors have a research question to answer; they have administered surveys, developed bilingual educational materials, and even created a business plan for a turtle camp. We avoid topics that involve invasive procedures or use captive animals because such studies can require specialized technical experience, permits from the local government, and clearance from universities.

- **Assignments**—Include a reading list and writing assignments. These key academic components help justify credits, and written products also ensure that the project will have a report to disseminate.
- **Equipment list**—Use equipment and software that are locally available so that the community can continue the research after the internship ends.
- **Schedule**—Have interns stay in the field for as long as possible. Students who stay longer are better trained, more adapted to local life, and are able to develop an adequate sample size for statistically significant results. For example, if it is not peak nesting season, or if water quality samples need time to incubate, the schedule should reflect that. To encourage longer stays, create a sliding scale fee system for housing national interns and long-term international interns.
- **Evaluation criteria**—Include your standards for recommending the work for academic credit. TSE uses a grading rubric in which 75 percent of the credits are based on timely completion of writing assignments. The conditions of our merit-based scholarships are detailed in writing as well.
- **Intellectual property**—Include expectations for data ownership and publication. TSE shares data with the



ALL: Academic interns assist at various sea turtle research and conservation projects throughout Latin America.
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 SEA TURTLE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

supervisors and offers joint authorship to anyone who helps on the project. Experts note that international collaboration is favored by journals and readers.

- **Backup plan**—Acknowledge that the plan is subject to field conditions. For example, what if the *arribada* does not arrive? Have a plan B in place that also qualifies for academic credits at their school.
3. **Provide supervision at several levels.** Often, it is the first time interns have participated in field research. Train them thoroughly and subsequently to observe his or her data collection methods. The intern should also analyze their own data and *will* need help from the supervisor. Schedule regular meetings to review their work.
 4. **Outline how the community will benefit.** Cultural exchanges are just as valuable as scientific exchanges, so include interns in all community outreach efforts. Visiting scholars can generate interest and lend validity to the conservation message. We learn best from teaching, so have the intern make presentations to the local schools. TSE requires our field interns to use Skype to teach low-income K-12 students through our Bridge the Border program. Our interns also must make a final presentation to supervisors and stakeholders in the local community. Interns should not take away a job or internship from a local; on the contrary, the community should see some economic gain from the internship. Consider organizing earning opportunities for locals as part of the internship, such as host family stays; meal preparation; or classes in language, surfing, art, music, or cooking.

5. **Ask for and provide feedback.** Actively seek feedback from participants. Interns have fresh, outside perspectives that supervisors may have missed from the daily grind in the trenches. Moreover, positive reviews are free marketing material! Offer interns feedback and career advice as well.
6. **Follow up.** After the interns get back to their university, be prepared to help them petition for credits, if necessary. Although TSE has never had credits denied, we have seen university faculty members change positions and have had to make the case for credits anew. Also, be aware that interns frequently ask for letters of recommendation for jobs even years later.
7. **Keep following up!** Encourage former interns to disseminate their work. TSE has helped more than half of our 36 interns to date present at conferences or publish. International exposure is important for getting funding and influencing politics surrounding turtle conservation. Finally, the intern–supervisor relationship is often deeper than that of the volunteer–supervisor. Interns can become project promoters, employees, and donors. Don't lose track of them!

Academic interns can require more investment of time compared to regular interns or volunteers, but the return on that investment is also greater. The Science Exchange is growing and looking for more interns and partners in Latin America, specifically Mexico. If your turtle project would like to host an intern, or if you are a student or recent graduate looking for a sea turtle internship, we'd love to hear from you. ■