



## Generating Change:

# Internships That Strengthen the Sector

### Challenge:

Find a way to combat brain drain and attract new talent to Cleveland's nonprofit sector

### Approach:

Create a dynamic, high-quality nonprofit internship program for local college students

### Investment:

\$95,000 per year to support 17 interns, plus staff time for intern selection and mentoring

### Result:

180 college students who have discovered ways to work or volunteer in Cleveland's nonprofit community

### Players:

Cleveland Foundation,  
Buckeye Area Development  
Corporation

In the spring of 2009, Stephen Love was a junior in college. He was working on a degree in political science and international relations and had recently returned from a semester in Mexico to his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. It was time to find a summer job.

"I had no 'outside-the-ivory-tower' experience in any professional setting," he recalls. "I wanted to experience something different and find a career path." Back at Baldwin Wallace University, he learned about the Cleveland Foundation Summer Internship Program, which places college students at area nonprofits for 12-week internships. "I wasn't familiar with the nonprofit sector in Cleveland and thought it would be a great experience."

The idea for this program arose 13 years ago, when the Cleveland Foundation staff began receiving numerous calls from the community inquiring about internships with the Foundation.

"We felt that because our role is to support the nonprofit community, we should help supply talent to help build capacity," says Nelson Beckford, program officer and coordinator of the internship

program. "But the Foundation's leadership realized that there were these notions that internships were unpaid and that interns could not do quality work. We wanted to challenge these notions."

### The "Heavy Lifting": Recruitment and Selection

Each year, the Cleveland Foundation matches 17 organizations with 17 interns. "Nonprofits are too busy to select, recruit and interview candidates, so we do the heavy lifting there," says Beckford. The Foundation also recruits and screens the participating nonprofits each year.

"Our first step is to seek out promising organizations and encourage them to apply with projects," Beckford explains. "The projects range from fundraising and event planning to marketing and finance. In 2012, 103 organizations applied. From those applicants, we create an annual portfolio of organizations that we feel would be attractive and give interns ownership, stretch them and see them through from beginning to end. We try to include organizations of all sizes and projects that require diverse skill sets. We also want to see projects

## Why Invest in Recruitment?

"Through this program, we've seen a new network of leaders emerging. Each cohort develops one. Folks who've never considered the nonprofit world are really considering it—as workers, volunteers, donors and board members."

— Nelson Beckford, Cleveland Foundation



## In Their Words:

“My internship was a doorway to a new career path. I was going to go to law school, but decided I wanted to be more practical and hands-on and make Cleveland a better place.”

— **Stephen Love**  
Information and  
Research Specialist  
Cuyahoga Land Bank

that will help an organization achieve an important goal and provide a rich learning opportunity for the intern.”

Internships are open to students who are either from Greater Cleveland or attending college in the Cleveland area. “Our goal is to expose a wide range of students to the nonprofit sector, so we don’t just focus on social work or nonprofit management majors. We also recruit business, science and art majors,” says Beckford.

About 300 students apply for the program each year. A ten-person selection committee, comprised of Foundation staff from many different departments as well as past interns, screens the first-round applications and narrows the field to 120 for interviews. After the interviews are completed, the committee locks itself into a room for a day-long session to narrow the field to 34 finalists.

Each year, the 17 participating organizations receive two of the 34 finalists to interview. The hiring decision is completely up to the nonprofit. Once the interns are selected, the Foundation’s grants enable each nonprofit to pay its intern through its own payroll. Interns currently receive \$12 per hour.

### Creating a Meaningful Experience

Stephen Love was placed with the Buckeye Area Development Corporation, one of the oldest community development corporations in Cleveland. His supervisor was Deepa Vedavyas.

“Buckeye, like most nonprofits, was very short staffed. There were simply not enough hands,” says Vedavyas. “We had no internship program there, although I had brought in college volunteers. Most interns need a supervisor, and the time commitment was a challenge for staff members. My interest

in taking part in the Cleveland Foundation program was twofold: First, I had benefited tremendously from internship programs myself in college and grad school; they helped me find my passion, helped me plan. I wanted to pass that on. Second, we had a lot of work to be completed.”

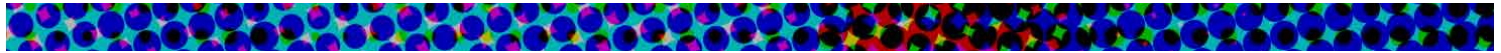
Vedavyas did her research before applying. “Internships often don’t work because of lack of structure. The Cleveland Foundation program was very structured and had specific criteria for selecting candidates. They did a lot of the work for us and matched interns based on their interests, so their passions would align.”

Love’s internship started out well. Vedavyas assigned him the task of completing a business assessment survey for the Buckeye business corridor and designing marketing materials for the local merchants’ association and an upcoming festival. Love accompanied Vedavyas at meetings with various community leaders and partners, created snapshot interviews with merchants for Buckeye’s quarterly newsletter and updated the organization’s social media.

Then the unexpected happened. Three weeks into Love’s internship, Vedavyas traveled to India for a family wedding, where back problems delayed her return considerably. Although she was able to communicate with Love daily via e-mail, her absence added a new dimension to his internship.

“At first it was stressful because I had very little knowledge about the organization or the community, but it really helped me grow in a lot of ways,” he remembers. “I wouldn’t have done as many things as I did, been on the ground and worked with the funding community. Nelson was a great mentor throughout.”

Beckford had been assigned as a staff mentor to Love as part of the



Cleveland Foundation’s underlying support network for interns. Foundation leaders and staff not assigned as mentors have an open-door policy for interns, answering questions and providing advice throughout the 12 weeks—during which time the interns meet weekly for professional development activities. The Foundation also requires that all interns visit their peers’ sites; “host” interns each explain what their organization does and what tasks they work on. This dimension of the program provides a rare educational opportunity, giving interns a broader awareness of the nonprofit sector as a whole and of the role of foundations and philanthropy within it. This knowledge can influence and benefit participants for years to come.

While Vedavyas was out, Love began to work directly with the city. He turned in the results of the business survey to secure Community Development Block Grant funds and managed a city grant to do a study with merchants. He also initiated a rain barrel program and applied for a grant to help merchants install CFL lightbulbs. Many of these activities are still going on today.

### From Internship to Career Building Cleveland

“If I hadn’t had this internship, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing now,” says Love, who is an information and research specialist at the nonprofit Cuyahoga Land Bank. Before that, he worked with Neighborhood Progress, another local nonprofit. “Having the experience from Buckeye allowed me to be competitive,” he says. “I had firsthand knowledge of the community development field and the nonprofit sector in Cleveland in particular.

“My internship was a doorway to a new career path. I was going to go to law school but decided I wanted to be more practical and hands-on and make Cleveland a better place.” Instead of a law degree, Love received a master’s degree in public administration with a concentration on community and economic development at Cleveland State University’s Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs.

“The internship provided both a network and a personal desire to lead and create something new,” he

adds. “After the program, I started a small volunteer organization that works with the Alliance for the Great Lakes, putting together education activities, beach cleanups and events. I’ve always been passionate about that.”

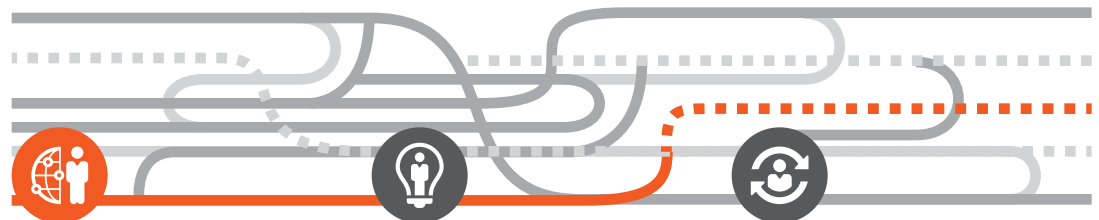
The internship was a positive experience for Buckeye as well. “It definitely changed the culture to one that welcomes interns,” says Vedavyas. “Interns act as network weavers, pulling people out of silos. It made the staff more at ease in sharing information. It inspired me to do internships regularly, at least twice a year. Having seen a good, structured program and supervised within it, I created our own program at Buckeye in partnership with Cleveland State University. We’ve had seven more interns from other local colleges and universities.”

Although an outside expert helped design the original program, the Foundation tweaked it as it progressed. A formal evaluation in 2004 found that host sites felt they had tremendous support from the Foundation in finding candidates. Interns felt good about the placement and support system that the Foundation provides.

## The Nonprofit Talent and Leadership Development Pipeline

“Recruitment” is just one of seven stages in the nonprofit talent and leadership development pipeline identified by Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy. Each stage of the pipeline offers myriad ways for funders to support the future of the nonprofit sector. Learn more about each stage at:

[epip.org/genchange](http://epip.org/genchange)



#### Filling the leadership pipeline

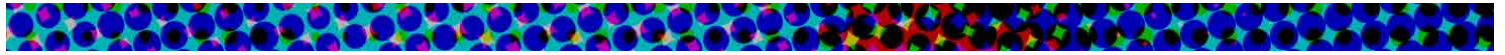
- **Recruitment**
- Retention

#### Developing and harnessing leadership talent

- Development
- Realignment
- Renewal

#### Transitioning and reengaging seasoned leaders

- Succession and transition
- Reengagement



But perhaps the best benefit is the growing pool of talent for Cleveland. “Like other rust-belt cities, Cleveland has had an issue with retaining talent,” says Beckford. “Through this program, we’ve seen a new network of leaders emerging. Each cohort develops one. Folks who’ve never considered the nonprofit world are really considering it—as workers, volunteers, donors and board members.”

“I would like to see more programs like this. It’s a sustainability issue, an attempt to ensure there will be more people coming into this system,” says Love. “There are a lot of people in this industry nearing retirement or in the mid to late stages of their careers. We need to have the back end planned for. You can’t cultivate talent if you don’t have the opportunities.”

### Lessons Learned

- **Good internship programs require more than a check.** It will take time, even after interns are placed, to help develop them. Time and effort are required to develop the cohort and provide access to foundation leadership when interns have questions.
- **Funders must respect the intern/supervisor relationship.** “You can’t intervene; you can just support as a coach,” says Beckford. “Your job is to help build capacity for both the intern and the organization, but don’t meddle.”

- **Good internship programs are self-promoting.** For the Cleveland Foundation, promotion of the internship program is primarily word of mouth. “Interns are our biggest fans,” says Beckford. “When we get an intern from a new school, applicants from that school greatly increase the next year.”
- **Share a clear list of expected tasks at the outset.** Good internships provide interns with a clear understanding of the work to be done and adequate resources to complete those tasks, says Vedavyas. They should also include opportunities for ongoing learning. “As a host, you need to put in a lot more work ahead of time to create a meaningful experience for both of you.”
- **Placing interns in the right organizations helps curb the brain drain.** “When interns aren’t put in the right places, they don’t make the connections that make them want to stay in the city,” says Vedavyas. “Cleveland has a great pool of talent, and we don’t want them to leave the region.”

### What Participants Say

*“I have participated in many intern programs throughout my career. This has been one of the best I have experienced: well-organized, flexible enough for the organization to get what it needs with enough structure to provide some accountability. The opportunity for interns to learn about a variety of non-profit or public organizations is a wonderful option and very important as they try to make their own career decisions.”*

- an intern supervisor

*“I am definitely hooked on the non-profit sector thus far. I am fascinated by all the different options available and endless opportunities for career development in the non-profit world. The exposure of this program to such possibilities was really helpful.”*

- an intern

### Learn More

Find out more about how foundations are supporting recruitment for nonprofit leaders at:

[epip.org/genchange](http://epip.org/genchange)  
[clevelandfoundation.org](http://clevelandfoundation.org)

This case study is part of **Generating Change**, an initiative designed to illuminate, inspire and activate the funding community to invest in talent and leadership development in grantee organizations, across networks and sector-wide. Generating Change is an initiative of Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy, a project housed at the Tides Center. Founded in 2001, EPIP builds extraordinary new leaders for foundations and the communities they impact.