



An Equity-Oriented Approach to Vetting Early Work-Placement Sites in Creative & Technology Industries

Rafi Santo, Dixie Ching, Chris Hoadley, & Kylie Pepler (Hive Research Lab)

Eda Levenson, Geneva White, Mikey Cordero (Scope of Work)

Audience

- Informal Educators
- Internship Coordinators
- Program Managers and Organizational Leaders
- Internship Site Supervisors

What's the Issue?

Through facilitating internship placements, informal learning organizations can act as bridges to professional worlds often inaccessible to underrepresented youth. But many industries — especially in computing, media and creative sectors — aren't just lacking in representation of black and brown minorities, but in creating inclusive and safe environments for these groups. This makes the practice of “vetting,” or identifying appropriate and safe early work sites, especially important.

These sectors unfortunately have records of inequitable hiring and promotion of underrepresented groups (EEOC, 2016; Gee & Peck, 2017), of lack of investment in addressing issues of diversity and equity (Hunt, 2017), and of gender and race-based harassment (Scott, Kapor Klein & Onovakpuri, 2017). At the same time, we know that there are places where youth can go and learn important skills, gain exposure to careers they are curious about, and build professional connections, with a growing number of companies in the tech, media and creative sectors developing initiatives to address these issues. An additional consideration is that even the most progressive environments don't necessarily have cultures oriented towards youth development — a focus on socio-emotional support, meeting youth where they're at, and creating developmentally appropriate roles and responsibilities.

Given these realities, it's important for informal learning organizations that engage in internship placements to consider how these early work settings are identified and vetted so that underrepresented youth are more likely to have positive experiences.

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APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

In thinking about this issue, we draw on work developed by Scope of Work (SOW), whose mission focuses on both access to and transformation of the creative sector in terms of diversity and inclusion of black and brown youth based in New York City. SOW, with support from Hive Research Lab, developed a set of tools meant to help youth-focused organizations identify productive and safe workplaces for internship placements. We share here both what they paid attention to when selecting placement sites, and how they went about gathering information about the sites.

What Organizational Characteristics Matter?

Through a process of ideation, research and direct feedback from youth, SOW and Hive Research Lab found four areas that education organizations engaging in internship placements should pay attention to when placing youth at work-sites: organizational mission, staff diversity and cultural competency, youth development orientation, and positive workplace “vibe”.

- **Organizational mission** — In looking at an organization, how much does its work reflect social responsibility? Is social impact embedded in its business model? How might the ‘core work’ of the organization speak to, or not, a young person from your organization?
- **Staff Diversity & Cultural Competency** — How diverse is the staff of the organization? How diverse is the leadership? Are there people in positions of power from under-represented groups? Has the organization developed specific policies or strategic goals around diversity and inclusion? Has it engaged in internal trainings or capacity building around these issues, or demonstrated a public commitment to these issues?
- **Youth development orientation** — Does the organization currently have an established internship program that’s oriented towards the development of young talent? Do youth work on substantive projects? Have they ever partnered before with a youth development or community-based organization? Do they display understanding of what it means to effectively support and mentor youth not only in terms of technical skills, but in their socio-emotional development and soft skills?
- **Positive Workplace “Vibe”** — Does the organization have a generally positive environment? Do the staff seem connected, friendly and open? Will a young person feel encouraged and welcome in terms of the everyday interactions that make up the work culture?
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Finding out about Organizational Cultures

Knowing what to look for is one thing, the second step is to go about actually finding information about a potential internship placement site. To do this, Scope of Work utilizes different strategies, ranging from less to more resource-intensive:

- **Reviewing an organization’s digital ‘footprint’**, including not just company websites but press, social media and public reports, can be helpful in filling in blanks about an organization’s stated values and commitments, and potentially existing work around inclusion.
- **Initial “getting to know you” meetings with potential placement organizations** provide opportunities to learn about the culture and priorities of an organization, and to see how they respond to an organization focused on youth inclusion and representation.

- **More formal interviews or staff surveys** can provide more in-depth information, and may be helpful if there aren't as many other sources of information on these areas for a given partner. These approaches also help to make clear to a potential placement organization what you value in terms of equity and youth development.
- **Have existing partners recommend new ones.** Organizations you've already vetted will often have a sense of what other potential partners are like in terms of being a good fit for youth interns.

Of course, if an organization is dedicated to connecting youth to early work experiences in outside organizations, learning about a site isn't something that should only happen before an internship placement. **During a placement, check-ins with youth and their on-site supervisors can be critical** in order to learn what kinds of supports they need and whether the placement is playing out productively. This can facilitate support for both the youth as well as the placement site supervisor, and the placement organization more broadly. Similarly, getting feedback from youth and the placement organization after a placement is a critically important source of information about whether a company should be a on-going internship site partner. All of this can be part of taking a developmental approach to working with and building the capacity of partner organizations to be good and supportive hosts for youth interns.

Taking a Contextual Approach

Finally, it's important to note that how productive a company could be for an early youth work experience isn't objectively the same - it depends on the conditions. The same company might be considered differently for a young person that's never had a job versus one that has a number of years of experience. A company that may have some "yellow flags" might be treated differently if you know that your program model involves active check-ins and support for youth and their supervisors at the partner company. In that case, some small concerns might be ameliorated since you know that there will be a parallel supportive context for sensemaking, support, and, potentially, intervention. If for some reason your model isn't able to provide this sort of support, it could be more important to weed out potentially challenging or less youth development-oriented work environments.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What level of “safety” is acceptable given who your youth are, what sorts of support you’re providing during the internship, and what kind of learning might come from encountering challenges?
- Are there ways to involve your youth directly in the process of vetting their placement sites, or sites that future program participants might be placed in?
- After I help to connect my youth to an internship in a company, when and how am I supporting them to make sense of the experience before, during and after the internship?
- Are there ways I can help prepare organizations that are acting as internship placement sites to be attendant to the needs of my youth?



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