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Co-Op/Volunteering/Internships – What’s the difference?

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In recent months, there has been much debate surrounding the issue of ‘free labor’ and utilizing volunteering, interning, and co-op placement opportunities as a means to gain experience and employment. While volunteering can provide opportunities to enhance or build skills useful for gaining employment, here are a few important tips on distinguishing a volunteer opportunity from a co-operative placement or internship:

- Volunteer opportunities are within not-for-profit organizations and/or foundations, and are roles that **do not** replace the role of a paid staff member. These roles provide support to programs and services that directly serve the community.
- A for-profit organization offering an opportunity for an individual to gain training in a specific profession is called an **internship**. There are a set of standards that govern the internship which include “that the internship is for the benefit of the trainee, and that the employer must derive little of any benefit from the labor”. These may be unpaid or paid positions, however, you can view <http://www.internassociation.ca/what-is-the-law/> for exceptions for unpaid positions.
- A **co-operative placement** is an opportunity provided to students that is used to fulfill a credit towards a diploma, certificate, or degree. The placement is for a set period of time, with specific hours and days of involvement.

Volunteer engagement practices are guided by the *Canadian Code of Volunteer Involvement*, a set of 14 standards developed to support and enhance engagement within not-for-profit organizations while also protecting volunteers and the organization during the volunteer’s term of involvement. **Standard 6 – Volunteer Roles** requires that organizations develop a description of the role to the volunteer that includes duties you can expect within the role, what you will be responsible for, desired skills that will help you within the role, time commitments, and benefits; providing essential information to help you decide if the volunteer role meets your objectives. It is also standard practice that organizations provide a volunteer handbook or policy manual that identifies the organization’s commitment to you during your volunteer term.

Remember that volunteering is a **two way relationship**—it provides you with the opportunity to contribute to addressing an identified need in your community while gaining valuable skills and exploring various interests, but also assists organizations in delivering essential programs and services to help individuals like you live in a safe and caring community. If you have any questions about your duties or rights as a volunteer, and how your role contributes to the larger mission and vision of the organization, take an opportunity to speak to the organization’s Volunteer Coordinator to gain information that will help you to determine whether the role is right for you.

ⁱ Seaborn, Claire et al. 'Canadian Intern Association'. *Canadian Intern Association*. N.p., 2015. Web. 27 Feb. 2015.