



## Mentorship Relationships: Things to Consider

Mentorships are most often pointed to as the most effective way for beginning farmers to learn and implement farm skills and knowledge. This document is meant to be a brainstorm for things to think through as a mentee and as a mentor when considering pursuing or accepting mentorships. This is intended as a brief summary; Additional resources can be found at <https://gofarmhawaii.org/ag-industry-educational-opportunities/>

The words “intern” and “apprentice” are widely used and often loosely defined. However the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) operates under a specific set of standards. Legally compliant options for structuring on-farm labor and learning are narrow in number and definition, and the words “internship” and “apprenticeship” connote specific labor arrangements. (From the *New Entry Agriculture Apprenticeship Toolkit*, pages 9 – 18:

[https://nesfp.org/sites/default/files/resources/ag\\_apprenticeship\\_toolkit\\_final.pdf](https://nesfp.org/sites/default/files/resources/ag_apprenticeship_toolkit_final.pdf)

- **Legal internship:** A legal category of on-farm labor which resembles training given in an educational environment, is for the benefit of the intern, and does not displace regular employees or confer immediate advantages to the employer. Internships are supervised by existing staff and the employer, and interns understand that they are not entitled to wages. If an intern is paid a wage (as opposed to a stipend), they then fall under the category of “employee.”
- **Ag apprenticeship:** A colloquial term referring to an array of on-farm/ranch educational and professional training opportunities where training includes hands-on experience in a real-life work setting alongside a dedicated mentor who is an experienced practitioner in the relevant areas of agricultural production. While often informal, most programs and individual farmers who offer non-registered apprenticeships provide more advanced and/or comprehensive training than is provided through internships. Ag apprenticeships are often longer than internships and attract more experienced learners. Many ag apprentices could be legally classified as unpaid interns, registered apprentices, or employees.
- **Volunteer:** Someone who performs services for a public agency and is motivated by civic, charitable or humanitarian reasons without promise, expectation, or receipt of compensation for their services. For-profit farm businesses cannot legally engage volunteers in their operations.

- **Employee:** A legal category of on-farm labor that describes anyone who performs services for a farm business at the discretion of the farm employer. An employee expects the employer to provide compensation for their services.

When an experienced farmer is agreeing to mentor a beginning farmer, they should both be aware of and agree upon the type of relationship that is appropriate to their objectives and capacities. While it may be ideal for a new farmer to work full-time under the supervision of a farmer-mentor, this is not always possible in Hawaii, given the high costs of living. Many new farmers must retain their former positions while they ease into farm work and farm ownership. A survey of GoFarm Ag School and AgPro graduates suggests that they are looking for part-time on-farm learning opportunities close to where they live; most of these experiences would be classified as internships. However, there are aspiring farmers who can make a longer commitment to their on-farm training and may be seeking apprenticeships that provide the experienced farmer-mentor with enough supportive labor so that the beginning farmer can be considered an employees. GoFarm encourages mentors and mentees to design and clarify their agreements with these categories in mind. A useful discussion of these issues can be found in Farms Common's *Managing Risks of Farm Interns and Volunteers*, <https://farmcommons.org/resources/managing-risks-interns-and-volunteers%C2%A0>

Underlying all advice from experienced farm mentorship and internship-apprenticeship practitioners is the importance of a clear initial understanding of expectations between the mentor and mentee and an agreed-upon process for keeping expectations aligned for the duration of the internship period. Put in simplest terms this requires:

- clarity on the part of a mentor as to what s/he can realistically offer in terms of education, coaching and compensation;
- clarity on the part of the mentee as to what s/he wants to learn and the extent of time, effort and resources s/he has available;
- commitment to open, honest, and respectful communication between the parties throughout the mentorship-internship period;
- a written agreement and educational plan as to the content and logistics of the mentorship-internship program that includes regularly scheduled opportunities for evaluation and adjustment;
- an agreed upon method for resolving any differences that might arise during the internship period and a mutual understanding as to how and for what reasons either party could end the mentoring relationship.

*The Western SARE Farm Internship Handbook* (<https://nesfp.org/resources/western-sare-farm-internship-handbook>) identifies five key benchmarks of a successful Farm Internship. Not all of these are applicable to the type of limited or short-term internships sought by Hawaii's beginning farmers, but worth mentioning for internships that include either intensive or extended periods of farming and ranching work.

## **1. Communication**

Communication is the most significant benchmark. Investing a lot of time up-front to set clear expectations of the internship is paramount. Experienced farmers have found that checking in with interns on a regular basis, ideally once a week, forestalls misunderstandings. These meetings can address plans for upcoming activities, feedback from previous work, discussion of any concerns or frustrations, and addressing questions. The meetings can be time-efficient but must allow for a supportive and relaxed atmosphere in which both parties can air any concerns they may have. If topics are potentially contentious or complicated it may be appropriate to allow for some reflective time away from the meeting; in other cases an issue must be resolved immediately. As the mentor-mentee relationship develops it may become clearer how to deal with any difficult issues.

## **2. Diversity**

Unless there are very few skills for which the internship is targeted, creating a range of experiences and responsibilities is advisable and may make the internships more meaningful. Interns who are serious about farming need to understand that a great deal of difficult, boring work goes into the job. But balancing these with opportunities to perform a variety of farm/ranch tasks including infrastructure development projects, marketing, distribution, new crop development, etc. can give a greater sense of whole farm operation and fosters their management knowledge and ability.

## **3. Teaching Healthy Habits**

Part of training new farmers is helping them work hard without causing bodily harm. It is helpful to spend some time for the mentor to explain the ergonomics of the tasks they are teaching, encouraging correct body positioning to reduce chance of injury along with self-awareness and ability to switch positions or tasks to avoid acute soreness.

## **4. Context**

Providing context allows an intern to understand why they are doing the work and what they are accomplishing. Interns who understand the why are more likely to follow directions and grasp the larger significance of the task at hand. Context can be broken down into categories that include:

- How the mentor's farm fits into the local agriculture system and into her/his particular vision of the future of agriculture in Hawaii.
- How a given project fits into the whole farm plan; how it meets the objectives of the farm or ranch.
- Task-specific instructions as to the basic steps necessary to execute the task and why those steps are done in the specific way demonstrated and the reasoning behind those methods.

## **5. Infrastructure (if the internship is residential)**

This applies if interns are spending residential time on the farm and the mentor is providing for basic needs: shelter, toilet facilities, and the ability to cook. If such facilities are being offered be

sure that the intern sees the accommodations beforehand to assess his or her comfort level and acceptance of the circumstances.

An excellent and detailed set of “ground rules” for successful mentorships can be found in

*Supporting Leadership: A Toolkit for Mentors and Mentees*, page 4,

<https://cahrc-ccrha.ca/sites/default/files/SAWA-advisory-group/Supporting%20leadership%20-%20Best%20Practice%20Guide%20for%20Mentors%20and%20Mentees.pdf>

## **Considerations for Mentees**

Before embarking on an internship, spend some time evaluating your readiness and commitment to on-farm experience and education. Define your long and short-term agricultural goals. When considering your goals, think about whether you are seeking to gain a focused set of skills or a broad introduction to the farm or ranch setting and choose a mentor and/or educational plan accordingly. Get some clarity on the type of learner you are so that you can determine whether a prospective mentor would be a good fit in terms of teaching and management style. For instance, do you like close on-going supervision or would you rather be given detailed instructions and then work on your own? Do you prefer to work alone or in a team? What is your capacity for physical work? Consider whether you are open to learning from someone who may not share your philosophical views or political opinions.

- **What kind of farm or ranch are you hoping to mentor with?**
  - Vegetable production?
  - Orchard production?
  - Large or small animal/dairy?
  - Value-added business?
  - Acreage scale \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Other?
  
- **To which geographical regions are you willing to travel for a mentorship?**
  - Do you want to commute or are you interested in a residential opportunity?
  
- **Time Commitment**
  - How many days per week can you commit to working with a farm mentor?
  - How many hours on these days can you commit to?
  - What length of time would you be able to commit to (3, 6, 12 months or more?)
  
- **What specific skills/concepts are you hoping to learn through a mentorship?** (A list of skills may help you determine a meaningful and focused set of educational goals to be used in negotiation with a mentor. Find samples here: <https://gofarmhawaii.org/beginning-farmer-training-certifications/> )
  - Are you hoping to learn managerial skills, labor level skills, or both?
  - Are you willing to do all tasks needed on the farm (even if many may be menial or repetitive)?
  - Are you willing to participate in marketing and distribution activities? If so, what interests you about this part of the business and what might you contribute from your past experiences?
  
- **Financial commitment**
  - Would you seek a stipend /hourly wage for your time? If so, how would you justify this and what would you propose?
  - Would you be willing to pay the mentor a fee for mentoring? If so, what seems reasonable to you?

- **Agreement, communication and evaluation**
  - It is important for you to work with a mentor to set clear expectations on both sides before beginning a mentorship.
  - Consider what you would like to see in an agreement with the mentor that outlines the details of your educational and interpersonal commitment to each other?
  - Commit to working with your mentor on a written agreement (See pages 7-8 below for the type of detail that goes into a written mentoring agreement.)
  - Be available for a weekly or regular meeting to discuss objectives for the coming internship period.
  - Agree to specific dates that you and your mentor will meet to reflect and evaluate as to how the internship is working, discuss any necessary or desired changes, and/or any obstacles to maintaining the working relationship. A minimum of monthly check-ins are recommended.
  - Commit to honest and open communication and feedback between mentee and mentor.
  - Commit to each party listening openly and respectfully when your input or opinion is challenged.
  - **Confidentiality:** Be sure that both the mentor and mentee understand what issues of confidentiality apply to the sharing of information, both agricultural and personal.

### **Considerations for Mentors:**

Spend time up front considering both your motivation and capacity for providing mentoring, coaching, and or work supervision to a beginning farmer. Some examples of what makes a good on-farm mentor include:

(from <https://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/mentorinternfinal.pdf>)

- At least 10 years of farming experience
- Organizational skills
- Patience and a supportive attitude
- Desire to learn from interns as well as to teach
- Ability to listen
- Respect for the community and the environment
- Ability to select an appropriate intern for their farm
- Verbal & non-verbal communication skills
- Ability to balance constructive criticism with compliments
- Self-confidence

Answering the following questions might help you determine whether mentoring at this time is a good choice for you:

- **Are you a good fit for being a mentor at this time?**
  - What are your long-term goals for your operation and how might adding an internship help fulfil these goals?
  - Given that mentor/mentee relationships are mutual learning experiences, what are you most enthusiastic about teaching, what do you want to learn?
  - How much time, energy and patience do you actually have?
  - In what ways are you interested and able to adapt your schedule, operation, and/or daily routine to include an intern?
  - How comfortable are you giving instruction, suggestions, criticism to an intern?  
How comfortable with accepting suggestions or criticisms from an intern?
  - How open are you to working with someone who is very different from you?
  - If a residential internship is offered, what impact would that have on your personal and family situation?
- **What would work for you and your farm?**
  - Time commitment – would you require a specific minimum or maximum amount of time for the mentorship?
  - Skills to share – what skills are you willing to share? Are there any that you don't feel comfortable with sharing?
  - Are you only looking to share skills or would you expect a mentee/intern to assist with regular farming and/or ranching work?
  - Any other expectations you would have for a mentee?
- **Is this mentee/intern a good match for me?**

Conducting an interview and hosting an initial one or two-day volunteer trial session is one way to get a sense of how you and the intern can work together before making a

commitment. This is an important opportunity to find out more about what the mentee/intern is looking for and for you to share what you are willing to provide. Some questions you might ask include:

What kind of physical labor have you done in the past?

What are your long-term agricultural goals?

Tell me about your working style: Do you prefer to work alone or on a team?

Do you like a lot of instruction and guidance or do you prefer to observe and then try things on your own?

Do you like to work in long stretches or take frequent breaks?

What have been your favorite jobs in the past?

Do you have any special needs, limitations, or requests that you'd like me to be aware of?

- **Financial commitment**

- Would you seek a fee for your time? If so, what seems reasonable to you?
- Would you be willing to pay the mentee a stipend/hourly wage for any labor provided? If so, what seems reasonable to you?

- **Agreement and Risk Management**

It is important to set clear expectations on both sides before beginning a mentorship. There are federal legal guidelines for determining whether a mentoring arrangement is an internship or an employment situation. These guidelines can be found at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/71-flsa-internships>

- Once you have outlined the specific parameters of your agreement, it will be wise to check with your Workman's Comp and General Liability insurer to determine what coverage you may already have or need for an unpaid volunteer or a paid employee. An extensive discussion of these issues can be found in the Farms Commons *Managing Risks of Farm Interns and Volunteers*.
- Develop a written internship agreement or employment contract with clear expectations and responsibilities. *For unpaid internships or internships with a stipend it is most important to outline the educational goals and activities of the on-farm program and how it fits into the overall education of the beginning farmer, as this is essentially the documentation for establishing that the intern/mentee is not an employee.* When possible include the mentee in the design and content of the agreement. The following issues are generally covered in model agreements:
  - Mentor contact information
  - Mentee-Intern contact information
  - Mentee Emergency contact information
  - Details of the internship
  - Beginning and end dates
  - Schedule for work and education sessions
  - Payment schedule, if any
  - Intern learning objectives and goals
  - Intern work plan /project and program responsibilities

- Mentor objectives and supervisory/educational responsibilities
  - Any special circumstances regarding the use of special equipment or gear
  - Meeting time schedule for check-ins and feedback
  - Process for addressing stumbling blocks/conflict resolution plan with potential assigned mediator
  - Process for program evaluation during and at the end of the internship
  - Circumstances under which the agreement will be terminated before the initially agreed upon end date
  - If any accommodations or amenities are included, those should be outlined in detail (housing, food, access to internet, visitors, etc.)
  - Signatures and dates
- **Communication and evaluation**
    - Commit to a weekly meeting to discuss objectives for the week.
    - Outline specific dates that you will both agree to reflect and evaluate as to how the mentorship-internship is working, discuss any necessary or desired changes, and/or any obstacles to maintaining the relationship. A minimum of monthly check-ins are recommended.
    - Commit to honest and open communication and feedback between mentee and mentor.
    - Commit to each party listening openly and respectfully when your input or opinion is challenged.
    - **Confidentiality:** Be sure that both the mentor and mentee understand what issues of confidentiality apply to the sharing of information, both agricultural and personal.