



The Next Generation of Public Finance

Internship programs infuse local governments with fresh talent and create pathways for students to pursue careers in public service.

BY ADAM POWELL

For 20+ years we have been saying there is a growing workforce challenge from a generation of retiring workers, without proof other than anecdotal stories. “Public finance can be a hidden gem, but many students associate government with politics, which is a stark contrast to the administrative and problem-solving roles available,” explained Jessica Savidge, administrative manager in the Town Manager’s Office for the Town of Palm Beach, Florida.

Public finance careers often go unnoticed because students aren’t exposed to them during their academic journeys. High schools and universities tend to emphasize more visible pathways such as the certified public accountant (CPA) or corporate finance roles. “Universities emphasize pathways like CPA certification, steering students toward private accounting roles with high earning potential, but without work-life balance or a sense of community impact,” shared Sheila Briesch, controller for the City of Edmond, Oklahoma.

She noted that the educational system often neglects to highlight the breadth of career possibilities in public finance, which extend far beyond accounting to roles in budgeting, strategic planning, procurement, treasury management, and public administration.

Additionally, misconceptions about public-sector work exacerbate the problem. Savidge pointed out that “students often see government work as rigid, monotonous, and disconnected from creativity and problem-solving.” In reality, public finance offers dynamic opportunities to address community challenges, optimize resources, and drive innovation. These false perceptions have contributed to young professionals being underrepresented in the field, leaving many

municipalities struggling to fill critical roles.

The stakes are high for local governments. Operational continuity, financial sustainability, and the quality of public services hinge on a steady supply of skilled professionals. Without a robust talent pipeline, municipalities risk not only delayed projects but also reduced effectiveness in serving their communities. This has prompted some forward-thinking governments to take action, developing programs to introduce younger generations to the field of public finance and cultivating an interest in municipal work. On the following pages, we explore how three cities have developed programs to bring in young talent and help prepare them for a potential future in public finance.

Many young professionals remain unaware of the opportunities available in local government finance, leaving municipalities at risk of losing institutional knowledge and critical expertise.



Irving's Financial Services Student Worker Partnership

THE CITY OF IRVING, TEXAS, launched its Financial Services Student Worker Partnership to address critical staffing shortages and prepare for the eventual turnover of its aging workforce. The program emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when staffing challenges became particularly acute. According to Ebony Roundtree, budget and compensation administrator for the City of Irving, the initiative was

designed not only to help fill administrative gaps but also to introduce local students to the field of public finance. "We wanted to provide an opportunity for some of the local students to get familiar with local government and learn about the community in which they live," she explained.

In partnership with the Irving Independent School District, the city identifies high school juniors and seniors

who show an interest in business or finance through their school's entrepreneurship and financial leadership programs. Teachers and counselors recommend students for the program, who then submit resumes and take part in interviews. Each year, one or two interns are selected to participate. Roundtree emphasized the importance of inclusivity, noting that "we prioritize students who show an interest in finance, but we also look for skills like proficiency in Excel and strong interpersonal abilities."

The program runs for nine to ten months, starting in the summer before the students' senior year. Interns rotate through divisions within the finance department, including budgeting, accounting, treasury, purchasing, and debt management. The experience is tailored to align with each intern's interests, allowing them to spend more time in areas that resonate with their career goals. "If they prefer working in budget or purchasing, they can spend more time there and complete projects that align with their interests," Roundtree said.

In addition to administrative support, interns engage in substantive tasks that offer valuable exposure to public finance. They conduct revenue and expenditure trend analyses, benchmark city rates, and review purchasing



processes. Some have even contributed to citywide efforts such as assisting the communications department with youth-focused marketing campaigns. These experiences not only enhance participants' technical skills but also provide a deeper understanding of the inner workings of local government.

The program has proven beneficial not only for the students but also for the city. While interns alleviate the burden of time-consuming administrative tasks, they also bring fresh perspectives and youthful energy to the workplace. "It's good to get some new blood, if you will, within the department. Their willingness to learn and provide different insights is invaluable," Roundtree observed.

Looking ahead, the City of Irving plans to expand the program by partnering with local colleges and universities such as North Lake Community College and the University of Texas at Arlington. These collaborations could create opportunities for mentorship between high school and college interns, fostering peer learning and support. Additionally, the city aims to implement entry and exit surveys to gather feedback and refine the program. By investing in these students and providing them with meaningful experiences, the city hopes to build a pipeline of future public finance professionals.



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EBONY ROUNDTREE, CITY OF IRVING
BUDGET AND COMPENSATION ADMINISTRATOR



Palm Beach's College Student Internship Program

FOR THE TOWN OF PALM BEACH, FLORIDA, the Town Manager's Office has developed a comprehensive internship program to provide college students and recent graduates with valuable exposure to public administration and local government operations. Since its inception in 2022, the program has focused on connecting participants' academic knowledge with practical applications in governance, strategic planning, and administration. "Internships are excellent opportunities for both the student and the organization," Savidge said. "The incoming generation is creative, technical, and purpose-driven. They have much to offer."

The program primarily targets college students and graduate students, though high school participants are occasionally included for shorter-term projects. Each semester, town officials interview candidates for a select number of paid internships, offering \$18 per hour to

ensure competitiveness. For students requiring college credit, the town tailors the experience to meet academic requirements. The hiring process emphasizes candidates' adaptability and initiative. "We seek individuals who are hungry, humble, and smart," Savidge explained.

A cornerstone of the program's design is its project-based structure, modeled after college assignments to align with students' familiarity and strengths. Interns work on initiatives such as implementing AI-powered website search tools, optimizing Office365 tools for the town council, and creating standardized communication templates. "I like to provide the target and timeframe but leave the path to the interns, allowing them to apply fresh perspectives and creativity," Savidge said. Notable past projects include the redesign of the town's website to improve accessibility and content



organization and helping with the development of the strategic plan collateral and budget alignment.

Flexibility is a hallmark of the internship program. During the academic year, schedules accommodate students' coursework, while summer internships involve more intensive, full-time commitments. By tailoring projects to individual interests and skill sets, the program ensures meaningful engagement. For instance, one intern with a passion for environmental sustainability conducted research on green initiatives and presented recommendations to the town council president. Another, a business major, applied data analytics to streamline public records requests.

Mentorship is another key component. Interns report directly to Savidge, who has weekly one-on-one meetings for guidance and professional development. The program also fosters peer learning and teamwork, often involving multiple interns collaborating on overlapping projects. "We aim to create

an environment where interns learn from each other, while also contributing to real, impactful work," Savidge said.

The program's success lies not only in its ability to deliver tangible results for the town but also in its ability to inspire participants to consider careers in public administration. Savidge recounted the enthusiasm of a marketing class at Palm Beach Atlantic University, which visited the town offices after hearing an intern's presentation. "They had no idea what government work entailed, but by the end of the visit, they were excited and inspired by the possibilities," she said.

As the program grows, the town continues to expand its focus on succession planning and talent development. Plans include collaborating with local universities to attract more graduate-level candidates and adding new internship roles in records management. By engaging the next generation, the Town of Palm Beach is building a workforce that's ready to meet the challenges of the future.



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JESSICA SAVIDGE, ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGER, TOWN MANAGER'S OFFICE, TOWN OF PALM BEACH, FLORIDA



Edmond's Finance Internship Program

THE CITY OF EDMOND, OKLAHOMA, has developed a specialized internship program within its finance department to provide accounting and finance students with hands-on experience in government operations. This initiative reflects the city's proactive approach to addressing workforce challenges in municipal finance while introducing students to career opportunities that often go unnoticed. "We wanted someone who was specifically interested in finance or accounting to gain real-world experience," Briesch said.

Interns in the finance program are deeply immersed in department functions, gaining exposure to treasury, accounts payable, purchasing, and fixed assets management. By working across these areas, students develop a comprehensive understanding of municipal finance. "Some students don't even know what capital assets are—it's not something

typically taught in school," Briesch explained. Interns also participate in departmental meetings and city council presentations, giving them insight into how financial decisions influence governance. For example, interns have been involved in projects related to Edmond's new tax increment financing (TIF) district, learning how to account for and manage this complex financial mechanism.

The program is structured to be flexible and have impact. Internships are semester-based, with extension opportunities if the arrangement works well for both parties. Interns work up to 20 hours per week during the academic term, with the option to increase hours in the summer. Briesch highlighted the contributions of a recent intern who took on significant responsibilities in accounts payable during a staffing gap caused by overlapping maternity leaves.

"He took on a huge role and now has a complete understanding of the accounts payable process," she said. "It's a win-win situation—students gain real-life experience, and we benefit from their fresh perspectives and support."

While the finance internship program is department-specific, Edmond also runs a broader initiative in partnership with the University of Central Oklahoma. This internship, focused on Masters of Public Administration (MPA) students, provides rotations through departments such as city management, budgeting, and economic development. The program allows students to earn academic credit while exploring their interests and gaining hands-on experience. "It's structured so students can explore their interests, whether that's finance, budgeting, or other areas of city operations," Briesch said. Several participants have transitioned from internships into full-time roles in Edmond or neighboring cities.

Despite the successes of these programs, Edmond still faces challenges in attracting talent, particularly in competition with private firms that offer higher wages and emphasize CPA certification. Briesch noted that universities often promote private accounting roles while failing to highlight the unique opportunities in government finance.



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**SHEILA BRIESCH, CONTROLLER FOR
THE CITY OF EDMOND, OKLAHOMA**



"The universities don't talk about the community impact or the benefits of government work," she explained. To make its internships more competitive, the City of Edmond is exploring ways to offer college credit and strengthen mentorship opportunities.

By combining the targeted finance internship with the broader MPA program, the city has created a well-rounded approach to talent development. Looking ahead, the city plans to build on these efforts by enhancing its relationships with local universities and refining its recruitment strategies. "These internships are critical for educating students about the many opportunities in municipal finance," Briesch emphasized. With continued investment, the City of Edmond's internship programs are poised to play a pivotal role in cultivating the next generation of public finance professionals.

Conclusion

Competition for labor is real. The public finance profession needs to improve its ability to recruit and demonstrate the value of careers in government. Finance professionals can take deliberate and proactive measures to secure the future of their finance departments. Programs like those highlighted in the City of Irving, Town of Palm Beach, and City of Edmond show what is possible when cities invest in youth engagement, mentorship, and meaningful work opportunities.

These initiatives highlight the value of hands-on internships that not only fill immediate staffing gaps but also serve as stepping stones for long-term career development. By rotating through departments, engaging in projects that have an impact on the community, and receiving guidance from experienced professionals, interns gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of public finance. As Savidge pointed out, students often come into the programs with misconceptions about government work. Exposure to real-world challenges and creative problem-solving dispels those misconceptions and opens students' eyes to the dynamic opportunities available in public service.

Moreover, these efforts demonstrate the significant impact that early engagement can have on both individuals and communities. For interns, the programs provide valuable skills, mentorship, and a clearer path to professional success. For municipalities, they bring fresh perspectives, youthful energy, and innovative ideas that enhance operations and build a sustainable talent pipeline. As Briesch emphasized, internships are "about shaping the next generation of public finance professionals," equipping them to address today's and tomorrow's challenges.

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ensures a steady flow of candidates who are prepared and eager to learn. Tailoring programs to align with departmental needs provides mutual benefits, allowing both students and staff to grow. Mentorship fosters meaningful connections that inspire interns to consider long-term careers in public service. And regular evaluation and feedback keep these programs dynamic and responsive to evolving workforce demands.

The stakes are high, but the opportunity is immense. Investing in the next generation of public finance leaders is not just a solution to today's staffing challenges—it's a commitment to the long-term health and vitality of our communities. Internship programs prove that when municipalities prioritize youth engagement, they also cultivate a workforce that is innovative, passionate, and prepared to lead.

As local governments look to the future, they must recognize the strategic importance of attracting and retaining young talent in public finance. By creating pathways for students to explore these careers and contribute meaningfully to their communities, municipalities can ensure that their finance departments remain strong and effective for years to come. The time to act is now. By taking these steps, local governments can build a legacy of leadership, sustainability, and community impact that will endure for generations. ■

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