

Ensuring the Next Generation of Clinical Researchers

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1. Background

The UF Health Cancer Center (UFHCC) Clinical Research Office (CRO) internship was developed to expose recent college graduates, planning future careers in health care, to clinical research. We noted that many health care providers have limited exposure to clinical research during formal education and struggle with integrating research processes into routine care¹. Simultaneously, we recognized this program could help address the high staff turnover commonly experienced within research organizations. Previously, the CRO hired staff with no experience into clinical research coordinator (CRC) roles. Turnover rates were as high as 30 percent within two years of employment with many staff ultimately determining their long-term career goals were misaligned with research. We recognized that the program could identify interns with an affinity for cancer research and provide opportunities for promotion into permanent CRC positions.

¹Michaels, M., D'Agostino, T.A., Blakeney, N. et al. J Canc Educ (2015) 30: 152.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13187-014-0662-6>

2. Goals

One program goal is to expose future health care providers to clinical research, so they gain an understanding of how research integrates with and impacts cancer care. For others, the program serves as an entryway into a clinical research career.

3. Solutions and Methods

This internship program launched in January 2019. Two interns are selected each fall and spring semester for this year-long salaried commitment. Interns work as clinical research assistants (CRAs), supporting study teams with the research process. Each intern undergoes a six-week orientation and is assigned a mentor to prepare them to participate in data capture and entry, laboratory procedures, and regulatory affairs. In addition, interns participate in a quality improvement (QI) project and data analysis. Below is a list of areas covered during the internship:

- Good clinical practice and research ethics
- Biology and treatment of cancer
- Informed consent
- Study management and operations
- Principles of data management

4. Outcomes

This program remains ongoing; the fourth intern cohort is planned for June 2021. To date, intern QI projects have resulted in CRO process improvements. For example, one intern implemented an office-wide messaging process to alert staff of clinical subject arrivals, thereby streamlining clinic and research staff communication which, in turn, improved the efficiency of study-related clinic visits. This intern was

accepted to a prestigious pharmacy program and upon graduation, hopes to continue working in the field. The program exposed him to opportunities within investigational drug services as well as the role pharmacists play in the development and implementation of study protocols. So far six interns have completed the program with four moving into full-time permanent positions within the CRO. Five of six interns have now been accepted into graduate programs in medicine, pharmacy, nursing, and public health. All cited their CRO experience as a significant factor in securing acceptance to these programs.

5. Lessons Learned

Hiring these bright and motivated interns has been invaluable to our program. They are engaged, eager to learn, and willing to tackle research challenges. Future directions include expanding opportunities within the CRO's investigator-initiated trials project management office and pediatrics division, and assessing permanent recruitment for interns who wish to continue careers in oncology clinical research. We also plan to offer undergraduate summer opportunities to further promote research as a career.