

From Exposure to Retention: a Competency-Based Clinical Research Internship to Support Career Development and Workforce Stability

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1. Background

In 2019, the UF Health Cancer Institute (UFHCI) Clinical Research Office (CRO) launched a year-long, post-graduate research internship program to help train the next generation of oncology researchers by providing expanded exposure to clinical research. The goals were two-fold: improve research integration into clinical practice and reduce early-career turnover within research organization. In 2025, the program was re-imagined with a month-by-month, topic-driven curriculum overseen by assigned mentors, in addition to the experiential education of working as a full member of a clinical research team. Competency-based education and structured mentorship support the expanded goals of this initiative and enable informed career decision-making and long-term workforce development.

2. Goals

1. Increase awareness of clinical research as a career.
2. Provide exposure to clinical research infrastructure beyond task-based experience.
3. Support clinical research operations.
4. Identify and retain individuals with a strong aptitude and sustained interest in clinical research.

3. Solutions and Methods

UFHCI CRO Interns hold bachelor's degrees in health-related or basic science fields and join the CRO each fall as Clinical Research Assistants for a one-year salaried commitment. In addition to standard orientation training, the new Intern-specific curriculum covers five essential research topics to be explored under the supervision of a mentor, who facilitates discovery and examination through discussion and learning activities including but not limited to: online modules, mandatory certifications (e.g., GCP, ECG, biosafety, etc.), observation of committee meetings, shadowing across functional areas, and guided reading and reflection assignments. This multi-modal approach provides insight into UFHCI's research infrastructure, encourages in depth exploration of the research process, and networking opportunities tailored to individual interests. The final three months of the internship year are dedicated to a capstone project, a quality improvement, creative, or research-focused initiative, that is developed and completed by the Intern with the assistance of their mentor and presented to CRO Leadership.

4. Outcomes

Twenty-one interns have completed the program with three currently enrolled. Cohorts demonstrate representation from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds and have provided meaningful operational support to the CRO while providing hands-on experience across the research lifecycle. Capstone projects have supported the transition to electronic documentation, identified and removed barriers to protocol compliance, improved communication by leveraging institutionally available technology, and improved microbiome specimen collection education and compliance.

Interns demonstrated improved career alignment with approximately 50 percent pursuing advanced degree programs, while 50 percent entered careers in clinical research, including promotion into

permanent roles within UFHCI. One intern pursued an advanced degree and then returned to the UFHCI to take an advanced clinical coordination role.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Interns are a valued part of our CRO, bringing enthusiasm, innovation, and process improvement while gaining experiential and professional development to successfully enter careers in health care. Future directions include expanding internship shadowing opportunities across the enterprise and engaging outgoing interns in interviews for the incoming cohort to strengthen interview skills for future endeavors.