

An Ounce of Prevention... Internship Planning and Implementation for Students, University Advisors, and Site Supervisors

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Abstract

Internships in the health profession, specifically in public and community health education and promotion, are a valuable opportunity for students to acquire new skills, as well as implement their recently acquired academic knowledge. There are generally three key players in the internship process: the faculty advisor or coordinator, the site supervisor, and the student intern. There are processes and procedures that can greatly help facilitate a positive experience for all three parties. Essential to this internship process are good organization skills, meticulous planning abilities, and clear communication channels. This article provides easy steps that all three individuals can benefit from during the planning and implementation phases of the internship experiences.

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Introduction

Whether a university calls it an internship, a preceptorship, practicum, or a field experience, it is nonetheless an exciting and important experience in a new health professional's career. Generally, internships are 6-12 credit experiences that last one semester with students working anywhere from 10-40 hours per week at the internship site. Typically, students engage in the experience after completion of their coursework, but prior to graduation. Internship experiences have been commonplace for almost two decades, especially since the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc. began its certification program in the 1990's (Schmidt & Hurley, 1990).

University internship guidelines for health promotion and health education majors vary greatly from one campus to another, and there are even more diverse internship expectations at the hosting health agency or organization. With this wide variety of opportunities, guidelines, and expectations, careful planning and organization by the three key players (university advisor, site intern supervisor, and student

intern) are critical to a successful internship experience.

Faculty Advisor or Coordinator

The advisor or coordinator's role is critical during the planning stages of the internship. The role of faculty advisor can be daunting and overwhelming if there are not set procedures and processes in place. Working with other colleagues in one's college or at another university can be very beneficial if this process is new to the coordinator. Washington (1986) provided four elements that are still considered essential to any successful internship coordinator's role: preplanning; site selection and student placement; residency experience; and program evaluation. Washington refers to the internship site as a residency — and this is a good way to conceptualize internship. Students are a 'resident' of that organization for a specified amount of time — they observe, learn, participate, delegate, and often lead health education functions as if they were fully employed by the organization. Therefore, the task of the faculty advisor or coordinator is to ensure a good placement for each student and

site. Organization will be the key to the advisor's success, especially prior to the actual internships. Pre-planning and developing a timeline for fall, spring, and possibly summer

semesters will guide not only the advisor, but also the students and site supervisors through the process more efficiently. An example of what this could look like is in Table 1.

Table 1
Internship Coordinator Timeline and Tasks

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|---|
| Beginning of Semester (September or February) |
| Make sure internship manuals are updated and in bookstore/office for students |
| By the 2nd or 3rd week of semester, send out welcome letters to interns that are out at their sites. |
| Collect internship application forms for next year's group. Start a file for each student and create a table of all of them and their contact and site information. |
| |
| Ongoing (all months) |
| Update sites and files |
| Evaluate and approve new sites. |
| Site visits for your interns. |
| |
| Health Education & Health Promotion Majors Meetings (November or April) |
| Introduce internship issues and dates to students |
| Handout—Tips & Important Dates for Interns |
| Q/A session |
| Arrange for site supervisors to attend or host an Internship Fair |
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| |
| Internship Orientation Session (October or March) |
| Create agenda |
| Bring copy of Internship Manual and examples of past final reports |
| Discuss portfolio guidelines. |
| Update student intern's address/contact information |
| Discuss academic status with individuals if necessary (GPA, etc). |

Frequent and effective communication with the students and site supervisors during the planning stage is also very crucial to a positive experience. Working with the sites and knowing their policies and expectations will make it more efficient for the student and faculty advisor. Create a system of open communication with both interns and site supervisors while keeping in mind:

1. How often will you communicate with the students/supervisors?

2. What form of communication is realistic based on the internship locations and your teaching or administrative load?
3. Will there be an onsite visit during the internship? If so, how many contacts?
4. What is your plan of action if the internship is not going well for the student or agency? Do you have procedures in place for such and occurrence? Be sure to share this information with interns and site supervisors before the experience begins.

Addressing these and other questions and planning for other communication issues can prevent misunderstandings and other problems among all participants, and provide a course of action in the event a major issue emerges.

Do's and Don'ts for Faculty Advisors

DO:

1. Do as much 'leg-work' before the semester begins.
2. Find time each week to organize internship materials, make phone calls, or conduct site visits. Block this time off on your calendar and let the interns and supervisors know that these times are available to them to discuss the internship experience.
3. Create an organized filing system (electronic or paper) that makes sense to you. You will need to be able to quickly access student files, agency contracts, and other internship materials. It is important to keep a digital or paper trail.
4. Share with the students early on that you are the facilitator of this experience and that it will be up to the student to identify possible sites, goals, and objectives. At this point in the student's academic career, they should be autonomous and resourceful enough to find a site in which to use the skills they've learned in the classroom.

DO NOT:

1. Expect there to be a perfect site for each student. Assist students make the best choice based on their needs, skills, geographical limitations, and let them know that this is not the only experience they will ever have in the field.
2. Forget that on the other end is another very qualified competent health professional who can help foster a good experience for the student. Site supervisors often have a lot of experience working with interns.
3. Omit regularly scheduled evaluations for the student and supervisor. You must be abreast of concerns and problems. Catching an issue early on in the experience may make it easier to fix than one that might occur later in the placement.

Site Supervisor

Health professionals are often very excited about the prospect of having an intern assist them in their organization and with guidance from the university faculty or coordinator, the internship can run more smoothly. If the site has not had interns before, it is critical for the college representative to work with the site supervisor to set up contracts, evaluation guidelines, orientation procedures, as well as critical communication avenues.

Before accepting an intern, it is highly recommended that the site supervisor conduct interviews (formal or informal) with potential candidates. In organizations that have a high demand for internships, this may be necessary as more than one candidate may be vying for the same position. A face-to-face interview is best, but sometimes a telephone interview is necessary due to location and schedules. Regardless, there are some steps to take before the interviews begin, to avoid potential problems.

Create an Internship Handbook

1. Identify and explain what your goals and objectives are for having an intern.
2. List and describe specific activities, functions, and roles that an intern would have in your organization.
3. Identify who will supervise and evaluate the intern in the organization.
4. Determine how the student will be evaluated. It may be appropriate and helpful to use the evaluation tool used by the organization for its own staff.

Create an Interview Process

1. Compile a list of questions related to your organization's needs and goals (see Table 2).
2. Find ways to identify students' abilities and skills that they will bring to your organization. Matching these skills to your organization's needs is very important.
3. Determine the interviewer or interview team and share with them the type of candidate that will best meet the needs of the organization.

4. Inform the intern candidate of the decision timeline for their possible placement.
5. Set up an orientation schedule that informs the intern of general information like workstations, parking, health and safety procedures, and their roles and

responsibilities. The organization's Human Resources Department may already have orientation sessions and materials that would be greatly beneficial to the student and site supervisor.

Table 2
Potential Questions for Internship Candidates

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| 1. What are your strengths and weaknesses as a health educator? |
| 2. Why did you pursue a degree and career in health? |
| 3. What do you want to do when you are finished with your degree |
| 4. What life experiences have helped you so far in your career in health education? |
| 5. What experiences in your undergraduate experience shaped your philosophy today? |
| 6. Where do you see yourself in 5yrs, 10 yrs, etc? |
| 7. What areas/issues are you passionate about? |
| 8. What areas of research are you interested in? |
| 9. What areas of research are you interested in? |
| 10. With what populations do you want to work? |
| 11. What types of programs have you developed, implemented, and/or evaluated? |
| 12. What types of programs have you developed, implemented, and/or evaluated? |
| 13. What professional organizations have you investigated/joined? |
| 14. What are your hobbies? |
| 15. What motivates you? |
| 16. What is your definition of success? |
| 17. What makes a team successful and how have you been a positive team contributor in the past? |
| 18. Tell about something you've read in a professional publication that interests you. |

Do's and Don'ts for Site Supervisors

DO:

1. Spend time with others in your organization to determine the need and priorities that might be fulfilled by a student intern.
2. Identify how an intern will positively affect your organization.
3. Develop a strong orientation process to establish ground rules, boundaries, and guidelines for professional expectations and responsibilities. It is best if these are in

written form as part of an internship handbook.

4. Create a personal workspace or office or the interns.
5. Try to make them feel as part of the organization or team as much as possible.
6. Set up regular communication with the faculty advisor for problem solving and prevention of misunderstandings.
7. Find an initial task or project the student intern is very likely to successfully complete.

8. Create an ongoing evaluation system with the intern. Frequently identify strengths and successes in addition to areas where growth and improvement are necessary.

DO NOT:

1. Create more work for yourself by doing the interns' job. Allow them to take the reins and make mistakes if necessary.
2. Feel it is only your responsibility to correct issues with the intern. If there are problems, first identify them with the student and then communicate with the faculty advisor. Be proactive.
3. Give them an initial project that is too difficult or confusing. Remember that this is a student new to the field. Don't jeopardize the overall well-being of your organization by giving a crucial project solely to an intern.
4. Forget they are there to learn, observe, and ultimately put into action their skills and academic knowledge. Mentoring and facilitating are your main roles.

Student Intern

It is critical that health majors begin their search for an internship site at least one year in advance of the placement. This process should begin with a faculty or internship advisor at an initial exploration meeting. Here students can begin to identify their specific health interests, health setting with which they align best (hospital, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, worksites, etc), and their personal career goals. If the college's internship procedures do not officially begin until the semester prior to the placement, the student should do this preplanning on their own a year in advance. Site approvals and paperwork alone can take up to six months for the site to be ready to 'hire' an intern. Students can also set up shadowing experiences or independent studies one year prior to their internship semester. This allows for the student to 'interview' and identify sites that align to their own health interests. The following (Table 3) are steps that can facilitate the exploration and planning phase of the internships.

Table 3
Steps for Student Interns

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|----|---|
| 1. | Identify your interests, skills, strengths, and weaknesses. If needed ask your university advisor to assist you in identifying these. Record your findings for future reference during your internship planning and decision-making. |
| 2. | Choose and prioritize the type of setting in which you want to complete your internship. (corporate worksite, governmental agencies/organizations, hospitals, schools, non-profit, etc.) |
| 3. | Determine your financial situation. Can you relocate? Will you have to work or take classes during your internships. Do you need a vehicle or is public transportation available? |
| 4. | Research the site/agency thoroughly. Talk with past and present interns and employees to learn about the expectations for interns. Spend time on their website to learn about the history and structure of the organization. What are their <u>mission and goals</u> and how would they fit with your own? How are interns supervised at the site? |
| 5. | Establish the interview opportunity and process with your advisor and the site. |
| 6. | Questions to ask the site supervisor: a. How do they <u>plan to utilize you</u> and your skills? b. Will you be learning new skills? c. Do they provide training for you? d. What would an <u>average day</u> look like for a intern? e. How will you be <u>evaluated</u> ? |

Do's and Don't For Interns

DO:

1. Know your university's internship procedures and policies one year prior to choosing a site.
2. Work closely with an advisor or internship coordinator early in the planning process. Your advisor likely has plenty of knowledge and experience with internships, so let them be your guide.
3. Talk with parents, guardians, or significant others about financial matters, insurance issues, and relocation concerns.
4. Spend time talking with seniors or current interns. Find out about their sites and experiences. Shadow current interns or professionals to get an understanding of their responsibilities.
5. Create an organized system to file and identify organization/site information.
6. Become familiar with and adhere to the policies and regulations of the hosting organization.
7. Act in a professional and ethical manner in all phases of the internship experience. This is your transition time from being a student to a becoming a professional. Much internship often lead to professional positions, so act as if you are a regular member of the staff before, during, and after the placement.
8. Immediately contact your site supervisor and faculty advisor with concerns or questions. Do not wait until it is too late in the semester to fix a problem that might easily be remedied immediately by your site supervisor or university internship advisor.
9. Spend time during this experience taking advantage of every learning opportunity. Go to trainings, conferences, and committee meetings. Observe and learn from those around you.

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DO NOT:

1. Expect your university advisor to continually remind you of important internship decisions and dates. Take the initiative early on in your academic career. Set up exploration appointments with them one year prior to your internship semester.
2. Get discouraged in your search for the 'perfect' site. Find the internship site whose mission and goals align best with your goals, skills, and interests.
3. Base your decision on where your friends or significant others want you to go or don't take the path of least resistance. Do what is best for you, challenges you professionally and intellectually, and will advance your future goals.
4. Hesitate to speak up at your site/organization during your internships. You bring with you a fresh set of eyes and ears and your initiative will be appreciated.

Finally, the internship is an experience -just like any class, job, or life event. It will not always be easy, but in the end all players will have gained important insights. For the faculty advisors and site supervisors, remember you are considered a mentor to the students. Your role is to strengthen already existing knowledge, broaden new skills, and foster a positive environment for students to be engaged in for a relatively short, but important, period of time. (Sowan, Moffatt, & Canales, 2004). Students on the other hand, are expected to be professional, to welcome new opportunities, and to identify potential future career ideals and aspirations. If all three parties can be proactive, remain organized, utilize good communication channels, and stay open and flexible, the experience will be very beneficial and rewarding.

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