

Supporting the Next Generation of Clinical Research Staff Through UFHCC's Internship Program

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1. Background

At the UF Health Cancer Center (UFHCC) Clinical Research Office (CRO), part of our mission is training the next generation of cancer scientists and leaders. Recognizing the relative lack of awareness among graduating students about clinical research as a career path, along with the common inexperience of medical students with clinical research, the one-year internship program was launched in 2019. The program introduces UF graduates to new career paths, while supporting our clinical research teams operationally.

2. Goals

The goal of this program was to introduce graduates to the exciting world of clinical research as a potential career or as a steppingstone to advanced degree programs.

3. Solutions and methods

Interns join the CRO each spring and fall as Clinical Research Assistants (CRAs). To be eligible, interns must have received a bachelor's degree in basic sciences, health related sciences, or similar, with at least a 3.2 GPA. Following a six-week orientation, they are assigned one or more CRO mentors who provide guidance on tasks such as laboratory processing, log creation, performing ECGs, regulatory processes, and a multitude of other experiences.

Recently, interns have served as coordinators for non-interventional studies with tasks including obtaining consent, sample collection/processing, maintenance of specimen trackers, and team updates. While engaging in these activities, interns glean knowledge on topics such as Good Clinical Practice, ethics, monitoring and auditing, and general oncology.

4. Outcomes

In 2022, we increased the number of interns onboarded (see chart below). In 2023, 3 out of 5 interns are under-represented minorities. Interns gain relevant work experience, but also become integral support for full-time clinical research staff. Clinical teams can be more focused and task-oriented on patient care and protocol adherence. Additionally, this program identifies student interns who possess keen interest and aptitude to perform clinical research. There have been several interns joining UFHCC for a "gap year" while they apply to medical school, only to discover a passion for clinical research and desire to promote internally. Our team has seen firsthand that hiring these staff upon completion of internships affords the benefit of hiring experienced individuals with less likelihood of turnover because they are already embedded in the office. Others take this newfound passion for research into their medical careers, eventually to conduct their own studies with a better understanding of the nuances of clinical research. The program also equips them with ample patient interaction opportunities and up-close engagement with clinical operations.

To date, 14 interns have completed their year-long commitment with us. Of these, 50 percent have gone on to enroll in medical school or other advanced degree programs and 50 percent chose careers in clinical research, some promoting into full time positions within UFHCC. All have cited intern experience as key to their successes.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Direction

This program has allowed us to effectively support full-time research staff with reduced financial burden while also providing new graduates with real-world experience. Future directions include expanding to other areas of CRO, and with the collaboration of Cancer Research Training and Education Coordination (CRTEC) and Plan to Enhance Diversity (PED), promoting at local high schools and events for increased awareness and recruitment opportunities.

Figure

