

Creation of an Entry Level Assistant Study Coordinator Position to Aid in Recruitment and Retention of Clinical Research Staff at an Academic Medical Center

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1. Background

The University of North Carolina (UNC) Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center (LCCC), a public state institution, must adhere to state parameters dictating position classification, compensation, education, and related experience requirements. Applicants to LCCC positions, such as study coordinator (SC), require a 4-year degree and 1 year of related experience to qualify for the oncology SC role within the current compensation band. Despite encountering exceptional candidates characterized by talent, intelligence, and ardor, those lacking related experience were excluded from employment consideration. To meet staffing demands, LCCC needed a mechanism to hire talented individuals with high potential and more limited experience, creating a feeder pool where individuals could gain experience for higher-level positions.

2. Goals

LCCC sought to strategically meet stringent state hiring parameters, while simultaneously cultivating a pipeline of trained individuals that could meet future staffing demands.

3. Solution and Methods

The assistant study coordinator (ASC) role was created to serve as a new entry-level position which would circumvent state requirements of 1 year of experience. An onboarding program was established to bridge the lack of experience in the clinical setting. This involved the creation of an orientation checklist designed to introduce increasingly complex research tasks over one year to meet state requirements in the future. The responsibilities of the role included working closely with SCs to learn and conduct basic elements of oncology clinical trials, including lab kit inventory and management, research chart maintenance, patient reimbursement and OnCore visit check-in, scheduling, follow-up visits, facilitating monitoring visits, and administering quality of life assessments.

A pre/post Likert assessment, based on the orientation checklist, was utilized to identify training gaps, and assess strengths and weaknesses. Results were grouped into positive responses (extremely confident, extremely comfortable, or yes) and negative responses (not at all confident, extremely uncomfortable, or no).

4. Outcomes

The ASC role was a success. Six individuals were identified and hired in May 2022. Of the six inaugural ASCs, four were internally promoted with the experience gained, one opted to remain an ASC, and one was externally promoted. The five who remained at LCCC are now approaching two years of employment.

Introduction of increasingly complex tasks over an annual timeline allowed ASCs to master concepts and contribute to the study team without the full weight of responsibility that accompanies the SC role. The positive assessment responses increased from 13 to 38 percent and the negative responses decreased from 25 to 22 percent over a period from fall of 2022 to summer of 2023.

5. Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Post onboarding, the ASC position needed additional structure therefore, a mentorship program was designed to provide support, ongoing training, and increase job satisfaction. Integrating this novel position into an established office also provided professional growth for existing staff as they contributed to shaping and supporting the new role. Promotion from the ASC role has allowed staff to enter a new role with prior training in internal policies, systems, SOPs, and trial portfolios. The addition of the ASC role has proven to be a successful approach to hiring, training, career development, and staff retention.