

**Johns Hopkins University**  
**School of Nursing**  
**Career Center**

Clinical Nurse Intern/Extern Programs:  
An Opportunity to Develop Nursing Skills

Clinical nurse internship/externship programs provide a tremendous opportunity for upper-level nursing students to successfully transfer from educational to clinical settings. Under the supervision of experienced preceptors, participants are guided towards mastery of nursing skills and improved patient service. Internships also provide the opportunity to explore various nursing fields to identify best career fits.

A clinical internship can be one of the most rewarding experiences a student nurse can have. With planning and preparation, you can identify the best opportunity for you, one that will prepare you for a successful career in nursing. The following is a guide for identifying and creating a successful clinical experience.

**What is the difference between an externship and an internship?**

Generally, externships are completed the summer between a nursing student's junior and senior year. They are usually full-time, paid and are six to eight weeks in length. Internships are usually available during the academic year, are part-time and are also paid. Some hospitals call these positions nurse technicians.

**What can you expect in a student clinical nurse program?**

A clinical internship should be treated like an actual job with the same expectations and requirements. Although you will have the opportunity to gain valuable nursing experience, the organization providing the internship has other expectations—often to learn about you and your work style, and to train a prospective employee who will provide excellent patient care.

Of course, each internship program will have unique requirements, but you can generally expect the following:

- Development of mutually agreed-upon goals and performance standards
- Development of specific clinical skills through observation of experts and supervised, hands-on experience
- An orientation period conducted with other interns
- An opportunity to earn money
- An opportunity to regularly shadow an experienced nurse
- A chance to observe clinical, surgical or other specialized procedures
- The experience of following a patient through his/her medical experience
- An opportunity to function independently following appropriate training and development
- Receipt of continuous feedback from a preceptor
- Appropriate resources to function effectively as a care provider

- Opportunity to work with health professionals from other disciplines (physicians, occupational therapists, nutritionists, etc)
- Exposure to state-of-the-art technologies and procedures

### **What is expected of you?**

The organization that is offering you a clinical internship also has expectations that you should be prepared to meet. You should:

- Understand the requirements of the internship (schedule, responsibilities, etc) and any contractual agreements. Upon completing a paid internship, you may be expected to begin employment upon graduation. Failing to do so may require paying back some or all of the salary or training costs.
- Arrive at your internship at the scheduled time and work through the entire shift. If the hourly requirements are flexible, under commit your time. That is, agree to work two shifts that you know you can always make. Of course, you can usually pick up additional work if possible. However, do not commit to more work than you can reasonably manage. You will be on the schedule—it is expected that you be there.
- Be on time and ready to work at least 10 minutes before your scheduled start time.
- Demonstrate the highest ethical standards of nursing.
- Build on your experiences so that you continue to learn and advance your skills.
- Be willing to ask questions.
- Be willing to receive consistent feedback.
- Have a sense of your career goals. Identify your areas of interest. If you haven't yet decided on a specialty, request an internship on a medical/surgical floor in order to gain broad nursing experience that can be transferred to many units.

### **How do you identify and pursue an internship opportunity that is a good fit for you?**

In many ways, finding an internship is not much different than conducting a traditional job search. You'll need to submit an application and resume and participate in an interview. Of course, you'll also need to follow-up once you have applied.

To ensure that you select the internship that is the most appropriate for you, be sure to:

- Identify your career goals. What are you seeking in a career in nursing? What are your areas of interest? You should be able to easily and effectively communicate your goals. No one should expect you to map out a 5-10 year plan. It's really not realistic anymore. However, you should be able to discuss what fields of nursing are of interest to you and why. Review your clinical rotations. Which were most satisfying? Why? Which were not as rewarding? Why? What geographic location appeals to you? With what population would you like to work?
- Speak to classmates, faculty advisors, professors, and others who can offer you guidance on possible externship opportunities. Do you know people who have participated in an externship? Ask them for advice. But remember, their suggestions will be colored by their own experience. There are so many paths to consider in nursing and only you will know what the best choice is for you.

- Participate in share days to learn about the organization and units of interest. Although you won't be working directly with patients, it is a terrific way to see a nurse and unit in action. Be thoughtful about arranging share days, because it generally means that the nurse you are following is not able to work her usual load, so it is a burden for the floor. Contact the units/floors in which you are most interested.
- Research the internet. Start with the hospitals of interest, many have links dedicated to nurse recruitment, some have information on nurse externships. Find out:
  - What is offered in the externship
  - When does it begin/end
  - What is the application process
  - What is the application deadline
  - Does the hospital have magnet recognition
  - Is part-time employment possible after the externship
  - Are externs given preference for employment after graduation
- Prioritize the places to which you might like to apply based upon an evaluation of your interests and skills and geographic preferences.
- Prepare a strong, error-free resume and cover letter that focuses on relevant experience. The person reading your resume is most interested in your nursing training and experience. It's also useful to include your leadership activities as well (student government, volunteer work, etc). Visit the SON Career Resource Center web site for a resume guide and samples. Stop by the Career Resource Center (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) for a resume critique.
- Submit complete applications well before deadline.
- Identify and contact references. Let them know that you are applying for extern positions. Provide a copy of your resume as well as information about the position. Be specific and keep them posted on your progress.
- Practice interviewing. Visit the SON Career Resource Center web site for the interview guide or the Career Resource Center to schedule a mock interview.
- Evaluate extern positions for which you have been selected to decide which one is the best choice for you at this time. Which will provide the greatest opportunity to develop your nursing skills?

You should hear from your externship sites in early spring. An externship is a remarkable opportunity that can provide great training for student nurses. Through clarifying your career goals, you can identify sites that will help you develop skills that you can effectively apply throughout your career.

Be sure to share your success with the Career Resource Center so we can develop a database of CNI opportunities. Good luck!

For assistance with achieving your career goals, visit the Career Resource Center in the Office of Student Services, 410-955-7548. Individual appointments are available each Wednesday, from 9am – 2pm (15-minute walk-in appointments from 12noon – 1pm).

**Additional resources:**

Bozell, J. (1999). *Anatomy of a Job Search: A Nurse's Guide to Finding and Landing the Job you Want*. Springhouse, PA: Springhouse Corporation.

Cardillo, D.W. (2001). *Your 1<sup>st</sup> Year as a Nurse: Making the Transition from Total Novice to Successful Professional*. Roseville Publishing: Prima Publishing.

Case, B. (1997). *Career Planning for Nurses*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers.

Dunne, G.D., (2002). *The Nursing Job Search Handbook*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Vallano, A. (1999). *Careers in Nursing: Manage your Future in the Changing World of Healthcare*. New York: Kaplan Books.