

Student internships: what you need to know to make programs work



By spending time with residents at Wesley Acres, students learn about older adults and the variety in the aging process

Learn the ins and outs of internship programs from an active-aging professional whose organization has worked successfully with students for more than four years

by Mary McCarthy, MPH

During this period of economic challenge, it may be difficult to request additional staff to help grow your program, even as you are asked to provide more options to those you serve. Time and budgetary limitations often make it difficult to provide a comprehensive older-adult wellness program. One solution to this challenge is to begin working with

undergraduate students who are seeking work experience and need to fulfill degree requirements for graduation.

Many students seeking degrees in health-related fields need to complete an internship prior to graduation. They are an excellent resource to consider because of their availability, current knowledge in the industry, and desire to learn. Although the initial time it takes to train a student may seem like a lot of extra work, you will realize the rewards outweigh the challenges once you find a qualified student who is willing to work hard and become a part of your team.

At Wesley Acres, a continuing care retirement community in Des Moines, Iowa,

we set up a student internship program after implementing our wellness program for one full year. As a former student intern and Wesley Acres' wellness director, I wanted to offer students a comprehensive, real-life experience and expose them to a population that has many incorrect stereotypes. More than four years later, our community, residents and students continue to benefit from these internships—and their value can extend further than you might think.

Benefits

Each student brings unique talents, strengths and interests to your organization, which allows for diversity in skills. Further, interns have yet to become comfortable in the company, so they will be listening and trying to learn everything you teach. Their goal is to learn as much as possible to help them transition into the working world.

Students are also expected to perform useful tasks during their internships, and can serve as additional personnel. As a supervisor, you can work with individual students to create new programs for older adults around the interns' areas of expertise and/or have them help you with larger projects that may take more than one person to implement.

Many students enjoy creating programs that interest them. This may be a program or activity you are not knowledgeable in or do not have time to create. For example, you may have a student who is passionate about nutrition. During the internship, this person could create a series of lectures about nutritional topics (e.g., cooking for one, benefits of organic food, selecting healthy options in the grocery store, reading food labels, understanding the new Food Guide Pyramid). Another student may want the experience of planning a health fair. To implement a large event like this requires planning, marketing, budget management, communication with outside vendors,

implementation and evaluation. A student who wants to take on some of these responsibilities helps make this event easier to execute.

Interns are often willing to research other health topics as well to gain a comprehensive experience. This effort allows students to learn more during their internships, apply these new skills to their first job, and list the experience on their resumé. Their flexibility and willingness to learn new things can be of real value to you and your department.

Another benefit in having student interns is the relationships they provide to older adults and to other employees. For example, numerous Wesley Acres residents have worked with students in their careers or have great-grandchildren and grandchildren who are close in age to our interns. These individuals enjoy getting to know the students and “adopt” them during their short time with the organization, helping these young people learn about older adults as they spend quality time together.

Frequently, students come into internships with inaccurate thoughts about the aging process and older adults. The students at Wesley Acres are encouraged to create relationships with residents during their internships and spend time with as many individuals as they can in the different areas of care. This gives them a better understanding of the variety in the aging process and enriches their experience. In fact, many students have said that these meaningful relationships are the greatest benefit of the internship.

For older adults, internships are beneficial too, because of what they learn from the students and a younger generation. Many individuals enjoy discussing current events, past life experiences and what is happening in the lives of the students. Understanding and compassionate towards the learning process, Wesley

Acres residents actually foster a safe environment for students as they learn how to teach group fitness classes, provide educational programs and speak in public to their elders. These older adults provide interns with helpful constructive feedback, giving reasons why things may need to change and/or improve. The students respect these comments. And they strive to make the necessary changes to improve.

One side benefit cannot be overlooked: Student interns are also great for public relations. Internship programs are highlighted in local newspaper articles, at awards dinners, and through word-of-mouth from school officials and students who participate, creating a positive image for your organization without any advertising expense.

Challenges

While there are many benefits to working with student interns, some challenges exist. It takes time to train an intern, for instance, and this training occurs each time you decide to work with a new student.

It is important that you meet with interns regularly to discuss a variety of topics, including:

- your organization's mission and vision
- your department's goals, policies and procedures
- project progress
- other questions students may have as they progress through their learning experiences

You may need to schedule time to teach interns your processes and follow-up to make sure they can apply them appropriately. For example, as Wesley Acres interns are given responsibilities to complete, we read over the work they do and teach individuals how to make changes,

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if needed. We also review all marketing materials before print, and observe interns teaching group fitness classes before they can teach on their own.

Another challenge is the quick turnover of students. It takes about three to four weeks to train interns until both parties feel they are competent in all areas. Once interns have become familiar with how the department and organization runs on a day-to-day basis, they can spend the next eight to ten weeks becoming integrated in the culture and part of the team. Once they complete their time, however, they are gone—and you start all over again with a new student.

Timing can also be a challenge as you transition between interns. Due to breaks between semesters, you will have two to five weeks between a student leaving and a new student being ready to teach independently. This is a challenge if you count on students to help teach your classes on a regular basis. You will need to determine if you want the classes and programs to stop temporarily until a new intern is ready to teach, or if you will pick up the extra responsibilities and continue until interns are ready to take over.

Although the variety of students' interests and personalities is a benefit, the variability of their skills represents another challenge. You will need to work with individual students to discover their strengths and weaknesses. If you depend on interns to teach a group fitness class, they may not have the skill or the background to begin teaching quickly (depending on their ability to count music and understand basic anatomy and physiology principles). However, if you have the time and the desire to help individuals grow in this area, the benefits will be well worth the time it takes to train them.

Responsibilities

As an intern supervisor, it is your responsibility to provide students with mean-



Residents at Wesley Acres often 'adopt' students during their internships and provide them with a safe, supportive environment for learning

ingful opportunities that foster learning and growth. In fact, many students search for internship sites that offer a variety of these opportunities. Look for tasks that include objectives learned in past classes. You may also want to give interns responsibilities they will have to perform during a full-time job.

It is helpful for each student to leave with a portfolio that offers many examples of responsibilities achieved during the internship. At Wesley Acres, for example, responsibilities can include:

- teaching group fitness classes in the land and/or water
- creating awareness and educational marketing materials, such as bulletin boards, flyers, and table tents (tabletop signs)
- conducting fitness assessments and new member orientations
- entering data for attendance records and assessment outcomes

- participating in leadership meetings and training opportunities within the organization
- planning educational programs for residents and staff
- designing and implementing incentive programs for residents and/or staff
- attending campus outings
- maintaining the cleanliness of the fitness center

Each intern is required to have at least one main project to complete in the semester. This is a requirement for some students to graduate, but not for all. While some of our programs need to be planned prior to the start of an internship because of budget or marketing deadlines, we encourage students to choose a project.

Within the first few days of internships, we meet with students to discuss their

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Interns say that the meaningful relationships they form with residents are the greatest benefit of their time at Wesley Acres

goals and objectives for the semester. This discussion provides an outline for them to follow. It also teaches them how to write appropriate objectives using the SMART method (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely). Students also put together a timeline in the format of a Gaant chart (a kind of bar chart), which helps them stay on track with their objectives and lists specific action items they need to accomplish each week to achieve their overall goals. Here is a text equivalent of what this might look like for a student with an exercise science background learning how to teach a group fitness class:

I. Goal: Understand the benefits of physical exercise as it relates to older adults.

A. Objective 1: Learn how to teach the seated strength and stability land group fitness class incorporating strength, balance, endurance and flexibility by the end of my first three weeks.

1. Action Item 1: Participate and observe two seated strength and stability classes during the first week.
2. Action Item 2: Take notes during the third class I observe during the second week.
3. Action Item 3: Team teach the warm-up and lower-body strength portion of the class during the second week.
4. Action Item 4: Team teach the upper-body strength portion and balance portion of the class during the third week.
5. Action Item 5: Teach the entire class with a wellness staff member observing me during the third week.
6. Action Item 6: Teach the entire class alone during the fourth week.

Other responsibilities include creating marketing materials that help promote awareness and educational programs

around campus. Marketing is an important task to learn, and is not always taught in health education classes. Opportunities to create bulletin boards and flyers, for example, allow students to practice writing and designing appropriate materials for the older-adult population.

At Wesley Acres, we also teach student interns how to do fitness assessments and orientations. This is a gradual process involving observation and cofacilitation by interns, who finally must display competence before we allow them to conduct the procedures on their own. These experiences help students learn about the variety of fitness levels in older adults, and provide meaningful opportunities for one-on-one coaching. They also allow the interns to get to know individual residents. As a result, these students learn an important truth about working with older adults: You cannot judge a person by their age or outward appearance.

Once interns prove their ability to be responsible for a program, give them the opportunity to be in charge of a specific event. An example is game night. An activities or wellness staff person can work with the student and teach this person how to set up for the program, what to do during the program and how to clean up. Once comfortable with these responsibilities, the intern can be asked to lead the event alone—an experience that empowers the individual to be independent and successful.

Student interns are further responsible for managing their time appropriately. This includes arriving to work on time, completing tasks as scheduled, and being flexible to meet the needs of the department. Once they have proven competence, students can function like one of your team members and help with tasks that need to be accomplished. This per-

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Student interns at Wesley Acres become a part of the wellness team during their valuable real-life work experiences

son is an additional resource and can be a real benefit to you and your department, especially when substitutions are needed, deadlines need to be made, and last-minute programs need to be implemented.

Getting started

If you decide to incorporate student interns into your wellness program, there are a few things you need to do to plan and prepare. To begin, determine your needs, establish goals and identify skills. By carefully considering these things ahead of time, you will be able to communicate your expectations effectively to schools and students when promoting your program.

Then start to research universities and colleges that have health education, health promotion, exercise science or other academic program that fits your

needs. Contact the internship advisors for these programs to find out their requirements for student interns and the qualifications a supervisor needs to work with them. Once you have determined that you and your site are qualified, share your interest with an advisor, as well as how many students you would like to work with each semester. It helps to stay in touch with these contacts throughout the year and remind them of the opportunities you offer each semester.

Many universities and colleges promote internship sites through a variety of forums. These can include:

- bulletin board listings
- guest speakers during a class
- career forums
- internship fairs
- emails to students

Discuss what your options are with the internship advisors and then incorporate them into your marketing plan.

You may want to create a promotional flyer for your internship positions to send to universities and colleges. These institutions will post your positions for students to read. You can provide information about your organization, internship responsibilities, qualifications, deadlines for applications, contact information, and benefits you may offer to a student (e.g., free housing, paid internship, free lunches, attendance at local conferences and trainings, use of the fitness center).

Many students are required to find their desired internship site one or two semesters prior to their full semester internship. Start promoting your internship opportunity early to help spread the word and create interest before students begin to submit their resumé and schedule interviews with potential agencies. The targeted deadline for securing an internship is approximately eight weeks prior to the semester's start.

When a student contacts you and expresses interest in your position, schedule a time to interview the person. Ask this individual to submit a resumé prior to your meeting and provide copies to each staff member who will be a part of the interview process. During an interview, you can incorporate a tour of the campus (or building), observation of at least one group fitness class, questions to be asked by both parties, and lunch with other team members the student may interact with during the internship. If lunch is not possible, schedule a time for other staff members (e.g., executive director, activities director) to meet with the student while the person is on campus.

An interview may take up to four hours when you include all of the above ele-

ments. This may seem time consuming, but you will be able to:

- get to know a student
- observe the individual in a variety of settings
- make an informed decision as you choose a student who will fit your program needs

The work you put into this process at the beginning pays off in the end. Because if, out of need, you choose a student who does not understand the setting you are asking the person to work in or does not have the skills to fit your program goals, it could be a long semester for both of you.

Once you complete an interview, encourage the student to take some time to think about joining your organization. Ask the individual to follow up with you with a specific start and end date and the number of hours he/she will work each week. To provide enough time for the student to learn and work independently in your department, it is helpful to have this person with you 30–40 hours each week for at least 12 weeks.

Finally, if both you and the student agree the internship is a good fit, you will need to complete the necessary paperwork for the university or college. This paperwork will act as a contract between both parties. It will also help you stay organized if you begin to work with multiple students from multiple schools.

Taking the leap

Once internships are in place, begin to prepare for each student's first week of work. It is helpful to create an information manual or packet that includes:

- information about your organization (e.g., mission and vision; address; CEO/president; department directors, titles and phone numbers)
- department policies and procedures

- project ideas and daily tasks
- emergency procedures for your area
- how to use the computer and telephone
- instructions on how to maintain your wellness center (if applicable)
- directions on how to conduct an orientation with a new member/resident
- basic health information about older adults (e.g., diseases, special considerations)

When interns arrive for their first day, do not sit them in a room with a stack of literature to read. Instead, take students on a tour, introduce them to older adults and coworkers, eat lunch with them, and get them started working on something. You can also introduce the internship manual and go over the tasks they will be expected to perform. It is important to plan the first day and week well! Other ideas you can incorporate into the first week include attendance at leadership meetings, programs and events around the campus; eating lunch with residents; and observing fitness classes.

It helps to provide a variety of work throughout an internship. When students work on the same project every day, it can get boring for them. Try to offer smaller jobs to break the monotony—for example, teaching group fitness classes throughout the week and attending programs.

Keep in mind that students are used to receiving grades for their work. Providing your feedback throughout internships is key to their professional growth and lets them know how they're doing. Try not to assume interns know what to work on. Instead, schedule meetings on a regular basis to review projects and give students pointers on how they can improve—do not wait to do this until the end. Invite students to ask you questions on a regular basis, to keep communication open and create a positive environment within the department. It's also important to

treat interns the same as you would full-time employees: Give them all the resources they will need, set high expectations, and provide good support.

You may be required to do a final evaluation of students once internships are completed, and this is a great time to review their work as well as to conduct an exit interview. This provides students with the opportunity to offer feedback from their experience to you as a supervisor and agency. It is also a time to share thank-yous. You may want to organize a celebration and invite both coworkers and older adults to attend. Encourage your members or residents to give cards only and not graduation gifts, so you can stick to your policies around gift giving.

Win-win opportunities

A common misconception about internship programs is that organizations and individuals do not have the time to run one. What employers and managers need to realize is that they don't have the time *not* to have interns. As we've discovered at Wesley Acres, students are highly capable of contributing to all kinds of business value. And when a student is well managed, the amount of time that an intern contributes yields far more productivity. ☺

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Images courtesy of Wesley Acres Retirement Community