
A LONG-TERM CARE ADMINISTRATION INTERNSHIP COHORT MODEL WITH ADJUNCTIVE APPLIED, ONLINE COURSEWORK

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, the Health Care Administration Program at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire launched a single cohort model for its administrative internship experience, and supplemented the field experience with a series of adjunctive, applied, online courses to maximize the learning and leadership development of future graduates. This innovative model provides a year-long, structured experience for each student, where they learn the role of the healthcare administrator in depth at a single site. In the context of a peer cohort, two series of online courses with applied learning activities and three in-person learning modules offer significant opportunity for peer-to-peer learning, allowing students to gain a broader breadth of experience. Student performance under this new model has been positive, as evidenced by preceptor and faculty reports of enhanced critical thinking, improved quality of coursework and online discussions, increased interaction and networking among the cohort, performance on both practice and actual licensure exams, and employability of graduates. This article describes the background and rationale for such a model, the model itself, and the benefits of such an approach to an internship experience in long-term healthcare administration.

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INTRODUCTION

The field of long-term care administration is facing a growing talent supply gap amid rising demand and dwindling fiscal resources; more people are leaving the field than are entering (Meyers, 2012). New administrators need quality Administrator-in-Training (AIT) experiences to ensure they are prepared for their future careers (Siegel, 2014; Olson, Johs-Artisensi, & Vaughan, 2013). Educational programs are in a unique position to supplement students' field experiences with a variety of adjunctive structures to best facilitate learning. This article describes the development, structure, and benefits of a long-term care administrative internship that integrates elements of experiential, cohort, and online learning techniques.

The Administrator-in-training/Internship/Field experience

An Administrator-in-Training (AIT) Program is a supervised internship where an AIT works under the guidance and supervision of an administrative preceptor. The AIT observes and participates in activities associated with administration and resident/patient care. The purpose is to facilitate the future administrator's development by arming them with the knowledge and tools needed to successfully lead a long-term care organization (Hahn, 2015).

Research indicates the AIT/internship experience has a strong influence on future success. Dana and Olson (2007) discussed the importance and uniqueness of the educational component of field experience in long-term care. Siegel (2014) and Olson et al. (2013) have suggested that the AIT/Internship and several factors that influence that experience are critical to the development of healthcare administration competencies. It is clear the AIT/Internship serves as a transition between student and employment status and is critical to both the short- and long-term success of future administrators.

For a long-term care administration program to be accredited by the National Association of Long-Term Care Administrator Boards (NAB), a 1,000-hour AIT/Internship experience must be completed (NAB, 2015). Many factors influence this experience: the type and quality of the site and services offered; characteristics of the administrator; skills of the administrator as a preceptor; and engagement of the organization's leadership team (Johs-Artisensi & Olson, 2012). The trainee's level of engagement also plays a role. Another key ingredient is how the academic program structures the experience and supports students and preceptors.

The value of the Internship/AIT experience is that the student is in one place long enough to gain exposure to key aspects of how a facility functions, develop an understanding of the administrator's role, and begin to develop

their own personal leadership style. One downside of many internship experiences is the trainee is learning primarily from a single administrator and is learning only one organizations' approach to care delivery, quality improvement, operations management, and leadership.

Cohort models and experiential learning pedagogy

Many long-term care administration programs are small, have few students, and the internship experience occurs independently. However, even with a small group of students, an educational cohort model offers several opportunities. A cohort is a group of students who begin and end an educational journey simultaneously and engage in a common learning experience. A cohort model lends itself to development of a supportive learning community (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006). Such a community helps socialize students to the professional practices of teamwork and collaboration (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006; Mandzuk, Hasinoff, & Seifert, 2003) and has a positive impact on students' professional growth (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Beyond the expected increase in networking and cohesiveness, the cohort design allows for changes in interpersonal relationships, shifts in relationships with faculty, the potential for bonding and connection, and deeper discussion of issues (Teitel, 1997). Basom, Yerkes, Norris, and Barnett (1995) posit that the cohort model has tremendous potential for developing collaborative, transformational leaders, which is critical for healthcare administrators.

A thoughtfully structured internship experience offers opportunities for both experiential and theoretical learning (Franks & Oliver, 2012), both important for professional development. The opportunity to integrate course knowledge with practical experience in a specific context encourages authentic learning. Reflective pedagogies (e.g., journaling) are a useful tool in students' professional development (Dymont & O'Connell, 2010), helping them to make connections between theory and practice, ask questions, and engage with higher order thinking (ChanLina & Hung, 2015).

Guthrie and McCracken (2010) studied online guided reflection pedagogies in experientially based learning and found them to have universally positive impacts on student learning. Benefits included relationship building with classmates, application of theories to practice, and development of critical thinking, all of which enabled meaningful learning extending beyond the experience itself. These pedagogies developed achievement of shared learning outcomes even more significantly when used with geographically dispersed students.

BACKGROUND

The University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire has an exclusively long-term care focused, NAB-accredited, undergraduate healthcare administration program. Approximately 200 students are enrolled. After taking multidisciplinary coursework in their first three years of study, students spend the year prior to graduation completing a structured administrative internship in a long-term care organization.

The 50-week, 2,000-hour internship affords the faculty supervisor, the onsite preceptor, and management staff the opportunity to invest in the student's development. The student experiences the entire annual cycle of activities and engages in projects that give back to the organization and residents. Partner organizations know they are getting well-prepared students within a structured program supported by faculty. Therefore, they pay a stipend to internship students, allowing them to defray living expenses and fully focus on the experience.

Prior to development of the current model, students began internship experiences at different times, and they had limited formal interaction with each other. As faculty, reviewing these student experiences and reflections was enlightening – overall, their work was rich, with varied experiences and insights, and we often learned a great deal from them. We also saw some students emerging with myopic viewpoints, and felt there was a missed opportunity for students to learn more from each other. Since our internship students are spread among several states and different types of organizations, we saw the value in peer-to-peer learning that could occur in a cohort model using online coursework. We redeveloped our internship program to incorporate a more thoughtful pedagogical approach.

The University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire healthcare administration internship model

As sophomores, students apply for full status in our program and their desired internship cohort, based on planned completion of all other university and program requirements. All internship experiences now begin in June, and students graduate the following May. The cohort size is limited to 60 students. The most competitive candidates have strong GPAs, healthcare experiences, and leadership potential.

The summer between their sophomore and junior years, students apply to and interview at three pre-approved sites of their choice. Both students and sites then rank-order their preferred sites/students. We match students and sites using a computer software program, first making 1:1 matches and then recalibrating rankings and re-matching, making as many placements as

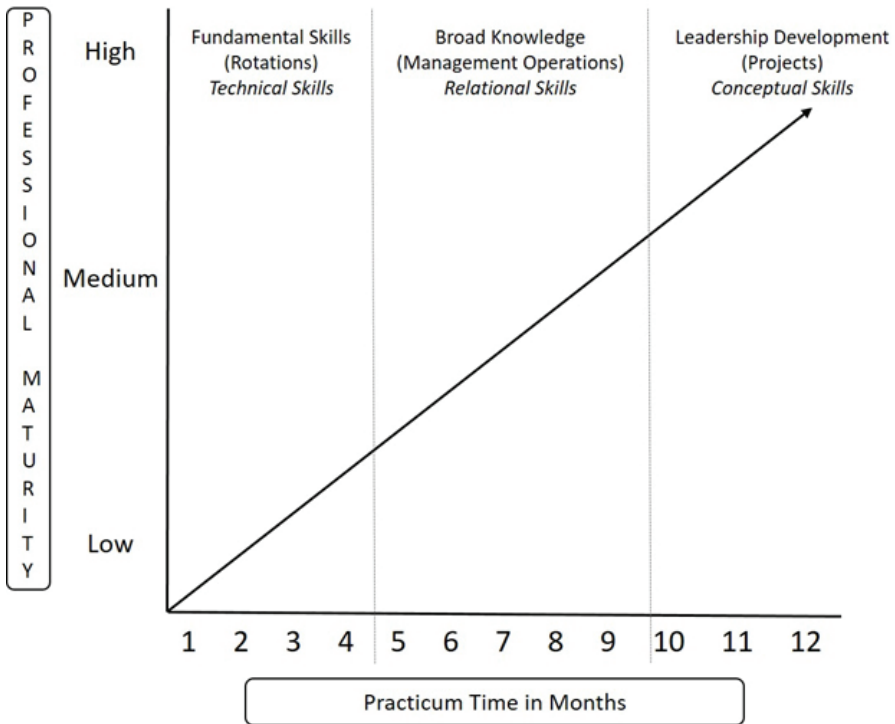
possible. Finally, the internship coordinator places unmatched students at open sites based on student preferences and remaining site characteristics. During the spring, prior to starting internship, students and preceptors receive orientation and education about internship expectations and their respective roles.

Students are supervised onsite by their preceptor, usually the facility administrator, supplemented with additional mentoring by other members of the organization's leadership team. The program's internship coordinator facilitates placements, trains and regularly communicates with preceptors, and is the faculty supervisor for internship students. Placements are spread across the upper midwest, and we have been piloting some cross-country placements. Although some face-to-face faculty-student-preceptor visits are conducted, especially to new sites or sites where issues may be occurring, we have implemented virtual visits. Each student has three Skype visits with the faculty supervisor – one each in summer, fall, and spring. In addition, the student cohort convenes three times during the year for 2-3 day learning modules where group supervision, content delivery, and peer networking occurs face-to-face.

Finally, internship students also take faculty-led online courses during the internship year. These courses deliver additional content, facilitate applied learning experiences, increase faculty interaction, and allow students to learn from each other. These classes are delivered on a web-based learning platform, which houses instructor commentaries, readings, resources, assignments and reflective, small-group discussions. These online courses allow faculty to introduce (or re-introduce) content to students, which now that they are in a healthcare environment, is more applied and meaningful to them. The content, assignments, and discussions encourage students to explore best practices and expose them to a variety of scenarios and management approaches. This model supports maximal leadership development, so students are successfully prepared to begin their career in long-term care administration upon graduation.

Figure 1

University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire healthcare administration internship model



The year-long internship experience is conceptually structured in three major parts: fundamental skills (rotations), broad knowledge, and leadership development. This pedagogical model intentionally facilitates development of the necessary technical, relational, and conceptual skills to lead an organization (Dana, 2005).

Fundamental skills

Students rotate through departments to become familiar with the roles of both frontline staff members and the department manager. They also get an administrative perspective of how to supervise these departments by gaining an understanding of how, operationally, each department functions within the broader organization.

Students are enrolled in three summer credits along with six credits each in the fall and spring, representing and encapsulating the field experience portion of the internship, and serving as a hub for online internship communication. As a formative assessment prior to internship, students take a NAB practice licensure exam (NAB, 2017) so areas of relative strength and limitation are considered as students build their rotation schedules.

In the first 4-6 months of internship, students spend approximately 25-35 hours/week completing these departmental rotations. They spend 1-4 weeks in each department, working through checklists of required learning experiences and compiling an online resource portfolio. They demonstrate completion of each required experience by collecting artifacts such as governing regulations, a sample position description, a list of Schedule I and II drugs, etc. They then write short reflections demonstrating mastery of required knowledge.

Each department manager and preceptor supervises the student, evaluating their learning and engagement level with a series of Likert-scale questions paired with individualized comments. As the internship concludes, students take a second NAB practice licensure exam as a summative assessment across the five major domains of practice, as well as to help them prepare for licensure.

Broad knowledge areas

Students are introduced to administrative and leadership skills requiring team efforts across departmental lines. They participate in activities in resident service, quality management, human resources, regulation, financial management, information systems, and marketing/public relations.

- Students are enrolled in three credits in fall, one in January, and three in spring.
- In each area, students take a four-week, online course where applied assignments requiring specific learning activities, observations, organizational data, etc., facilitate knowledge acquisition and practice. Examples might be attending a care-planning meeting to learn about interdisciplinary care teams, observing and describing their facility's approach to collecting accounts receivable, reviewing their facility's web page, etc.
- Students gain an understanding of each area's function and interrelationships, the role of the administrator, and the status of each area at their organization. The final project for each course has the student research best practices and make recommendations for change, which they are encouraged to share with their preceptor.
- Often, learning activities in Broad Knowledge courses stimulate leadership project ideas.

Leadership development

Students engage in observation, self examination, and use external feedback to develop key management competencies, facilitate their professional leadership growth, and learn to execute strategic leadership practices.

- Students are enrolled in three credits each summer, fall, and spring.
- These are “hybrid” courses, with content delivered through online coursework, face-to-face modules, and through the execution of three significant leadership projects onsite.
- These courses are sequenced to build a student’s management competencies and leadership abilities as they grow in skill and assume greater responsibilities. The summer course focuses on the student observing management practices at their facility, the fall course on developing personal leadership, and the spring course on organizational leadership. The coursework supplements commentaries, readings, assignments, and discussions with insights generated from self-assessments like StrengthsFinder and the Leadership Practices Inventory, and feedback from preceptors, other organizational leaders, faculty, and peers. It culminates in the development and implementation of a personal professional development plan.
- Neuroscience of leadership research suggests people learn best through self-discovery in a trusting environment where they can practice skills (Rock & Schwartz, 2005). Thus, students also assume leadership of three significant projects in internal operations, customer service, and external partnerships.

Benefits

The networking and sharing of ideas and best practices among students is evident in both small-group discussions within the online classes as well as on the cohort’s general messaging boards. For example, in a unit on care planning, students discovered that at some facilities the administrator attended, at some residents attended, while others even included nursing assistants. Sharing these reflections in small groups prompted students to ask why participants differed from facility to facility and to think about how they might like to do things at their own facility one day. Additionally, when students are launching leadership projects, they often query peers who have engaged in similar initiatives for resources, suggestions, and ideas. Students’ coursework, online discussions, and leadership project quality have improved with this new model.

Students’ overall learning during internship has increased. Prior to this

model, our student pass rate on the NAB licensing exam was above average (in the low-mid 70%s). Since using this model over the past seven years, pass rates have increased significantly, averaging 89% ($n=40-50$ annually) compared with national pass rates averaging 63%.

Preceptor feedback has also been positive, with 90-100% of preceptors responding “always” or “usually” to program assessment plan questions evaluating student competencies across the NAB Domains of Practice. Employer feedback also attests to the quality of our students and recent graduates.

Finally, our students are hired into significant leadership positions early in their careers following graduation. This is the best testament of how this cohort approach, supplemented with applied online coursework, has facilitated their development. In our most recent graduating class, 57 of 58 students were employed as long-term care administrators either prior to or within 6 months of graduating, with just one graduate employed outside the field at their preference.

CONCLUSION

This structured internship approach is well suited to long-term care administration students or other healthcare administration students striving to develop similar competencies and skill sets. It has been well received by students, preceptors, and partnering organizations. The model allows for experiential and peer-to-peer learning with individualization and customization, while ensuring an element of standardization. Faculty feel confident in the rigor of the experience, structured such that students become increasingly competent and independent as they learn to translate theory into practice. Our internship model prepares students to pass the NAB Licensure exam and retains students in the profession as long-term care administrators following graduation. This is a model other long-term care administration programs should use and that corporate AIT programs or other healthcare administration programs could modify for their own use.

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