

The Internship Process: A Student Perspective

Casey Calhoun, PhD, attended graduate school at the University of North Carolina. He recently completed his clinical psychology internship at the Medical University of South Carolina, where he is currently completing a postdoctoral position.

1. What should applicants look for in an internship site?

Calhoun: This will vary considerably between applicants depending on their goals for the internship year. Some students may want to deepen their fairly well-developed knowledge regarding a specific clinical population or treatment approach. Others may be interested in broadening their clinical skillset and exploring clinical populations or treatments that are less familiar. Students interested in pursuing a career in research may prioritize research opportunities. In each of these situations, students should evaluate the supervision offered at every site to ensure that they will have the support they need in working towards their goals. Some students may also consider workload (i.e., hrs/wk), availability of postdoc positions, where interns are generally employed after internship, stipend vs. cost of living, and personal factors (e.g., career opportunities for partners, proximity to family). It is fairly unlikely that a site will perfectly fit all of the criteria a student may have, so it is important to prioritize which criteria are most important and which are more flexible.

2. Any advice on how best to prepare for an interview?

Calhoun: The most impressive interviewees are those who have done their research about the site and have thoroughly considered how the site fits with their background and interests. Going into the interview, students should have identified the training opportunities that excite them the most and have clear, well-formed arguments for why the site is a great fit for them. Practice saying your answers to common questions with others so they can provide feedback on clarity and delivery. Try to provide answers that incorporate the unique training opportunities at each site, instead of providing the same generic answers at all sites. Prepare a list of questions to take into the interview so that you are always ready with a question when the opportunity presents itself. Expect that interviewers may need a refresher on your recent accomplishments and interests; don't be discouraged if they don't remember all the details from your application (they have likely reviewed many applications that sounded very similar). During the entire interview process (including social get-togethers and meetings with current interns), be confident, polite, respectful, and positive. Students who come across as arrogant, overly negative/critical, condescending, self-deprecating, or unprepared are at greatest risk of making a bad impression. Show enthusiasm even if the site is not your top pick; if you don't match at one of your top sites, you will want to have other options. Be sure to contact students from your program who recently applied for internship and get many examples of interview materials and feedback about interviewing at sites you are considering.

3. How do you balance the clinical and research components of internship?

Calhoun: The internship year is intended to be an intensive clinical training year, so clinical work definitely takes up a great deal of time, even at sites with a research component. As such,

students aren't generally expected to publish a great deal during the internship year. Given that most sites don't provide structured research time, the average number of publications during the internship year is most likely less than one. Even at sites that offer a full day of research time, interns would need to do research outside of their work week to have time for multiple publications. Keep in mind that structured research time can include lab meetings, meetings with a preceptor, and other trainings/meetings. Clinical work can also creep into an intern's research time if they have a particularly heavy clinical work load. So, 8 hours of research time doesn't necessarily mean 8 hours of time for writing manuscripts, analyzing data, and running participants. In my opinion, interns should hold off on establishing quantity expectations for research productivity until they have a better idea of their workload (perhaps after the first month or two). They may want to focus more on pursuing goals centered on developing greater research knowledge, skills, and collaborative relationships as these are more manageable/achievable.

4. How much should I weigh the next step after the internship when I do my rankings?

Calhoun: Where interns place for jobs after internship is definitely important to consider when evaluating sites, but it may not be a top priority. A site's job placement rates likely reflects, at least in part, how much faculty support interns received as they applied for jobs and how valued a site's training is to prospective employers. However, given the limited number of internships (especially those offering research time) and the unpredictable nature of matching, employers tend to evaluate a student's pre-internship successes more heavily than where they completed internship (at least that's what I've heard).

5. What do you think are the most important things to pay attention to when visiting a site for interviews? For instance, what should I be asking the current interns to identify whether the site will be a good fit for me?

Calhoun: Ask questions to confirm whether or not you will be able to achieve your internship goals. Written descriptions do not always fully capture the training and clinical responsibilities at a site/rotation, but you can get a more accurate account by gathering interns' perspectives on what a week in each rotation entails as well as any additional training opportunities that seem appealing. I would also be sure to ask current interns how many hours they work per week, what resources are available to them (office, computer, printer, treatment manuals, etc.), whether they are responsible for billing/scheduling, how many hours they spend on case management, how they would rate the supervision/mentorship they've received, whether they are satisfied with available research opportunities, and generally whether the atmosphere is collegial and friendly.

6. How common is it for an intern to stay at the internship site for a postdoc? Is this something important to consider when applying or deciding?

Calhoun: Personally, I gave priority to sites that offered in-house postdoc opportunities to reduce the likelihood that my partner would need to relocate and restart her career, yet again, after I completed internship. Interns who stay at a site for postdoc can continue to build collaborations they've already started and save money from not having to move again. However, applying for internship is different from applying to grad school in that it is much less likely that a student will find a perfect match with their research interests. As such, interns may benefit

from transitioning into a research environment that is a better fit with their interests after the internship year. It is unlikely that hiring committees would evaluate staying at an internship site for postdoc more favorably than taking a postdoc position elsewhere. When considering postdoc positions, students should focus more on which position is the best fit and prepare them for the career that they plan to pursue.

7. Are faculty on internship helpful in navigating the transition from being a student to a professional?

Calhoun: This varies highly across sites. Asking about the quality of supervision that interns receive will help clarify the level of support offered at a site. As an intern, will be important to conduct regular self-evaluations to determine what you could benefit from most as you continue to grow into a professional; use these self-evaluations to help provide more substantive feedback to supervisors about how they can be helpful.

8. What is your favorite part of internship? What is the most challenging?

Calhoun: I really enjoyed broadening my clinical skillset during the internship year, but I also found this the most challenging. When taking on diverse clinical populations, I encountered numerous overlapping learning curves (diagnoses, developmental considerations, treatments, non-traditional treatment deliveries, clinic logistics, medical record systems, etc.). These learning curves pushed me beyond my comfort level, but ultimately, I walked away from internship feeling confident in my ability to provide effective treatment for a wide range of individuals.