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Expanding Horizons: Online, In-Person, and Hybrid Internship Opportunities to Meet the Needs of Environmental Health Students and Potential Employers

Editor's Note: In an effort to promote the growth of the environmental health profession and the academic programs that fuel that growth, the National Environmental Health Association has teamed up with the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AEHAP's mission is to support environmental health education to ensure the optimal health of people and the environment. The organization works hand in hand with the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) to accredit, market, and promote EHAC-accredited environmental health degree programs.

This column provides AEHAP with the opportunity to share current trends within undergraduate and graduate environmental health programs, as well as efforts to further the environmental health field and available resources. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA.

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Internships in environmental health provide students with a professional experience that allows them to accrue skills in the field. Interns can apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings. As a result, internships can impart and broaden technical skills, build résumés to become more marketable to future employers, allow for negotiation of higher starting salaries, and develop relationships with mentors who then serve as advocates in their careers (Scott & Richardson, 2011). These invaluable experiences

can also solidify the areas of environmental health each student might want to pursue.

Internship providers are critical in arranging positive experiences that can lead to new research, community outreach, and monitoring. Providers can expect internship opportunities to be a two-way learning exchange that prepares the current public health workforce now and for the future. Environmental health internship providers work with their interns to perform disease surveillance and to learn about legislative processes, sanitation,

groundwater and wastewater, pools, rodent control, and more. Through these activities, providers can critically evaluate how interns work, complete tasks that lack staffing support, teach interns to work independently, and develop a mentoring relationship. These mutually beneficial opportunities eventually can be a pipeline to new employees by providing a trial period prior to a permanent position. Select specific examples of internship projects completed in 2022–2023 are listed in Table 1.

Students who graduate from environmental health programs that are accredited by the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) are especially prepared for internships and employment (www.nehspac.org). EHAC-accredited programs, along with schools interested in environmental health, can join the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP) to assist with student recruitment and retention, student engagement via internships, and student events and resources (www.aehap.org). Students in EHAC-accredited programs focus on core sciences and other framework requirements that form a comprehensive learning experience designed to produce graduates who are well prepared to respond to a variety of challenges in environmental health practitioner positions (EHAC, 2022). These students must complete an internship that is greater than 180 hours for course credit. Internships are most often completed in the summer of junior or senior years after students have had most of their upper-level environmental health classes.

TABLE 1

Examples of Internship Projects From Health Departments That Have Part-Time or Full-Time Online Components

Internship Example
Assist in the coordination of outreach messaging, public advisory postings, and stakeholder actions if conditions are found to be a potential threat to public health (e.g., recreational waters).
Study of the peak activity times of different species of mosquitoes in Central Ohio, as well as assist with other aspects of integrated mosquito management. The results of this project will help inform control activities for adult mosquitoes and improve the control of species that pose a vectorborne disease concern.
Work on the National Environment Policy Act and Endangered Species Act through valuating maps, databases, interviews, and historical analysis for the determination of new construction and industry in public health districts.
Content development, design, and outreach material for a public health newsletter.
Content creator and designer for health department social media.
Environmental law literature search to support evidence for personal injury due to environmental exposures.

FIGURE 1

Internship Logic Model Depicting Relationships Among Internship Factors and a Resulting High Impact Internship



Source: Recreated from Elon University, Center for Engaged Learning, 2023.

The National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHIP) is a guided internship program that provides students with stipends and placement at qualified state, tribal, local, and territorial environmental public health agencies (National Environmental Health Association [NEHA], 2023a). Benefits of the NEPHIP program—aside from providing financial support to students and providing health departments with quali-

fied students who have skills that match the internship—include providing health departments with students who can be taught to work independently and who can assist and support staff and projects. Furthermore, this internship period can be used as a trial period prior to a permanent position.

NEPHIP internships provide a year-round source of highly motivated students who can bring new perspectives to old problems.

Trained interns can give the professional staff of health departments the freedom to pursue more high-level projects. And as NEPHIP provides a stipend for interns to cover salary and moving expenses, health departments have a cost-effective way to host interns.

Outside of NEPHIP internships, health departments can develop their own internship programs. The University of Findlay (n.d.) offers a guide to developing a quality internship program. Furthermore, the process of internship development for health departments new to hosting interns can be facilitated through the use of the logic model and process in Figure 1. First, health departments need to determine what they would like to gain from an internship program, then begin to develop real-work assignments or projects for the intern. After those tasks, a person should be designated to be responsible for the intern and act as a mentor. Health departments should consult with their internal human resources department regarding pay unless the internship is voluntary. Wages vary widely from field to field and health departments should strive to offer competitive wages and incentives (e.g., housing, parking). Finally, a job description should be created that clearly explains the duties and expectations of the internship. Once finalized, health departments can share their internship opportunities with AEHAP or program directors of EHAC-accredited programs to advertise their internships. Health department can also submit an application through NEPHIP to host an intern (NEHA, 2023b).

Modern internships can be in person, fully online, or hybrid (both in person and online). After the COVID-19 pandemic, the field of environmental health began to use its practitioners in remote capacities for numerous job duties. Online activities can include but are not limited to writing handbooks or manuals, designing posters, evaluating data to produce charts and graphs, generating financial forecast and cost recovery reports, performing software and hardware modifications, conducting studies and surveys, developing presentations, compiling technical reports, creating academic lesson plans, conducting research, generating marketing plans, conducting training packages, preparing budgets and financial reports, and completing hands-on projects as needed.

When assigning professional tasks to interns, the evaluation of deliverables can be key to assessing the quality of an intern's work. These deliverables yield data that can report the time spent on each task and what tasks were completed. Internship deliverables like reports, presentations, social media content, inspection reports, and the assessment of the previously mentioned tasks can be used to determine the value of an intern and their work, especially when they are working independently on a project remotely.

University internship coordinators serve as support for interns and internship providers. Many programs require weekly status reports. These reports are typically organized around the identified projects, as well as the project plan, and include a discussion of pertinent information about all of the items outlined in internship requirements. The report should be sent through the mentor. The mentor is expected to evaluate weekly reports for accuracy, completeness, and conformance with any company policies concerning security, proprietary information exclusions, etc.

Evaluation of the intern's work and professionalism through feedback to the intern and their university internship coordinator is critical to the professional development of the student. These evaluations also allow health departments to document the potential of the intern as a permanent employee. A final report or presentation should be submitted to encapsulate the internship experience, encompassing the initial goals, challenges encountered,

and the profound impact the internship has had on the intern. The submission should encompass all the aspects detailed in the preceding paragraphs. This terminal report provides documentation of the greater than 180 hours of professional work required for course credit in EHAC-accredited programs. This information should be presented to the health department and to the intern's university.

An additional factor in establishing internships can include a memorandum of understanding (MOU) agreement between a health department and a university. MOUs establish the terms of the internships, the responsibilities and duties of the students, and the learning objectives that the provider will meet by providing the internship. Many are signed for a period of 3–5 years so that numerous interns can work with the health department without signing a new MOU for each intern.

In conclusion, intern technical skills and the application of these skills in real-world scenarios are essential for workforce development. Internships can yield great gains for students such as an increase in technical skills and communication abilities, opportunities to use problem-solving skills, and the development of soft skills and professionalism. Altogether, internship programs are an effective mechanism to assess students for employment in health departments. ✨

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