

BSOS STUDENTS: INTERNSHIP SUCCESS

Volunteer Clinical Research Assistant Center for Autism Research at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia



Carli Fine '20

Major: Psychology

Minor: Neuroscience

Employer: Center for Autism Research (CAR) at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)

Position Title: Volunteer Clinical Research Assistant/Student Trainee

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What was a typical week like in your internship position?

I commuted via train and worked a 40-hour week from 8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. each day. On Monday mornings, we had a meeting with an informational interview with a different CAR faculty/staff member about their personal background, their education/career pathway, and their role in the center. On Monday evenings, there was an additional seminar meeting with doctors and researchers from various departments at CHOP to learn about their work and their experiences. During the rest of the week, I worked on several different tasks.

My first priority was to assist the Infant Brain Imaging Study, which collects longitudinal data from infants and children at high and low risk for ASD. I entered data from parent questionnaires, autism diagnostic assessments, and behavioral tasks across multiple databases for this study, and charts for a few other studies as well. Another one of my main tasks for the summer was transcribing interviews with individuals on the spectrum about their quality of life to better understand the needs of individuals with ASD across time and at different life stages. Opportunities often arose to gain insight into other parts of the research process, such as the time when I observed an ADOS assessment, which is an evaluation that a clinician does to help inform their diagnosis for a participant or patient, and involves talking to the person and completing different kinds of tasks together.

What do you enjoy most about the position?

The thing that I most enjoyed about the position was the opportunity to interact with a variety of different researchers and clinicians to learn about their non-linear pathways in attaining challenging, fulfilling careers that fit their lifestyles.

How has your coursework helped you in your current internship?

Working in a research lab at UMD through PSYC479 credits immensely prepared me for the position. I found a lot of the similarities between the research processes at the different institutions, even among the way that it is conducted at UMD versus in a clinical setting. Additionally, taking PSYC301: The Biological Basis of Behavior with Dr. Yager provided me with a helpful background on the neurodevelopmental basis of ASD.

How did you locate your internship position?

Dr. Tracy Riggins, the PI of the lab in which I am a Research Assistant at UMD and intend to complete my Psych Honors Thesis, helped me to locate this internship position from a listserv in which she communicates research assistantship openings from other institutions.

Internship advice for students:

- DO:**
- Start looking early for opportunities. Even if the deadline is not for a while, that gives you more time to check over your résumé/cover letter and practice your interviewing skills with the Career Center. I had my résumé and cover letter proofread by peers in my Professional Writing course, and had a mock interview at the UMD Career Center for PSYC123: The Psychology Getting Hired, where I practiced succinctly articulating my background and research interests.
 - Feel free to attend optional opportunities for professional development sessions during the workday. Whenever I asked my supervisor if it would be okay to take a break from my projects to attend a webinar or a career panel, she was more than willing to grant permission for me to take that type of initiative.

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DO:

- Engage with the people around you. When one of the PI's told us to feel free to schedule a meeting with her if we wanted to talk further after her seminar presentation, I emailed her right away. When I missed one of the weekly meetings due to a family wedding, I was able to schedule a lunch with the two graduate students whose presentation I missed, and they gave me lots of advice about the grad school application process, and even provided a few names that I should look into for potential Ph.D. mentors. I was also able to find a Research Assistant who had enrolled in the same study abroad program I'll be attending this spring, and she gave me lots of advice about my application and course registration and even emailed me a list of must-visit sites while I'm there. After noticing a class on her to-do list, I was even able to talk to my supervisor about our shared interest in dance and the potential connections between dance and brain science. Reaching out to the people around me in the office helped me to access personalized guidance that I would not have otherwise received, in addition to making me feel more welcome in the workspace.

DON'T:

- Don't be afraid to let people know that you're searching for positions and ask for help. Had I not let my professor know that I was interested in seeking an opportunity, she would not have known to forward me all of the positions coming her way. Dr. Riggins was able to help me find the summer opportunity that worked best for me, so that I could gain experience in another lab during the break and then return to her lab during the semester when I came back to campus.
- Don't be afraid of taking an unpaid experience that you know will help to propel your personal and career goals. Consider seeking sources of external funding if your internship is not subsidized. I am grateful to have received a BSOS scholarship that covered the costs of my transportation for the summer so that I would not be at a deficit for accepting an opportunity that I knew would professionally benefit me in the long term.
- Don't be afraid to ask the same person for multiple letters of recommendation. I was concerned to ask too many favors by asking my mentors to write letters of recommendation for multiple summer internship applications. However, once someone has written a letter of recommendation for you, they can make edits to make it relevant for your different experiences, which is less work than finding a new reference to write a letter from scratch.
- Don't be afraid to apply to multiple opportunities, and don't be afraid to face multiple rejections. Some experiences are extremely competitive, but you'll never be accepted if you don't even try to fill out the application.

Final thoughts:

A great piece of advice that I received at my internship is to look for a career where you'll have longevity and be able to see yourself working for a long time. This means that discovering through an internship things that you don't like in a potential future position is just as valuable as discovering things that you do like. For example, working in developmental neuropsychology at CAR this summer, I confirmed my interest in pursuing neurodevelopmental research and developed an interest specifically within the clinical ASD population.

However, in order to have longevity as a researcher one day in the future, I realized that I would prefer to split my time with mentoring students and lecturing courses at a university rather than diagnosing and treating patients at a hospital. I believe this self-awareness is a testament that I grew personally and professionally this summer, learning both about the content and skills of the field and also myself.