

# **Focus Group Report: Externship Supervision**

ASHA Health Care Conference  
Bethesda, Maryland  
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## **Purpose of Focus Group**

ASHA conducted a focus group to gain insight into the feelings, opinions, and perspectives of ASHA members on the topic of **externship supervision**. It was moderated by an ASHA staff member who works in the Association's Research Issues and Activities Cluster.

The focus group was held on Saturday, March 31, 2007 at the ASHA Health Care Conference in Bethesda, Maryland. It lasted for approximately ninety minutes.

The focus group moderator led participants in a structured discussion of the following sub-topics:

- Memories of focus group participants' externships
- Preparedness of today's students for externships
- Importance of externships to health care facility and university administrations
- Strengths and rewards of externships
- Barriers to/challenges of externships
- ASHA's role in facilitating access to externships

A copy of the focus group moderator's guide is contained in the appendix of this report.

Light snacks were made available to all participants. Each participant also received \$45.

## **Composition of Focus Group**

The focus group consisted of nine ASHA members. All are female. Three of the members represented universities; six represented health care facilities. All were knowledgeable about the topic of interest.

## **Disclaimer**

Focus groups allow for the collection of qualitative data that shed light on a topic of interest. They **do not** allow for the development of numerical data that is generalizable to a larger population.

## Executive Summary

### Memories of Focus Group Participants' Externships

Overall, the focus group participants described **more positive than negative aspects** of their experiences as students in extern programs. Even those who described the more negative parts of their experiences continue to see the benefits of extern programs generally.

### Preparedness of Today's Students for Externships

The participants emphasized the positive feedback that they'd received from students in extern programs **more than** the negative feedback that they'd received. Some of the negative feedback that they'd received (e.g., that students felt overwhelmed) is understandable and perhaps even unavoidable.

The participants generally agreed that externships influence students' thinking about job choice. Sometimes they **confirm** students' current interests; sometimes they **lessen** them. Sometimes they lead students down new career paths altogether.

The participants agreed that some students are more prepared than others for their externships. They had different perspectives, though, on how prepared students **should** be.

### Importance of Externships to Health Care Facility and University Administrations

One participant indicated that her health care facility administration provides **structured** support for their extern program. Other participants indicated that their administration provides **less structured** support.

The participants in health care facilities indicated that they did **not** receive tangible benefits, such as money, comp. time, etc. from their administration for supervising. They do, however, reap other types of benefits (e.g., knowing that they've helped someone else.)

The participants generally agreed that health care facility administrators recognize that extern programs are vehicles for recruiting future staff. Some use them as recruitment tools, though, more than others. A number of participants indicated that their administrators feel compelled to **place greater priority on meeting high productivity requirements** than on taking on students (who can be burdensome in the short-term.)

A number of participants in universities indicated that their administration supports their extern program by providing supervisors with **continuing education opportunities** at either no or a reduced cost.

## **Strengths and Rewards and Barriers to/Challenges of Externships**

The participants in health care facilities described many strengths and rewards of extern programs. They also described a number of barriers to/challenges of such programs. They focused on one challenge in particular – the **lack of formal training** for extern supervisors.

The participants in universities indicated that they facilitate successful externships by **routinely communicating** with students and supervisors.

The participants in universities described a number of barriers to/challenges of extern programs. These include **liability issues** and **scheduling difficulties**.

The participants indicated that communication between health care facilities and universities **varies** for a wide variety of reasons.

## **ASHA's Role in Facilitating Access to Externships**

The participants suggested a number of ways that ASHA could facilitate students' access to extern programs. These include **offering continuing education units for supervising, offering a formal course on supervision, encouraging research on the topic of supervision** (research that could be published in journals and shared at national conferences,) and **making grants available** to speech therapists who wish to supervise students.

## **I      *Memories of Focus Group Participants' Externships***

**Think back to when you were a student being supervised in a health care placement. Describe some of the positive and negative aspects of that experience.**

Many of the focus group participants described the **positive aspects** of their student externships. They emphasized that they'd learned a lot. One participant stated that her externships had **supported** her coursework (i.e., they'd made the abstract concrete.) One participant stated that her externship had **supplemented** her coursework. (Through her externship, she'd learned about pediatric dysphagia. A course on that subject was not offered at her university at the time.) Two participants mentioned that their externships had been helpful in part because they'd "matched" their chosen specialty area (voice.)

A number of the participants stated that their hospital placements, including one at a Veteran's Affairs hospital, had been beneficial. For one participant, her placement had solidified her desire to work in a hospital following graduation.

A couple of participants mentioned that they'd had "wonderful" supervisors. One participant stated that through her externship, she'd built mentored relationships with two supervisors that had been retained over the years.

One participant stated that her externship had been valuable – that sometimes her colleagues have to travel to conferences (at a cost) in order to obtain the information that she'd obtained through her externship. In her words, following her externship, she'd felt "ahead of the game."

Some of the focus group participants also described the **negative aspects** of their student externships. A number of the participants indicated that they'd been dissatisfied with their facilities. One participant said that she'd been disappointed with the (limited) number of hours that she'd been given. One participant recalled being left alone in a private pediatric practice for ten hours and being expected to see patients. A number of participants indicated that they'd been unhappy with their supervisors. They said that their supervisors had conducted themselves poorly/treated students badly.

Interestingly, a couple of the participants stated that they'd benefited from the *negative* aspects of their student externships. Those negative aspects motivated them to ultimately become good supervisors and to make students a big part of their professional lives.

## **II      *Preparedness of Today's Students for Externships***

**What feedback have you received from students in externships about their experience?**

On the more **positive side**, one focus group participant said that their students learn a lot; they have a greater knowledge and skill base which increases their confidence. She also said that their students come back feeling excited, enthusiastic, and positive.

One participant said that through externships, their students obtain a set of core clinical skills that can be used across work settings. She also said that students learn to “problem solve” and think in a logical fashion.

One participant emphasized that through externships, students are provided the opportunity to work with different therapists who have different styles, different patient caseloads, etc. She said that her students feel “safe” coming to her and to the other therapists to talk, share concerns, etc.

On the more **negative side**, a number of participants indicated that the students are initially overwhelmed. They sometimes cry. The students aren’t prepared to have contact with patients in hospitals who are so sick, who may be on ventilators, have trachs, etc. One mentioned a student who’d passed out in the Intensive Care Unit.

Another participant noted that students struggled with the fast-pace of the work and the necessary documentation. She also noted that it’s difficult to simultaneously take classes and participate in an externship. (That’s a heavy workload.)

### **How supported did the students feel by both the university and the health care facility?**

One focus group participant said that she supports her students by setting short- and long-term goals for them. She said that it’s helpful to students to have structure, and to know what’s expected of them. She said that her students have given her positive feedback on this form of support. She also said that the clinical staff of Rush University interviews and rates supervisors (including her.) She said that she appreciates their doing that in support of their students.

One participant said that Temple University uses an “Expectations Form” which they encourage students and supervisors to complete during their first week together. It’s a tool that the university uses to ensure that the expectations of both the students and supervisors are met. Faculty members from Temple University also meet with supervisors, have telephone conversations with them, etc. as a way to support both students and supervisors.

### **How do you think externships influence students’ thinking about job choice?**

The focus group participants agreed that externships influence (sometimes dramatically) student job choices. One participant said that she specifically looks for students with an interest in her own specialty area (voice.) This not only facilitates successful externships, it also helps to **confirm** students’ interests.

One participant said that meeting her supervisor “changed the course of her career.” (Prior to meeting her supervisor, this participant never thought she’d pursue a career in pediatrics/pediatric swallowing.) She said that she thinks that sort of thing “happens all the time.”

One participant recalled a first-year graduate student who was certain that she wanted to pursue a career in adult neurologic disorders. Following her placements, she chose to work in a school treating children.

One participant said that sometimes her students decide that a career in private practice is not for them, at least not right out of school. (They see that she sometimes has to work very long hours and complete a lot of paperwork in order to be paid by insurance companies.) She thinks that's a good choice – they need to explore their options.

One participant brought up a unique situation (limited to New York.) She said that sometimes her students really like the facility they're in but they've already committed to working for the Board of Education for a period of time following graduation. (The Board will pay for their education if they do so.) So sometimes her students feel torn. They've found a facility in which they might like to work but the opportunity to have their education paid for is also appealing.

One participant said that sometimes supervisors ask her students if they're more interested in working with children or adults. She said that she coaches her students to answer that question in an "open-ended" way.

### **How prepared do you think the students were to have successful externships?**

A number of focus group participants said that some students were more prepared than others – it depended on the university. One participant said that students from "University A" – who'd completed their coursework and had only their externship left to do, and possibly a thesis, were far better prepared than students from "University B" – who'd completed only part of their coursework and were taking classes/participating in an externship simultaneously. She said that taking on unprepared students is a problem that she "runs into time and time again."

One participant said that she's frustrated with universities that "turn their students out." She said that she very carefully attempts to match students to supervisors and settings in order to facilitate successful externships.

One participant said that when she was a supervisor, she wondered why the universities weren't teaching the students X and Y. Now that she's a faculty member, she sees that they are teaching them X and Y! She also said that she doesn't think that it's her job to teach her students everything. She wants to help prepare them to make "connections." She wants to help develop students who will take the initiative to study their textbooks, review their notes, and ask questions.

The participants spent much time discussing whether or not the students **should be** well prepared for their externships. There were strong differences of opinion on this topic.

One participant, as noted above, said it's problematic for her if her students aren't well prepared for their externships.



Two participants said that they understood the “frustration” felt by (burdened, very busy) supervisors who take on students who aren’t as prepared as they’d like them to be. One of these participants also said, though, that “It’s a Catch 22. You can’t get the training until you have the experience but you can’t have the experience without the training.”

One participant said that, at a minimum, she wants students who understand “basic neurology.” She said she thinks that’s what’s essential. Another participant agreed.

One participant said that she thought it was “good to get them (the students) out early,” even if they couldn’t assist much or help in a hands-on way. She said that the exposure and opportunities for observation and learning were beneficial. Another participant agreed. She said that it’s important for students to have opportunities to “marry” text-based information with clinical information. She said that she doesn’t expect her students “to know everything” when they walk through her door.

### **III *Importance of Externship to Health Care Facility and University Administrations***

#### **A question for folks in health care facilities: to what extent does your administration become involved in or support the student externship program?**

One participant said that her facility has a structured program for speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and physical therapy students. The program manager has a meeting for all of the students every other week. The students are expected to bring a “wrap-up form” that they’ve completed along with their supervisor. The form summarizes what the student’s been doing, what they’ve learned, etc. The meetings provide students with an opportunity to share, receive feedback, prepare for what’s ahead, etc.

One participant responded, “That’s really cool!” She said that her facility doesn’t have any type of program for students. In her words, it’s “very, very loose.” She said that if someone wants to take on a student, they seek permission from a manager who’ll typically give him or her the “ok.” A senior therapist will take care of the interviewing, paperwork, etc. She said that she and her colleagues would really like to take on a student every semester – and that their administration would support them – but that they’re too busy/that it’s too difficult logistically.

Another participant said that her facility didn’t have a structured program, either. She said that she, too, liked the idea of having one, though.

#### **What incentives (e.g., money, comp. time, reduced productivity levels) does the administration provide for employees who supervise externships?**

The focus group participants laughed when the moderator asked them if their administration reimbursed them for supervising! They emphasized that they, as well as other supervisors, are caring professionals who give back because they want to. They’re rewarded in non-financial ways for doing so (e.g., knowing that students have been observing, listening, and learning!)

One participant said that, as a form of compensation, she's allowed to take courses (in any field) for academic credit at a university in New York. She's responsible for paying the course registration fee. She greatly appreciates this form of compensation.

**Does the administration recognize the externship program as a way to recruit Clinical Fellows and future employees?**

One participant said "yes," her administration definitely recognizes the externship program as an excellent vehicle for recruiting future employees. She said that sometimes, though, their students are treated more like employees than students. (They're expected to "hit the ground running.") She emphasized that it's important for administrators to remember that the students aren't employees *yet* – that they're still in a learning period.

One participant (**representing a university**) said that it's her impression that rehabilitation companies are better than hospitals at using their extern programs to recruit future staff. She said that they'll work with whomever because they know that "the payoff" is potentially there.

One participant said "no," because her administration is not looking to expand its speech and hearing clinic.

One participant said that she thinks her administration understands that their externship program could be a valuable tool for recruiting future staff. In the short-term, though, they've had to focus on meeting high productivity levels. She said that recruitment of students, though, may become more of a priority in the near future. Her facility is struggling to recruit staff as it's based in an area in which housing costs are high.

Another participant (**representing a university**) said that hospital administrators in the Washington, D.C. area tell her that they're too short-staffed and too busy to take on students; that their productivity demands are too high. But she's concerned that if they don't take on students for training, if no one's "in the pipeline," that the pool of qualified job applicants for hospital positions will ultimately "dry up."

**A question for folks in universities: To what extent does your university administration become involved in or support your student externship? Does it cultivate relationships with health care facilities? Does it offer incentives to the extern site supervisors?**

One participant said that her university offers a continuing education event for supervisors every year. Supervisors are invited to attend the event and earn free continuing education units. Another participant said that supervisors can attend – for free or at a reduced cost – any of the continuing education programs that her university sponsors.

One participant said that her administration doesn't do a lot to support its student extern program even though they rely so heavily on it. She said that they're appreciative, and that they say "thank you" and make telephone calls. She recognizes that she and others in her administration need to provide more support for their extern program.

One participant (**representing a health care facility**) said that a university looking for a supervisor who was bilingual recently contacted her to see if she'd take on a student if they paid her and sent that student to her/her clinic (i.e., she wouldn't have to go to the university to supervise.) She's considering that offer - it might be "worth her time and effort" - but she has to consider many factors first (insurance contracts, etc.)

#### **IV Strengths and Rewards and Barriers to/Challenges of Externships**

**To the health care facility people: Talk a little about the challenges and rewards - or strengths and barriers - of having an extern program.**

A number of the focus group participants talked about the **strengths and rewards** of having an extern program. One participant said that working with students helps her to grow professionally. She obtains new information from students and improves skills-wise. She also said that she benefits socially. Another participant agreed that working with students prompts her to "keep up" with new information.

One participant said that she enjoys "giving back." She also said that it's important to "armor" students for the workforce. Externships allow for that.

One participant said that she likes having control over what students are learning. She also said that her relationships with students are "symbiotic" and "wonderful."

One participant (**representing a university**) described extern programs as "an integral part of the education" process. She said that students learn "the basics" at their universities and "the advanced-level parts" at their extern programs.

One participant said that their extern program strengthened her relationship with a local university generally - a relationship that she values very much.

A number of the participants talked about the **barriers to/ challenges of** having an extern program. One participant emphasized that it's very time consuming.

One participant said that supervising some students is more challenging than supervising other students (due to personality differences, etc.)

One participant said that there's a lack of formal training for supervisors. The mention of this "barrier" or "challenge" prompted a fairly lengthy discussion among participants about the availability/non-availability of formal training for supervisors.

One participant responded that she was required to take a class on supervision at a university prior to supervising.

One participant said that the topic of supervision is discussed at her university's annual continuing education event for supervisors. (At that event, there are sessions for both new and seasoned supervisors.)

Two participants commented on a voluntary, two-day class on supervision that's offered by the American Physical Therapy Association. The intent of the class is to prepare physical therapists to become supervisors. One of the participants said that the class might become mandatory for those who wish to supervise.

One participant (**representing a university**) said that she belongs to ASHA's Special Interest Division 11 (Administration and Supervision.) She said that belonging to the Division has been a "wonderful experience" and that she's received much support from her fellow Division members.

**To the university people: What do you do (or see others do) to facilitate the success of your externship program? What factors affect success?**

One focus group participant said that she tries to prepare her students for their interviews. She also said that she puts together a "pretty substantial packet of information" about the university for supervisors. She, too, stays in touch with supervisors (by phone) and students (by face-to-face meetings) to gain their perspectives on how the externship is going. Sometimes the perspectives of the supervisors and students are quite different!

One participant said that she does those things, too. She also reminds supervisors that they shouldn't try to "create a finished product" by the end of the semester. They need to "meet their students wherever they happen to be" at that point in their training.

One participant (**representing a health care facility**) said that she interviews her students two months prior to the start of their externships in order to learn about their coursework, expectations, etc. She said that the interview serves to relieve some of the students' anxiety. Another participant said that she asks her students to provide her with a resume.

**To the university people: Talk a little about the barriers to/challenges of having an extern program.**

One focus group participant said that liability issues present challenges to having an extern program. She said that on the one hand, hospital attorneys are very interested in liability issues. On the other hand, universities, particularly state universities, don't want to be "Big Brother" and won't sign contracts that obligate them to ensure student behavior.

One participant said that scheduling coursework and externships is challenging. In her words, "There's no magic that works for everybody."

One participant said that her university continues to follow the older ASHA guidelines that require students to get their "20-20-20" in different disorders. Consequently, their students aren't always available for externships.

**How well do the universities and the health care facilities communicate and meet one another's expectations?**

One focus group participant said that she's in constant communication – by phone or email – with university staff, primarily to “cover” herself. She's “constantly worried” that students will misinterpret what she's said and so she takes great care to explain her words/teachings to university staff.

One participant said that there's constant open communication between university and health care facility staff. She made a point of saying that this communication is “very time consuming.”

One participant said that university staff had been “condescending” and hadn't been clear about why they'd wanted to visit. (She'd suspected that they were “nervous,” as she was a first-time supervisor, but hadn't been certain.) She found their lack of communication “frustrating.”

A number of participants said that the communication between university and hospital staff varies for a number of reasons. One participant said that she'd prefer to set up externships with a program coordinator (like the one at Temple University) rather than with students. She also said that, unless there's a problem, she might not communicate with university staff until there's a week or so left in the extern program.

One participant said that she's established a great rapport with staff at one university but not with another – primarily because of a lack of time.

One participant said that after a while, you get to know people and places very well and that site visits become less necessary. (They can even be disruptive.) She said that she'll make a site visit, though, if she thinks a student will have a “rough learning curve.”

One participant said that she's new to her position and is trying to establish a good rapport with health care facility staff. She thinks it will come in time, but it's challenging, as the staff had grown accustomed to working with her predecessor, who'd been in the position for eleven to twelve years.

**V *ASHA's Role in Facilitating Access to Externships***

**What could ASHA do to facilitate students' having access to health care externships?**

One participant asked if ASHA could provide continuing education units (or some other form of “credit”) for supervising.

One participant recommended that ASHA offer a course on supervision, as the American Physical Therapy Association does. She thinks that such a course would increase the confidence of supervisors, help them to become “educators” as opposed to “supervisors,” and ultimately improve the quality of training received by students in externships.

One participant said that it would be in the profession's best interest to teach the "basic skills of supervision" – skills that would be applicable across work settings.

One participant said that the field doesn't have research on supervision. She also said that even if someone's interested in doing research on supervision, it won't necessarily be easy to get it published in journals or accepted at national conferences. (That's important for tenure.) She emphasized that being a supervisor is not the same as being a clinician.

One participant said that ASHA should strive to attain greater respect for the field, particularly at the "legislative level" and with Medicare. She said that she isn't always recognized for her medical knowledge and the clinical experience that she has – she's treated as more of a "para-professional" or "technician." This hampers her desire to take on students and the burdens that come with doing so.

One participant suggested that ASHA help students with various housing needs.

One participant suggested that ASHA make grants available to therapists who wish to supervise students.

## **VI    *Wrap-up***

**I'd like to go around the room and ask you to make one last comment about supervision. You may either emphasize one point you made earlier or add something you didn't have the opportunity to say.**

One focus group participant said that externships allow staff to "get a good perspective on the student's developmental stage." She also said that an externship is work, "if you're doing it right!" She emphasized, though, that midway through the externship, there should be less work – that the student should be helping instead of hindering. For that reason, sometimes longer externships are better than shorter ones. She ended by saying that they'd all gotten supervision as graduate students and that it's important to give back.

One participant emphasized that university staff are very appreciative of supervisors, especially given the high productivity demands placed on them.

One participant emphasized the importance of supervision skills and the field's need for research on supervision.

One participant said that we could learn a lot from OT and PT – they do a lot with their externships and a lot generally.

One participant said that she'd like to be invited to speak at a university to provide students insight into what it's like to be a speech therapist. Another participant agreed, saying she thinks it's important for students to see that "this is what I'm going to grow up to be."

One participant said that too much emphasis is placed on diagnostics and not enough emphasis is placed on treatment. That had made her uncomfortable as a student. She'd prefer to see a greater balance.

One participant said that she'd "love" to be invited to speak at a university. She also emphasized the importance of supervisory skills (which are different from other types of skills) and the need for training or a competency in that area. She also said that she'd feel more confident as a supervisor if there were research on supervision or some sort of protocol on goal-setting for students in externships.

One participant said that she speaks at a university every year and for NSSLHA and that it "really, really renews" her. She also said that she lobbies and takes students with her to the Capitol, to meet members of Congress, etc. She reminds them that "in therapy, we need advocates."

# Appendix



**Supervision**  
**Health Care Conference (Bethesda)**  
**Marriott (5701 Marinelli Road), Timberlawn Room**  
**Focus Group Protocol**  
**Saturday, March 31, 2007 5:15 – 7:00 pm**

**Preliminary**

Why we're here; "rules"; etc. from Cheat Sheet

Introductions (demographics)

Name

Function (clinical service provider, administrator, etc.)

Facility (pediatric hospital, SNF, etc.)

Does your facility offer student externships? How many?

(JJ: keep track of who said yes.)

*This evening we're going to be talking about supervision. Some of you represent universities and some are from health care facilities. We're here to listen to what you have to say about the challenges and benefits and how we can encourage more people to supervise.*

**I. Your memories as a supervised student**

1. Think back to when you were a student being supervised in a health care placement. Describe some of the POSITIVE and NEGATIVE aspects of that experience.

**PROBE:**

- ♦ (JJ: keep short)

**II. Preparedness**

2. **(Student perspective)** What feedback have you received **from students** in externships at your health care facility about their experience?

**PROBE:**

- ♦ How prepared did **the students** think they were?
- ♦ How supported did **the students** feel by both the university and the health care facility?
- ♦ How do you think the externship influenced their thinking about job choice?

3. How prepared do YOU think the students were to have successful internships?

**PROBE:**

- ◆ Get university perspective
- ◆ Get health care facility perspective

**III. Importance of externship to administration**

4. A question for folks in health care facilities: To what extent does your administration become involved in or support the student externship program? (JJ: high level administration)

**PROBE:**

- ◆ What incentives does the administration provide for employees who supervise externships?
  - \$
  - Comp time
  - Reduced productivity level
- ◆ Does the administration recognize the externship program as a way to promote recruitment of CF positions? (JJ: externship → CF → employee)

5. A question for folks in universities: To what extent does your university administration become involved in or support your student externship?

**PROBE:**

- ◆ Cultivating relationship with health care facilities
- ◆ Offering incentives to the extern site supervisors

**IV. Challenges...Barriers...Benefits**

6. The health care facility people: Talk a little about the challenges and rewards---or strengths and barriers---of having an extern program.

**PROBE (+):**

- ◆ Health care facility perspective
- ◆ Student's perspective
- ◆ Supervisor's perspective

**PROBE (-):**

- ◆ Why they don't now (or didn't in the past) have an extern student.

7. To the **university** people: What do you do (or see others do) to facilitate the success of your externship program?
  - What factors affect success?
  - What factors create barriers?
8. What are the **BENEFITS** to those of you who supervise students in externships? What do you get out of it?
9. What are the **CHALLENGES** of supervising students—and how could they be overcome?
10. How well do the universities and the health care facilities communicate and meet one another's expectations?

#### **V. ASHA's role**

11. What could ASHA do to facilitate students' having access to health care externships?

**PROBE**



#### **VI. Wrap-up question**

12. I'd like to go around the room and ask you to make one last comment about supervision. You may either emphasize one point you made earlier or add something you didn't have the opportunity to say.

**Thank you**

**GET TAPES!!!**