

How to get the most out of your externship

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Introduction

Externships are a form of real-world learning: learning that takes place outside of the teaching hospital. They are wide-ranging opportunities, from industry to clinical and can happen at all stages of veterinary training. Externships vary greatly in terms of oversight from the veterinary school or college, with respect to grading, communication with the school, and legal matters (PLIT, insurance). The number of externships that students undertake varies widely between institutions. For this talk, externships will refer specifically to clinical practice experience, with an emphasis on bovine or mixed practice. Why externships?

Students may choose to do externships for a variety of reasons; in a survey, the most common reported reasons were to gain clinical and practical experience, apply knowledge and skills, experience other aspects of practice (e.g., beef vs. dairy) or to interact with a practice for a longer period of time as a “working interview”. The more experiences students have in practice, the more ideas they have of life in practice, and the challenges they may experience once they graduate. This can be discovering what life is like in a rural practice, hours worked, client expectations and type of practice (e.g. ambulatory, in-clinic). It is also a great opportunity to have frank discussions with the veterinarians about all these aspects.

What makes a successful externship?

A successful externship is generally one where there are matched expectations between desired student outcomes and what the practice can deliver, clear guidelines as to how the externship will proceed and good communication between the practice and the student. It is a given that the student should not experience discrimination of any kind during their externship. How to handle difficult situations that arise will be discussed later. Longer externships are recommended as it allows the practice to build rapport and confidence in the student’s abilities, ultimately resulting in the student being more interactive. A check list of best practices from the practice’s perspective is listed below. The student must remember that for most externships, one of the practices’ primary responsibilities to the client is to work efficiently. Therefore, in some situations you may do less, for example only palpating every few cows at the sale barn so as not to slow down the flow.

What is a learning contract?

One of the biggest reasons students state they had a poor externship, was a mismatch between their expectations and the practices (e.g. the student desired to get a lot of palpating experience but ended up in the small animal clinic). This may be because the externship was scheduled at the wrong time of year and this could have been communicated during set up, or maybe the student did not express their desired outcomes early enough. A formal learning contract allows these discussions to happen. It can be shared before the rotation, or on the first day. Ideally, the student can list a variety of case presentations (e.g. bloated cow), or skills (e.g. C-section, history collection). The

level of involvement should also be discussed, is this observation, direct supervision, or indirect, while also adhering to the state practice act! It is also a good time to discuss your comfort level with basic practices, and this will vary widely between year of students, program and personal experiences.

Best practices for externships for students

- Have a team member (DVM or support staff) as the assigned externship manager for primary point of contact.
- Have clear guidelines for externships in terms of desirable length, time of year, whether there is any payment to the student, accommodation availability, year of student expected, whether a vehicle is needed.
- Send out details about the externship before it starts informing the student of guidelines above but also expected working hours, clothing required, lunch breaks or whether sack lunch is needed, on-call requirement, accommodation specific (spouses/pets/family allowed).
- In return, the student should share contact details of the school in case of emergency, or other issues.
- Ensure all legal requirements are met: PLIT, health insurance, liability insurance.
- Day 1. An orientation should be done by externship manager and/or lead DVM. This should cover such things as cell phone policy, health and safety, medical record system, introductions to all members of team, policy for signing up for cases/assignment of cases.
- Day 1. The student will bring a learning contract outlining their goals for the rotation. This should be shared and discussed with the lead DVM to ensure practices and student’s goals meet. The learning contract can be posted for all members of the team to view. This is also a good time to discuss students’ abilities and confidence for each area they want to work in.
- Feedback. Formal feedback, ideally at half way and at end should be performed, with ad hoc feedback.
- Engage the student in the practice: introduce to clients.

Professionalism

Having exceptional professional skills is key – remember you are representing your school and your class when you go on externships. Key points include:

- Be respectful to all members of the team, everyone has something to teach you from receptionist to barn crew to tech to veterinarian.
- Be tidy, clean, prompt with good time management skills. Needing to go to the bathroom at the time the vet is leaving is inconsiderate.
- Communicate your needs: do you have a dietary restriction and need a gluten-free option for the practice lunch? Do you have kids and need to leave by 5:30 PM? However, be reasonable, it is a great way to experience what life in practice is like.
- Have questions as to why something was done? Ask professionally – usually NOT in front of the client.

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- Be interested and engaged – be careful with the use of a cell phone – communicate if it is for notes.
 - If you do not know the answer to something, say I do not know (no one knows everything!), but follow up! Look it up.

How do I get to be actively involved in the clinic?

Part of this is the practice's responsibility and commitment to taking externships, but professionalism, being interested and communication will allow a rapport to build between you and the practice. Better rapport often means you get to be more involved.

Other externship recommendations

Externships can be very expensive, however, there are many scholarship opportunities available. Join as student members of practitioner associations (AABP, AASRP, AVC, AASV) to apply. There are also externships that have free (cheap) accommodation or will provide a stipend.

What happens when things go wrong?

Unfortunately, sometimes externships need to end early for health and safety reasons or other major issues. This can be generated both from the student and the practice. The practice should have contact details for your school, and you can also reach out to the externship coordinator or similar in cases of emergency or other issues. Handling conflict and challenges in a professional manner is also an important learning point during an externship. For minor issues, feedback at the end of the rotation if offered by the practice is important. Remember that receiving and giving feedback is a core competency to develop. If the practice does not offer formal feedback, it is often appropriate to ask for feedback. Feedback to the practice, once you have finished the externship, can also be helpful to the practice if written professionally and constructively.

