

Evaluation of the LeadingAge Summer Enrichment Program

Introduction

LeadingAge launched the Summer Enrichment Program (SEP) in 2021. The 10-week program invites a diverse group of undergraduate or graduate students to become interns at participating LeadingAge member organizations. The interns complete a substantive project, work with mentors to hone their skills, and take part in leadership development activities.

Twenty-eight interns completed the 2021 Summer Enrichment Program. The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston conducted an evaluation of the program to better understand the experiences of interns, mentors, and preceptors. This report summarizes key findings from:

- ➔ A survey of 14 interns (50% response rate).
- ➔ Interviews with nine interns of color.
- ➔ A survey of 16 mentors (55% response rate).
- ➔ A survey of 17 preceptors (59% response rate).

Perspectives of All Interns

Most interns responding to the survey described their internship as a positive experience. Twelve interns (86%) rated the experience as excellent and two described it as good and fair.

Benefits: Interns said they would recommend the SEP internship to other students; 86% said they would recommend it highly. Interns enjoyed making valuable connections with organizational leaders, gaining workplace



experience in varied care settings and departments, increasing their understanding of long-term services and supports (LTSS), and attending SEP activities. They said SEP offered them a depth of experience (71%), encouraged personal growth (79%), and allowed them to benefit from the expertise of staff at host organizations (64%). Most interns said SEP met their expectations (79%) and was challenging (50%).

“ I never knew anything about (life plan communities) before the internship. Now I have gained so much knowledge in such a short period. ... This internship has been life-changing ... I am now considering working in senior living. ”

Helpful Connections: Interns reported connecting with senior leaders (67%) and the president or CEO (90%) of host organizations, and participating in department or staff meetings (57%) and board meetings (69%). Most interns said their internship project benefitted their professional development (71%) and allowed them to use their knowledge and skills (86%).

Career Preparation: Most interns said SEP sparked their interest in pursuing a career in the LTSS sector. Interns expressed an interest in becoming senior leaders in nursing homes, senior living communities, and corporate offices, and in holding policy positions. SEP helped interns gain networking and communication skills, and develop an understanding of aging services, issues facing older adults, the structure of LTSS organizations, and how leaders make decisions.

Suggestions for Improvement: Two interns suggested that preceptors working with interns should take more time to supervise, provide guidance, and ensure interns have sufficient and meaningful work. Interns also said they want opportunities to connect with each other through group activities, in-person events, and virtual meetings.

Relationship with Preceptors and Mentors: Overall, interns established positive relationships with preceptors who treated them with respect (86%), answered their questions (79%), communicated with them (71%), made them feel comfortable in the organization (71%), connected them with organizational leaders (71%), provided them with valuable skills (71%), provided constructive feedback and coaching (64%), and helped them set goals (57%).

Interns described similarly fruitful relationships with mentors, adding that mentors educated them about the LTSS field and held them accountable.

Several interns began relationships with their mentors that will last beyond the internship.

"My mentor was a tremendous connection to have, offering an alternative, yet critical, perspective from outside my host organization. This only increased my knowledge and overall exposure and understanding in relation to long-term care and aging services."

"(My mentor) encouraged me to be the best version of myself and to always believe in myself. She gave me advice that I will keep for a lifetime, and we built a long-lasting bond, for which I am very grateful."

Perspectives of Interns of Color

Interns of color did not seek out internships geared toward older adults. They applied to SEP because it offered an opportunity to diversify their interests and experiences, help vulnerable populations, and promote the inclusion of students of color. These interns were influenced in their decision by "trusted others," including professors, school speakers, and family members.

"I took a course in the first semester ... that was focused on senior living operations ... I really enjoyed the course. I spoke with the instructor, I spoke with leaders, the guest speakers from that course. And they all (recommended) the aging services and senior living (field) as a place that I'd be able to grow ... as a place of ample opportunity."

Benefits: Like other interns responding to the LTSS Center survey, interns of color identified many SEP benefits, including opportunities to network with individuals within host organizations; connect with professionals outside those organizations; develop relationships with preceptors and mentors; work on projects that were meaningful, resident-centered, and hands-on; and gain new perspectives on the concerns of older adults and the role of nonprofit organizations. SEP helped inform their career paths, primarily through networking activities and organizational meetings.



“I have been working on evaluating the strategic plan. I’ve been able to speak with executive team members; I’ve been able to speak with board members. (My preceptor) has put me in contact with a number of CEOs from other organizations ... so I’ve been able to connect with a lot of people.”

“(SEP) was able to open up a path to a career I thought I would never even be a part of.”

“One of the greatest positives is ... just opening my worldview. As a young person, you don’t really think about issues that (older adults) face.”

Challenges: Not all interns identified challenges associated with their SEP experience. Those who did discuss challenges mentioned miscommunication with preceptors, different working styles, lack of diversity, logistical issues, and concerns over resident health and safety.

Hosting Interns of Color: Most interns felt their host organizations were well prepared to host interns of color. Well-prepared organizations typically had a diverse workforce both at executive and direct care levels and made conscious efforts to increase diversity.

“(My host site) is a really diverse company, at least in the affordable housing sector. People in affordable housing, they want to serve their communities. And I think people of color are just more likely to be more intimately tied with affordable housing.”

“They talked about how they’re trying to be more diverse, which is why ... they’re trying to hire people of color. But ... I didn’t really see that. Searching for a job, it’s so hard. ... I don’t see anything other than direct care services. And that’s not what I want to do. ... but it’s so hard to find positions.”

Increasing Diversity in LTSS: Most interviewees stated that a lack of diversity in the workplace, especially at the highest levels of the organization, presented a barrier to achieving more diversity in the LTSS field. These interns suggested that workplace diversity can also be hindered by workplace characteristics, including low compensation. Only two interns did not identify any barriers to attracting people of color to the LTSS field.

“Clearly, frontline staff is very diverse. But when you start moving up to management and to senior executives in the C-suite ... that’s predominantly older white folk.”

“The leadership teams in a lot of organizations are predominantly white. I feel like it’s going to be hard to attract people of color into ... those leadership positions. There are not many opportunities like (SEP) for people of color to get into those leadership positions.”

Recommendations: Interns recommended that organizations recruit students “where they’re at,” including at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU); increase diversity at the highest levels; compensate employees fairly; create fellowship programs to prepare prospective leaders; and continue promoting opportunities like SEP.

“What I would suggest, especially if they want students of color, is going to HBCUs. The pool of students is already there. So, you might as well go meet them where they’re at.”

“Within the hospital industry, there’s something called fellowships. When someone graduates from their master’s program, they enroll in this fellowship for one to two years. And immediately coming out of it, they are a director of some department. So, it is a very clear pipeline. For more organizations to be more ready to accept diverse candidates ... it would be really necessary to have a way for people to join the organization, grow, and be taught in that organization so that they stay.”

Perspectives of Mentors

Mentor Experience: Most (87%) mentors responding to the survey rated their experience as excellent (36%) or good (50%). Mentors benefitted personally from their mentee relationship (63%) and said they are highly likely (56%) or likely (31%) to stay in contact with their mentees.

Benefits: Mentors said they liked connecting and building relationship with mentees and providing them with information about the field, career guidance, training and transferrable skills, leadership tools, and perspectives on challenges facing their generation. All mentors said they would highly recommend (69%) or recommend (31%) that their colleagues become SEP mentors. Most said they are highly likely (69%) or likely (19%) to volunteer with SEP again.

Challenges: Eight mentors reported having trouble connecting with mentees due to physical distance, work responsibilities, time, and the mentee’s lack of interest in aging services. More than 40% of mentors met with their mentees at least seven times during SEP. Others met with their mentees three-to-six times (31%) or not at all (2 mentors). Almost all mentors described their mentees as very engaged (40%) or somewhat engaged (40%).

Recommendations: Mentors said they would have appreciated receiving more information about SEP’s expectations for mentors and the work objectives of the mentee. They recommended that SEP provide more guidance on how mentors could structure their time with mentees and enrich an intern’s experience and exposure to the field. Mentors also suggested that SEP could better facilitate relationship building by being more intentional and thoughtful when matching mentors and mentees.

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Perspectives of Preceptors

Preceptor Experience: Almost two-thirds of preceptors responding to the survey rated their SEP experience as excellent; the remaining one-third rated it as good. Preceptors reported that SEP was well organized, provided valuable tools and support, and organized good virtual meetings. Preceptors also enjoyed working with interns and helping them meet their goals. All respondents said they would recommend that their colleagues become SEP preceptors; 94% would recommend this highly. All preceptors said they are likely to host an intern through SEP in the next year or in the future; 77% said they were highly likely to do so.

Benefits: Preceptors enjoyed educating and supporting interns, getting to know them personally and professionally, watching interns grow and develop, helping them meet their goals, and creating opportunities for them to network with others and work with employees from different departments. One preceptor said that the intern *“brought new energy to our organization at a time when energy was low due to ongoing COVID operations.”*

Challenges: Eight preceptors reported that coordinating schedules and time with interns was their greatest challenge. It was difficult for these preceptors to balance time with an intern and the preceptor’s own work responsibilities. Preceptors said they had difficulty ensuring that interns had enough impactful work. They also reported having trouble staying on top of intern assignments. Five preceptors did not identify any challenges.

Relationship with Interns: Three-quarters of the preceptors interviewed and hired the intern personally. Sixteen preceptors described the relationship with the intern as excellent and one described it as good. Preceptors either met daily (47%) or weekly (53%) with the interns.

The majority of preceptors reported that their interns were very engaged (82%) and that the knowledge and skills of interns matched extremely well or very well with assigned job responsibilities (76%). Preceptors worked with interns to set goals (82%), develop and implement a learning plan (65%), connect interns with leaders in the organization (82%), and help interns participate in department or staff meetings (82%) and board meetings (67%).

Conclusion

Interns, preceptors, and mentors benefitted from the relationships they built during the Summer Enrichment Program, and many indicated that those relationships would continue beyond SEP. Interns identified many program benefits, including the opportunity to network, gain skills, and learn about aging services and the issues facing older adults. The SEP experience offered many interns the opportunity to imagine themselves building careers in a sector they had not considered prior to the internship.

Survey respondents also highlighted several challenges that SEP should address in coming sessions, including the need for mentors and preceptors to be more available to guide students. Respondents also called for greater clarity regarding the role of and expectations for mentors and preceptors, an internship structure at host organizations that encourages more meaningful and sufficient work for interns, and better matches between interns and mentors and between interns and host organizations.

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WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE

2519 Connecticut Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20008
202-508-1208
LTSScenter@leadingage.org

BOSTON OFFICE

Wheatley Hall, 3rd Floor, Room 124A
University of Massachusetts Boston
100 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125
617-287-7324
LTSScenter@umb.edu

Visit www.LTSSCenter.org to learn more.