

Observership, Research and Externship in the United States

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Abbreviations: US – Unites States, CV – Curriculum vitae, USMLE – United States Medical Licensing Exam, LORs – Letter of Recommendations, USCE – US clinical Experience, HIPAA – Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

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Summary:

Observerships, research and externships give you an exposure of healthcare system of United States and give you an idea of what to expect during residency; (the nature of work, healthcare facilities, code of conduct for healthcare professionals, the cutting edge technology, electronic healthcare records, diseases prevalent in a certain geographical area and the social and cultural values of people of United States). In this issue of the section of the Road to Residency, Aitzaz and Saima discuss their views about the importance and the various ways to do an observership, research and externship in the United States.

Why do an observership, research or an externship in the United States?

Before we give our views on how to find an observership, research or an externship in the US, let's first give you a few reasons as to why to opt for these options.

(1) Observerships, research and externships give you an exposure of healthcare system of United States and give you an idea of what to expect during residency; (the nature of work, healthcare facilities, code of conduct for healthcare professionals, the cutting edge technology, electronic healthcare records, diseases prevalent in a certain geographical area and the social and cultural values of people of United States).

(2) By working with US physicians and researchers, you make "connections" in the System which pays you a lot later on when you are applying for a residency spot in the US after doing your USMLE (United States Medical Licensing Examination). The name of an imminent scientist or clinician in the references section of your CV can open many doors for you in your professional life. The Letters of recommendations (LORs) from the faculty of a renowned hospital in US are always looked favorably by program directors of residencies and fellowships.

(3) If you opt for an externship, it will count as your US clinical experience (USCE). Due to growing number of highly qualified candidates from the world, the competition is fierce to get a residency spot. Many residency programs want to see USCE as a prerequisite to apply

into their residency program. If you don't have USCE you are simply screened out from the list of eligible candidates for interviews for those programs who require USCE.

(4) If you choose to join a research team, you may get some quality publications which do carry some weight age when screening candidates for interview and more importantly at the time of ranking candidates for the residency spots. Even if you are not able to publish a few research papers, your experience in a research team will reflect your genuine interest and aptitude for research which is seen highly favorable by many university residency programs.

What to Choose?

Among observership, research and externship, if you have to choose one; go for externship because it carries the highest weight age of all three. Externship is called a "mini residency". During externship you get "hands on" clinical experience as you are actively involved in patient care; you can take history, examine the patients and get involved in patient management along with residents. But the problem is that most of the hospitals do not allow externships due to tough laws of patient privacy and HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) rules.

The bottom-line, however is, that get whatever you can; may it be research, observership or externship, but prefer externship over research and observership.

How to find a research position, observership or an externship?

Regarding research, first of all to be very honest emailing professors or other research scientists does not help much. Most of the directors of research don't open any mail that would be related to a research opening or volunteering; that's what my Principal Investigator told me, but exceptions are always there. So you should try and mail the researchers but the chances of ending up in a spot are not much as most of the researchers get hundreds of such mails daily from all over the world and they are screened by their spam filters unless they have an open position. And if you are away from US and the only thing you can do is to email the researchers then my advice would be not to send a generic mail to all the scientist and wait to hit the jackpot. Do your homework well, send an individualized email to every scientist, know his research well, find his publications on pubmed and make an appropriate cover letter which should show your genuine interest in the research that person is doing.

If you are lucky enough to be in US then the best bet would be to meet the researchers in person. Take a well written CV and a cover letter with you. But before going to any person you should spend some time and find his areas of interest, his current and previous research projects so that you can have common grounds during discussion with that person. If you don't have previous research experience, my advice would be that not to ask for a "Paid" position

as nobody is going to pay you from day 1 without enough research skills and experience. Try to volunteer in some lab for 2-3 months, learn some basic research techniques and you can later get paid in the same or some other lab if the investigator is satisfied with your research work.

Another important factor when deciding to work in a research lab is to choose to work with a researcher who is a big shot in his field as his reference would count when you would be applying anywhere for any type of work. One way of finding out if the person is a big name is to search his name on pubmed.gov and find out the impact factor of few of his publications. But that may not be true in every case.

Regarding observerships, the same would apply. However, the difference in this case would be that you should contact renowned clinicians through email, phone calls or better still meet them in person. Another good option is to find an M.D., PHD who is involved in both research and direct patient care and start volunteering in some of his lab work and then later begin attending clinics with him, if he is still doing them.

Externship as I previously mentioned are difficult to get but if a certain program offers externships, then they will have a certain office dedicated to it and you can email or call them. But for externships these hospitals usually charge you a handsome amount for a limited period of time and you also have to buy malpractice insurance; but all that spending is worth it.

Types of Research.....

Now coming to what kind of research you should join. There are two basic types of research: (1) basic science or bench research and (2) clinical research. There are advantages and disadvantages of both.

For most types of clinical research, the plus point is that there often there is patient contact, for those who are not interested in typical lab work. However at the same time if you talk about bench research, the plus point is that often you get hands on experience on latest lab techniques such as RT PCR, luciferase assay, western blots etc but to get a publication in basic science research is relatively more laborious and difficult. But if you are interested in lab work and are considering in pursuing a PhD as well, then the latter may be a better choice.

Few things to do during your student life.....

During student life do not miss any opportunity to get involved in any sort of research project going on in departments you are rotating no matter how simple it is. Do electives in US during your clinical years and above all never miss your clinical wards.

At the same time, try to learn a couple of softwares, which will help you a lot in research such as SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and other research related softwares.

Important Lessons to Learn

(1) Externships, observer ships and research should be done to get overview of healthcare system of US, make some connections in US or to publish few papers.

(2) Externship should be preferred over observership and research.

(3) It's always better to meet the relevant person in person rather than emailing them and if email is to be done it should be individualized.

(4) You can choose clinical or bench research depending upon your aptitude, the length of time available and your future career goals.

(5) One should not miss any opportunity to get involved in any research or clinical project during student life and to learn few statistical softwares.

Editor's Note.....

There are a certain important points that the authors have brought to attention to which we would like to comment upon.

One is to discourage the practice of '**mass e-mailing**'. Day by day, this wrong practice is increasing. Often, you would find students wasting hours in emailing the same request to almost every other professor to whose email address they can get their hands on. This is a bad practice. Emailing if required should be very individualized and personalized. Along with this, you should first

decide if the person's research area is of any interest to you. In some cases, people end up working in a project in which they have no interest, which in turn leads to months of precious time wasted.

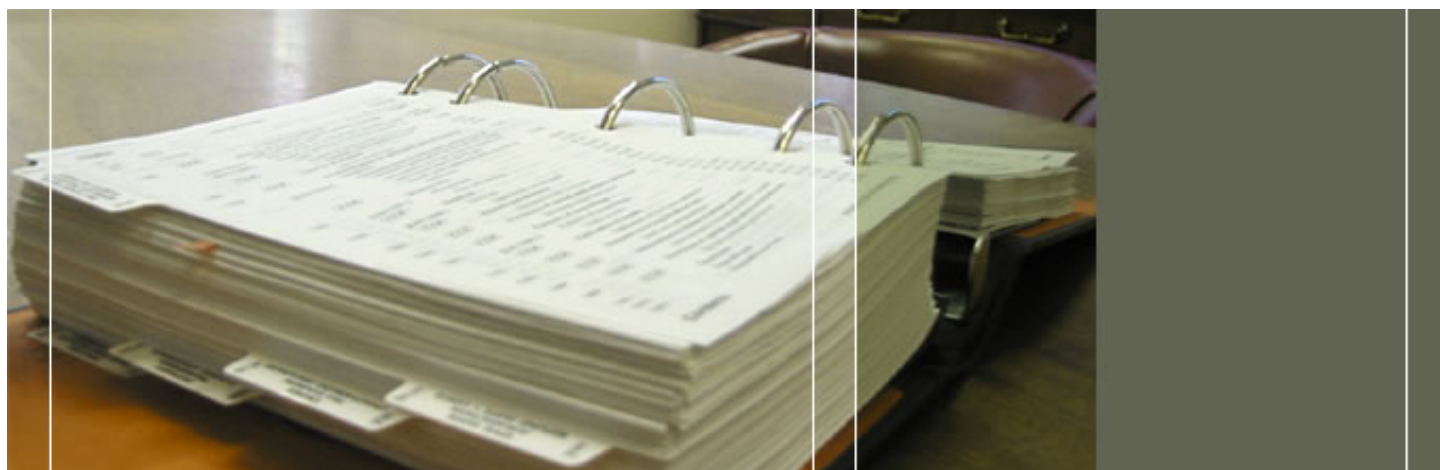
Even worse is the practice of getting accepted for a research position, using it to get a US VISA and then not going to them. This unfortunate practice too is on the rise. This not only brings a bad

name to your institution, but to your country as well. These practices should be avoided and discouraged.

At the same time, as the authors mentioned, do not miss upon any opportunity in your home country and college.

These days the undergraduate research especially in Pakistan is gaining a lot of momentum. Few of

my colleagues have gone onto publish their group work in one of the world's biggest journals. The lesson is not to underestimate the importance and the good research work that you can do at your own home institution. It is certainly more fruitful than wasting hours everyday mass mailing and getting no response.



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