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Benefits of Summer Scholarships

Growing Young Researchers: Benefits of Summer Scholarships

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NURSE AUTHOR & EDITOR, 2019, 29(1), 2

INTRODUCTION

Summer scholarships provide an opportunity for undergraduate students to apply their learning in a practical way and develop their research skills in addition to their studies. However, undertaking the supervision of a student researcher can be a challenging task and it is important to consider a variety of factors to ensure that potential for development is optimised. This article outlines some key benefits for students in undertaking a summer scholarship and highlights the potential value of these programs. It also offers guidance on aspects of the scholarship planning and supervision that should be taken into consideration throughout the process. A

summer scholarship can be an invaluable experience for a student and it is important to consider the benefits of these programs and approaches to ensure their success.

BENEFITS

A summer scholarship can provide an excellent connection between university study, clinical research, and the professional workplace. Importantly, a summer scholarship program is reported to be a rich source of motivation for talented students (Morris, 2017; Wilson et al., 1994). Through undertaking this scholarship, a student has the opportunity to be directly involved in the practical application of skills they are developing through their university and studies. Theoretical knowledge is applied in an authentic context making the coursework concrete. This experience allows students to see the relevance of their studies within a supportive learning environment and with a higher level of guidance than may be afforded upon entering the workforce post-graduation. Hence, students are able to better appreciate their current degree while further developing their skills. In turn, these skills will continue to benefit the student throughout the completion of their studies. The student is also given a significant role in a project, providing an opportunity to accelerate their learning.

Undertaking a summer scholarship allows the student to explore a potential career pathway without the commitment that is required and expectation of a continuing position. Many tertiary degrees have broad potential career opportunities and graduating students may progress into a variety of different fields and types of work. Whilst the diversity of opportunity may be appealing, students may be unprepared to choose a career path that matches their skills and interests. The capacity to build a portfolio for their career objectives may be limited to professional placement experience and project work within their degree. The opportunity to engage in a field of potential interest without long-term obligation is

rare and provides a unique platform for career and personal exploration and reflection. Providing students with this experience also contributes to the industry, as graduates are in a better position to make committed career or educational choices upon completion of their degrees and have developed skills that are job ready.

A summer scholarship also assists in the development of research skills, providing the student with an opportunity to experience the processes of project methodology, data collection, and report writing, in particular for scientific publication. The procedural and academic requirements of formal publication to those of university assessments and hence the practical experience a student gains during the scholarship project will be important in their future academic or professional career. This experience also provides excellent preparation in overseeing a project from conception to completion without requiring the student to develop the project themselves, as is required in postgraduate research. Working and collaborating with a group of researchers who are in a clear supervisory role on a project that is carefully defined and has a specific timeline and endpoint, provides a safe and directed environment in which the student can develop multidisciplinary skills. This is excellent preparation for future research or postgraduate studies which involve an extension of this process and larger responsibility. The student also gains insight into their own capacity and interest in research, and returns to their studies with an improved understanding of scientific research, which can only improve their understanding of the scientific literature.

In addition to the development of skills, the opportunity to develop professional connections and network with practicing researchers is a key benefit of a summer scholarship. As well as learning from their expertise, building relationships with industry professionals may be beneficial for the student's future career. Researchers may require assistance with future projects and a summer

scholarship could be an excellent opportunity to demonstrate competence and value to the researcher, which may encourage future collaboration. A summer scholarship is also a valuable addition to a student's portfolio and may be the experience which sets the student apart when applying for future jobs, grants, or post-graduate positions and scholarships.

POINTS OF CONSIDERATION WHEN SUPERVISING

To ensure the summer scholarship experience is optimised, it is important to consider the amount of independence provided to the student, and the expectations on them. The student should be allowed a degree of freedom throughout the project to find processes that work for them and gain experience solving problems on their own. This freedom will also help them develop their time management and self-motivation skills as they work towards deadlines at their own pace. However useful this freedom is, it is also necessary to consider that students have little experience in this field and will need more guidance and support than the supervisor's usual collaborators. Allowing the student too much independence or expecting them to work through parts of the project alone may cause the student to feel overwhelmed and counteract some of the benefits this opportunity can provide. The shorter time-frame of the scholarship also does not allow the same amount of self-direction that is appropriate for honours and postgraduate projects. It is important that the supervisory team keep this in mind when considering the amount of direction given to the student.

Finding the appropriate balance between independence and support is difficult and should be a careful consideration of a summer scholarship supervisor. One way this can be achieved is to ensure that there are open channels of communication between both parties. The student should be able to contact their supervisor to ask questions and receive guidance when necessary, and the supervisor should be clear with instructions and expectations. Supervisors should also aim to ensure

they are approachable in their student's eyes as open communication will only be possible if the student feels comfortable and well supported. In doing this, the student and the supervisor should be able to produce high quality work and make the most of the experience.

Supervisors should ensure that when they propose a summer scholarship project, that they have allocated the appropriate time for the student. Given the short time-frame and typically rudimentary research skills of the student, this may be a greater commitment per week than might be required for postgraduate students. Students also often have work, family, or study commitments that they must give time to alongside the scholarship project. It is important that when students take on a project that they can make the appropriate commitment, but also that supervisors take into account that the student cannot be overburdened in that their other commitments are negatively affected.

Another key aspect for consideration in a summer scholarship it is likely to be the student's first experience working on a project of this nature. While they may have learnt approaches to scientific and clinical research in theory, it is unlikely that they will have undertaken project work of this type. It is important that the supervisor approach this situation as a teaching opportunity and allow the student time to learn about the process as well as putting it into practice. It may be useful for those involved to discuss the student's previous experience, skills and knowledge of the topic at the outset to ensure that task demands are understood and allow the ability to assess the level of instruction which will be required.

While the novelty of the project provides both challenges and learning opportunities, there are additional aspects of the experience that will be new for the student. Each workplace will have its own processes to follow, preferred programs, and nomenclature. Though the student may have some exposure to these concepts, it is important that supervisors take the time to explain acronyms,

shorthand and jargon. Misunderstandings about processes and terminology have a potential to waste valuable project time, resulting in frustration and confusion. Attention to these details serves the dual purpose of educating the student and preparing them for the professional environment, whilst also ensuring that the student and the supervisor are on the same page throughout the project.

CONCLUSION

Summer scholarships can be an excellent opportunity for students to gain first-hand experience working and developing relationships with practicing researchers to safely explore the world of professional research and build a portfolio of work. For this scholarship to be valuable to both supervisors and students, it is important to set a high standard and encourage the student to extend themselves. However, consideration should be given to the novelty of the experiences and additional study and/or work that the student may undertake simultaneous to the scholarship. While it is important to allow the student the time and space to work independently, appropriate levels of support and guidance are essential to the project success. Goals should therefore be realistic and communication clear, regular and accessible. A genuine and considerate approach by student and supervisors create an optimal work environment and ensure that the opportunity is valuable for both parties.

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COLLABORATION

