

Creating a High-Quality Practicum Experience in Psychosocial Oncology: Program Evolution and Lessons Learned

Patient and Family Support Program

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Cedars Sinai Cancer Patient & Family Support Program

Cedars-Sinai Cancer provides comprehensive care and treatment across the greater Los Angeles area. The Patient and Family Support Program (PFSP) delivers multidisciplinary psychosocial support to patients, families, and survivors and includes clinical social work, psychiatry, spiritual care, clinical nutrition services, supportive care medicine, and cancer rehabilitation and survivorship. The social work team, the largest within PFSP, provides a full continuum of services ranging from resource linkage to psychotherapy for individuals impacted by a cancer diagnosis.

Internship Program Origins

The PFSP Social Work (SW) team launched its internship program in 2020 to create a high-quality oncology social work training experience that supports staff and student professional development. Practicum education is recognized as the signature pedagogy of social work education and is central to developing clinical competence, professional identity, and workforce readiness (Bogo, 2015). Building on established practicum instruction experience and a growing department, the program expanded learning and support opportunities to meet increased patient care demands. Evidence demonstrates that high-quality practicum placements improve student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and professional development for students, supervisors, and organizations (Concha-Toro et al., 2020; Taussig et al., 2015; Zuchowski et al., 2023).

Since 2022, leadership gaps created challenges including inconsistent communication with school partners, variable cohort sizes, and limited program growth. In response, we volunteered as program leads to revitalize and strengthen the program. Post-COVID-19 literature further highlights the need for structured, supportive practicum environments that foster consistency, emotional support, and professional connection in complex healthcare settings (Au et al., 2023; Keesler et al., 2022).

Four core pillars were established to guide program growth and sustainability: Internship Development, Cohort and Team Development, Professional and Clinical Skills Development, and Personal and Career Development. This poster presents the evolution of the PFSP SW internship program over six years, highlighting key successes, challenges, barriers, and growth opportunities for a sustainable and impactful practicum model.

Intern Group Supervision

One key component of the PFSP SW internship program is Intern Group Supervision, a central feature that supports all four pillars of program growth and sustainability. Consistent with literature emphasizing intentional supervision, reflective practice, and cohort-based support, group supervision enhances student learning, emotional well-being, and professional self-awareness (Alschuler et al., 2015; Gregory et al., 2025; Strang, 2021).

To address the dual requirements of MFT and MSW students, we implemented a mandatory two-hour weekly supervision model for all interns. The first hour consists of psychoeducational content delivered by staff or guest speakers, followed by a second hour of traditional case consultation and reflective supervision. Research supports group supervision as a mechanism for strengthening peer support, reducing isolation, and increasing clinical confidence (Alschuler et al., 2015; Strang, 2021), as well as exposure to diverse supervisory styles and interdisciplinary perspectives in healthcare settings (Klein, 2015).

A rotating facilitation model involving staff volunteers was introduced to reduce burden on individual practicum instructors while broadening interns' exposure to varied clinical voices and approaches. This structure strengthened team relationships and cohort cohesion, supporting seamless transitions between practicum instructors when needed. Positive supervisory experiences are also associated with increased long-term professional engagement and commitment to the field (Lan et al., 2024).

Pillar I: Program Development

This pillar focused on strengthening university partnerships, cohort size, field instruction, group supervision, and the formalization of orientation and onboarding processes. Emerging literature supports the importance of structured and intentional practicum education models that promote continuity, role clarity, and organizational integration within complex healthcare systems (Bogo, 2015; Concha-Toro et al., 2020). Across six academic years, growth occurred in each of these areas, with a temporary decline during 2024–2025 related to leadership vacancies, disrupted communication with university partners, and missed practicum interview timelines. (See Figure 1)

We conducted outreach to local universities to expand student access and diversify the intern cohort. Partnerships were re-established with five local universities, while new partnerships were developed with one local university and two distance-learning programs. To optimize both quality and sustainability, clear program requirements were established, including a minimum 20-hour/week commitment and a fall-to-spring placement structure.

A major area of growth involved formalizing and standardizing orientation and onboarding processes to promote consistency, equity, and cohesion across a multi-site cohort. Informed by direct student feedback and literature emphasizing the importance of structured onboarding experiences (Bogo, 2015), all interns participate in a mandatory in-person orientation that include modules designed to strengthen collaboration, foster team integration, and establish multiple layers of support (See Table 1). Expanded staff involvement distributed onboarding responsibilities and increased team-wide engagement in intern development. Additionally, a centralized shared onboarding resource folder was created to streamline materials, support continuity across cohorts, and incorporate ongoing contributions from both staff and students.

The program has reached a sustainable capacity for cohort size, practicum instructors, and Intern Group Supervision facilitators within current resources. Team-wide engagement has been a significant strength, with participation extending beyond designated practicum instructors. Future resource and staffing expansion may create opportunities for continued growth in cohort size and practicum instructor participation.

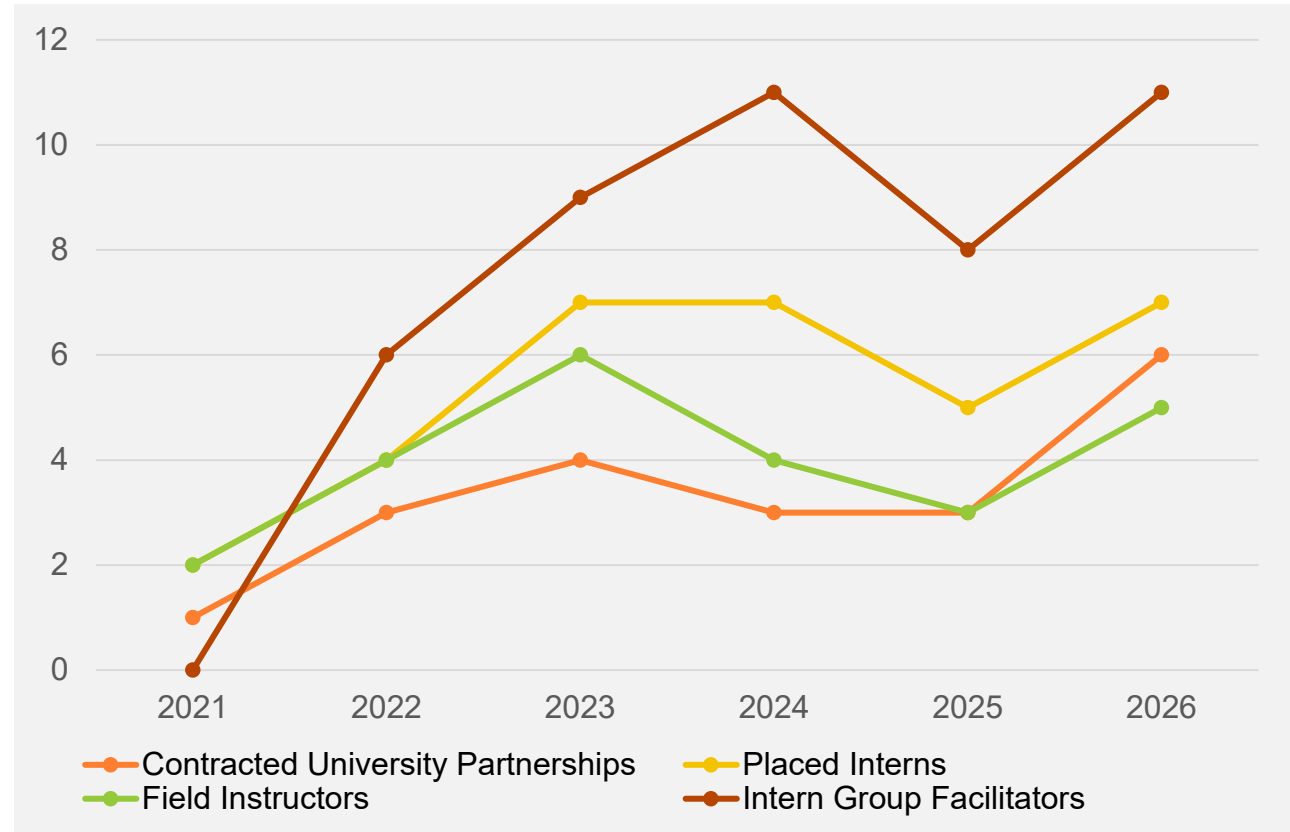


Figure 1: PFSP SW Practicum Growth Metrics

Initial Orientation Training Modules			
Cancer 101: Introduction to Oncology	Cancer 102: Introduction to Psychosocial Oncology	Public Benefits & Community Resources	EMR Training (CS-Link)
Psychosocial Assessments	Mandated Reporting	Cedars Sinai Cancer Financial Assistance	PFSP Group Offerings
Documentation	End of Life Considerations	PFSP Administrative Practices & Policies	Cedars Sinai Enterprise-Wide Trainings
Interdisciplinary Meet & Greets: Care Coordination, Nutrition, Psychiatry, Spiritual Care, Supportive Care Medicine (Palliative Care), Cancer Rehab & Survivorship			

Table 1: Initial Orientation Training Modules

Pillar II: Cohort & Team Development

At the center of this pillar is Intern Group Supervision, fostering cohort cohesion, interdisciplinary connection, and shared professional identity development. Staff develop close relationships with interns, creating a shared practicum experience that is distinctive to the program. Consistent with literature, reflective and cohort-based learning environments enhance emotional support, reduce professional isolation, and strengthen collaborative learning (Gregory et al., 2025; Strang, 2021), with post-COVID-19 research emphasizing the importance of intentional rapport building, mentorship, and connection in practicum education (Au et al., 2023).

Interns are integrated into department and enterprise-wide educational programming and team-building activities throughout the year, promoting inclusion, interdisciplinary collaboration, and professional development. Participation includes welcome and appreciation events, lunch and learns, PFSP meetings, Schwartz Rounds, grand rounds, and informal team-building gatherings. Research underscores that mentorship, professional socialization, and supportive learning environments contribute to confidence building and professional identity formation (Taussig et al., 2015; Vitoria, 2020), with increased inclusion strengthening cohort cohesion, professional growth, and patient care engagement.

Pillar III: Professional & Clinical Skills

The standardized modules for the cohorts' initial onboarding and orientation is the foundation of the clinical skills needed for a successful and effective practicum. We build upon that with ongoing modules that are presented by staff and guest speakers from community organizations in Intern Group Supervision each week. Intern Group Supervision is the vehicle to continue to introduce and expose the cohort to a wide breadth of clinical topics to both utilize throughout practicum as well as spark future clinical interest. The growing list of topics presented during that initial group supervision hour is motivated and determined by staff personal interest as well as feedback from interns (See Table 2). Additionally, interns each facilitate a case presentation in the spring term as well as have the opportunity to present macro-level projects during this time.

With growing support group offerings, interns can shadow and co-facilitate all social work run support groups. Those groups include: Cancer Coping Skills, The Wellness Group (GynOnc, Breast), Coping Through Mindfulness, Sleep Skills (CBT-I), and Meaning Making Group. Interns experience support group dynamics firsthand as well as facilitate content and moderate participants when clinically appropriate.

Ongoing Training Modules: Professional & Clinical Skills						
Oncology Specific	Clinical Modalities		Clinical Skill Building			
Cancer & Anxiety	EMDR	Meaning Centered Psychotherapy	ACP & GOC Discussions	De-Escalation Techniques	Boundary Setting	
Cancer & Intimacy	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)	Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)	Coping with Holiday Stress	Race & Cultural Humility	Grief & Loss	
BMT	Cancer Coping Skills	Mindfulness & Meditation	Trauma Informed Care	Termination	Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity	Caregiver Support

Table 2: Ongoing Training Modules, Professional & Clinical Skills

Pillar IV: Personal & Career Development

The literature highlights the growing importance of addressing burnout, compassion fatigue, and emotional resilience within social work education, particularly in emotionally demanding healthcare environments (Griffiths et al., 2019; Harr et al., 2014; Lewis & King, 2019). Studies support the integration of self-care, mindfulness, reflective supervision, and compassion satisfaction practices to strengthen resilience and sustainability among trainees (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011). Opportunities for mentorship, career development, and reflective discussion further contribute to confidence building and professional identity formation during the transition into clinical practice (Taussig et al., 2015; Vitoria, 2020).

The program incorporated ongoing training focused on professional identity and career development to inspire future social workers. The team has a shared passion for our beloved field, and we recognize the importance of fostering and encouraging continued progression for the next generation of social workers. Career development modules incorporated into supervision include discussions on self-care, imposter syndrome, licensure preparation, and approaches to securing employment following graduation (See Table 3). These modules aim to normalize the emotional realities of oncology social work while promoting compassion satisfaction, sustainability, and long-term professional engagement.

Ongoing Training Modules: Personal & Professional Development	
Self-Care	Imposter Syndrome
Provider Grief & Loss	Compassion Fatigue, Secondary Trauma & Burnout
Finding Your Clinical Voice	Licensure
Resume Workshop	Career Development Panel

Table 3: Ongoing Training Modules, Personal & Professional Development

The Career Development Panel introduces the interns to Cedars Sinai staff and former PFSP SW interns who have a wide spectrum of job experience. This is an open forum that is steered by intern interest and curiosity. It instills validation, hope, support, and confidence during a vulnerable and uncertain time heading into graduation and the workforce. This pillar highlights our commitment beyond PFSP to the continued growth and success of the social work profession—investing in each intern and cohort at a time.

Barriers

Over the last six years, the program has navigated several barriers common within medical settings, including limited physical space, technological restrictions, and lack of dedicated funding. Limited office space across sites caps cohort size despite available practicum instructors. Technological barriers related to non-Cedars issued equipment also limit intern access to HIPAA-compliant telehealth applications during hybrid work schedules which directly impacts patient care and productivity. Additional challenges include staff hesitancy to volunteer as practicum instructors due to perceived increases in workload related to onboarding and supervision responsibilities. Furthermore, without an allocated internship program budget, volunteer leads and practicum instructors frequently absorb out-of-pocket costs related to patient care and team development initiatives.

Challenges & Growth Opportunities

Over the past six years, the program has evolved into a structured and sustainable practicum model. Challenges associated with COVID-19, virtual learning, leadership transitions, and program growth reinforced the importance of cohort cohesion, intentional supervision, and consistent training practices. Expansion of Intern Group Supervision to all licensed staff reduced supervisory burden, increased interdisciplinary learning, and broadened exposure to diverse clinical perspectives. Growth in practicum instructor participation, designated preceptors, and monthly instructor meetings further strengthened supervisory support and program sustainability.

Lessons learned from a winter-to-summer placement during the 2025 academic year highlighted the importance of training continuity, emotional support, cohort equity, and meaningful clinical immersion. In response, the program formalized university partnership requirements by prioritizing fall-start placements and a minimum 20-hour weekly commitment to support patient care, caseload development, and participation in supervision and ongoing training.

Future growth opportunities include expanding interdisciplinary enterprise-wide shadowing and rotation opportunities, incorporating additional PFSP disciplines into Intern Group Supervision, and enhancing training in medical documentation, ethics, and practicum instruction. Collectively, these efforts enhance the quality, sustainability, and impact of the internship program.

Student Feedback (2023-2026)

"I have never been a part of something as *meaningful, integrative, and challenging* in the best way possible."

"I felt heard and was able to bring up cases as they evolved and concerns or anxieties *without fear of judgment*."

"This role challenged me in the most invaluable ways and jumpstarted a form of *professional growth and development that will shape the rest of my career* as a social worker and aspiring clinician. I have learned the power in the human experience - in the privilege of being there during the most vulnerable and life altering moments of some lives. Being a member of a multidisciplinary team left a lasting impression and revealed a new environment I could see myself thriving in, *guiding my hope to continue this work* as a soon-to-be ACSW!"

"Intern Group Supervision was helpful in having a different topic each week to support professional development ... I enjoyed the opportunity to receive insight from staff and fellow interns. It *promoted connection among interns* in relating to similar experiences and personal challenges/successes."

"The most helpful aspect of group supervision was getting the chance to receive feedback from all of the practicing clinicians on our team. This brought fresh, new perspectives each week and allowed us to *develop bonds with staff members* who work at different sites and have different expertise. It was so helpful to know what to expect each week and have an actual schedule to follow/prepare cases and questions for."

"It was helpful to have the 2 hours broken into different segments to allow check in, consultation, discussion and psychoeducation. It *helped me grow as a clinician by having that space to discuss and learn from other interns*"



Picture: Practicum Instructors, Group Facilitators, Interns (2026), Former Interns (2024, 2025) now Staff

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